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China's Islam in Xinjiang: from functionalization to elimination

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China's Islam in Xinjiang

From Functionalization to Elimination



China's Islam in Xinjiang: From Functionalization to Elimination

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1. Introduction

The repression of Uyghur social and religious life by the Chinese state has turned the world's eyes to Xinjiang. Security measures in the region have known a steady rise with the Strike Hard campaigns in the 1990s, scaling up with the global War on Terror in 2001, the 2009 Urumqi ethnic riots between Han and Uyghurs, and the 2013 and 2014 terrorist attacks at Tiananmen, Kunming and Urumqi. In 2014, the "People's War on Terror" was announced, and investment in security forces and infrastructure increased. With the coming of the new regional Party secretary Chen Quanguo in 2016 a new level of state securitization was attained. Recruitment for security forces increased thirteen times over in comparison to the preceding period from 2009 to 2016, a fine-mazed grid of police stations was erected, and in 2017 the first centers were built that were intended for "re-educating" the local population.¹ Backed by central Communist Party leadership, a full-blown civil engineering project was set up to contain the "Xinjiang problem," engulfing every aspect of Xinjiang society.² The situation has caused observers to wonder not only about the outcome of such a violent civil engineering project but also about the underlying historical processes. This thesis cannot provide an answer to the first question, but it means to shed light on the latter. More specifically, it will consider the role of Islam in the conflict, and this from the perspective of the Chinese state. Uyghur tension with the Chinese state and Islam's relationship to it have been a central topic of 21st-century publications on Xinjiang. While researchers on the region have convincingly argued that Islam among Uyghurs has primarily served as a tool for identity politics, the Chinese state's argumentation behind the "People's War on Terror" is that Islamic extremism is the cause of subversive action by the Uyghurs.³ State restrictions on Uyghur religious life and the state's fear of Islam as a vessel and cause of Uyghur unrest have already existed since the 1990s. Then what is different about the post-2014

¹ See Adrian Zenz and James Leibold, "Chen Quanguo: The Strongman behind Beijing's Securitization Strategy in Tibet and Xinjiang," *Jamestown Foundation China Brief* 17, no. 12 (2017), <https://jamestown.org/program/chen-quanguo-the-strongman-behind-beijings-securitization-strategy-in-tibet-and-xinjiang/>. Adrian Zenz and James Leibold, "Securitizing Xinjiang: Police Recruitment, Informal Policing and Ethnic Minority Co-optation," *China Quarterly* 242, no. 06 (2020): 324-48. Björn Alpermann, *Xinjiang: China und die Uiguren* (Würzburg University Press, 2021), 143-224. Joanne Smith Finley, "Securitization, Insecurity and Conflict in Contemporary Xinjiang: Has PRC Counter-terrorism Evolved into State Terror?," *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 1 (2019): 1-26.

² At the time of finalizing the present thesis, the role of central government in the Xinjiang policies since 2014 was further confirmed by multiple sources as gathered by Adrian Zenz in the so-called "Xinjiang Papers": Adrian Zenz, "The Xinjiang Papers: An Analysis of Key Findings and Implications for the Uyghur Tribunal in London," December 9, 2021, <https://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Xinjiang-Papers-An-Analysis-for-the-Uyghur-Tribunal.pdf>.

³ Joanne Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance: Uyghur Identities and Uyghur-Han Relations in Contemporary Xinjiang* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Jonathan Becquelin, "Xinjiang in the Nineties," *The China Journal* 44 (2000): 65-90. Graham E. Fuller and Jonathan N. Lipman, "Islam in Xinjiang," in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, ed. Frederick S. Starr (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 320-52.

and especially post-2016 period? Is it merely an intensification of a long-standing policy of repression?

This thesis looks at the Chinese Communist Party's relation with religion in post-Mao China and what it was about Xinjiang that has produced the extreme level of intolerance towards and the wholesale repression of Islam and Uyghur culture after 2016. Based on policy speeches and publications, as well as fieldwork in Xinjiang itself and among the Uyghur diaspora in Europe, this thesis asks what went wrong in Xinjiang. What did the CCP want to achieve and why did it fail? Are the Uyghurs the exception, caused by special circumstances, or is it possible that the Xinjiang model of repression, intolerance and social engineering gives us a glimpse into the future of CCP governance more generally? Goossaert and Palmer, in their landmark publication *The Religious Question in Modern China* (2011), described different scenarios about how the relationship between the Chinese state and religion could evolve in the 21st century, based on patterns that can be observed in the century before. All the scenarios they outlined lead to an expansion of the grey area in which religion moves, with "an unclear and ambiguous relationship with the norms and institutions of the state."⁴ At the same time, the authors saw increased state attention for spirituality, as well as an increased importance of religion at all levels of Chinese society. According to Goossaert and Palmer, these trends, combined with China's changing ideas of itself and position on the global scene, would usher in changes in the state-religion relationship in China in the second decade of the 21st century. What these changes would be, remained to be seen.⁵ The current thesis proposes to offer a piece of the vast puzzle that makes up the religious question in 21st-century China. Focusing on the development in Xinjiang, it aims to point out how the CCP policy towards Islam has shifted in the Uyghur situation, and how that shift is linked to broader CCP politics.

To analyze this shift in the current strategy towards Uyghur Islam, the thesis examines how CCP religious policy has developed from the 1980s until 2018. In Xinjiang, government administration of religious affairs was relatively restrictive because the state was wary of religious platforms and figures that could drive Uyghur separatism or ethno-nationalism. But while the state's repressive policies in Xinjiang have been addressed by several studies, an underreported aspect is that the state also backed a positive narrative concerning Islam.⁶ As this thesis will discuss, around the turn of the 21st century, China's management of religion included a policy explicitly aimed at the

⁴ Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011): 400.

⁵ Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, 401.

⁶ Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). Becquelin, "Xinjiang in the Nineties," *The China Journal* 44 (2000). Fuller and Lipman, "Islam in Xinjiang," (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2004). Rémi Castets, "The Modern Chinese State and Strategies of Control over Uyghur Islam," *Central Asian Affairs* 2 (2015): 221-45.

“functionalization” of Islam. In this policy of functionalization, the Chinese state developed a program that appropriated Islam in its own nation narrative and used Islamic doctrine and religious authority in its efforts to legitimize CCP rule. Considering the overall repressive measures taken by the state in Xinjiang, what are we to make of this state-supported positive Islamic narrative? As this thesis will show, the state functionalization of Islam was primarily a tool of state control over Islamic practices, fitting into the idea that the state needed to close off the chance of any hazard that religion might pose. But it was a control tool that allowed a level of pragmatic and ideological ambiguity. What we have seen happen, however, is that this practice of ambiguous governance of religious affairs became contested for Uyghur Islam. Around 2014, with the increased stress on terrorism and securitization, the state moved away from its functionalization policy, and became intolerant of any form of ambiguity in dealing with religion among Uyghurs. Instead, Uyghur Islam was profiled as the enemy of the Chinese nation in the CCP’s crackdown on the Uyghurs, and could not be allowed to exist in any form.

1.1. Development of a Research Question

The broader question that initially drove this research project was how Uyghur religious life was influenced by Chinese state policy in post-Mao China. Triggered by the seemingly conflicting and ambiguous environment created by the Chinese state in Xinjiang, the aim was to see how the Uyghurs explored and passed on the Islamic tradition in this environment. But due to the rapidly changing circumstances in Xinjiang the focus of this research project moved away from the response of the Uyghurs to Chinese policy, and toward the policy itself. When starting out with preliminary research for this project in 2012 and 2013, the People’s War on Terror had not yet been initiated. Already at that time, conducting research on religion and politics of a Muslim minority in a border area was a sensitive undertaking. But the possibilities for field research were still there, and access to sources was not an insurmountable problem. This changed rapidly in the first few years after starting the project in 2014, and it forced a change of methodology and focus. Initially, the project revolved around Islamic educational practices among Uyghurs, and wanted to answer the question of how Uyghurs navigated state policy on religion in their religious educational settings. But the state crackdown on Islamic practices and Uyghur everyday life that was introduced with the People’s War on Terror in 2014 and especially the intensified measures since 2016 made it impossible to conduct the long-term fieldwork required for such a research focus. Both these practical limitations as well as the unfolding policy shift refocused my attention to the role of the state. The Uyghur reaction to state policy is still explored in this thesis, but with a narrower scope and a heavier theoretic angle. The main issue that will be explored is what has changed in recent years in the Chinese policy towards Islam in Xinjiang, and what this reveals about the state’s desired relation with Islam. It does

this by looking at state policy as propounded in documents and speeches, and how the policies were implemented and communicated locally in Xinjiang.

This study will not approach the issue of Islam through analyzing the status of human rights in Xinjiang. To be clear, I do not deny the fact that there are human rights violations taking place in China. However, looking at the Chinese state's religious policy mainly through a human rights lens does not contribute to a better understanding of the relation of the Chinese state to religion, but seeks to pass judgment on it. The approach of this study is to explore what China's policy position has been in the discussion of citizenship and religion. The post-Mao Chinese government granted more socio-economic autonomy to its citizens in exchange for political loyalty. This study considers the pragmatics of CCP governance by exploring the costs and benefits of a state-society relationship where the state explores the wants and needs of citizens. These wants and needs include the exploration and expression of religious and ethnic identities. By examining China's governmental logic behind the functionalization of Islam and then the abandonment of that policy, we can learn more about the state's intended relationship with its citizens.

In short, the questions that this thesis seeks to answer are: How did the Chinese state's functionalization of Islam in the early 2000s fit into a post-Mao CCP policy logic? How was it implemented in the province of Xinjiang, where the state simultaneously repressed many of the local Islamic practices? What was the situation of the Uyghur Islamic tradition at the time that the functionalization policy was implemented, and what was the policy's effect? And lastly, why did the state abandon the functionalization policy in Xinjiang and what came in its place? Answering these questions will provide us with insight into how the CCP's position towards religion is evolving as it enters a new political era.

1.2. The Functionalization of Islam

As this thesis will discuss, the Chinese government constructed a narrative of a positive, Chinese Islam and used Islamic scripture to convince Muslims that Islamic piety overlaps with good citizenship. For a state to use religion in service of its socialization project is nothing new. A moral agenda, combined with or perceived within a religious context, often lies at the heart of state educational projects.⁷ The term "functionalization" is taken from anthropologist Gregory Starrett,

⁷ See for example Benjamin C. Fortna, *Imperial Classroom: Islam, the State, and Education in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 36-39. Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Gregory Starrett, *Teaching Islam: Textbooks and Religion in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), 5. Christopher Bagley and Nader Al-Refai, "Citizenship Education: A Study of Muslim Students in Ten Islamic and State Secondary Schools in Britain," in *Reforms in Islamic Education*, ed. Charlene Tan, 197. Dilyara Suleymanova, "Islam as moral education: Madrasa courses and contestation of the secular in the Republic of Tatarstan, Russia," *Religion, State & Society* 43, no. 2 (2015).

who conducted a study on the Egyptian state's use of Islam as a governance tool. Functionalization is to be understood in the sense that "intellectual objects from one discourse come to serve the strategic or utilitarian ends of another discourse."⁸ Starrett argues that this is what the Egyptian government did with regard to Islam: it adopted Islamic practice and discourse to serve the national cause. The Egyptian government permeated the public sphere with religious commodities bearing the mark of state institutions and organizations such as al-Azhar and the Ministry of Religious Endowments.⁹ As part of this policy, state-led mass education was infused with Islamic discourse, as the government saw in Islam potential to imbue its children with the necessary moral guidelines in order for them to become good citizens of the Egyptian nation. Starrett's study told two things about state functionalization of Islam: First, the message communicated by the state through Islamic discourse and spaces cannot be expected to be received in the way the state wishes.¹⁰ Second, the fact that the state uses Islam to communicate their expectations and citizenship ideas influences the role of Islam in society. Through the state functionalization, Islam was strengthened as an important discursive tool to express social norms in Egypt.¹¹

The Chinese state's functionalization project shows similarities, but also important differences to the Egyptian functionalization policy as described by Starrett: In terms of similarities, the Chinese state wanted to appropriate Islam to persuade people of the state's ideal of good citizenship. It also, as in Egypt, saw the functionalization of Islam as a means to keep them away from the destructive forces of extremism and "epidemic intellectual trends."¹² But the policy also showed stark differences with the Egyptian functionalization policy. While the narrative it created was that Islam demanded political loyalty and good citizenship, the overall message communicated by the functionalization policy and by religious policy in general was that it was the state that demanded political loyalty from Islam. In addition, the Chinese government did not infuse the public sphere with Islamic concepts, and it explicitly refused religious influences in public areas of life such as public education. So while the Chinese state sought to make use of the authority of Islam as the site of social normativity, it also refused to concede this role to it.

This contradictory nature of China's functionalization policy – where it used but also opposed Islam's authority – was part of the ambiguous nature of the CCP's dealing with Islam. The ambiguous approach was a matter of practical governance and was largely unproblematic in many areas. Researchers on the Hui, China's largest Muslim minority which has a long history of dealing with the

⁸ Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 8–9.

⁹ Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work*, 97.

¹⁰ Starrett, 24.

¹¹ Starrett, 92.

¹² Starrett, 105.

Chinese state, have shown how pragmatism on the local level trumped claims of incompatibility between Islam and the CCP's non-Islamic political system. Tontini calls them "subtle practices" that are of importance to understand how Islam has been able to work in China.¹³ They represent local pragmatism, where Islam is not problematized if it does not openly threaten state authority. The Chinese state's relation with Uyghurs in Xinjiang, however, had a history distinctly different from that with the Hui, and presented a specific challenge to the idea of functionalizing Islam and ambiguous dealing with Islam.

Before trying to understand state functionalization of Islam in Xinjiang, let us take a step back and consider what is meant by the concept "Islam" and how to look at this from a state-society-relations viewpoint. Due to its great diversity, many studies have tried to grapple with the question of what Islam is, of what lies at its core, and how to characterize deviations. In short, they seek an essentializing definition. For this study, I find the concept developed by Talal Asad a useful one. He considers Islam a "discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'an and the Hadith."¹⁴ Islam understood as a discursive tradition does not seek to define core characteristics that make it possible for Muslims and non-Muslims to identify things as Islamic or non-Islamic throughout history. Instead, it considers the fluidity of Islamic traditions, and includes the conflicts and ambiguity found throughout all claims made in the name of Islam. Due to the fluidity of Islamic traditions, Islamic doctrinal orthodoxy cannot be predicated on its content, but must be identified in its social and interactional discursive context.¹⁵ As such, "orthodoxy" cannot be defined, for example, in terms of a strict adherence to prayer and fasting, or for instance describe Wahhabi influence. Instead, something is labelled "orthodox" when it holds an authoritative position within a discourse. It represents certain power relations, which are, as Talal Asad formulates it, "conceptualized as being based at least retrospectively on claims of religious legitimacy and 'truth': orthodoxy in this sense is a mainstream or a powerful institution which is connected to the claim of representing some higher normative truth."¹⁶ There are continuous shifts in what constitutes the authoritative discourse of Islam. What is interesting is not the dominant discourse itself, but the social dynamics and power structures that allow for or lead to its dominance.

The relationship between the Chinese state and the Uyghurs is determined by several economic, political and social factors, in which the state holds power dominance. However, to analyze social

¹³ Roberta Tontini, *Muslim Sanzijing: Shifts and Continuities in the Definition of Islam in China (1710-2010)* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 218-19. Matthew S. Erie, *China and Islam: The Prophet, the Party, and Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1996), 14.

¹⁵ Paula Schrode, "The Dynamics of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Uyghur Religious Practice," *Die Welt des Islams* 48, no. 3-4 (2008): 397.

¹⁶ Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, 14.

relations we must not just examine the power dynamics themselves, but also consider how people perceive them. Subjectivist sociology pleads for the importance of studying people's perception of the social world. Not just the social actions themselves, but also the narratives and world visions that affect these social actions deserve study if we want to understand the underlying dynamics of social interaction.¹⁷ In Pierre Bourdieu's economy of practices, social groups have different forms of capital that make up the dynamics of social interaction, such as time, money, connections, academic qualifications, experience, objects, etc.¹⁸ These forms of capital grant their possessors social power. As the political, social and economic grasp of the Chinese state over Xinjiang has risen, one can argue that the Chinese state has gained considerable social power in Xinjiang. However, what is particularly relevant to social relations is whether the abovementioned forms of capital are perceived as legitimate. When someone's forms of capital are perceived as legitimate, the possessor gains what Bourdieu calls "symbolic capital." This symbolic capital can translate into symbolic power, which is "the power to impose upon other minds a vision, old or new, of social divisions [...] It is the power granted to those who have obtained sufficient recognition to be in a position to impose recognition."¹⁹ Symbolic power is arguably what the Chinese state seeks to wield over its citizens, trying to align the citizens' ideas of an ideal society with that of the state. What can be seen from the situation in Xinjiang, is that the state wielded considerable social power but was lacking in legitimacy among the Uyghurs. Due to its lack of legitimacy, the state faced a wide gap between its social power and its symbolic power in Xinjiang. And as Bourdieu points out, although power relations are not wholly dependent on legitimacy, the symbolic power to impose worldviews is very much so.²⁰

1.3. Methodology and Research Strategy

The changing circumstances around Xinjiang led to a change of methodology and sources. In August 2013 I went to Xinjiang for the first time, exploring Urumqi, Turpan and Kashgar while preparing the current research project, which officially started the next year in October 2014. In autumn 2015 I visited Xinjiang for six weeks, staying in Urumqi, Turpan, Kashgar, and Khotan. I was able to gather textbooks from the Islamic Institute, preacher books, social studies on Islam, and theological treatises. In addition, I gathered information through short on-the-spot interviews and was able to collect plenty of visual material concerning state policy and propaganda. During this research visit, I had conversations with staff at Xinjiang University in order to assess the possibilities for long-term field research. There were several issues by then that made me uncertain whether field research

¹⁷ See for example Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power," *Sociological Theory* 7, no. 1 (1989), 18.

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 241-58.

¹⁹ Bourdieu, "Social space and symbolic power," 23.

²⁰ Bourdieu, 22-23.

would be feasible. The first issue was that I did not know whether I was going to be able to talk freely to people without endangering them. Already during the 2013 visit, I had experienced the scrutiny people received when they had been in contact with me. Second, I suspected government surveillance of my activities would interfere too much with the process of gathering sources and interviews. This was confirmed when heading to Kashgar in 2015, where a Uyghur “guide” tried to join every trip, and I was questioned and my luggage searched several times. The experience made it very clear that such guidance and scrutiny could be expected to interfere with any local networking. After returning to Europe, I started to network with the Uyghur diasporic community to build up a second line of sources that was more easily accessible. This led to fruitful interviews in the Netherlands and Germany in the course of 2016 and early 2017. I was especially interested in meeting Uyghur imams, or *molla* as they are called. Many of those to whom I spoke had studied at Islamic schools in Xinjiang in the 1980s and 1990s, later been local religious leaders and then fled the country due to government pressure. These interviews largely concentrated on the means, the setting and the content of Islamic education received by the interviewee, in Xinjiang as well as in the current country of residence. Other parts of the interviews were concerned with the interviewee's social background and political views. I had also planned to conduct interviews with Uyghur religious figures in Turkey and Egypt in 2017, but these appointments had to be cancelled at the last minute due to the mounting scrutiny these diasporic communities were experiencing. In Turkey, authorities suspected Uyghur involvement in the Istanbul night club attack on New Year's Day 2017. And in Egypt, messages were coming in that Uyghur students studying in Cairo were being pressured to return to Xinjiang.²¹ In the meantime, my sources in the Netherlands were also expressing concern for their safety and became more reluctant in their contact with me. By this time, it was clear that the situation was only becoming more difficult, and my full focus had turned to the unfolding policy shifts. I examined previous and current policy documents on religion, both from the central government and from local authorities. Speeches by the head of Religious Affairs and President Xi Jinping at the National Religious Work Conference in 2016 were clear signals of heightened attention on Islam and on Xinjiang by the central administration. Reports on what was happening in Xinjiang convinced me of the necessity to return to the field for observational research, even if I could not conduct in-depth fieldwork. In the summer of 2018 I returned to Xinjiang and revisited Turpan, Urumqi and Kashgar. My main contact at the Xinjiang University, Prof. Rahile Dawut, had disappeared a few months earlier. I could not talk to any Uyghurs on the street, let alone conduct

²¹ Radio Free Asia, “Detained Uyghur Students Held by Egypt's Intelligence Service,” July 19, 2017, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/students-07192017124354.html>. Jason Lemon, “Egypt is Deporting Chinese Muslims... Even Though They May Face Torture,” *Step Feed*, July 7, 2017, <http://stepfeed.com/egypt-is-deporting-chinese-muslims-even-though-they-may-face-torture-1963>. Middle East Eye, “Egypt Rounds Up Uyghur Muslims at Behest of China,” July 6, 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-cracks-down-muslim-chinese-community-816905577>.

interviews. Instead, I focused on observations of the public space, revisiting the places I had seen three years earlier. This fieldwork affirmed the different course of the CCP's handling of Islam in Xinjiang.

Further results of my research among the Uyghur diaspora in the Netherlands and Germany were published in the edited volume *Ethnographies of Islam in China*, edited by Rachel Harris, Guangtian Ha and Maria Jaschok. The article, entitled "Diasporic Lives of Uyghur Mollas," delves deeper into the activities of Uyghur religious scholars in these communities, and the role that Islam plays in the Uyghur diaspora in Europe.²² Although the article covers a different topic from the present thesis, some overlapping elements can be found there.

1.4. Notes on Language and Transliteration

Conversations in China were mainly in Chinese, except for those with Uyghur researchers at Xinjiang University, which were in English and German. The interviews in Germany and the Netherlands were conducted in German and Dutch respectively, occasionally with a Uyghur interpreter if the interviewee was not proficient in the respective language. The written primary sources used here are mostly in Mandarin and some in Uyghur, which I am able to read with a dictionary. Secondary sources are mostly in English, German, or French.

For transliterating Chinese into Roman letters I use *pinyin*; for Uyghur I use the Uyghur Latin Script as used in Tarjei Engesøeth, Mahire Yakup and Arienne Dwyer's Uyghur language handbook *Greetings from the Teklimakan: a handbook of Modern Uyghur* (2009) with the exception of using "kh" instead of "x" for خ. For the occasional Arabic source I use the system found in the Hans Wehr dictionary (English edition), also with the exception of using "kh" for خ.

1.5. Chapter Overview

The introductory chapter two provides the wider socio-historical context to the subject matter. It explores the different experiences of the Hui and Uyghur Muslim minorities, introduces the history of Xinjiang as part of the Chinese polity and examines the development of Chinese state policy in Xinjiang since the 1980s. Largely based on existing scholarly literature, the chapter aims to show the broader social, political and economic circumstances of Uyghurs and illustrates the context of Uyghur discontent.

²² Elke Spiessens, "Diasporic Lives of Uyghur Mollas," in *Ethnographies of Islam in China*, eds. Rachel Harris, Guangtian Ha and Maria Jaschok (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2021), 245-65.

Chapter three of this thesis looks at Islam and Islamic education among Uyghurs in the context of a wider set of changes taking place in Uyghur society since the 1980s. Just as in other Islamic societies worldwide, modern systemic changes of gainful employment society, individualization, and the nation-state changed the way Uyghurs engaged their religion. Based on interviews with Uyghurs now living in Europe, short-term fieldwork in Xinjiang, and secondary literature, this chapter gives insight into the changing ways in which Uyghurs were able to interact with their Islamic discursive tradition. It shows the possibilities offered by increased mobility and new media, as well as the restrictions that came with state control.

Chapter four explores how CCP policy towards religion has developed between the 1980s and the early 2000s and how the functionalization of Islam fits into that policy logic. Policy papers, speeches and legislation provide insight into the Chinese state's understanding of religious freedom and what liabilities it sees in religion. As we will see, this reveals how political loyalty is a central condition to CCP tolerance of religious activities. This political loyalty was not ensured merely through administration and legislation, but also through the development of nationalist religious discourses. Focusing on Islam in specific, the chapter uses publications and educational curricula developed by the China Islamic Association to see how the state sought to forge a patriotic Islam.

After exploring the broader situation in the first chapters, the fifth chapter then looks at how the functionalization of Islam was implemented in Xinjiang. In a region where the government had been vigilant concerning Islam as a social force among Uyghurs, the state tried to appropriate Islamic history and historical figures to create a patriotic Islamic landscape of Xinjiang. By studying the state's message and its methods, the chapter uncovers the problems and conflicts that the policy entailed in that region.

Finally, after treating the problems of the functionalization policy in the Xinjiang context, the last chapter considers the abandonment of that policy under the Xi presidency and the provincial leadership of Chen Quanguo. We see the state withdrawing its support of the functionalization policy and instead demanding a comprehensive repression of any symbolic use of Islam. Driven by the need to gain comprehensive control and ideological loyalty, the Islamic discourse was overwritten with Party discourse.

2. Socio-Historical Context to the Research Topic

This introductory chapter provides context to the situation of the Uyghurs and Xinjiang before and during the functionalization policy. Based on existing research, complemented by own primary sources, this chapter provides a general idea of the situation of Muslims in China as well as overall Chinese policy in Xinjiang since the 1980s up until the early 2000s, before the large-scale crackdown on Uyghur society began.

2.1. Muslims in China

In the People's Republic of China, Islam is linked with specific ethnic identities, or *minzu*. Of the fifty-six official ethnicities in China, ten are considered "Islamic": the Hui, Uyghur, Kazakh, Uzbek, Tajik, Kyrgyz, Dongxiang, Salar, Bonan, and Tatar, of which the Hui and the Uyghur constitute the largest groups.²³ These two largest Muslim minorities each have a distinctive history in relation to the Chinese state.

Hui: The "Chinese" Muslims

The Hui are often called "Chinese Muslims" or "Sino-Muslims," which sets them apart from the "Turkic Muslims" in China, even though technically the latter also have Chinese citizenship. It is not always clear whether the terms "Chinese" or "Turkic" allude to the groups' cultural or linguistic aspects. Although many of the Hui do in fact have Chinese as their mother tongue, there exist multiple dialects, and there are other Hui who speak a completely different language, such as the Hui from Hainan, Tibet and Inner Mongolia.²⁴ Generally, the idea of "Chinese Muslims" reflects a view that the Hui are more integrated in the Chinese cultural sphere, and have adopted a very similar lifestyle to their Han neighbors. Seen as "familiar strangers," the Hui have a long history within Chinese society.²⁵

Historically, Muslim communities in North, East and South China have had very different centers of social organization with diverging religious traditions. We can speak of four main types of Islamic social organization. The *gedimu* (also referred to as *qadim*, or *laojiao*) is characterized by the central position of the mosque and the importance of the local *ahong* (the Chinese word for imam, derived

²³ See especially the work of Dru Gladney on the effect of state-imposed ethnic categorizations of the Muslims. See also Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 215-16.

²⁴ Dru C. Gladney, "Islam in China: State Policing and Identity Politics," in *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China*, eds. Yoshika Ashiwa and David L. Wank (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 154.

²⁵ See Lipman, *Familiar Strangers*, 1997.

from Persian *akhund* (آخوند). This was traditionally the most widespread form of social organization in local Muslim communities in China.²⁶ The Sufi organizations (*menhuan* 门宦), who have been active in China since the 17th and 18th centuries, are organized on a larger scale and are typified by political involvement and missionary activities.²⁷ The Yihewani, a Wahhabi-inspired movement, was founded in the late 19th century. This reformist movement called for an education reform which would allow every Muslim (both men and women) to be able to read the Qur'an for themselves. They were opposed to most Sufi practices and sought to reduce the importance of the imam. Over time, the Yihewani developed a more Hanafi-based dogma and largely aligned itself with the modernist goals of the Chinese state. The last group are the Salafi, who, in their quest to establish more "authentic" religious practices through the correct reading of the Qur'an and the Hadith (accounts and interpretations of the prophet Mohammad's words and actions), strongly rejected the "sinicized" traditions of Chinese Muslims.²⁸ One of the central features of Hui Muslims is that they have developed an extensive scriptural tradition of Islamic writings in Chinese, often referred to as the *Han Kitab*. This body of literature, which had its creative peak in the early 18th century with authors such as Liu Zhi, was discussed within a wide network of Islamic scholars, and its ideas were disseminated through an educational network.²⁹ According to Kristian Petersen, this literature and related education practices helped Chinese-speaking Muslims to fashion the idea of a distinctive

²⁶ Dru C. Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 37-41. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers*, 47-49.

²⁷ The Chinese *menhuan* are local subgroups located around a holy place with a hereditary lineage of masters (*jiaozhu* or *daozhang*) at their head. The master leads a strict central hierarchy of disciples who serve as *ahong* in the area of the master, and often also outside of it. Among the Chinese Sufi *menhuan*, the most well-known division is between the Jahriyya and the Khufiyya. See Françoise Aubin, "La Chine," in *Les Voies d'Allah: Les ordres mystiques dans l'islam des origines à aujourd'hui*, eds. Alexandre Popovic and Gilles Veinstein, Paris: Fayard (1996), 265.

²⁸ Élisabeth Allès, "À propos de l'islam en Chine: Provocations antireligieuses et attitudes anticléricales du XIX^e siècle à nos jours," *Extrême-Orient, Extrême-Occident* 24 (2002): 70-71. Leila Chérif-Chebbi, "Brothers and Comrades: Muslim Fundamentalists and Communists Allied for the Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in China," in *Devout Societies vs. Impious States? Transmitting Islamic Learning in Russia, Central Asia and China, through the Twentieth Century*, ed. Stéphane A. Dudoignon (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2004), 61-63.

²⁹ Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). To learn more about Liu Zhi and his influence, see for example James D. Frankel, *Rectifying God's Name: Liu Zhi's Confucian Translation of Monotheism and Islamic Law* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011) or Leila Chérif-Chebbi, "Between 'Abd al-Wahhab and Liu Zhi: Chinese Muslim Intellectuals at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century," in *Islamic Thought in China: Sino-Muslim Intellectual Evolution from the 17th to the 21st Century*, ed. Jonathan Lipman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 201.

identity.³⁰ Research on the *Han Kitab* emphasizes the scholars' efforts to harmonize Islamic identity with the Chinese political and social environment.³¹

Uyghurs: The Unfamiliar Strangers

The Uyghur as we now understand them have their roots in the 18th and 19th century settled Turki communities of the oasis towns around the Tarim Basin, a desert area that spans more than one million square kilometers and is enclosed by mountains ranges.³² The geographical spread of the Turki communities extended across most of what is now Xinjiang, and is often denominated by the term Altishahr (Uygh: *alte sheher* ئالتە شەھەر, literally "six cities"), referring to the six oasis communities of Kashgar, Yarkand, Khotan, Aqsu, Kucha and Turpan.³³ The inhabitants of Altishahr shared a common identity on the basis of a common historical experience, inter-oasis mobility, shared myths and legends, and explicit perceptions of alterity towards other groups.³⁴ Altishahris clearly differentiated themselves from Chinese, from Turkic and Mongolic nomadic groups, and, despite sharing the same religion, language and way of life, they also differentiated themselves from the settled Turkic-speakers of Western Turkestan (the areas of Andijan, Khoqand, Samarqand, Bukhara), whom they called "Andijani."³⁵ The Altishahri identity was further shaped by the geographical boundaries of the Pamir, Karakoram and Tianshan mountain ranges and the political boundaries of the Qing empire in the 19th century, which restricted travel to Western Turkestan and Inner China.³⁶ Chinese records historically referred to the region that roughly corresponds to today's Xinjiang as Xiyu ("Western Regions"). Xinjiang as we know it was officially incorporated into the Qing Empire as a province in the 1880s amid rising colonial power play by the Chinese and Russian

³⁰ Kristian Petersen, "Reconstructing Islam: Muslim Education and Literature in Ming-Qing China," *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 23, no. 3 (2006): 26. Zvi Ben-Dor Benite's *Dao of Muhammad* (2005) provides a good insight in the workings of the *Han Kitab* and the educational network of the *jingtang jiaoyu*.

³¹ Petersen, "Reconstructing Islam," 25. See also Lipman, *Familiar Strangers*, 226; Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad*, 13. The idea put forth by Raphael Israeli, that the *Han Kitab* were a way for Chinese Muslims to explain and rationalize Islam for a non-Muslim Chinese elite, is countered by Kristian Petersen and others. They say that the main goal was to produce advanced theological texts for the advancement of local believers' understanding of Islam. Raphael Israeli, ed., *Islam in China: Religion, Ethnicity, Culture, and Politics* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2002), 61; Petersen, "Reconstructing Islam," 36.

³² Laura J. Newby, "'Us and them' in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Xinjiang," in *Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia*, eds. Ildikó Bellér-Hann et al. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 16.

³³ Ildikó Bellér-Hann et al., eds., "Introduction: Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia," in *Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 5.

³⁴ Newby, "'Us and them,'" 22-26. Rian Thum, *The Sacred routes of Uyghur History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 158-159.

³⁵ Newby, "'Us and them,'" 17. Rian Thum, "Modular History: Identity Maintenance before Uyghur Nationalism," *Journal of Asian Studies* 71:3 (2012): 629. This group identification was also applied by the Qing administration, who clearly demarcated the Turkic Muslim sedentary population of Xinjiang from other people such the Kazakh and Chinese speaking Muslims. David Brophy, *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 33.

³⁶ Thum, "Modular History," 649.

empires in Central Asia.³⁷ In the 1930s, the Altishahri identity was shaped into a “Uyghur” identity, a term that has been taken over by the Communist government, and integrated into the official *minzu* classification.³⁸ Under the PRC administration, the settled Turkic Muslims were now officially labelled as the Uyghur *minzu*, and became the majority nationality in the Xinjiang province, also called the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR).

The question of how Islam is entangled with Uyghur identity is a difficult one. For the pre-Communist period, historical anthropologist Ildikó Bellér-Hann has argued that by the late 19th century a basic Islamic identity characterized a large majority of the Altishahri population, but that this shared religion was no unambiguous, static boundary. Instead, communities were constructed around multiple axes, such as ethnicity, region, religion, profession, gender, etc. Whichever community was emphasized depended on the context.³⁹ In more recent times, Uyghur identity is equally fluid, and is characterized by numerous axes of division. For the late 20th century, Justin Jon Rudelson has provided a convincing account of the importance of different oasis identities. In addition, he argues that the different social groups within Uyghur society each bring their own interpretation to Uyghur identity.⁴⁰ But in general, Uyghurs see Islam as a central aspect of their identity, ostensibly more so than for example the other Muslim Turkic *minzu*, the Kazakh.⁴¹ Uyghurs have historically never experienced a great divide between Sunni and Shi’a traditions and had no widespread awareness of adhering to the Hanafi school of law.⁴² The binary opposition between Sufi practices or “official,” scriptural Islam existed, but was not always very pronounced, with no discernible distinction between networks of religious scholars and Sufis, and the authority of both esoteric and exoteric knowledge was seen as complementary.⁴³ Up to the 21st century, Sufi practices were reported to be

³⁷ For a detailed historical account, see Brophy, *Uyghur Nation*, 53-85. Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 24.

³⁸ Thum, “Modular History,” 628.

³⁹ Ildikó Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters in Xinjiang, 1880-1949: Towards a Historical Anthropology of the Uyghur*, China Studies 17 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 427.

⁴⁰ The three different social groups identified by Rudelson are peasant, merchants, and intellectuals. Justin Jon Rudelson, *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism Along China's Silk Road* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

⁴¹ Colin MacKerras, “Religion in Contemporary Xinjiang,” in *Silk Road Studies* 12 (2008): 218. For an excellent discussion on the relation of Islam and the Hui *minzu*, see Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, 1991. Gladney emphasizes the importance of Hui ethnicity over that of Islam. Raphael Israeli, on the other hand, has fervently countered that argument, stating that Islam is clearly the most important identity marker for Muslims in China. Colin MacKerras has noted that studies that are based on single ethnic groups tend to favor Gladney’s analysis. See Colin MacKerras, “Some Issues of Ethnic and Religious Identity among China’s Islamic Peoples,” *Asian Ethnicity* 6, no. 1 (2005): 3-18.

⁴² Schrode, “The Dynamics of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Uyghur Religious Practice,” 310.

⁴³ Thierry Zarcone, “Le Turkestan chinois,” in *Les Voies d’Allah: Les ordres mystiques dans l’islam des origines à aujourd’hui*, eds. Alexandre Popovic and Gilles Veinstein. (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 268. Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*, 284.

widespread among rural Uyghurs.⁴⁴ Wang Jianxin observed during his fieldwork in Turpan in the 1990s that “what was different for individual Uyghurs was that they used religious symbolism differently, and had different opinions about Islam and its relation to their cultural traditions. [...], different Uyghurs, no matter what their formally expressed opinions may be, actually accept differing mixtures of religious traditions. They knew how to express their Islam according to what Islamic leaders taught, while they also knew other meaningful traditions for their daily life and how to interpret them as Islamic.”⁴⁵ This observation matches anthropologist Bellér-Hann’s idea of Islam as part of a shared symbolic vocabulary in Uyghur society, which people make creative use of in different circumstances.⁴⁶

Fellow Muslims in Xinjiang – The Hui, Kazakh, Tajik and Kirghiz

Under PRC rule, the Uyghurs for a long time formed the majority ethnic population in Xinjiang. Only recently have the Han started to outnumber the Uyghurs, because of the massive influx from other Chinese provinces.⁴⁷ Besides the Uyghurs and Han, Xinjiang is also home to other populations, such as the Kazakh, the Kirghiz, the Tajik and the Hui. Historically, there has always been a distinct otherness to the Muslim Kazakhs or Kirghiz, with their nomadic or partially nomadic lifestyle, their own rituals and myths, and their related but different language. As Laura Newby explains, trading and alliances were common, but intermarriage was rare.⁴⁸ The Shi’a Tajik who lived in the mountains and spoke an Indo-European language were also regarded as foreign.⁴⁹ In more recent times, religious activities by these groups are mostly conducted apart from the Uyghur community, although my interviewees have attested that, in small numbers, Kirghiz and especially Kazakh also attended Islamic education in the Uyghur language.⁵⁰

Research suggests that Uyghur and Hui Islamic traditions have historically been relatively distinct throughout most of their development. There were connections, mostly through the ties of

⁴⁴ Thierry Zarcone, “La Naqshbandiyya,” in *Les Voies d’Allah: Les ordres mystiques dans l’islam des origines à aujourd’hui*, eds. Alexandre Popovic and Gilles Veinstein (Paris: Fayard, 1996), 456-57. Rachel Harris, “Harmonizing Islam in Xinjiang: Sound and Meaning in Rural Uyghur Religious Practice,” in *On the Fringes of the Harmonious Society*, eds. Trine Brox and Ildikó Bellér-Hann (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2014), 293-317. Zarcone, “Le Turkestan chinois,” 271-73.

⁴⁵ Jianxin Wang, *Uyghur Education and Social Order: The Role of Islamic Leadership in the Turpan Basin*, *Studia Culturae Islamicae* 76 (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 2004), 29–30.

⁴⁶ Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters*, 309.

⁴⁷ Nicolas Becquelin, “Staged Development in Xinjiang,” *China Quarterly* 178, no. 178 (2004): 359.

⁴⁸ Newby, ““Us and them,”” 18.

⁴⁹ Under the late-18th and early-19th-century Qing administration through local officials (the so-called *beg* system), the Tajik were used as slaves. Newby, ““Us and them,”” 20.

⁵⁰ Author’s interviews with Tursun, Emet, Jusupjan, July and December 2016.

Naqshbandiyya Sufi orders.⁵¹ The influence of these connections was, however, limited. Focusing on the Hui, Leila Chérif-Chebbi has noted that, although the geographical span of the Chinese Islamic discursive tradition was wide and there was a variety of people included in it, the Uyghurs never formed a part of this Chinese religious landscape.⁵² Instead, the Uyghur Islamic tradition was clearly embedded with Central Asian practices, literature, and architecture. When comparing Central Asian, Chinese and Uyghur burial practices, Bellér-Hann has noted that even though there are general similarities between Uyghur and Chinese burial practices, such as one can find in many other regions in the world, there are distinctions at a closer level, while Uyghur and the Central Asian practices share many specific similarities.⁵³ Historically, students studied in the Islamic centers of Bukhara or Samarqand, local rulers were related to Central Asian lineages, and Sufi saints and Islamic scholars who are central to the Uyghur Islamic experience did not come from China, but from the Central Asian, South Asian, or Middle Eastern traditions.⁵⁴ Although many works were lost during the turbulent years of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, research has shown that the legacy of the Central Asian scriptural canon is clearly present in 20th-century Xinjiang.⁵⁵ This reflects how the Uyghurs constitute a part of the Central Asian religious and cultural sphere, in a manner that is not the case for the Chinese sphere.

The Hui Muslim communities are quite populous in Xinjiang cities such as Urumqi and Turpan, where they have their own mosques, with their own imams who hold sermons in Chinese.⁵⁶ My interviewees alluded to the relative segregation of Hui and Uyghurs, with both groups keeping to their own communities. One interviewee attested that, even when studying abroad or when going on pilgrimage to Mecca, there was little intermingling between Hui and Uyghurs. He said the only circumstances under which it was deemed acceptable for Hui and Uyghurs to share a religious space,

⁵¹ Ma Laichi, who introduced the Naqshbandiyya Sufism to Northwest China, was one of the students of the Naqshbandi Sufi leader Apaḡ Khoja, a major historical figure in Xinjiang whose tomb lies in Kashgar. Zarccone, "La Naqshbandiyya," 454.

⁵² Leila Chérif-Chebbi, "Between 'Abd al-Wahhab and Liu Zhi: Chinese Muslim Intellectuals at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century," in *Islamic Thought in China: Sino-Muslim Intellectual Evolution from the 17th to the 21st Century*, ed. Jonathan Lipman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 201.

⁵³ Ildikó Bellér-Hann, "Situating Uyghur Life Cycle Rituals between China and Central Asia," in *Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia*, eds. Ildikó Bellér-Hann et al. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 142.

⁵⁴ Thierry Zarccone, "Le culte des saints au Xinjiang de 1949 à nos jours," in *Saints and Heroes on the Silk Road*, eds. Thierry Zarccone, Ekrem İşin and Arthur Buehler (Paris: Maisonneuve, 2002), 138. Fuller and Lipman, "Islam in Xinjiang," 327.

⁵⁵ See Zarccone, "Le Turkestan chinois," 271–273; Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 62–63; Karin Scheper and Arnoud Vrolijk, "Made in China: Physical Aspects of Islamic Manuscripts from Xinjiang in Leiden University Library," *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 2 (2011): 51–52. For comparison, see the textbooks used in a late-20th-century *mekteḡ* in Bukhara as referred to in Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 23–24. One of my interviewees mentioned the Ṣaḡīḡ al-Bukhārī, the *Mukhtaṣar al-Wiqāya* (a core work of jurisprudence in the *medrese* of Central Asia), and "many works of Central Asian scholars" as the most important books of his time at the Xinjiang *medrese* in the late 1980s. Author's interview with Isa, December 2016.

⁵⁶ MacKerras, "Religion in Contemporary Xinjiang," 212–13.

was when Uyghurs traveled to the inner provinces. There they could attend Hui mosques or even attend courses in a Hui Islamic school.⁵⁷



Figure 1: Hui mosque in Urumqi (Shaanxi Mosque 陕西大寺) (photo by author, July 2018)



Figure 2: Hui mosque in Urumqi (Yongdeng Mosque 永登寺) (photo by author, July 2018)

There are, nevertheless, records of religious spaces in Xinjiang shared by Hui and Uyghurs, mostly in oasis towns in the east of the province. One such space is the shrine of Thābit ibn Qays, believed to be one of the earliest bringers of Islam to the region, in Qumul (Hami). The shrine was reported to be frequented by both Hui and Uyghurs in the region.⁵⁸ But despite occasional places and instances where Uyghurs and Hui crossed paths because of their shared religious tradition, they remained a distinct “other” to each other.

⁵⁷ Author’s interview with Turgunjan, July 2016.

⁵⁸ Frederick de Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context: Life in Shinjang Documented from Public Places* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 16. De Jong also refers to Patrick Hällzon’s observation of Hui and Uyghur visitors to the shrine, in Hällzon, “Stepping onto Sacred Ground: The Mazar in Uyghur Day-to-Day Life,” in *Pilgrimages Today*, ed. Töre Ahlbeck, (Åbo: Donner Institute for Religious and Cultural History, 2010), 87-121. De Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context*, 96, 108.

The perception of the Hui, or Tungan as they are often called, community in Xinjiang by the Uyghurs whom I interviewed was strongly colored by state policy. The lenient state treatment of Hui religious expression, in comparison to the strict policy towards the Uyghur community, encouraged a sense of estrangement and resentment towards Hui. These are remarks made by my interviewees when asked about the relation between Uyghurs and Hui:

- (1) “Tungan [Hui] are the same people as China. They talk the same, dress the same, look the same. Only the religion is different. The big difference with Uyghurs is that they are not being repressed, and that they do not have their own land.” (Emet)
- (2) “We don’t have a good experience with Tungan. In the past, many things happened. We used to trust each other, they are Muslims, we are Muslims, so we are brothers. But then they just sold us out to the Chinese a couple of times. In the end, they are Chinese, right?” (Jusupjan)
- (3) “The problem with Tungan is that they say you have to listen to China.” (Isa)
- (4) “You cannot compare our situation with that of the Tungan. In the 80s, there was equality, equal rights, a relaxed government that allowed things. But then they started to forbid a lot for the Uyghurs such as veiling, public religious activities, state officials praying or fasting. But up until now, not at all for the Tungan, they can do everything. They have a lot of *medrese*, and also [schools] for the children. Women are allowed to veil. State officials can pray and participate in Ramadan. The Chinese state supports Tungan to go to Mecca. Many go to Mecca. For Uyghurs, that is very rare, and practically forbidden.” (Tursun)

This thesis unfortunately cannot go into the situation of other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang and focuses on the Uyghur experience. While the state policies also affected other Muslim minorities in the region, the different experiences would require a research project of its own.

2.2. State Policy in Xinjiang from the 1980s until the early 2000s.

Development

As many researchers have remarked, the state’s attitude towards Xinjiang and its inhabitants bears the marks of a „civilizing project,“ as Stevan Harrell has phrased it:

[...] a kind of interaction between peoples, in which one group, the civilizing center, interacts with other groups (the peripheral peoples) in terms of a particular kind of inequality. In this interaction, the inequality between the civilizing center and the peripheral peoples has its ideological basis in the center’s claim to a superior degree of civilization, along with a

commitment to raise the peripheral peoples' civilization to the level of the center, or at least closer to that level.⁵⁹

This civilizing project, Harrell claims, provokes a specific reaction in the peripheral people which runs counter to the aims of the civilizing center. It actually stimulates the shaping of ethnic awareness and emphasizes the differences between center and periphery.⁶⁰

Researchers discussing the management of Xinjiang by the Chinese government have for years identified a dissatisfaction on the part of the Uyghurs with Chinese state rule, the failing of the state to ease ethnic tension and even the worsening of it by state policy.⁶¹ The state's primary strategy for integrating the region into the Chinese state and dissipating unrest has been economic development and the strict repression of dissent. The economic push of Xinjiang has taken off since the late 1980s and early 1990s, and received new vigor with the Western Development Program in 2000, with its plans for infrastructure, foreign trade and investment, and workforce management.⁶² South Xinjiang experienced a significantly slower growth rate than the north, where Chinese settlement and investment has been considerably higher.⁶³ In order to rectify the unequal situation, the state improved transportation between north and south, pushed Han settlement in the Kashgar and Khotan regions, and increased local investment. In 2010, Kashgar, south Xinjiang's largest city, was nominated a Special Economic Zone with increased infrastructural projects and tax-free zones, which attracted state and private investment.⁶⁴ The Silk Road Economic Belt (or One Belt, One Road, or Belt and Road Initiative, abbreviated BRI) initiative of 2013, which aims to strengthen economic cooperation with Central and South Asia, has meant a further incitement from Beijing to investment in the region and the fostering of transnational trade.

The consequences of China's development policy in Xinjiang have been multi-sided. Nicolas Becquelin has called the sustainability of the modernization and territorial integration approach into

⁵⁹ Stevan Harrell, ed., *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), 4. Several authors, such as Ildikó Bellér-Hann (2008), Joanne Smith Finley (2013), and Rian Thum (2014) have raised the concept of Harrell's civilizing project to describe the situation in Xinjiang.

⁶⁰ Harrell, *Cultural Encounters on China's Ethnic Frontiers*, 17.

⁶¹ Nicolas Becquelin, "Xinjiang in the Nineties," *The China Journal* 44 (2000); Nicolas Becquelin, "Staged Development in Xinjiang," *China Quarterly* 178, no. 178 (2004); Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Far Northwest* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004); Colin Mackerras, "Xinjiang in 2013: Problems and Prospects," *Asian Ethnicity* 15, no. 2 (2014). For a clear overview of organized protests and violent events in Xinjiang from 1949 to 2005, see Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 174-190 (appendix).

⁶² This policy was developed in order to reduce the economic gap between China's East and West, and included plans for Chongqing, Gansu, Guangxi, Guizhou, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Shaanxi, Sichuan, Tibet, Qinghai, Xinjiang, and Yunnan.

⁶³ Becquelin, "Xinjiang in the Nineties," *The China Journal* 44 (2000): 68.

⁶⁴ Matthew S. Erie, "Defining Shari'a in China: State, Ahong, and the Postsecular Turn," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review* 12 (2014): 94, <http://cross-currents.berkeley.edu/e-journal/issue-12>.

question. For him, Xinjiang's economical integrity was far from being achieved, the ecological challenge was growing because of rising demographic pressure, heavy industry, and mismanagement, and the ethnic minorities in the region have not been able to profit from development as much as the Han population.⁶⁵ Colin Mackerras has stated that not to develop the region would be worse, but that the way the Chinese state was implementing the push for modernization was increasing social tensions. In particular, Han immigration, ecological mismanagement, and discrimination of Uyghurs in the labor market have been detrimental to the region's social stability.⁶⁶

Marginalization of Uyghurs

Han immigration into the region, popularly referred to as "mixing sand" (*chan shazi* 换砂子), was already taking place on a massive scale in the 1990s and has become a confirmed policy by the government since the start of the Western Development Program.⁶⁷ In 2000, head of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission Li Dezhu openly stated that the goal of Han westward migration was homogenization and development. He did warn that the migration push would cause problems with the ethnic minorities and that this conflictual situation should be handled well.⁶⁸ Whereas Han constituted only six percent of the population in Xinjiang in 1949, it rose to almost half of the province's total population in the early 2000s.⁶⁹ In 2010, the number of Uyghurs in Xinjiang was estimated to be around ten million, while the Han in the region numbered 8.4 million.⁷⁰ Han immigration was indirectly promoted through beneficial policies for new Han workforces in Xinjiang. The fostering of migration to western minority regions in order to dilute the ethnic populations in these areas is called "homogenization" (*ningjuhua* 凝聚化) and explicitly serves to strengthen national unity.⁷¹ The state's application of family-planning policies (birth restrictions) for non-Han ethnicities since the late 1980s in Xinjiang further exacerbated tensions between the Uyghurs and the state and intensified frustration over Han immigration, without which Xinjiang would not have had such a steep population increase.⁷² The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corp (XPCC, also referred to as *bingtuan*), as one of the most important economic players in the region, contributed to

⁶⁵ Becquelin, "Staged Development in Xinjiang," 371-72.

⁶⁶ Mackerras, "Xinjiang in 2013," 249. Colin Mackerras, "Some Issues of Ethnic and Religious Identity among China's Islamic Peoples," *Asian Ethnicity* 6, no. 1 (2005): 16-17.

⁶⁷ Becquelin, "Xinjiang in the Nineties," 74-76.

⁶⁸ Becquelin, "Staged Development in Xinjiang," 374. Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 58.

⁶⁹ Becquelin, "Staged Development in Xinjiang," 359.

⁷⁰ Joanne Smith Finley and Xiaowei Zang, "Language, education and Uyghur identity: an introductory essay," in *Language, Education and Uyghur Identity in Urban Xinjiang*, eds. Joanne Smith Finley and Xiaowei Zang (London: Routledge, 2015), 5.

⁷¹ Becquelin, "Staged Development in Xinjiang," 373-74.

⁷² Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 59.

the Han domination of Xinjiang's economy and resources. It holds about one third of Xinjiang's arable land, is overwhelmingly Han, and continues to attract Han migrants to the region. Becquelin calls it a "powerful colonizing force."⁷³ The *de facto* colonization of the region has aggravated ethnic tensions in the region, as it has resulted in more competition over land resources and work placement.⁷⁴

Another important aspect of China's policy in Xinjiang has focused on language. Through the Western Development Program, the government increasingly pushed the promotion of Mandarin among ethnic minorities, as good communication was considered necessary for development.⁷⁵ Before the region's Han domination, Uyghur was the *lingua franca* for most ethnicities in Xinjiang. Now, the language has been increasingly marginalized as publications and media broadcasts are largely in Mandarin. During my visit in 2015, local respondents working in schools reported in conversations that although the government for a long time lacked the means and manpower to implement the desired level of Mandarin instruction in public schools in rural areas of Xinjiang, education was increasingly becoming a Mandarin-dominated domain.⁷⁶ Han Chinese, especially recent work migrants, hardly possessed any Uyghur language skills and often did not make the effort to learn more than basic words. Although Uyghur language use was still very much widespread, especially in the south, it became a sensitive issue and part of the battleground in the region's ethnic strife.⁷⁷

Han also increasingly gained the upper ground at the political level. Uyghurs were underrepresented in the political system managing the PRC's Xinjiang province, with Han Party officials occupying every major post in state and Party governing entities.⁷⁸ Even Uyghur elite students who had attended special schools in inner China with the purpose of training them as loyal Party cadres found themselves marginalized in the labor market upon their return to Xinjiang.⁷⁹ Xinjiang's management

⁷³ Becquelin, "Staged Development in Xinjiang," 367.

⁷⁴ Becquelin, Xinjiang in the Nineties," 77-80. Becquelin, "Staged Development in Xinjiang," 374. Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 58.

⁷⁵ Officially, the 1952 Chinese constitution protects the status of minority languages, which means among other things that education and publications have to be made available in the minority languages. But at the same time the law also states that Mandarin Chinese should be promoted throughout China. In practice, neither of those stipulations acts as guiding principles for educational language policy. Instead, specific historical developments on political and economic issues have made languages functionally unequal. Language policies and practices are determined for the most part by regional and local officials who try to balance central against local demands. Regie Stites, "Writing Cultural Boundaries: National Minority Language Policy, Literacy Planning, and Bilingual Education," in *China's National Minority Education: Culture, Schooling, and Development*, ed. Gerard A. Postiglione (New York: Falmer Press, 1999), 104.

⁷⁶ Conversations with Xinjiang University employee and school personnel, October 2015.

⁷⁷ Eric T. Schluessel, "'Bilingual' education and discontent in Xinjiang," *Central Asian Survey* 26 (2007): 251-77. Joanne Smith Finley and Xiaowei Zang, eds., *Language, Education and Uyghur Identity in Urban Xinjiang* (London: Routledge, 2015). Arianne M. Dwyer, *The Xinjiang Conflict: Uyghur Identity, Language Policy, and Political Discourse*, Policy Studies 15 (Washington: East-West Washington Center, 2005).

⁷⁸ Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 23.

⁷⁹ Timothy Grose, "Protested Homecomings: Xinjiang Class Graduates and Reacclimating to Life in Xinjiang," in *Inside Xinjiang: Space, Place and Power in China's Muslim Far Northwest*, eds. Anna Hayes and Michael Clarke (London: Routledge, 2016), 206-24.

was very strongly connected to central Party authorities in comparison to other Chinese provinces, and Beijing had a powerful economic hand in the province since the largest part of the Xinjiang economy was driven by state investment.⁸⁰ An important share of Beijing's power in the province is concentrated in the aforementioned Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC).⁸¹ It functions as a Party organization, with all of the higher offices held by Party members. Founded in 1954 under Mao Zedong, the institution was meant to help stabilize and develop the border province. Research has shown that the XPCC has moved away from being a military-agricultural colony and has become an influential corporate entity that is socially and economically well-integrated into the region.⁸² Its power and influence have risen further in the 21st century and are now equal to that of the provincial government, and it is answerable only to Party officials in Beijing. It provides a powerful way for Beijing to influence Xinjiang's management, as XPCC specialist Thomas Cliff has argued: "[...], the assertion of full Party control over the *bingtuan*, in combination with the organization's ability to operate flexibly as a corporation and/or as an organ of the central state in parallel with the XUAR [Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region] government, means that the Party in Beijing now has at its disposal a selection of different tools with which to mould the socio-political economy of Xinjiang."⁸³ The high degree of central control over the region is taking place at the expense of local governmental bodies, which translates in the increased marginalization of the Uyghurs in the province's decision-making processes.⁸⁴ This conflicted with the sense of collective identity and expectations of self-governance among the Uyghurs that according to Gardner Bovingdon was strengthened by the granting of the status of Autonomous Region and the use of the Uyghur ethnonym.⁸⁵ The general system in Chinese politics of a single-party state left no room for dissident voices, and the increased paranoia towards any Uyghur petition for self-governance dramatically reduced the capacity of any Uyghur collective identity to have a hand in political decision-making.

The 1985 educational reform initiated by the CCP Central Committee consisted of a total of nine years of compulsory education, six years' primary and three years' junior secondary classes.⁸⁶ Among urban Uyghur residents, many parents decided to send their children to schools that would facilitate their way into higher education and consequently employment. Because the chances to receive a

⁸⁰ Becquelin, "Staged Development in Xinjiang," 362. Becquelin, "Xinjiang in the Nineties," 71-74.

⁸¹ Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 60.

⁸² Thomas Matthew James Cliff, "Neo Oasis: The Xinjiang *Bingtuan* in the Twenty-first Century," *Asian Studies Review* 33, no. 1 (2009).

⁸³ Cliff, "Neo Oasis," 102.

⁸⁴ Becquelin, "Xinjiang in the Nineties," 77-80.

⁸⁵ Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 40-44. See also Becquelin, "Staged Development in Xinjiang," 373.

⁸⁶ Linda Benson, "Education and Social Mobility among Minority Populations," in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, ed. Frederick S. Starr (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 197.

higher education and steady employment significantly improved with Chinese language skills, this often meant sending children to Chinese schools.⁸⁷ That being said, the Chinese state also experienced difficulties convincing the Uyghur population to send their children to state schools. Up until the early 1990s there was a strong rise in the number of school students in Xinjiang, but afterwards mostly poor parents were reportedly pulling their children out of school after primary school due to relaxed state control, but also due to the rising importance of the market economy.⁸⁸ Peasants with small landholdings could not cover their livelihood and expenses with farming alone, and sideline production provided an important source of income for them. Bellér-Hann noticed that during her 1996 fieldwork in Kashgar many peasants were engaged in sideline production as felt makers, cobblers, carpenters and other crafts. She noted that boys were taken out of state schooling after a few years to take an apprenticeship with a local master. This apprenticeship was seen as a secure way to a stable source of living and a certain level of prestige in society.⁸⁹ Higher-level education was seen as coming with high costs and was often considered a waste of time, since the chances of obtaining a good job were thought to be very low. As Bellér-Hann has noted, “[m]any people believe that only the children of the Han Chinese and privileged Uyghur groups, namely higher level cadres children, and young people educated in Chinese schools stand a chance to get into university.”⁹⁰ In this regard, there was a very important distinction between urban and rural households. Rural households often considered the chances that their children can enter university to be very slim, since urban schools were generally considered to be better. Even if rural children did pass the entrance exams and got a university degree, the residence registration system, which distinguishes between urban and rural residents, prevented rural residents from obtaining employment in the city.⁹¹ But even among urban residents, ambitions to reap the advantages that higher education and economic development had to offer were often frustrated by a Han-dominated market. As Steenberg and Rippa argued in an article on development in Kashgar, “development indicators (such as rising gross domestic product, lower poverty rates, and higher education standards) hide a much more complex reality, in which growing inequality is fueling marginalization and discontent.”⁹² The importance of the market economy was rising, and with it the importance of a

⁸⁷ Uyghurs educated in the Chinese language are usually referred to as *minkaohan* (民考汉), as opposed to *minkaomin* (民考民), Uyghurs educated in the Uyghur language. Joanne Smith Finley, “‘Ethnic Anomaly’ or Modern Uyghur Survivor? A Case Study of the *Minkaohan* Hybrid Identity in Xinjiang,” in *Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia*, eds. Ildikó Bellér-Hann et al. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 220.

⁸⁸ Ildikó Bellér-Hann, *The Written and the Spoken: Literacy and Oral Transmission among the Uyghur* (Berlin: Das Arabische Buch, 2000), 70.

⁸⁹ Bellér-Hann, *The Written and the Spoken*, 74-75.

⁹⁰ Justin Jon Rudelson, *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism along China's Silk Road* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 82. Bellér-Hann, *The Written and the Spoken*, 77-78.

⁹¹ Bellér-Hann, *The Written and the Spoken*, 77-78.

⁹² Rune Steenberg and Alessandro Rippa, “Development for all? State schemes, security, and marginalization in Kashgar, Xinjiang,” *Critical Asian Studies* 51, no. 2 (2019): 6.

modern, higher education. But significant portions of Uyghur society were only able to enter this new system to a limited degree. As the Han dominance of Xinjiang economic life grew exponentially since the late 1990s, it became increasingly clear that although marketable skills were crucial for Uyghurs to take advantage of the economic growth, they were not the only conditions for participation in economic success. Entering the higher levels of economic opportunities often entailed adapting to Han-dominated surroundings. The Uyghur youth found itself at the center of the conflict, as they struggled between the prospect of better chances on the job market by learning Mandarin, and the fear of marginalizing their cultural and linguistic heritage.⁹³

As touched upon earlier in this chapter, the history of Xinjiang is contested by different parties, and the CCP seeks to claim the region as a historical part of China. The historiography of Xinjiang has been deployed as an essential tool in the Chinese administration of the region. All publications on Uyghur culture and history have to be approved by the Chinese Propaganda Department.⁹⁴ Both in publications and museums Uyghur history and culture are marginalized in favor of a Xinjiang historiography that is directed towards Beijing.⁹⁵ The Chinese state's official Three Histories (*san shi* 三史) historical narrative for the region divides Xinjiang history in three parts: Xinjiang history, religious history and ethnic history. The Xinjiang history aims to establish that the Xinjiang territory has always been tied to China's dynastic history. The religious history explains how Xinjiang is not just Islamic, but has known several religious traditions, such as Buddhism.⁹⁶ This way, it does integrate Islam into the region's identity, but rather repudiates the idea that Xinjiang's history is mainly Islamic. The ethnic history seeks to demonstrate that Xinjiang has always been home to multiple ethnicities. This counters the idea that Xinjiang can be designated as the "Uyghur homeland." In this way, the Chinese state tries to separate Uyghur history from Xinjiang history, claiming that Xinjiang has always been a part of China, and that the Uyghurs were for a long time a migrant people and have no claim on indigeneity in the region, but that they did belong to China's great family of *zhonghua minzu*.⁹⁷

⁹³ Dwyer, *The Xinjiang Conflict*, 13. Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*, 33.

⁹⁴ Bellér-Hann, "Feudal Villains or Just Rulers?," 312.

⁹⁵ Anna Hayes, "Space, Place and Ethnic Identity in the Xinjiang Regional Museum," in *Inside Xinjiang: Space, Place and Power in China's Muslim Far Northwest*, eds. Anna Hayes and Michael Clarke (London: Routledge, 2016), 52-72.

⁹⁶ Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Central Committee Propaganda Department, *Xinjiang 'san shi': jiaoyu jianming duben* 新疆“三史”：教育简明读本 [Xinjiang 'Three Histories': Basic Educational Textbook] (Urumqi: Xinjiang Qingshaonian Chubanshe, 2010).

⁹⁷ Gardner Bovingdon, "The History of the History of Xinjiang," *Twentieth-Century China* 26, no. 2 (2001): 123-25.

Development in Xinjiang went hand in hand with intolerance towards any open forms of Uyghur dissent. Whereas the relatively open climate in the early 1980s allowed for protests, most of which were relatively peaceful, these began to be forcefully suppressed in the late 1980s. The national political environment after the Tiananmen massacre in 1989 heralded a time of stricter regulation of demonstrations and repression of open protests. In the 1990 conflict in Baren, a township in the Kashgar region, around 200 Uyghurs rebelled against the Chinese government, protesting Han immigration, and calling for independence. The protest lasted several days and was eventually shut down by Chinese armed forces.⁹⁸ Adding to the tensions in the region, the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent Central Asian states in 1991 fueled ideas of independence among Uyghurs.⁹⁹ In 1996, a Party Central Committee document sent to the Xinjiang government stated that the threat of foreign and domestic terrorist and separatist movements was critical and might undermine the region's and possibly the whole country's stability.¹⁰⁰ Beijing's call for action caused the provincial government to step up its repression of separatist movements. In 1996, the province participated in the national Strike Hard campaign, focusing on separatist and religious activities in Xinjiang and in 1997 and 1998 they held "rectification of the social order" campaigns.¹⁰¹ Bovingdon has shown that the number of protests fell in the 1990s, claiming that the stricter policies were successful in "keep[ing] off the streets many people who might have joined protests in the more open climate of the 1980s."¹⁰² At the turn of the century, the state crackdown on Uyghur protests intensified. In 2003, Xinjiang's Party secretary Wang Lequan stated that the economic development of the province would not be sufficient to guarantee stability. He said that the belief in a natural solution to Xinjiang's tensions by economic development and improvement of living standard was "wrong and dangerous." He said that "economic development cannot eliminate separatists and cannot prevent them from separating from the motherland and seeking independence."¹⁰³ The state took an increasingly harder stance towards any persons, institutions or practices that were perceived as potential challenges to Beijing authority. While the state was successful in repressing large-scale protests, the region was marked by several small and often violent acts of protest, demonstrated by thousands of arrests each year.¹⁰⁴ The brewing pot of Uyghur dissatisfaction boiled over during the

⁹⁸ Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 123-24.

⁹⁹ Becquelin, "Xinjiang in the Nineties," 70-71. Ildikó Bellér-Hann et al., "Introduction: Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia," in *Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia*, eds. Ildikó Bellér-Hann et al. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 4.

¹⁰⁰ Becquelin, "Xinjiang in the Nineties," 87-88.

¹⁰¹ Becquelin, 87-88.

¹⁰² Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 106.

¹⁰³ Quoted in Becquelin, "Staged Development in Xinjiang," 374.

¹⁰⁴ Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 106, 133-34.

2009 Urumqi riots, one of the most violent outbreaks of interethnic conflict in CCP history with almost 200 reported deaths.¹⁰⁵ While state restrictions were intensified after the Urumqi riots, small acts of everyday resistance and several conflicts involving Uyghurs throughout and outside of the province since 2009 testified to the fact that discontent remained widespread.¹⁰⁶

Uyghur Activism Abroad

There are large Uyghur diasporic communities in Central Asia, an estimated 350,000, most of them residing in Kazakhstan, where they constitute the second largest ethnic group in the country.¹⁰⁷ Although large, the Uyghur diasporic communities in Central Asia have not served as bases for Uyghur separatist movements since the late 1990s due to successful pressure from China not to give any platform to Uyghur separatist voices.¹⁰⁸ Turkey, which has been a primary destination for Uyghur exiles and refugees, has also become a difficult country for Uyghur political activism, with China criticizing the country more openly since the late 1990s and successfully stifling Turkish political support for Uyghur activists.¹⁰⁹ As a result of the successful pressure exerted by China on Central Asia and Turkey, Uyghur activists became more active in the industrial democracies of Europe and the United States, which were deemed to be less sensitive to Beijing's pressure. The strategies and effects of Uyghur activism in these countries are different, since they do not offer the geographical proximity of the Central Asian states or the possibility of appealing to pan-Turkic sentiments in

¹⁰⁵ Tania Branigan, "China locks down western province after ethnic riots kill 140," *The Guardian*, July 6, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jul/06/china-uyghur-urumqi-riots>. "Timeline: Xinjiang Unrest," BBC News, page last updated July 10, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8138866.stm>.

¹⁰⁶ Rémi Castets, "The Modern Chinese State and Strategies of Control over Uyghur Islam," *Central Asian Affairs* 2 (2015): 245. Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 79.

¹⁰⁷ These Central Asian diasporic communities consist mostly of two different groups of Uyghur immigrants: the first wave came in the late 19th and early 20th century, and have now lost practically all connection to Xinjiang. The second wave came in the 1950s and 1960s, and are said to have more contact with Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Presentation Sebastien Peyrouse, 2nd International Conference on Uyghur Studies (Brussels – Paris), November 17-20, 2015.

¹⁰⁸ Xinjiang borders Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Mongolia, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. A substantial number of Uyghurs live in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. Beijing started negotiations with several Central Asian states, resulting in the Shanghai Five (China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Russia) in 1996, which was later expanded with several other countries and renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It became a platform for cooperation in the region, and successfully curbed Uyghur nationalist movements from gaining a foothold in the neighboring countries. Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 145-46.

¹⁰⁹ Yitzhak Shichor, "Virtual Transnationalism: Uyghur Communities in Europe and the Quest for Eastern Turkestan Independence," in *Muslim Networks and Transnational Communities in and across Europe*, eds. Stefano Allievi and Jørgen Nielsen (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 305.

Turkey.¹¹⁰ The activists have to rely on states and other political organizations for material resources as well as political support.¹¹¹

Attempts to unite Uyghur diasporic communities in a single authoritative representative body have been unsuccessful. After several meetings in Istanbul, Munich and Brussels, with debates on the Uyghur nature of the organization, the World Uyghur Congress (WUC) was founded in Munich in 2004, with activists from Turkey, Germany and Central Asia as their leaders. However promising the founding of the WUC, the fractured nature of Uyghur transnational activities was made clear when, in that same year, a group of Uyghurs in Washington announced the formation of the “Eastern Turkestan Government in Exile.”¹¹² Although the WUC does have a large constituency, it still cannot claim to be the sole representative body of all Uyghurs.¹¹³ The construction of diasporic Uyghur identity has especially been facilitated by social media, which offer a platform for activists to spread their message and for Uyghur community members to discuss important issues concerning the situation in Xinjiang. However, a 2013 study on Uyghur diasporic activity on Facebook showed that although it was an important forum for discussion and expression, it did not necessarily incite political action.¹¹⁴ As of yet, even though international awareness of the Uyghur situation has risen, Uyghur activists seem to have won almost no tangible results in improving the situation in Xinjiang. There have been some successes in heightening the acceptance rate of Uyghur refugees in host countries, but there is no sign that they have compelled the Beijing government to be more receptive to Uyghur demands.¹¹⁵ If anything, Beijing has stepped up its efforts at thwarting Uyghur lobbying by discrediting them and labeling them violent terrorist organizations.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 157. Shichor, “Virtual Transnationalism,” 307-8.

¹¹¹ Inevitably, states, or more specifically, political parties within states, have used Uyghur activist organizations for their own benefit. For example, in Germany, where many Uyghur activities have been concentrated, the Green Party uses their support of the Uyghur cause to convince German voters that their party speaks on behalf of multiculturalism. Similarly, both Democrats and Republicans in the US support Uyghurs to demonstrate their fight for democratic development and human rights in China. In Japan, the Uyghur lobby is supported by right-wing politicians with a strong anti-Chinese rhetoric. Yu-Wen Chen, *The Uyghur Lobby: Global Networks, Coalitions, and Strategies of the World Uyghur Congress* (London: Routledge, 2014), 130. Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 152.

¹¹² Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 149-151.

¹¹³ An important step in presenting a unified face for the Uyghur cause was the WUC leadership of Rabiye Qadir since 2006, who served as the symbolic leader of the Uyghurs. Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 156. Since 2017, Dolkun Isa was elected the new president of the WUC. World Uyghur Congress, “Dolkun Isa”, accessed June 2, 2022, <https://www.uyghurcongress.org/en/staff/dolkun-isa/>.

¹¹⁴ Nur-Muhammad Rizwangul et al., “Identity, Responsibility, then Politics: The Uyghur Diaspora, Facebook and the Construction of Identity Online,” paper presented at The Asian Conference on Media and Mass Communication 2013, Osaka, available online, accessed October 10, 2016, http://iafor.org/archives/offprints/mediasia2013-offprints/MediAsia2013_0080.pdf.

¹¹⁵ Presentation Henryk Szadziewski (Uyghur Human Rights Project), 2nd International Conference on Uyghur Studies (Brussels – Paris) November 17-20, 2015. Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 157.

¹¹⁶ Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 154.

The Chinese state has seen religion as a dangerous force in its battle with Uyghur dissent. The early 1980s were a period of relative lenient policy towards religion, and many mosques were rebuilt after almost every mosque in the province had been closed or destroyed during the Cultural Revolution.¹¹⁷ Uyghur religious life experienced a revival, with imams restored to their position in local societies, and people observing prayer, attending mosque sermons and resuming shrine pilgrimage. But by the end of the 1980s, which was a period where Uyghurs repeatedly voiced their discontent with Chinese governance, the lenient religious policy was condemned as encouraging the formation of opposition networks on an Islamo-nationalist basis.¹¹⁸ The Xinjiang provincial government started to gradually build up a system of control, which included new legislation and the repression of religious activities not organized or sanctioned by the state. In 1988, Xinjiang served as a testing ground for new policies on religion with the “Temporary Rules for the Management of Venues of Religious Activities.”¹¹⁹ The Baren protest in April 1990 as well as the protest in Ghulja in February 1997, Xinjiang’s two major protests in the 1990s, intensified the officials’ fear for religion-based protest and separatism. The alleged leader of the Baren protest was Zeydin Yusuf, leader of the East Turkistan Islamic Party (ETIP).¹²⁰ A follower of Zeydin Yusuf was reported to have said that Yusuf was inspired by the concept of holy war of the *mujahidin* in Afghanistan.¹²¹ Bovingdon concludes that Baren and the Ghulja protest “were religiously motivated, and both emphasized public repudiation of the official policy on religion and the party’s claim to be the highest authority.”¹²² Alarmed by the religious elements in the protests, the state sought to intensify control of religious activities through juridicization and institutionalization. The “Temporary Rules for the Administration of Religious Personnel” were

¹¹⁷ In the late 19th and early 20th century, before socialist rule in Xinjiang, only limited restrictions were imposed on Islamic practice by provincial authorities. State policies were concerned with only the most visible manifestations of religion that were considered a threat to social and political stability. This state policy impeded certain reformist trends from gaining a foothold in the region, but did not interfere in more intimate areas of Islamic practice. Only after the Communists came to power did Beijing politics interfere systematically in the religious life of Uyghurs. (Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters in Xinjiang*, 422.) In the 1950s, the CCP tried to undermine the authority of religious elites by taking away their economic base. Property laws were changed and religious institutes were not allowed to withhold taxes. Agrarian reform and the wide-scale collectivization in the 1950s turned the whole country’s, including Xinjiang’s, social and economic life upside-down. (Castets, “The Modern Chinese State,” 228.)

¹¹⁸ Castets, “The Modern Chinese State,” 235. Erie, “Defining Shari’a in China,” 101.

¹¹⁹ MacKerras, “Religion in Contemporary Xinjiang,” 207.

¹²⁰ For a more detailed account of the Baren protests, see Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 123-24. According to former members interviewed by researcher Rémi Castets, the ETIP shifted its anticolonial and nationalist discourse to an Islamic discourse after the state shut down famous medrese in Karghilik in 1987-1988. Rémi Castets, “Uyghur Islam: Caught between Foreign Influences and Domestic Constraints,” in *China and India in Central Asia: A New “Great Game”?*, eds. Marlène Laruelle, Jean-François Huchet, Sébastien Peyrouse, and Bayram Balci (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 224.

¹²¹ MacKerras, “Religion in Contemporary Xinjiang,” 213.

¹²² Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 128.

drafted six months after the Baren protests, followed by the permanent “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Religious Affairs Regulations” in 1994.¹²³ A 1993 law protecting minors stipulated that parents and legal guardians are forbidden to allow children under eighteen to participate in religious activities.¹²⁴ Mosques were often only opened during prayer time, and restrictions on religious education for minors were more strictly enforced.¹²⁵ Private learning, male social gatherings (Uygh.: *meshrep* مەشرەپ) and shrine pilgrimages were considered “illegal religious activities.”¹²⁶ Every religious activity needed to obtain the approval of local authorities, which in practice meant that only a few officially regulated activities were conducted, and imams were checked by government informants and received punitive measures if their actions did not accord with government instructions.¹²⁷

Considering the economic, social and political situation of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, what can we say about the role of Islam? In the following chapter, I will explore the situation of Uyghur Islam more deeply. We will consider what possibilities and what difficulties the Uyghur community experienced with regard to their religious life in times not only of state restrictions, but also of rapid socio-economic change.

¹²³ Castets, “The Modern Chinese State,” 235-36.

¹²⁴ Mackerras, “Religion in Contemporary Xinjiang”, 207. Mackerras, “Religion and the Uyghurs,” 59-84.

¹²⁵ Allès, “Muslim Religious Education in China,” *China Perspectives [online]* 45 (2003): 2-3.
<http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/230>. Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*, 265.

¹²⁶ Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 87, 120.

¹²⁷ Castets, “The Modern Chinese State,” 236-37.

3. Islam, the State and Modernity among the Uyghurs

This chapter presents the questions and themes that originally lay at the center of the research project: how Uyghurs have been able to explore the Islamic tradition since the 1980s. While the overall research focus has shifted to Chinese policy rather than Uyghur religious life itself, it remains necessary to consider state policy from the perspective of the dynamics of Uyghur religious life. Uyghur Islam has been affected by Chinese policy but at the same time has not been completely dependent or just reactive to it. At the start of the 1980s, Uyghurs were quick to revive the places of worship that were shut down during the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Mosques that had been torn down were rebuilt with local community support, local government support or international funding.¹²⁸ Shrine visitations increased and former religious scholars took up positions again as imams and teachers as a network of Islamic education was steadily rebuilt. The 1980s in many ways was a time in which people tried to revive their earlier platforms of community, of which religious spaces such as mosques and shrines were an important part. In 1990 there were reported to be about 17,000 mosques and 43,000 “other places of religious activity” in Xinjiang.¹²⁹ At the same time as these platforms for Uyghur religious communal living were being revived, however, they were also transformed by completely new developments in Uyghur society. Reopened borders, new transportation and communication technology, urbanization, and socio-economic developments all changed the way knowledge about the Islamic tradition was circulating in Uyghur society.

Along with exploring changes in Uyghur Islamic practice, this chapter takes a theoretical approach to discussions about changing ideas of Islamic orthodoxy among Uyghurs. Since the 1990s scholars have observed a rise in instances where Uyghurs questioned the status quo of religious practices and beliefs, as well as increased mosque attendance, stricter observance of daily prayer, and later on different veiling practices.¹³⁰ It would be a mistake to explain the development that Uyghur Islam has gone through since the 1980s as stemming solely from changing state policies that stimulated, banned or repressed Uyghur religious practices. The evolution of Uyghur Islam is linked with the social, economic and political changes that strongly influence ideas and attitudes towards the

¹²⁸ Saudi money is sometimes mentioned as an important source for the mushrooming of mosques in Xinjiang in the 1980s, although it is difficult to find any hard numbers. See Rémi Castets, “The Modern Chinese State and Strategies of Control over Uyghur Islam,” *Central Asian Affairs* 2 (2015): 232.

¹²⁹ Colin Mackerras, “Religion and the Uyghurs: A Contemporary Overview,” in *The Uyghur Community: Diaspora, Identity and Geopolitics*, eds. Göljanat Kurmangaliyeva Ercilasun, Konuralp Ercilasun (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 80.

¹³⁰ Edmund Waite, “The Impact of the State on Islam amongst the Uyghurs: Religious Knowledge and Authority in the Kashgar Oasis,” *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 3 (2006): 261. Waite, “The Emergence of Muslim Reformism in Contemporary Xinjiang,” 178. Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*, 372. James Leibold and Timothy Grose, “Islamic Veiling in Xinjiang: The Political and Societal Struggle to Define Uyghur Female Adornment,” *The China Journal* 76 (2016): 84-85.

purpose and function of Islamic belief and practice. This is not to say that the state did not play a part in the way in which Uyghur perspective on Islam has evolved. On the contrary, it did. But to ignore Uyghur agency in Uyghurs' relation to Islam means ignoring the socio-economic transformation and the internal discursive field since the 1980s.

Because Chinese policies became increasingly restrictive around the time the current research project started, it was not possible to do extensive fieldwork or in-depth interviews in Xinjiang. Instead, the main original sources for this chapter are interviews I conducted among Uyghur diasporic communities in the Netherlands and Germany, as well as short-term observational fieldwork in Urumqi, Turpan, Kashgar and Khotan in 2013, 2015 and 2018. These sources supplement existing field research by researchers such as Ildikó Bellér-Hann, Rian Thum, Joanne Smith Finley and others, who conducted field research in Xinjiang between the 1980s and the early 2010s. Several people I interviewed had followed and taught Islamic education at different stages in the 1980s and 1990s across Xinjiang and abroad, from local Qur'anic classes to studies at Islamic universities. Through their accounts we can learn how new possibilities as well as new restrictions since the 1980s have shaped the way Uyghurs accessed the Islamic discursive tradition.¹³¹ This can tell us more about the condition of Uyghur Islam before the time of the policy shifts in the late 2010s, and put the role of Islam in the Xinjiang conflict into the broader perspective of the dynamics of the Uyghurs' relationship with Islam, modernity and the Chinese state.

3.1. Reviving Platforms of Uyghur Islamic Learning

It is difficult to clearly demarcate the places where Uyghurs "learn" about Islam, since Islam is part of the social fiber of Uyghur society, and as such every conversation, every situation, every interaction has the potential to be an implicit or explicit lesson on how to "be" Islamic. When looking at "Islamic education" more specifically, it can mean different things, from the training of Islamic scholars, to secular high school classes about Islam, to knowledge about Islam passed on within the family unit.¹³² There were state institutions for the training of specialists on Islam, which will be discussed in depth in the next chapters. This chapter focuses on education that is not organized by the state, on what I

¹³¹ Among my interviewees were seven Uyghur *molla* who lived either in Germany or the Netherlands since the early 2000s. Besides telling me about their own studies, some also recounted how their teachers or family members studied Islam. To learn more about the activities of these religious scholars in the diasporic communities, see Spiessens, "Diasporic Lives of Uyghur Mollas," (2021).

¹³² To quote Gregory Starrett's ideas about religious socialization: "[...], life is not divided between analytically discrete scenes or sources of religious socialization. Parents and relatives, the school, the mosque, the social service agency, the Ministry of Religious Endowments, programming on television and radio, government and private youth organizations, publications aimed at children; all of these shower religious language on the child like a cascade of boxes tumbling off the top shelf of an overcrowded closet." Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work: Education, Politics, and Religious Transformation in Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 124.

will call *minjian* Islamic education in Uyghur society. *Minjian* (pronounced as *mintʃen*) is a Chinese term which, when translated literally into English, means “(from) among the people.” It is used here to describe the Islamic educational system as it took shape within Uyghur society without state support or oversight. My use of the word *minjian* depends on the work of Leila Chérif-Chebbi and Matthew Erie, who have both employed this term to describe Islamic education within Chinese Muslim communities. Chérif-Chebbi translates the term as “popular” or “non-institutional.”¹³³ Erie points to *minjian*’s inherent idea of disconnection with the state, saying for example that “[s]cripture hall education is the *minjian* institution par excellence, because the curriculum and teaching were developed by Hui over a century independent of state intrusion.”¹³⁴ The term is suited for describing the evolution of Uyghur Islamic education, because the Uyghur Islamic educational system, until recently, was based on personal networks and resources, with little or no involvement of the Chinese state. It was a system vitally dependent on personal networks, community funding and individual effort and availability.¹³⁵

It was not just organized settings specifically set up to transfer knowledge about Islam, such as schools (*mektep* and *medrese*), that were central to the transmission of the Uyghur Islamic tradition; the family home or the public space offered equally important platforms for communicating Islam. Many of my interviewees related that their mother had taught them to recite the Qur’an when they were small children. It was often mothers who provided the first religious teachings, while formal religious training was supervised by male educators.¹³⁶ Uyghurs usually received basic lessons about Islam at home, through observation of and participation in habits and rituals of family members, or through explicit instruction by a parent. One of my interviewees, Adil, an important community figure in the Dutch Uyghur diasporic community, related how he never officially studied Islam, but learned what it means to be a Muslim from his father who showed him, for example, how to pray five times a day. And yet, it was the way his father always offered to help people in the community that made a lasting impression on him. And although Adil did not attend formal religious education himself and he did not see himself as very devout, the religious ethics passed down through his

¹³³ Leila Chérif-Chebbi, “Between ‘Abd al-Wahhab and Liu Zhi: Chinese Muslim Intellectuals at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century,” in *Islamic Thought in China: Sino-Muslim Intellectual Evolution from the 17th to the 21st Century*, ed. Jonathan Lipman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 197-232.

¹³⁴ Erie, *China and Islam*, 174.

¹³⁵ For an interesting discussion on the translatability of the term *minjian* in another context, see M. van Crevel, “Walk on the Wild Side: Snapshots of the Chinese Poetry Scene,” *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture Resource Center* 2017, 47-48, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://u.osu.edu/mclc/online-series/walk-on-the-wild-side>.

¹³⁶ In Uyghur communities, women’s religious education involved a different educational and occupational realm than that of male Uyghur religious professionals. Bellér-Hann has noted that informal religious education had always been the common practice for Uyghur women, whereas for men’s education, the recourse to informal educational circles because of state repression represented a disruption with the more expansive structural *minjian* religious education from the past. Bellér-Hann, *The Written and the Spoken*, 76.

father were part of the motivation to send his daughter to an Islamic school in the Netherlands.¹³⁷ In short, the role of non-institutional platforms in shaping religious understanding cannot be underestimated, especially when institutional platforms for Islamic knowledge transfer were limited or completely absent, as became the case in Xinjiang.

Mektep: Education in Islamic Sociability

State schooling, which became widespread over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, officially at least, did not provide room to discuss Islam.¹³⁸ *Mektep* education, sometimes referred to as mosque education, was the only institutional setting in which children could be educated about the Uyghur Islamic tradition with subjects such as the Qur'an, the Prophet, local saints, and Islamic history. *Mektep* education was situated within the discursive tradition of Islam, which provided the conceptual and historical framework for basic elements of culture and modes of behavior. Under the guidance of a local scholar, children were taught the basic skills necessary to function within their community. Children learned the basic tenets of Islam, the Islamic holidays, when to recite certain Qur'anic verses, the basics of Arabic script, and poetry from the Persian and Turki traditions.¹³⁹ This knowledge was cultural capital and was considered useful in Uyghur society. Especially in the early 20th century, the *mektep* functioned more as a setting to socialize children in their community rather than being a well-defined institute.¹⁴⁰ *Mektep* were founded by a neighborhood, and classes often took place in the mosque, in the house of the teacher, or, especially in summer, outside. The teacher received donations from the parents of his pupils on a regular basis, and again on holidays or upon the completion of certain stages in a pupil's education.¹⁴¹

After the closure and tearing down of mosques during the years of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1961) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the 1980s saw an explosive rebuilding of mosques by local communities under state relaxation. Although there was a shortage of learned religious leaders due to

¹³⁷ Author's interview with Adil, May 2016. We can draw a parallel here with what Ildikó Bellér-Hann has argued for the production of historical knowledge in Uyghur society; that it is a product of seemingly different realms that work together to create a pool of knowledge that people draw from and that they pass on in their interactions with others. Ildikó Bellér-Hann, "Feudal villains or just rulers? The contestation of historical narratives in eastern Xinjiang," *Central Asian Survey* 31, no. 3 (2012): 313, 323.

¹³⁸ Dilmurat Mahmut, "Controlling Religious Knowledge and Education for Countering Religious Extremism: Case Study of the Uyghur Muslims in China," *FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education* 5, no. 1 (2019): 23.

¹³⁹ Wang, *Uyghur Education and Social Order*, 297. Bellér-Hann, *The Written and the Spoken*, 46. Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 62-63. For *mektep* curricula in Central Asia, see Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform*, 26-27.

¹⁴⁰ In his study on the Jadid reformers in Central Asia, Adeeb Khalid cautions against comparing *mektep* with schools as we know them now, saying that "[t]he maktab was not a school at all in the sense of an institution set apart from other practices but a site for the acquisition by children of basic elements of culture and modes of behavior through interaction with an older, learned man." Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform*, 26.

¹⁴¹ Bellér-Hann, *The Written and the Spoken*, 46.

the gap in religious knowledge transmission over the previous decades, local communities were proactive in reviving Islamic education. According to a state survey, in 1990 there were 938 Qur'anic schools in Xinjiang, with a total of almost 10,000 students.¹⁴² As of the early 1990s, basic *minjian* Islamic education became a source of concern for the government. After the ethnic unrest in the town of Ghulja in 1996, religious education in mosques was forbidden, and mosques were only allowed to be open during prayer time. But it was especially after the turn of the century that religious education for children was made practically impossible. The government began to hold strictly to the already existing but previously unenforced rule that children under eighteen were not allowed to receive religious education. Full-time Qur'anic schools for children had always been forbidden, and now after-school teaching was no longer tolerated.¹⁴³

Medrese: Educating Religious Scholars

Important positions within Uyghur society have often been held by religious scholars, often called *molla*.¹⁴⁴ From my interviews with Uyghurs who studied and sometimes taught at Uyghur *medrese* in the 1980s and 1990s, I was able to get a basic idea of what a *molla*'s function was and what the education for religious scholars entailed. In the basic sense, a Uyghur *molla* is a Muslim intellectual, someone who has specialized knowledge about Islam, and is thereby granted a certain level of authority. A young Uyghur who wants to become a religious scholar would engage in further studies, often in the setting of a master-apprenticeship. The idea of *molla* education was to train people to become social leaders who could guide the community with their knowledge of the Islamic scriptural tradition. Depending on the acquired skillset, one could lead Friday prayer, offer legal advice, settle disputes, or become a high-level religious scholar who trained other scholars. While interviewees used the terms *molla* and imam interchangeably, they also used other denominations when describing different levels of religious scholars: *damolla* and *chong damolla*. When asking my interviewees about these appellations, their meaning was mainly expressed by the person's respective textual knowledge and authority. The general explanation I received from interviewees was that a *molla* can read the Qur'an and some Hadith, while a *damolla* is able to recite the Qur'an and read Hadith and *tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis). A *chong damolla* can do all of this, but beyond it has the authority to write about religious matters himself, and to hand out *ijāza*, which is a certificate that states that one is qualified to teach a specific scripture (see Figure 3). My interviewees said the system also entails functional differences. A *molla* can lead the prayer and teach basic religious knowledge to children. Because of their limited clerical function, *mollas* often have other jobs on the

¹⁴² Castets, "The Modern Chinese State," 233.

¹⁴³ Allès, "Muslim Religious Education in China," 2-3. MacKerras, "Religion in Contemporary Xinjiang," 207. Waite, "The Impact of the State on Islam amongst the Uyghurs," 258. Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 67.

¹⁴⁴ Wang, *Uyghur Education and Social Order*, 297-98.

side. *Damollas* are able to set up *medrese* and provide further education for those wishing to deepen their religious knowledge. They receive payments from their students and sometimes rely on the family business for financial support without engaging in the business themselves. The *chong damollas* are expected to engage in teaching, but also to produce religious commentaries themselves. One interviewee explained the *molla – damolla – chong damolla* hierarchy by comparing it to the schooling levels in the European educational system, saying that you could consider a *molla* as someone who finished high school, a *damolla* as someone who finished university, and a *chong damolla* as someone who was a professor at a university. However, the system is not rigidly institutionalized. Whether someone calls himself or is called a *molla*, *damolla* or *chong damolla* appears to depend on community understanding rather than on an institutionalized system of titlature. My interviewees said there were no clear qualifications for someone to receive a specific title. The degree of knowledge required to be recognized as a *damolla* or *chong damolla* seems to be dependent on the concentration of religious specialists in the area. My tentative observation is that this vagueness in hierarchy allows for a flexible system within a community that is limited by small numbers and geographical diffusion.

A large part of the education of Uyghur *mollas* consisted of informal training by a family member or by a local scholar. Higher stages of education involved moving to the next town in search of other, more learned scholars. In the 20th century, Xinjiang had few centers with larger gatherings for higher Islamic learning, so, for most people, studying higher Islamic theology or Islamic law meant traveling far and being away from home for a long time. After the *mektep* education, students went to study with other imams in the region, preferably with imams who had studied during the Republican period, or imams who had studied abroad. The *medrese* were platforms where one or more scholars would meet with colleagues and pupils. In Xinjiang, this was usually a mosque.¹⁴⁵ Although there certainly were different methodologies, the core of the *medrese* system was the personal teacher-pupil relationship. The teacher was considered a master in one or more scriptures and would pass this knowledge onto the pupil. One interviewee explained it as follows: “It is not something like a school, it is more like homeschooling. You sit there and you start with one book, with a few students together. You just finish the book, and then another book follows. That is how you learned.”¹⁴⁶ The time of studying was not set. It was dependent on the curriculum and how fast or slow the pupil could learn. If the teacher thought his student was ready, he would set a test and possibly grant his pupil the title of *molla*. If a student wished to obtain the higher title of *damolla*, he would be tested by multiple *mollas*. The curriculum and the type of “certification” a pupil could receive often

¹⁴⁵ One interviewee explained that, when he was studying in Kashgar, the mosques where he studied would have sleeping areas upstairs. Author’s interview with Tursun, July 2016.

¹⁴⁶ Author’s interview with Jusupjan, December 2016.

depended on the knowledge of the teacher, which is why many students traveled to study under different teachers. Depending on his capabilities and the length of study, a student was expected to become knowledgeable in the Arabic language, Hadith, Qur’anic exegesis and Islamic jurisprudence. Upon finishing a certain scripture, the pupil would receive an *ijāza*, that permits him to teach the scripture to other pupils himself. The chain of transmission is very important for the value of an *ijāza*. If someone does not possess an *ijāza*, then he cannot pass one on himself.

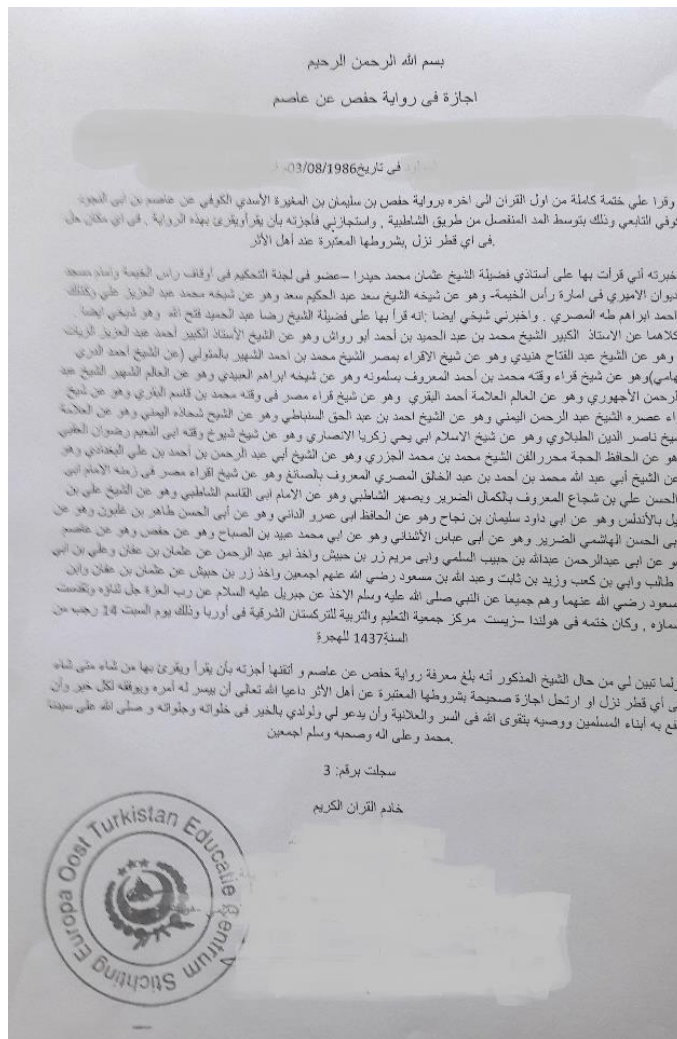


Figure 3: *ijāza* of an imam at the Dutch East Turkestan Education Center, with the name of the book on top, followed by the whole chain of transmission (photo by author, 2016)

Mobility was necessary for *molla* education. Learned imams were scarce, and students would leave their homeplace to study with other learned men in other cities.¹⁴⁷ Many of my interviewees studied in at least three different places in Xinjiang, if not more. One of my interviewees told the story of his father, who saw a chance to study in the new freedom of the 1980s. As he described it, his father had

¹⁴⁷ See also Castets, “Uyghur Islam,” 223. Castets, “The Modern Chinese State,” 233.

an interest in religion and wanted to teach his community, but he did not possess the necessary knowledge himself. So, starting his studies at the age of thirty-five, the father left his wife and children each year for a couple of months to go study. He went to study in Karkash, Kashgar and Karghilik, under reputable scholars such as Ablimet Damolla in Kashgar and Ablikim Makhsum in Karghilik. When he was back home, he would speak for the local mosque and teach basic religious education to his son and some ten to fifteen other boys in the village. In the months when he was gone, he arranged for them to attend classes in a nearby village with a local *molla*.¹⁴⁸

One of my interviewees, Tursun, has gone through virtually all the stages in the education of a Uyghur *molla*. Born in 1966, Tursun attended primary school from the age of six in a small town near Aqsu. After attending primary school and while in middle school, Tursun started studying under a local *molla* in his village. After finishing middle school and attending classes with different *molla* in his town, he went at the age of nineteen to study in Kashgar for two years under several *chong damolla*. Together with other students, he stayed at the mosque of his teachers, usually sleeping in an upstairs dorm, and took classes during the day. He returned to his town in 1987 and in the following year, went on pilgrimage to Mecca, traveling via Central Asia and Pakistan. After staying in Saudi Arabia for two months and visiting Mecca and Medina, Tursun traveled further to Cairo, where he would study at the renowned Al-Azhar University for seven years, from 1988 to 1995.¹⁴⁹ When he returned to Xinjiang, he became a *damolla* in his hometown. He attracted many students, also from other towns and villages, and he said that his popularity was soon seen as a threat to local state authorities. After refusing to listen to state directives, Tursun was imprisoned. After his release, he fled the country in 1999.¹⁵⁰

Just as with mosque education for children, adult *minjian* religious education became much more difficult since the late 1990s and even more so in the early 2000s. After statements by Xinjiang Party Secretary Wang Lequan in 1999 about the danger of *mollas* having too many pupils and *mollas* being laterally appointed, the 2001 law on religion was revised, stating that *mollas* could only serve in the mosque where they were trained.¹⁵¹ As of 2002, a *molla* in Xinjiang was only allowed two pupils, and the only officially recognized institute for Islamic education in the province was the Islamic Institute in Urumqi.¹⁵² During his fieldwork in 2003, Colin Mackerras noticed that, although many mosques still had space for theological schooling, there were fewer signs that they were actively functioning, in

¹⁴⁸ Author's interview with Jusupjan, December 2016.

¹⁴⁹ Al-Azhar is a world-renowned Islamic university in Cairo, Egypt. It was founded in 969 under the Fatimid dynasty, and started educating students in 975. Indira F. Gesink, *Islamic Reform and Conservatism: Al-Azhar and the Evolution of Modern Sunni Islam* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 2.

¹⁵⁰ Author's interview with Tursun, July 2016.

¹⁵¹ Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 67-68.

¹⁵² Allès, "Muslim Religious Education in China," 2-3. MacKerras, "Religion in Contemporary Xinjiang," 207. Waite, "The Impact of the State on Islam amongst the Uyghurs," 258. Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 67.

comparison to his earlier visits in the 1990s. During those earlier visits, it had also been much easier to interview students at the schools.¹⁵³

Mazar: Shrines and Saints

Shrines (Uygh.: *mazar* مازار) were important places of Uyghur Islamic sociability.¹⁵⁴ A 2001 study recorded more than 200 shrines all over Xinjiang.¹⁵⁵ The shrines of Sufi leaders such as Apaḡ Khoja and of scholars such as Mahmud Kashgari and Yusuf Khas Hajip are known throughout the whole of Xinjiang.¹⁵⁶ There are also more locally known shrines, such as those of craftsmen, who are believed to possess specific healing abilities.¹⁵⁷ A marked feature of Uyghur shrines are long poplar poles decorated with colorful flags and often animal carcasses, horns or skin. These poles are scattered all over the shrine's grounds and are fixed when conveying one's wishes to the shrine's saint (see Figures 4–7). My interviewees, who undertook their studies in the 1980s and 1990s, adamantly insisted that their study did not have anything to do with *mazar*, and that it exclusively concerned the Qur'an and other scriptures. But even though it may not have been the primary focus, pupils did receive from their teachers some introduction in the local saint traditions. One interviewee explained that his *damolla* mentioned figures like Yusuf Khas Hajip, Mahmud Kashgari and Satuḡ Bughra Khan as examples. He said that "we were told about these people, and that they are holy because they did good things for the people. Out of interest, we would visit the *mazar* by ourselves." But the focus of study, he emphasized, was the Qur'an and its meaning.¹⁵⁸

Dr. Rahile Dawut of Xinjiang University is known for her extensive studies on Uyghur *mazar*. In her studies, she emphasizes that shrine visitations were very functional, and not just static reminders of the past. Shrines were believed to help solve problems, both communal and personal. For example, when there was a water shortage, people of a village would bring offerings for the saint believed to be buried at the *mazar* in the hopes that it would bring rain. Or when a woman had trouble becoming pregnant, she would visit a shrine known for fertility. According to Dawut shrine visitations were primarily about current problem-solving, and a shrine's specific function had more meaning

¹⁵³ Mackerras, "Religion and the Uyghurs," 66.

¹⁵⁴ Several authors have written on *mazar*, such as Rahile Dawut, Rachel Harris, Thierry Zarcone, Togan Isenbike, Karl Reich, Minoru Sawada, and Rian Thum.

¹⁵⁵ Rachel Harris and Rahilä Dawu, eds., "Mazar Festivals of the Uyghurs: Music, Islam and the Chinese State," *British Journal of Ethnomusicology* 11, no. 1 (2002): 103.

¹⁵⁶ Rahilä Dawut, "Shrine Pilgrimage and Sustainable Tourism among the Uyghurs: Central Asian Ritual Traditions in the Context of China's Development Policies," in *Situating the Uyghurs Between China and Central Asia*, eds. Ildikó Bellér-Hann et al. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 151.

¹⁵⁷ Harris and Dawut, "Mazar Festivals of the Uyghurs," 103.

¹⁵⁸ Author's interview with Tursun, July 2016.

than its—often forgotten—history.¹⁵⁹ An indirect function of the shrine visitations lay in their potential to connect people from all over Xinjiang. Especially large yearly *mazar* festivals, usually held in the low farming period between March and October, were important gatherings for people who otherwise had no means to communicate and interact.¹⁶⁰ These pilgrimage festivals were festive occasions, with lots of ritual, storytelling, trading, and music. Dawut described the largest of these shrine festivals, the Ordam festival near Kashgar, for which people traveled with trucks and donkey carts for days or weeks, for the road to the shrine was already part of the experience.¹⁶¹ Shrines were important platforms for rituals of Uyghur Islamic tradition to be lived and experienced and they served as important sites of economic, cultural exchange, and entertainment. Researcher Rian Thum relates how the Imam Shakir shrine near Khotan, before it was shut down by authorities in 2009, functioned as a site of communal religious experiences:

In the hour or two before the midday prayer, pilgrims would gather behind the shaykh on the dunes, kneeling in the sand and facing eastward toward the tomb of the martyred saint Imam Shakir. There the shaykh and others took turns reciting Qur'anic passages and Uyghur-language *hükmät*, songs comprised of verses from Central Asian Sufi poets such as Yasavi, or versified narratives about early Islamic figures such as the prophet Muhammad's daughter Fatima.¹⁶²

Besides being a site of offerings, petitions, and prayers, Uyghur *mazar* were also a place where textual performances of saints' biographies were held. Biographical texts of the shrine's saint(s), known as *tazkirah*, were kept at shrines and performed to visiting pilgrims. Since shrine activities have become strictly regulated by the Chinese government, *tazkirahs* have been removed from the shrines and performances have been discouraged and eventually forbidden. Thum, who has performed extensive research on the *tazkirah* tradition, says that *tazkirah* readings have been relatively successfully repressed, although he experienced during his fieldwork in the early 2010s some small-scale, informal ways in which the information of the *tazkirahs* was preserved and passed on.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Lisa Ross, *Living Shrines of Uyghur China: Photographs by Lisa Ross*. With the assistance of Alexandre Papas and Rahilä Dawut (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2013), 121-22.

¹⁶⁰ Dawut, "Shrine Pilgrimage and Sustainable Tourism among the Uyghurs," 151.

¹⁶¹ Ross, *Living Shrines of Uyghur China*, 122. Dawut, "Shrine Pilgrimage and Sustainable Tourism among the Uyghurs," 153.

¹⁶² Thum, *The Sacred routes of Uyghur History*, 101–2.

¹⁶³ Thum, 87.

Since the 1990s, the Chinese state has labelled many practices connected to the shrines as “illegal religious activities.”¹⁶⁴ The state has long been wary of the authority of *shaykhs* and the practices of saint veneration and has portrayed their practices as backward and exploitative of the population.¹⁶⁵ Shrines and large shrine festivals were platforms for activities that were hard for authorities to regulate, and they often were feared because they could draw in large groups of people. While officials did not hinder all religious activities, they did curtail large-scale events.¹⁶⁶ Over the years, many of the shrines were either closed down or turned into a museum-like site, estranged from or inaccessible to the local population.¹⁶⁷ Local policies could differ widely, though. Dawut related, for example, how the Ordam festival in Kashgar was banned in 1997, but then also how the local government in Khotan throughout the 1990s and early 2000s supported the festival at the Imam Asim site, which was held yearly in May-June, and received around 20,000 visitors each year. She expressed the hope that the policy for the Imam Asim festival could serve as an example for reinstating the Ordam festival.¹⁶⁸ However, Rian Thum has said that while the Imam Asim festival was held until at least 2010, officials stopped pilgrims from accessing the shrine when he was there in 2013. They did not stop all activities, though, and Thum relates how he himself was able to circumvent the restrictions by slipping onto the site together with a smaller group of fifteen pilgrims.¹⁶⁹ When I visited the Imam Asim *mazar* in autumn 2015, although quiet at the time of my visit, there were clear signs that religious activities were still taking place at the site, with a large amount of what seemed to be recently erected poles with cloth and hides amid older ones (see Figures 4–7). Signs of state management of the site were present, and there were several posters and banners on the site (see Figure 8). The site was not part of a tour itinerary, though, and our driver found my request to go there peculiar. In contrast, the shrine for the well-known author Mahmud Kashgari at Opal village near Kashgar was clearly prepared for foreign and domestic tourists in 2015 (see Figures 9–13). Named a protected National Cultural Relic Site since 2006, it was a vast terrain with maps and signs in English, Chinese and Uyghur, as well as a museum-like exhibition in the main hall. The exhibition hall’s courtyard was undergoing renovations at the time of my visit in 2015. Signs on the site said the Xinjiang government had undertaken the initial restoration of the site in 1983–1985. The exhibition hall showed several pictures of government officials visiting the site. During my visit, I encountered two Uyghur families visiting the site, who recounted that they were

¹⁶⁴ Thum, 87, 120. See also the text observed by Frederick de Jong in Aqsu in 2009 called “Specification of the 24 Kinds of Illegal Religious Activities”. Frederick de Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context: Life in Shinjiang Documented from Public Places* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 119–28.

¹⁶⁵ Castets, “The Modern Chinese State,” 229–30. Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 87, 120.

¹⁶⁶ Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 120.

¹⁶⁷ Thum, 120–21.

¹⁶⁸ Dawut, “Shrine Pilgrimage and Sustainable Tourism among the Uyghurs,” 154.

¹⁶⁹ Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 120–21.

from another town in Xinjiang and had never been to the site before and that as tourists they enjoyed learning more about their history. There were indications that the site was being used for religious activities, having some scattered bundles of flagpoles away from the main path (see Figure 14). While I had no difficulties accessing the Mahmud Kashgari site in 2015, my driver in 2018 claimed not to know the site and drove past it.¹⁷⁰



Figure 4: Author at Imam Asim mazar site near Khotan, with poles with flags and animal skin (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, November 2015)

¹⁷⁰ I did not push him on the matter due to the tense circumstances in 2018. Unfortunately, I could not return for another attempt due to time restrictions.



Figure 5: Flagpoles along the path leading towards the main Imam Asim mazar site near Khotan (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, November 2015)



Figure 6: Entrance to the main Imam Asim mazar site which holds the central shrine, Khotan (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, November 2015)



Figure 7: Praying area around Imam Asim tomb (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, November 2015)



Figure 8: State poster saying “Strengthen unity, build a peaceful mosque” at Imam Asim mazar in Khotan (photo by author, November 2015)

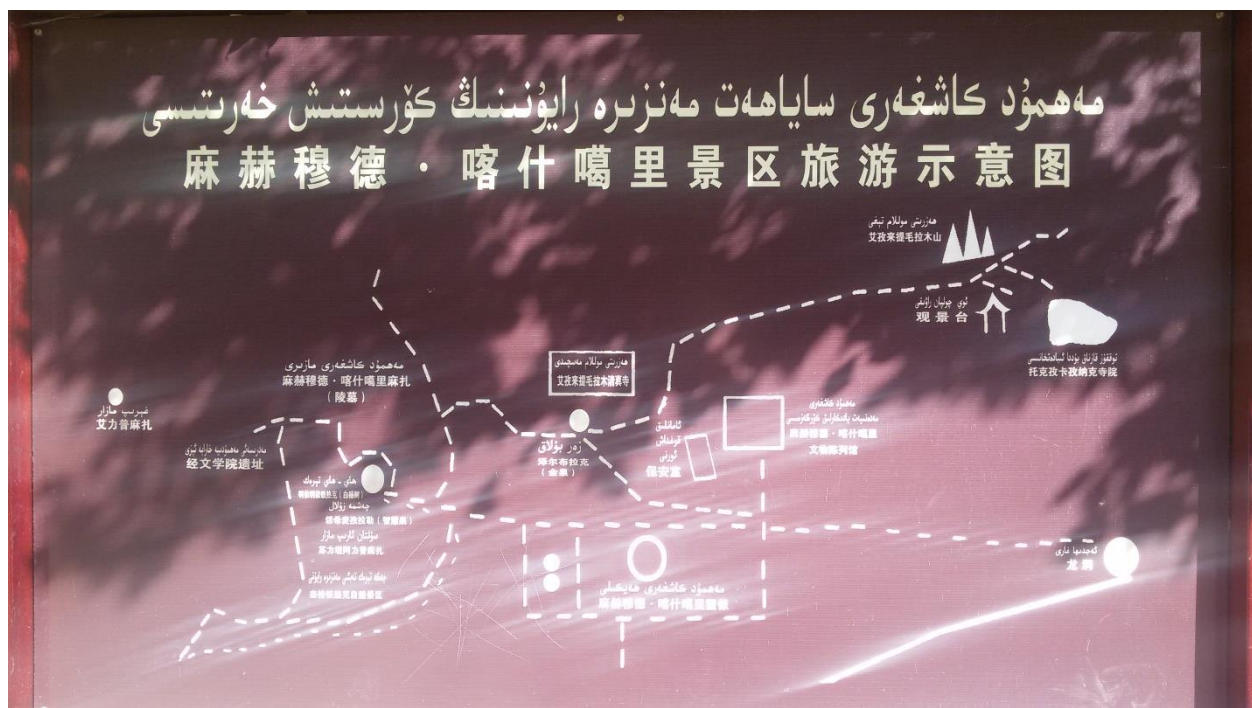


Figure 9: Map of the Mahmud Kashgari shrine site, Opal (photo by author, October 2015)



Figure 10: Sign at the entrance of the Mahmud Kashgari site, Opal (photo by author, October 2015)



Figure 11: Main building of the Mahmud Kashgari site, Opal (photo by author, October 2015)



Figure 12: Staircase toward the entrance of the Mahmud Kashgari site's main building, which features a large portrait of Mahmud Kashgari. (photo by author, October 2015)

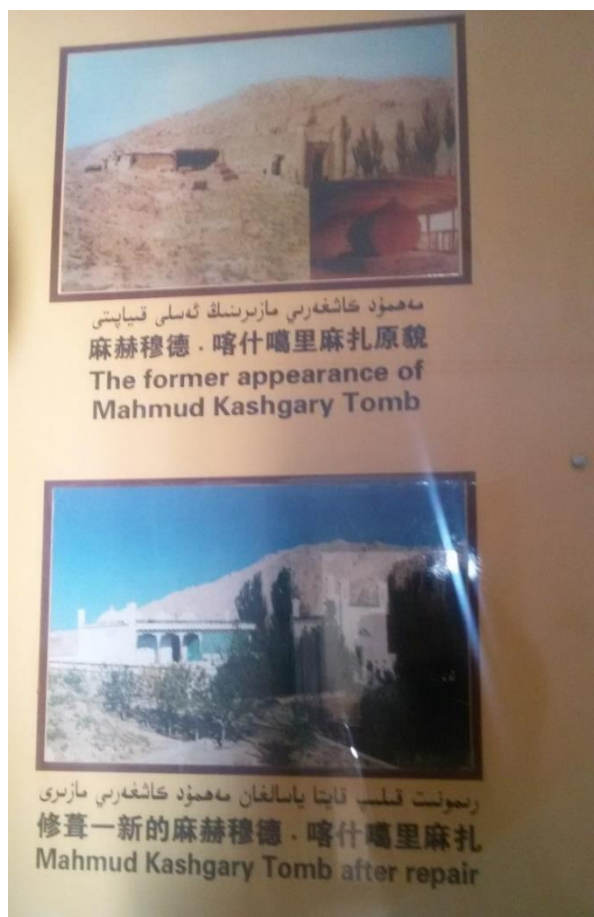


Figure 13: Sign in the exhibition hall at the Mahmud Kashgari site in Opal, showing the results of the site's renovations (photo by author, October 2015)



Figure 14: Flagged poles at the Mahmud Kashgari site, Opal (photo by author, October 2015)

3.2. New Paths of Islamic Learning

The revival of old knowledge and old platforms was joined by possibilities that had not been there before the Cultural Revolution. In particular, open borders and a changing economy since the 1980s, state schooling and literacy, and digital media in the 21st century have shaped new paths of Islamic learning for Uyghurs. At the same time, Chinese politics posed a challenge, as the Chinese state tried to come to grips with this resurgence and created an environment where both the revived platforms and newly explored paths were very quickly being shut down.

International Travel

Central Asian cities such as Bukhara and Tashkent were important centers of learning for Uyghur religious specialists in the 19th and early 20th century.¹⁷¹ Due to the Sino-Soviet split, cross-border contacts with Central Asia were still relatively limited in 1985, but Justin Rudelson has remarked on how rapidly that changed in the following years: “By 1989, cross-border travel had increased so much that an Aeroflot desk was opened at the Overseas Chinese Hotel in Urumchi. Over the past several years, many Uyghurs have begun to receive letters from family members in Central Asia for the first time since 1962. At the Turpan post office I was often asked to help people write letters in Russian to Uyghurs or help post office personnel read packages addressed in Russian to Turpanliks.”¹⁷² Until 1985, people that wanted to travel to Soviet Central Asia to visit their family had to travel to Beijing to request permission. The permission presented less of a hurdle after Uyghurs were able to request permission in Urumqi instead of Beijing.¹⁷³ As travel became more viable, even if expensive, more people found their way to Central Asia, but also beyond. Until the mid-1990s, hundreds of Uyghurs went to study in Pakistan, Turkey and the Middle East.¹⁷⁴ The Al-Azhar University in Cairo, arguably the most renowned institution of Islamic study, was a popular destination for aspiring Islamic scholars.¹⁷⁵ One of my interviewees, who studied at Al-Azhar in the late 1980s, attested to its position as an important place of Islamic authority: “My plan was to go study in Egypt after I had been on Hajj. Al-Azhar has a history of more than 1000 years, a very strong Islamic history. These professors know what real Islam is. I wanted to learn that too, and that is why I went there.”¹⁷⁶ The Arabo-Islamic world held an important position, due to its perceived authority as the center of

¹⁷¹ Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 174. Zarcone, “Le culte des saints au Xinjiang de 1949 à nos jours,” 138.

¹⁷² Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, 52.

¹⁷³ Rudelson, 52.

¹⁷⁴ Mamutjan Abdurehim, “Transnational Migration and Religious Practice: Uyghur Students in Malaysia,” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 35, no. 4 (2015): 556, 568. Castets, “Uyghur Islam,” 226-27.

¹⁷⁵ Castets, “Uyghur Islam,” 233.

¹⁷⁶ Author’s interview with Tursun, who studied at Al-Azhar between 1988 and 1995.

Islam.¹⁷⁷ Also the central role of Arabic as the language of Islam drew many Uyghurs to the Middle East, as illustrated by this interviewee who studied in Yemen: “I wanted to study in an Arabic country. Because Islam is actually the Arabic language. If you want to study Islam, you have to know Arabic. I thought to myself, if I want to be proficient, I have to go to an Arabic country.”¹⁷⁸ *Medrese* curricula invariably contained a large portion of Arabic language training, and it was usually the first item Uyghur *mollas* mentioned when asked what they had learned during their studies. The necessity to study Arabic, aside from the strong imaginary of the Middle East as the center of Islam, was an incentive for religious students to pursue their foreign education in an Arabic-majority country. Sometimes, Uyghurs first went to Mecca and Medina for the Hajj and afterwards traveled further to pursue studies at a foreign institution. But the number of pilgrims to Mecca was limited and people wanting to go abroad had to obtain valid travel visas, which often required a lot of time, connections, and significant sums of money.¹⁷⁹ Rudelson relates how in the late 1980s many Uyghurs asked him to translate declarations of Pakistani friends or vague acquaintances in Pakistan that stated that they were inviting their “Uyghur family members” to come visit them and join them on Hajj. These types of declarations were necessary if Uyghurs wanted to obtain official permission to go abroad.¹⁸⁰ In the 1990s, Pakistan served as a major transit point for both Uyghur pilgrims and refugees. Uyghurs made use of different *waqf* buildings in Pakistan, established by previous generations of rich Uyghur merchant migrants. One of my interviewees explained how from 1995 to 1997 many young Uyghurs in search of education abroad traveled first to Pakistan. They were able to cross the border in relatively large numbers by using old passports of former Uyghur Hajj pilgrims or the papers of traders who had to cross the Pakistani border for their merchandise. The students came together in the buildings that were owned and run solely by Uyghurs. These buildings were used by Uyghur students, pilgrims and traders who would come there in the weekend to talk and trade.¹⁸¹ Rémi Castets recounts how it was not always easy for Uyghurs to study abroad because foreign governments were sometimes reluctant to accept Uyghur students because of Chinese pressure. Since the late 1990s, the Pakistani government pushed back against the influx of Uyghur students because of Chinese state pressure. They deported students that did not have regular status, and

¹⁷⁷ One attestation to the pull of the Arabo-Islamic world among Uyghurs is the observed trend whereby people prefer to give their children Arabic names instead of Uyghur ones. Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*.

¹⁷⁸ Author’s interview with Jusupjan, who studied Islamic theology at a university in Yemen in the 1990s.

¹⁷⁹ Rudelson estimated the costs for going on Hajj in 1990 to be around 10,000 RMB/1,850 USD. Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, 50.

¹⁸⁰ Because of the many applications, the Chinese state issued a three-year stop in 1990. Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, 49.

¹⁸¹ Author’s interview with Jusupjan. See also Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, 49. See also Alessandro Rippa, “From Uyghurs to Kashgari: A Pakistani community finds itself caught between two worlds,” *The Diplomat*, December 20, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/12/from-uyghurs-to-kashgari/?allpages=yes>.

pressured local Islamic schools not to take on Uyghur students.¹⁸² Turkey, a favored destination because of linguistic and cultural affinity, was home to a large Uyghur diasporic community and had a political climate that was generally unproblematic for Uyghurs. But there were instances where Turkish institutes and authorities pushed back against the influx of Uyghurs due to Chinese pressure. The large Uyghur community in Turkey in some instances compensated when official support was missing. For example, after the University of Marmara stopped accepting Uyghur students after 2001, Uyghur Marmara alumni set up the Association for East Turkestan Culture and Solidarity in 2006, an association with a strong Islam-oriented program.¹⁸³ Around the beginning of the 21st century, many Uyghurs also went to study in Malaysia. According to some estimates, there were 200 to 250 Uyghur students in Malaysia in 2010.¹⁸⁴ The students that left China to go on pilgrimage or to study over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s often did so illegally, and Castets notes how returning to Xinjiang after one had left the country without authorization increasingly became a risk to Uyghurs, especially in the 21st century, when the risk of retaliation has become so grave that it has kept many students from returning to China at all.¹⁸⁵ According to Rudelson, it is partly as a result of this that the Uyghur diasporic communities in Saudi Arabia and Turkey have grown so steadily.¹⁸⁶

One of the other options for Uyghurs to study outside of their home region was to study in the more relaxed Hui communities in other provinces. But in the early 21st century, the Hui schools in China's inner provinces increasingly became reluctant to take on Uyghur students.¹⁸⁷ Anthropologist Matthew Erie observed that since the 2009 Urumqi riots, Uyghur students were regarded with suspicion:

Following the events of July 2009, most Uyghur students were expelled from madrasas throughout northwestern Gansu and elsewhere in the Hui-dominated parts of the Northwest. [...] A series of measures restricted students' movements. For instance, in April 2010 the Linxia City BRA required all students to register with the bureau. I saw students filling out a form that asked for their scriptural name, Chinese name, hometown, age, and ethnicity. [...] A cleric told me that these measures were developed to identify local students versus 'outsiders,' and particularly those from Xinjiang (i.e., Uyghurs).¹⁸⁸

¹⁸² Castets, "Uyghur Islam," 233. Sean R. Roberts, "A 'Land of Borderlands': Implications of Xinjiang's Trans-border Interactions," in *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland*, ed. Frederick S. Starr (London: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 232.

¹⁸³ Turkish name of the association: *Doğu Türkistan Maarif ve Dayanışma Derneği*. Rémi. "Uyghur Islam," 233.

¹⁸⁴ Abdurehim, "Transnational Migration and Religious Practice," 556, 568.

¹⁸⁵ Castets, "Uyghur Islam," 233.

¹⁸⁶ Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, 51.

¹⁸⁷ Castets, "The Modern Chinese State," 241.

¹⁸⁸ Erie, *China and Islam*, 188.

But even at times that Hui schools did still accept Uyghur students, foreign institutes of Islamic learning held a level of legitimacy and authority and a certain freedom in religious exploration that Islamic schools in inner China did not offer.

New Sources of Knowledge: Books, Audiovisual Media and the Internet in Xinjiang

Open borders not only made it possible for Uyghurs to go abroad, but they also allowed goods and discourses to find their way into Xinjiang. Before the internet arrived on the scene, books and cassette tapes were the most important media that brought new sounds to the region.¹⁸⁹ Bellér-Hann has noted how in 1990s Xinjiang, tapes with religious poems, music and songs used for private religious gatherings and worship were smuggled from Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. She emphasized the power of these unauthorized oral transmissions, both among peasants as well as among the more literate groups in society.¹⁹⁰ In the period between the late 1980s and the early 2010s, books circulated with relative ease. Even when internal print publications on Islam remained limited, foreign books on Islam were brought to Xinjiang by merchants and then translated and copied into Uyghur.¹⁹¹ Historian Rian Thum has observed that before the late 1970s, printed Uyghur publications were limited to papers and magazines, but since the 1980s, also Uyghur books started to circulate in printed format.¹⁹² Since 1986, several Uyghur translations of the Qur'an have appeared.¹⁹³ Rudelson recounts how in Turpan in the 1990s, Qur'ans, Islamic books and various pamphlets were sold outside of mosques. The content ranged from prayer instructions to lists of saints mentioned in the Bible, the New Testament and the Qur'an.¹⁹⁴ Throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, books on religion were available to Uyghurs in state bookshops, although the number of Uyghur books on religion remained limited. The publicly available books on religion that Edmund Waite observed in the early 2000s included for example *Hadiths Concerning Social Relations and Moral Conduct* by Q. Ekber and A. Damollam (eds.), *Answers and Questions about the Muslim Religion* by A. Imin (ed.), *Islamic Law* by A. Sabit (ed.) and *Philosophical Thought from the Qur'an* by Yang Chichen (ed.), translated into Uyghur by Obul Islam and Zahit Rehim.¹⁹⁵ During my visits in 2013 and 2015, there were several books on Islam in the Xinhua state bookshops, including a series of short biographical stories of historical and religious figures that included Muhemmet Siddiq Zelili and

¹⁸⁹ As anthropologist Charles Hirschkind has argued for cassette sermons in mid-1990s Egypt, audiovisual mass media were an important new aspect of religious mediation that created an attractive arena of Islamic argumentation. Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 12.

¹⁹⁰ Bellér-Hann, *The Written and the Spoken*, 86.

¹⁹¹ Castets, "Uyghur Islam," 226-27.

¹⁹² Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 193.

¹⁹³ Waite, "The Impact of the State on Islam amongst the Uyghurs," 259.

¹⁹⁴ Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, 81.

¹⁹⁵ Waite, "The Impact of the State on Islam amongst the Uyghurs," 265.

Ibn Sina.¹⁹⁶ Through print, the shrine manuscript tradition of *tazkirah* also found new paths to circulate in Uyghur society. Rian Thum observed that while *tazkirah* readings at shrines were being forbidden and manuscripts confiscated, the stories were republished in journals and books. But as Thum pointed out, the publication of *tazkirahs* in journals and research reports was lost on the majority of shrine visitors and shrine keepers.¹⁹⁷ Some *tazkirah* manuscripts were still being copied in secret in the 2010s, but many have been lost, and even more remained completely unknown to the younger Uyghur generation.¹⁹⁸ But while the *tazkirah* genre was unknown to most young Uyghurs, its new form, the historical novel, became quite popular for a time. Fictionalized biographies of local heroes were a new way of passing on the stories of important historical religious figures.¹⁹⁹ Although certainly not all characters of these historical novels were figures from the *tazkirah* tradition, several biographical novels were published of what Thum calls “saints of the nation,” such as Satuq Bughra Khan (1987), Apaq Khoja (published in 2000 by Xinjiang Press, banned in 2001) and Yusuf Khas Hajip (2002).²⁰⁰ As Thum has argued, the *tazkirah* genre was not entirely displaced, but rather was transformed and tailored to an environment characterized by “new kinds of education, new modes of knowledge, and new technologies.”²⁰¹

While print and tapes provided their own paths of information exchange, the internet presented a whole new platform for the exchange of religious knowledge and experiences. Access to internet progressed at a rapid pace in Xinjiang over the 21st century, evolving from internet cafes to smartphones. Edmund Waite reported having relatively free access to internet cafes in Kashgar and other places in Xinjiang in 2003. When coming back a year later, in 2004, access had become hindered by applications for user permits.²⁰² But while access to internet cafes was becoming more restricted, the number of web users continued to rise rapidly in the 21st century. Statistics show that between 2004 and 2016, the internet penetration rate in Xinjiang had risen from 6.20% to 54.9 %, with 1.19 million web users in 2004 and 12.96 million web users in 2016.²⁰³ Over this period, state

¹⁹⁶ Tursunbeg Ibrahim Taymas; Qurbanjan Baqi, *Bilqut balilar shekhis hékayiliri - Muhemmed Siddiq Zalili*, Shinjang éléktron ün-sin neshriyati / Shinjang bilqut shirkite tüzüldi, 2011. Tursunbeg Ibrahim Taymas, Qurbanjan Baqi, *Bilqut balilar shekhis hékayiliri - Ibn Sina*, Shinjang éléktron ün-sin neshriyati / Shinjang bilqut shirkite tüzüldi, 2011.

¹⁹⁷ Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 194-95.

¹⁹⁸ Thum, 163.

¹⁹⁹ Thum, 164-65.

²⁰⁰ For a list of biographical novels published between 1987 and 2003, see Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 204.

²⁰¹ Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 164.

²⁰² Waite, “The Emergence of Muslim Reformism in Contemporary Xinjiang,” in *Situating the Uyghurs Between China and Central Asia*, eds. Ildikó Bellér-Hann et al. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 173.

²⁰³ ChinaPower CSIS, “China Provincial Internet Penetration Rate,” downloaded at <https://chinapower.csis.org/data/internet-penetration-statistics-province/>. CNNIC, China Internet Network Information Center, “39th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China,” CNNIC website, January 2017, page 42, <https://cnnic.com.cn/IDR/ReportDownloads/>.

monitoring and control of web usage in Xinjiang evolved at an equally fast pace. After the Urumqi riots in July 2009, the internet was blocked for everyone in Xinjiang, including Han businesses, and it was not possible to receive or make international phone calls for ten months. After about six months, a few state-run websites like *Xinhua* and *The People's Daily* were made accessible, but it took another four months for complete internet access to be restored, albeit in a highly censored form.²⁰⁴ In the whole of China, YouTube was banned for short periods in 2007 and 2008, and completely banned after the protest in Tibet in 2009. After the Urumqi riots in 2009, Twitter, Flickr and Facebook were also banned.²⁰⁵ But these state restrictions did not make Uyghur web usage stop dead in its tracks. Researchers Rachel Harris and Isa Aziz observed how the social networking platform WeChat (Ch.: *weixin* 微信, Uygh.: *ündidar* ئۈندىدار) became highly popular among Uyghurs in 2013. There were over 1 million Uyghur users of WeChat from mid-2013 to mid-2014. During this period, they noticed a steady increase in religious content that was being shared. An example of such content was a transnational Islamic charity group, consisting of higher educated Uyghurs from Kashgar, Urumqi, Guangzhou, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Europe and Kazakhstan, which gathered and donated money to the sick and poor in Southern Xinjiang.²⁰⁶ Harris and Isa noted how most of the religious content was apolitical, and some of it was openly confrontational. In the summer of 2014, the state issued a crackdown on unwanted content on WeChat, and Uyghurs were forced to become more circumspect with what they said and shared on WeChat, and religion-inspired content was censored.²⁰⁷

3.3. Dynamics of Uyghur Islamic Orthodoxy

The last part of this chapter addresses Uyghur Islamic orthodoxy discussions since the 1980s. While it is interesting to note which practices are on the rise and which practices are dwindling, changing ideas of religious orthodoxy is something of all ages. The immediate goal is not to discuss how Uyghur Islamic practices and ideas have changed, but rather to illustrate the relevance of the technological, social, economic and political circumstances of Uyghurs with regard to changing Islamic orthodoxy. The controversies and possibilities caused by the democratization of Islamic knowledge were undeniably present in Uyghur society, where they converged with other disruptive socio-economic factors of a modernizing society as well as with the authoritarian aspirations of the Chinese state.

²⁰⁴ Josh Summers, "Living Without Internet for a Year (the REAL Story)," *Far West China*, April 21, 2014, <https://www.farwestchina.com/blog/living-without-internet-in-xinjiang/>.

²⁰⁵ Matteo Vergani and Dennis Zuev, "Neojihadist Visual Politics: Comparing YouTube Videos of North Caucasus and Uyghur Militants," *Asian Studies Review* 39, no. 1 (2015): 8.

²⁰⁶ Rachel Harris and Aziz Isa, "Islam by Smartphone: The Changing Sounds of Uyghur Religiosity," *Sounding Islam in China*, last updated May 9, 2020, www.soundislamchina.org/?p=1277.

²⁰⁷ Harris and Isa, "Islam by Smartphone."

The reflexivity on one's position in the Islamic tradition is often discussed in literature under the concept of the "objectification" of Islam.²⁰⁸ Conceptualized by American anthropologist Dale Eickelman, the objectification of Islam is described as a distinct modern phenomenon, occurring when large numbers of people begin to question what their religion is, what meaning it has for them, and how it influences their conduct.²⁰⁹ Instead of being embedded in everyday social practice, Islam now was something that could and should be defined and explained, alongside other aspects of life.²¹⁰ Viewed within a larger frame, this objectification of Islam fits the reflexive self-identification and cultural reification that features so prominently in modern societies. Tradition needs to be chosen and defended: it is no longer a given.²¹¹ Researchers have shown that modernity cannot be described as the reason why people start to question their religion and culture. Anthropologist Saba Mahmood has criticized the oversimplification of the idea of the objectification of Islam as a clear-cut shift from unconscious enactment of tradition to a critical reflection upon tradition. Instead, she emphasized that we have to look at this change within the changing conditions for reflection on one's tradition. She says it is true that modern conditions of increased literacy, urban mobility and mass media provide the tools for a wider group of people to engage with doctrinal reasoning. However, they are not the *reason* that people start to engage differently with their tradition. Rather, it is the search for answers to specific problems that leads people to questions and changes.²¹² Using Cairo's women's mosque movement since the 1970s as an example, Mahmood explains that their practices "have not emerged as a result of an abstract tendency toward objectification, but are provoked by a specific problem, namely, the concern for learning to organize one's daily life according to Islamic standards of virtuous conduct in a world increasingly ordered by a logic of secular rationality that is inimical to the sustenance of these virtues."²¹³ What Mahmood's research has shown is that the reason for a changing Islamic discourse is not a universal modern tendency of critical engagement with one's tradition. Reforms have been part and parcel of any discursive

²⁰⁸ See for example Adeeb Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform*, 1998; Gregory Starrett, *Putting Islam to Work*, 1998; Benjamin C. Fortna, *Imperial Classroom*, 2002; Muhammad Q. Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 2002; Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Gregory Starrett, *Teaching Islam*, 2006.

²⁰⁹ Dale F. Eickelman, "Mass Higher Education and the Religious Imagination in Contemporary Arab Societies," *American Ethnologist* 19 (1992): 643.

²¹⁰ The idea of Islam as a consciously distinct aspect of life is not just something belonging to reformist thinkers; it is also used by so-called "traditionalists" in their defense of the position of Islam in society. Muhammad Q. Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam: Custodians of Change* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 15, 63.

²¹¹ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London: Pluto Press, 2010), 95, 184.

²¹² Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 54-56.

²¹³ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 56.

tradition and can be motivated by a variety of factors ranging from the political to the economic to the philosophical. As researcher Gary Bunt has stated, “Frequently, reform was sought in response to a shift in historical circumstances: invasion, expansion, colonialism and emigration have all stimulated reappraisals of Islamic interpretation.”²¹⁴ It is specific challenges that drive the direction of inquiries and change. Modern circumstances simply allow for questions to be discussed under different conditions than before. As we have seen in the current and previous chapter, the new conditions that Uyghurs have faced since the 1980s were manifold: urbanization, China’s civilizing project, Han chauvinism, economic chances as well as economic exclusion, and enhanced as well as limited contact to the world outside of the Uyghur community. Each of these changing social, economic and political factors had their impact on Uyghur engagement through ideas about religiosity, identity and modernity. They prompted specific questions that drove new approaches to the Islamic tradition. These questions were met with changing platforms in which to explore answers.

Uyghur Traditional Religious Authorities and Reformists

At the turn of the 21st century, earlier reform movements were in some form remembered and picked up in debates about Uyghur orthodoxy. In the early 20th century, Uyghur reformers wanted to reformulate Uyghur culture around a modernist discourse, which included a modern type of Islam.²¹⁵ Largely influenced by Central Asian Jadids, who were a diverse group of intellectuals, publishers and educators who advocated new thinking, the “new schools” founded by reformists in Xinjiang wanted new methods of teaching Arabic and new approaches to Qur’anic education.²¹⁶ The figure that became most symbolic of the early reform movements in Xinjiang is Abdulqadir Damolla (1862-1924). Abdulqadir was born in Artush and became a renowned Uyghur Islamic scholar at the turn of the 20th century. In 1891 he went to study in Bukhara for eight years, studying the works of Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn al-Qayyūm, Jamāl al-Dīn Afghānī and Muhammad ‘Abduh. After returning to Kashgar,

²¹⁴ Gary. R. Bunt, *Islam in the Digital Age : E-Jihad, Online Fatwas and Cyber Islamic Environments* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 128.

²¹⁵ Many Uyghur reformers blamed local backwardness and Chinese rule for Uyghur discontent and were active in independence movements against the Chinese. In the 1930s, there was a short-lived Turkish Islamic Republic of Eastern Turkestan in southwest Xinjiang, and in 1944, an Eastern Turkestan Republic was set up in the northwest. Castets, “The Modern Chinese State and Strategies of Control over Uyghur Islam,” 224-25. Becquelin, “Xinjiang in the Nineties,” 89. Also see Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*, 2013; Ildikó Bellér-Hann, “The Burden of the Past: Uyghur Peasants Remember Collectivisation in Southern Xinjiang,” 2016; Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 2010.

²¹⁶ For more information on Jadidism in Xinjiang, see David Brophy, “New Methods on the New Frontier: Islamic Reformism in Xinjiang, 1898-1917,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 59, no. 1-2 (2016): 303-32. Brophy explains how Jadidism was essentially a foreign influence, coming to Xinjiang via merchants and concentrating in cities. Brophy, “New Methods on the New Frontier,” 304. See also Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters*, 321. Waite, “The Emergence of Muslim Reformism in Contemporary Xinjiang.” Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 173.

he then went on pilgrimage to Mecca in 1906, while also traveling to Al-Azhar in Cairo. Returning from this journey, he went on to write several handbooks for a new style of Islamic education in Turki. He wrote a handbook for learning Arabic, books on Islam, mathematics, and literacy. With the support of the wealthy and influential Musabayev brothers, he was not only able to publish several books, but also started a Jadid-style school in Kashgar in 1912.²¹⁷ Even though the development of Abdulqadir's reformist school was cut short, his publications were not lost over the course of the 20th century. Edmund Waite attested that at the time of his fieldwork interviews in the 1990s, many young Uyghurs drew upon Abdulqadir Damolla "as a moral exemplar who combined religious piety and the understanding of 'true Islam' with a striving for modern learning and development."²¹⁸ In 2003, the popular biography *Standard Bearers of New Education: Abdulqadir Damolla* was published.²¹⁹ His handbook on Arabic was reprinted by the Xinjiang People's Press in 2002, and one of his catechisms was reported to still circulate on the Xinjiang black market in the early 2010s.²²⁰

Next to revisiting former reformers, the open period of the 1980s produced its own important reformist leaders. A prominent reformist *molla* was the popular scholar Ablikim Makhsum, who, after his release from prison in the 1980s, became renowned for his *medrese* in Karghilik. He had gone on Hajj and traveled to Saudi Arabia when he was young, and advocated new Islamic observances and criticized several local practices.²²¹ Ablikim Makhsum's schools in Karghilik were shut down by the government in 1987 and 1988, which according to researcher Rémi Castets led to social unrest that fed the East Turkestan Islamic Party (ETIP). The ETIP is mostly renowned for its part in the 1990 Baren uprising. Former ETIP members interviewed by Castets said that that Party, originally called the East Turkestan Liberation Party, changed its discourse from anticolonialism and nationalism to a more Islamic discourse after the closing of the schools.²²² Another prominent advocate for Islamic reform was Ablimet Damolla, also referred to as Abdulhemid. Ablimet Damolla travelled to the Middle East in the 1980s and performed the Hajj. When returning to Kashgar, he expanded the Toqquz Tash mosque in the north of the city from where he preached a form of Islam very similar to what Ablikim Makhsum advocated. He admonished that practices such as holding lavish commemorations for the deceased, holding vigil for the sake of gaining intercession from the deceased, and paying *mollas* for Qur'anic recitations were not part of correct Islamic practice because they were not mentioned in

²¹⁷ To learn more about the Musabayev merchant family's role in Jadidist activity in Xinjiang, see Brophy, "New Methods on the New Frontier."

²¹⁸ Waite, "The Emergence of Muslim Reformism in Contemporary Xinjiang," 167.

²¹⁹ Waite, 167.

²²⁰ Brophy, "New Methods on the New Frontier," 317-19. Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 174. Abdulqadir Damolla is also a prominent figure in contemporary Turkish publications on Uyghur Islamic history, e.g. Nurahmet Kurban, "Çağdaş Uyghur İslam Düşüncesinin Önderi Abdulkadir Damolla," *bilig*, Spring, no. 53 (2010), 167-82.

²²¹ Castets, "Uyghur Islam," 223. Castets, "The Modern Chinese State," 233.

²²² Castets, "Uyghur Islam," 224.

the Qur'an or Hadith.²²³ He observed Hanbali practices, such as crossing the hands in front of the chest while standing up during prayer (instead of hands folded right over left above the navel), and saying *amin* out loud at the end of the *fatiha*. He advocated more egalitarianism and criticized the unquestioned status of religious elders. He was said to be especially popular among younger Uyghurs. He had also set up a school in the city center of Kashgar for foreign language education. The government closed his school in 1996 and removed him from his post at the Toqquz Tash mosque in 1997.²²⁴

Through the crackdown on Uyghur reformist leaders who had gained too much renown, state restrictions arguably hampered a wide-scale, institutional spread of reformist Islamic learning. Edmund Waite has argued that these state restrictions have inadvertently bolstered the reliance on traditional religious authorities and oral transmission within Uyghur Islamic communities in rural Kashgar in the 1990s.²²⁵ But the wider access to information on the Islamic tradition did lead to the realization that many Uyghur *molla* were limited in their knowledge of the scriptures. Books and literacy represented a means of self-education, as a farmer from Kashgar explained to Waite in 2003: "When you first came here, I didn't know much about religion—I just recited a few verses from the Qur'an. Now I have started to read these books and know much more. You see for a long time we didn't have religious books. *Mollas* and other religious leaders could recite from the Qur'an but they couldn't really understand it. Now there are many more knowledgeable people in Kashgar."²²⁶ Increased levels of literacy and increased access to sources on Islam did not necessarily do away with the need of authorities on religion, but it facilitated the questioning of traditional authorities' interpretations and explanations.

The authority of traditional Islamic scholars is often perceived to have waned as a consequence of new educational systems and the proliferation of information sources. Mahmood says that while education, travel and new media enabled people to enter a discussion on Islamic orthodoxy, the authority to speak in the name of Islam also depended on one's identification with the Islamic tradition. In her study on women's mosques in Egypt's piety movements, she observed that a person's level of education is not always relevant for them to be able to speak in the name of Islam,

²²³ Waite, "The Impact of the State on Islam amongst the Uyghurs," 259-60.

²²⁴ Waite, 260.

²²⁵ Waite, 260. On a practical level the need of a religious elite was also carried by the importance of the Qur'an in its Arabic version. Even though more Uyghurs had access to religious literature, few were able to understand and interpret Arabic. Based on fieldwork in the Turpan basin of the 1990s, Wang Jianxin mentioned the difference between the importance of the Arabic Qur'an and that of its Uyghur translation, explaining that "[...] the Uyghur version at best was a reference. It was taken for granted that Islamic learning started only in reading and understanding Quranic verses in its Arabic version under the instruction of Islamic leaders." Wang, *Uyghur Education and Social Order*, 164-65.

²²⁶ Waite, "The Impact of the State on Islam amongst the Uyghurs," 261.

as long as they are regarded as an authority in the Islamic tradition. The ability of someone to preach for Islam, she says, does not depend so much on that person's doctrinal knowledge. Rather, the person's familiarity with and their observance of the Islamic tradition are considered more crucial for their ability to speak with authority on Islamic issues.²²⁷ This claim was also made by Muhammad Qasim Zaman, who addressed the position of traditional Islamic scholars in this challenging environment in his work *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam* (2002). Zaman did not contest the notion that modernization and social change undermined Islamic scholars' former authority, but sought to explain their continued and even renewed presence in the contemporary Islamic public sphere. He claimed that it is exactly their connection to "traditional" and "authentic" Islam that provides the most important legitimation of their authoritative position in Islamic discourse.²²⁸ What we can deduce from this, is that while traditional authorities on Islam are being challenged, society still feels the need for specialists and persons of authority. But with increased mobility and literacy, people can draw from a multitude of sources to shape their thoughts on Islam, and the position of an Islamic scholar has more potential to become marginalized. The authority of religious leaders is being questioned more, and can expect more competing voices, but the position itself has not become superfluous. Islamic scholars are rather more expected to be able to defend their position and interpretations. This puts pressure on Islamic scholars to ground their knowledge in different forms of social and cultural capital. In Xinjiang these sources of capital were for example the number and the type of scholars they studied with, going on pilgrimage, or studying at a foreign institution.

Uyghur Discussions on Islamic Orthodoxy

While the state hampered the unrestricted spread of reformist teachings, and traditional religious leaders still constituted important authority figures, Islamic reform impulses were never absent, nor did they disappear. Discussions on Islamic orthodoxy instead moved away from open communal platforms. Waite observed how Uyghurs would approach each other in a circumspect, informal way about observing Islamic practice, on the street, in the workplace, in nightlife settings, and also on Internet websites: "One important channel for the dissemination of Muslim orthodoxy is through a discursive form of proselytizing (*täbligh*) based on the use of *näsihät* [advice; admonition], which is extremely informal in nature due to political bans on meeting outside the mosque together with government persecution of reformist Muslims."²²⁹ Uyghur discussions on Islam were still taking

²²⁷ Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 65.

²²⁸ Zaman, *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam*, 180.

²²⁹ Waite also writes: "A 21-year-old carpet-seller with strong sympathies for those aspiring towards orthodoxy described their techniques as follows: 'If a young man does not go to the mosque they will go up to that person and encourage him to follow an Islamic lifestyle. If he is arguing or using bad language they will approach him and encourage him to be more polite.'" Waite, "The Emergence of Muslim Reformism in Contemporary Xinjiang," 173.

place, but in an environment where state repression of Uyghur sociability was increasingly omnipresent.

Especially since the 1990s, researchers have reported several instances during their fieldwork where they observed changing attitudes of people towards prevalent customs in the Uyghur community. Waite observed groups of Muslims in Kashgar in the 1990s that started praying at other times than was customary because they wanted to adhere strictly to the exact height of the sun.²³⁰ Smith Finley observed increased mosque attendance and stricter observance of daily prayer by Uyghurs in the 1990s and early 2000s.²³¹ And where in the 1980s and mid-1990s veiling was reported to be fairly rare except for in the Kashgar region, in the 21st century researchers Leibold and Grose noted a marked increase of veiling practices both in rural and urban areas.²³² As Smith Finley has remarked, the reasons behind the Uyghurs' changing Islamic practices were complex and multi-layered, and cannot be ascribed to one particular aspect.²³³ Leibold and Grose's study on veiling showed that the motivations for practices were varied.²³⁴ One element that can be discerned in their respondents' discussion on veiling is that people frequently viewed a religious practice in terms of how foreign or native it was. For example, a young Uyghur university student wearing the *hijab*, something rare for university students, explained how veiling allowed her to convey her religiosity to others, and related how she was influenced by Egyptian fashion at first, but then found a style that she thought fitted her Uyghurness.²³⁵ Another example Leibold and Grose provide is the reaction of a young Uyghur man passing a woman wearing a *hijab* in the streets of Kashgar. The man's reaction showed struggles over ideas of Uyghurness in relation to Islam and how to represent and defend that Uyghurness in the face of transnational influences: "There has been an Arabization of Kashgar, you know. These types of headscarves are becoming more popular. We are Muslims, but we aren't Arabs. We have our own customs."²³⁶ In these examples, we see how open borders and international travels sensitized Uyghurs to the similarities and differences of their practices within the wider Islamic

²³⁰ Waite, "The Impact of the State on Islam amongst the Uyghurs," 261.

²³¹ Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*, 372.

²³² James Leibold and Timothy Grose, "Islamic Veiling in Xinjiang: The Political and Societal Struggle to Define Uyghur Female Adornment," *The China Journal* 76 (2016): 84-85.

²³³ Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*, 280-83.

²³⁴ Leibold and Grose, "Islamic Veiling in Xinjiang," 101-2. As Leibold and Grose stated, the Party-state's attempts to define correct attire for Uyghur women failed to deal with the variety of motivations for Uyghur veiling practices, ignoring the complexity of the meaning of the veil for Uyghur identity and modernity. This friction between the complexities of discussion on Islamic orthodoxy and the Party's need for stereotypical objectification in its management of Islam was not something unique to the Uyghur case. Maris Boyd Gillette similarly argued that Hui Muslims in inner China tried to find ways to appropriate ideas of modernity that did not necessarily conform to the Chinese state's model. Maris Boyd Gillette, *Between Mecca and Beijing: Modernization and Consumption among Urban Chinese Muslims* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 2-3, 18-19.

²³⁵ Leibold and Grose, "Islamic Veiling in Xinjiang," 98.

²³⁶ Leibold and Grose, 100.

world, thus diversifying the discourse on how and why women should or should not veil. While Uyghur society sought to find its connection to a more global Muslim community, that trend sometimes found itself at odds with the Uyghur ethno-national discourse that increasingly made use of Islamic symbols.

Another area of Islamic practice that was under discussion in Uyghur society was Sufism and saint veneration. Until recent years, Sufi practices were widespread among rural Uyghurs.²³⁷ While shrine visitations and saint veneration enjoyed a popularity in rural areas up until the 2000s, there were also critical sounds. Many of the activities at shrines, such as saint veneration or *dhikr*, fall outside of the activities deemed “orthodox” by scripturalist interpretations of the Islamic tradition.²³⁸ Rahile Dawut for example reports meeting a woman at a shrine festival in 2000 who tried to convince pilgrims that saint veneration at shrines was against correct Islamic principles.²³⁹ Reformist figures such as Ablikim Makhsum and Ablimet Damolla were also prominent critics. Edmund Waite, in his 2002 research on Islam in the Kashgar area, pointed to two influential historical works that shaped the negative attitude of many Uyghurs towards historical Sufism in the region: the 1989 book *Short Historical Descriptions* by Ibrahim Niyaz and a series of articles that appeared in the journal *The Culture of Xinjiang* between 1986 and 1990, written by Nizamuddin Husayn.²⁴⁰ The arguments of these authors were echoed in my interviews with Uyghur *molla* in the Netherlands and Germany. Practices that my interviewees conceived of as unorthodox and “local” were frequently linked to the structures of authority that Sufism represented, and especially the role of Apaq Khoja. For example, one interviewee, Isa, named the wider awareness of the political role that Sufi shaykhs have played in local history as grounds for resentment of Sufism in Xinjiang. Isa criticized the historical leadership of Sufi Khoja rulers of Kashgar and saw it as one of the causes of the Uyghurs’ political marginalization in their own territory:

Sufism also has a bad history in our country. Because of Apaq Khoja. He invited the Mongols and the Chinese into our country when he gained power. That is why all the people hate Sufism. Because of this Sufism, problems have come over us. We know this through history books, we read that a lot in the 1980s and the 1990s in stores in East Turkestan. People

²³⁷ Zarccone, “La Naqshbandiyya,” 456-57. Rachel Harris, “Harmonizing Islam in Xinjiang: Sound and Meaning in Rural Uyghur Religious Practice,” in *On the Fringes of the Harmonious Society*, eds. Trine Brox and Ildikó Bellér-Hann (Copenhagen: NIAS, 2014), 293-317. Zarccone, “Le Turkestan chinois,” 271-73.

²³⁸ *Dhikr* is a form of meditation within the Islamic tradition whereby a word or a short sentence is repeated, such as the name of God, often accompanied by rhythmic chanting, singing, swaying and dancing. There are several account of *dhikr* taking place in Xinjiang up until the early 21st century. Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 109. Zarccone, “La Naqshbandiyya,” 456-57. Harris, “Harmonizing Islam in Xinjiang.” Zarccone, “Le Turkestan chinois,” 271-73.

²³⁹ Waite, “The Emergence of Muslim Reformism in Contemporary Xinjiang,” 178.

²⁴⁰ Edmund Waite, *The Impact of Socialist Rule on a Muslim Minority in China: Islam amongst the Uyghurs of Kashgar* (PhD diss., Cambridge University, 2002), 215-22.

wrote about all of those things. There was an imam, he was a specialist about Sufism, Nizamuddin Husayn, he is a professor. He is a very good writer about Sufism. That is why people do not want Sufism to stay the main ideal in East Turkestan. – Isa, *damolla* in his 50s²⁴¹

One of the most frequently criticized aspects was the unquestioned loyalty one had to show to the *shaykhs*. Another of my interviewees, after I asked him about Sufism and the role it played in Uyghur Islam, was eager to explain how people were able to get rid of incorrect practices because of Ablikim Makhsum and the people that studied with him:

There are people in Karghilik, because of Abdulhakimjan Makhsum, because of him a lot of people have studied Islam. Because of those boys, because of people that studied, they came to our entire country. Before, Sufism was like that, that Uyghur people were like slaves, they do not let the people move, you just follow a person that tells you what to do. Sufism isn't actually like that, but that is the way it was lived there. Sufism actually means that people pray very well, etc. With us [in Xinjiang], it was understood in a wrong way. If somebody becomes a *shaykh*, then everybody will praise him as if he was God, give everything to him and ask him about everything. And that is wrong. So, the people that studied with Makhsum, they explained it, and Sufism started to retreat. It was very known to us in Khotan, the *mazar*. But actually, Sufism is not like that. Sufi means very pure heart. That has changed. And maybe there still is some influence, but not like that since the 1990s. For example, because of people that studied abroad and came back, because of people that studied with Abdulhakimjan Makhsum. Then it became more open, more critical. – Jusupjan, *molla* in his 40s²⁴²

The interviewee, Jusupjan, described both resistance to Chinese state rule and challenges to the unquestioned authority of Sufi shaykhs or elderly *molla* as part of a general “awakening” among Uyghurs:

In the 90s, it was open and the people began to understand how real Islam is. And at the same time, since 1995, China starts to clamp down hard on it. They understand that people are starting to awake. First about Sufism, then about Chinese pressure. The people understand ‘we are Uyghurs.’ When they started to realize that, China changed its policies

²⁴¹ Author's interview with Isa, December 2016. The reputation of Apaq Khoja, the first Naqshbandi Sufi ruler of the region, is a much-discussed topic in local as well as international scholarship. For more information, see for example Rian Thum, “Beyond Resistance and Nationalism: Local History and the Case of Afaq Khoja,” *Central Asian Survey* 31, no. 3 (2012): 293-310. Edmund Waite, “From Holy Man to National Villain: Popular Historical Narratives About Apaq Khoja amongst Uyghurs in Contemporary Xinjiang,” *Inner Asia* 8, no. 1 (2006): 5-28.

²⁴² Author's interview with Jusupjan, December 2016.

immediately, and started to forbid everything, all *medrese*, all *mollas* and *damollas*. –
Jusupjan²⁴³

Considering the situation of my interviewees as Uyghurs living abroad who left after confrontations with the Chinese government, it is no wonder their discussion on Sufism is framed within questions of Uyghur identity and power relations. However, the critique of Sufi leaders' positions was by no means exclusively expressed by Uyghurs. Since the 1980s both Chinese and Uyghur writers have expanded previous anti-feudalist discourse portraying Sufism and saint veneration as heterodox power tools of the Khoja rulers.²⁴⁴ As Paula Schrode has observed, "Marxist ideology of progress and Islamic reformism thus converge in a way that often makes it difficult to recognize the argumentative backgrounds in Uyghur literature on religion."²⁴⁵

The socio-political reality of the Chinese state's repression of religious practices as well as the wider social, political and economic marginalization of Uyghurs undoubtedly impacted Uyghur discussions on Islamic orthodoxy. To understand how power dynamics can influence the relation between state, society, and religion, an article by Samuli Schielke on saint festivals in Egypt is helpful. In his article, Schielke draws a link between social order and power relations and the possibility for religious ambiguity. He argues that discussions of religious orthodoxy become central in society when the position of religion as the source for social normativity is threatened and when power relations allow for control over people's behavior.²⁴⁶ There are two aspects of Schielke's observation that are helpful for understanding the situation in Xinjiang. First, the aspect of comprehensive control over the behavior of people. Chinese state control over Uyghur behaviour has dramatically increased since the 1990s and has reached a position where it can and does exert control over people's day-to-day actions and expressions of religiosity. Second, religion as the site of social normativity. In Xinjiang, religion is being threatened as the supreme site of social normativity. As we will see in the next

²⁴³ Author's interview with Jusupjan.

²⁴⁴ In the 1950s, the socialist government reinterpreted local history in terms of separatist/loyalist and feudal/modernist, where religious elites, the 19th-century Khoja rulers and Sufi saint veneration were all accused of hindering the province's development and suppressing the population. The CCP tried to undermine the authority of religious elites by taking away their economic base. Castets, "The Modern Chinese State," 229-30.

²⁴⁵ Schrode, "The Dynamics of Orthodoxy and Heterodoxy in Uyghur Religious Practice," 409.

²⁴⁶ "[...] while the ambiguous and open-ended atmosphere of *mawlid*s [saint festivals] continued to provoke the anger of some scholars and inspired occasional efforts to purge the festivals of what were seen to be immoral practices, it did not constitute a threat to the religious and social order of the time. *People could cross the limits of religious commandments and everyday morality at mawlid because they were living in a social order and in relations of power that allowed for temporary shifts and did not require (and was not capable of commanding) comprehensive control over the behaviour of the people.* If some people used the *mawlid* as an occasion to drink and to fornicate, this was perhaps forgiven in the sacred occasion, and even if it was not, *it did not threaten the validity of religion as the supreme site of social normativity*" (emphasis added). Samuli Schielke, "Hegemonic Encounters: Criticism of Saintsday Festivals and the Formation of Modern Islam in the Late 19th and Early 20th-Century Egypt," *Die Welt des Islams* 47, no. 3-4 (2007): 327.

chapters, the functionalization policy only enhanced this perceived threat to Islam as the site of social normativity. Following Schielke's argument, the two aspects of state control over religious social settings and the nation threatening Islam as the site of social normativity consequently put questions of religious orthodoxy at the center of Uyghur discourse about their place in the Chinese nation.

3.4. Conclusion

The platforms on which Uyghurs could discuss and explore the Islamic tradition have changed drastically over the last decades. In the 1980s, we saw an enthusiastic revival of networks of learning. People re-educated themselves and each other and explored new paths of knowledge. Although argumentation on Islamic orthodoxy was often formulated around what the scriptures allowed or did not allow, broader access to Islamic texts does not in itself explain the tensions about Uyghur Islamic orthodoxy that emerged in the early 1990s. Islamic scriptures did not determine the content of Uyghur religious discourse; the changing discourse rather was driven by the need of Uyghur religiosity to confront questions of modernity, identity and nationalism. The discussions that arose fitted the social, economic and political situation that the Uyghurs found themselves in. More awareness of the global *umma*, rapid urbanization and individualization, and marginalization by a politically and economically powerful other, all contributed to the dynamics of Uyghur Islamic orthodoxy.

Over the course of the 1990s, state intervention began to limit and criminalize the networks of *minjian* learning, and started putting restrictions on the mobility of Islamic teachers and pupils. While state actions hindered an institutionalized spread of reformist ideas, the criminalization of open platforms of discussion and learning gave an impulse to the trend of individualized learning that had come with increased literacy and Internet access. When non-state platforms for Islamic education became either illegal or non-existent, the opportunities for Uyghurs to cultivate their ethical selves became very limited. But at the same time as the state was shutting down platforms of Uyghur communication and mobility, new technology opened up new ways of communicating about Islam. With physical platforms for social interaction and debate becoming very scarce, the Internet, for a short period of time, filled the void and allowed for a lively platform of interpretations and of mutual exchange. But this period where state repression was partially countered by the opening of new paths of religious exploration was relatively short-lived. As we will see in the following chapters, China's surveillance measures became increasingly intrusive and capable of controlling every social platform, both physical and digital.

4. The Chinese Nation's Vision for Islam

State actions towards Islam in Xinjiang cannot be understood in isolation from central CCP principles on religion. Based on policy papers, political speeches and legislation, this chapter clarifies the position of the Chinese Communist Party towards religion since the 1980s and shows how that position explains both the repression and functionalization of religious practices. The CCP chose to contain religion where it was deemed dangerous and to use it where it was deemed useful. This chapter explains, moreover, how political loyalty was a central condition for Party tolerance of religion, and that CCP worries about religion were primarily connected to issues of ethnicity and nationalism. For the case of Islam, we then examine the measures that the state took not only to control Islam, but actually to incorporate it into what I will call the “nation narrative” and thereby to define the role that it should serve in Chinese society.

4.1. Religious Policy of the Chinese Communist Party since the 1980s

The basic religious policy principles of the post-Cultural Revolution CCP were laid out in the 1982 CCP Central Committee's landmark paper “Document 19: The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during our Country's Socialist Period,” generally referred to as “Document 19.”²⁴⁷ The document carefully distances the Party from the harsh crackdowns of earlier decades, blaming the mismanagement of religion on leftist extremists who misunderstood Marxist principles on religion. Arguing against the coercive removal of religion, Document 19 says that people who rely on coercive measures “are entirely wrong and will do no small harm.”²⁴⁸ In 1990, President Jiang Zemin likewise condemned the “left” approach and pleaded for long-term considerations when dealing with religion:

We must not be too hasty to deal with the problem of religion. We cannot repeat the “left” approach in the Cultural Revolution and must have long-term considerations and must work in a practical manner. – Jiang Zemin, CCP Secretary-General 1989-2002, PRC President 1993-2003 (1990)²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ Donald E. MacInnis, transl., “Document 19: The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question during our Country's Socialist Period,” in *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989), 8-26. Translation reprinted on Religlaw, accessed June 25, 2015, <https://www.religlaw.org/content/religlaw/documents/doc19relig1982.htm>.

²⁴⁸ MacInnis, transl., “Document 19,” chapter I.

²⁴⁹ Jiang Zemin, “Yiding yao zuohao zongjiao gongzuo” 一定要做好宗教工作 [Must do a good job of religious work], December 7, 1990. Published in *Xin shiqi tongyi zhanxian wenxian xuanbu (xubian)* 新时期统一战线文献选编（续编） [Selection of Literature of New Era United Front Documents (sequel)] (CPC Central Party School Press, July 1997), 287. Republished on CPC News “Religious Work,” accessed October 29, 2017, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64171/65717/65721/4461297.html>.

According to Document 19, the use of these incorrect leftist theories contradicted the theory of Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong's thought, and “basically did away with the work the Party had done on the religious question.”²⁵⁰ In this way, the Party wants to create the illusion that the Party has always been correct as it shoves the blame onto “antirevolutionaries” who intentionally misinterpreted Marxist theory. Document 19’s basic ideas about how the CCP should view religion still hold ground today.

The constitutional right of “religious freedom” (*xinjiao ziyou* 信教自由) in China has been defined by the differentiation between recognized “religion” and illegal “superstition.”²⁵¹ After 1949, the CCP developed a definition of religion which ascribes universal qualities to religion such as logic, theosophy, scriptures, professional clergy and fixed religious sites. Only Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism and Islam were seen as fitting this description.²⁵² Other activities were condemned as feudal superstition (*fengjian mixin* 封建迷信), referring to pre-Communist “feudal” society. But this does not mean that every activity that is conducted under the label of official religion is tolerated, and every activity that falls outside of its scope is banned. A 1979 CCP article in the People’s Daily clearly shows the arbitrary line between tolerance and suppression:

By religion, we chiefly mean worldwide religion, such as Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and the like. They have scriptures, creeds, religious ceremonies, organizations, and so on (...). Religious freedom, first of all, refers to these religions (...). It is true, real life is much more complex than simple concepts and definitions. There still are, among the people, certain long-standing activities such as ancestor worship and belief in ghosts and deities. Although they are a kind of superstition, we generally do not prohibit them as long as they do not affect collective political and economic activities(...). (People’s Daily, 1979)²⁵³

²⁵⁰ MacInnis, transl., “Document 19,” chapter III.

²⁵¹ Vincent Goossaert, “State and Religion in Modern China: Religious Policies and Scholarly Paradigms,” *Communication au colloque du cinquantième de l’Institut d’Histoire Moderne de l’Academia Sinica* (2006): 4, <halshs-00106187>. Historian Rebecca Nedostup has argued that the fundamental aspect of the redefinition of religion by early Chinese modernizers was the overall condemnation of “superstition” (Ch.: *mixin* 迷信). Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 3, 18. The label “superstition” was institutionalized in the *Guanli simiao tiaolie* (Regulations for the Supervision of Monasteries and Temples) in 1915. The difference between real religion and superstition was further emphasized during the Smashing Superstition campaign in 1929. At the time of the campaign, the government announced that Buddhism and Daoism were “pure religions” and were under legal protection. Yoshiko Ashiwa, and David L. Wank, “Making Religion, Making the State in Modern China: An Introductory Essay,” in *Making Religion, Making the State: The Politics of Religion in Modern China*, eds. Ashiwa and David L. Wank (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 9.

²⁵² Ashiwa and Wank, “Making Religion, Making the State in Modern China,” 9.

²⁵³ “Zongjiao he fengjian mixin” 宗教和封建迷信 [Religion and feudal superstition], *People’s Daily*, May 15, 1979. Accessed online through People’s Daily Graphic Database, data.people.com.cn.

So even if many activities officially fall under the label of illegal superstition, this religion/superstition categorization is overruled by the main concern for political and social stability.²⁵⁴ Even activities that would fall under the five officially sanctioned religions fall prey to state sanctions if they are considered to cross the ever-shifting line of political tolerance. The Chinese state frames its criminalization of superstition, fortune telling, and other unwanted religious activities as a way of protecting normal religious activities, depicting the state as acting in religious groups' best interest. It portrays itself as the protector of righteous religious activities, protecting religion against abuse by criminals.²⁵⁵

[...] superstition has neither coordination of worship, nor the established purpose, rules or rituals, nor a common place of activity. Objects of superstition may be fairy ghosts, it may be mountains and trees. Superstition generally refers to gods, witches and superstitious professionals who use witchcraft to carry out activities such as fortune telling, divination, drawing lots, glyptomancy, reading dreams, calling upon immortal beings, and looking at *feng shui*. The masses consult these just to foresee their future fate, and they do not use it to shape a worldview of their own. Superstitious professionals use these activities to extract money, as a means to make a living. ("The Difference between Religion and Superstition", CCP website)²⁵⁶

The distinction between religion and superstition is by no account merely a state-imposed concept. Rather, it is a perception of religion that has equally developed within religious communities themselves, which have also sought professional training of clergy and the elimination of practices they deemed incorrect.²⁵⁷ The position of the state, as legislator and administrator, on the definition of religion does carry a significant weight if it chooses to enter the debate. As Ashiwa and Wank have stated, the dynamics of religious modernity are marked by negotiations among multiple parties. Religions accommodate the state institutions to ensure their existence, while the state proves itself modern by acknowledging the existence of those religions.²⁵⁸

²⁵⁴ For a similar argument, see Zhang Qianfan and Zhu Yingping, "Religious Freedom and its Legal Restrictions in China," *Brigham Young University Law Review* 2011, no. 3 (2011): 784-85.

²⁵⁵ For an overview of Chinese policy towards unwanted spiritual and religious groups until the early 21st century, see Kristin Kupfer, "'Häretische Lehren bekämpfen': Der Umgang der chinesischen Regierung mit spirituell-religiösen Gruppierungen seit 1978," in *Religion und Politik in der Volksrepublik China*, eds. Wiebke Koenig and Karl-Fritz Daiber (Würzburg: Ergon Verlag, 2008): 251-88.

²⁵⁶ CPC News, "Zongjiao yu mixin de qubie" 宗教与迷信的区别 [The difference between religion and superstition], n.d., accessed October 29, 2017, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64107/65708/66067/66082/4468773.html>.

²⁵⁷ Ashiwa and Wank, "Making Religion, Making the State in Modern China," 3-8.

²⁵⁸ Ashiwa and Wank, "Making Religion, Making the State in Modern China," 8.

Even when the Chinese state has allowed a place for religion in society since the late 1970s and early 80s, it is only under an atmosphere of tolerance.²⁵⁹ Document 19 links the existence of religion to negative societal circumstances that generate the need for religion's existence. These negative circumstances being "natural and man-made disasters," the continued existence of class struggle within certain limits, and a "complex international environment."²⁶⁰ The document further explains the Party's religious policy, which states that religion will gradually disappear with the development of a socialist civilization.²⁶¹ It foresees a future where social circumstances allow for citizens to "deal with the world and our fellowmen from a conscious scientific viewpoint, and no longer have any need for recourse to an illusory world of gods to seek spiritual solace."²⁶² The Party officially does not wish to eradicate religion from society, as it is convinced that religion will disappear over time, when social conditions allow for it. Meanwhile, as an atheist political party, it has to consolidate its atheist worldview with the management of religious communities. One of the main instruments for achieving this is its specific understanding of "religious freedom." The Party understands freedom of religion as the freedom to believe, but also *not* to believe, in religion:

The religious worldview and Marxist worldview is fundamentally opposed. Communists are atheists, and the communist Party members' worldview should be a Marxist worldview. Communists not only cannot believe in religion, but also have to promote atheism, and propagate a scientific worldview. For us Communists, we must adhere to the Marxist view of the world, but also conscientiously implement the national constitution of the religious freedom policy, that is, each citizen has both freedom of religious belief, but also the right not to believe in religion. — Jiang Zemin (1990)²⁶³

The apparent contradiction between a government that firmly supports atheism and believes in the gradual extinction of religion over time while at the same time claiming to uphold the constitutional freedom of religious belief has been a debated topic since the early years of CCP rule. A People's Daily article from 1956 states that "freedom of religion" is meant in the sense that the state cannot forcibly remove religion from society, but has to let it fade away by educating the people and raising the standard of living.²⁶⁴ By this interpretation, freedom implies a *laissez-faire* attitude, and at most a formal protection of religious organizations and religious individuals against being persecuted

²⁵⁹ Goossaert, "State and Religion in Modern China," 11.

²⁶⁰ MacInnis, transl., "Document 19," chapter I.

²⁶¹ MacInnis, chapter XII.

²⁶² MacInnis, chapter XII.

²⁶³ Jiang Zemin, "Yiding yao zuohao zongjiao gongzuo" [Must do a good job of religious work], 287-88.

²⁶⁴ Ceng Wenjing 曾文经, "Xuanchuan wushenlun he zongjiaoxinyang ziyou shi chongtu de ma" 宣传无神论和宗教信仰自由是冲突的吗 [Are atheism propagation and freedom of religious belief in conflict?], *People's Daily*, February 29, 1956, database accessed December 7, 2017, <http://pdul.egreenapple.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/index2.htm>

because of their belief. But given the priority of national security over individual rights, this protection is negated once there is a general assumption that one's religious activities endanger a healthy societal development.

The Party seeks to protect the right not to believe in religion by banishing religion from the public and official environment. State propagation of a "scientific" worldview is seen as giving each religion equal chance, and thereby ensuring said "freedom." It is the Party's duty to promote an atheist, scientific worldview. Document 19 stipulates the Party has to use a Marxist worldview of science and reason, which is then used to criticize "idealism," which includes religion:

An important task for the Party on the propaganda front is the use of Marxist philosophy to criticize idealism (which includes theism), and to educate the masses, especially the broad mass of young people, in a dialectical and historical materialist and scientific worldview. To do this, we must strengthen our propaganda in scientific and cultural knowledge as these relate to an understanding of natural phenomena, the evolution of society, and of human life, with its old age sickness, death, ill and good fortune. (Document 19, 1982)²⁶⁵

There is an underlying idea of reason and knowledge being able to defeat religion in the battle for the construction of social reality.

The CCP's prevailing sense of having to deal with religion, even though they prefer to see it gone, affects the policy on how state administrators should handle religious officials and religious communities. Document 19 clearly states that the policy of freedom of religious belief "is not applicable to Party members" and that they should uphold an atheist worldview. But it does make an exception for ethnic minority Party members. The document claims that it is difficult for many ethnic minority Party members to shake off the religious influence in their lives, but that many of them are very loyal to the Party and run an effective administration according to Party policy. Because of these members' Party loyalty, Party organizations should not exclude religious minority members but instead just guide them in obtaining a religious-free worldview.²⁶⁶ According to a 2005 publication by Chan and Carlson, it is a public secret that even some Han Party members are religious. This situation is tolerated as long as these members do not publicly denounce atheism or participate in any public religious ceremonies. Chan and Carlson even state that the Party has refused the dismissal of religious cadres several times since it would affect the Party's prestige in some areas.²⁶⁷ In a similar

²⁶⁵ MacInnis, transl., "Document 19," chapter XII. As a side-note, the word *shisuhua* 世俗化, commonly translated as "secularisation," can also be used to refer to the idea of disenchantment, the collapse of idealism and holding on to cosmological worldviews. See Goossaert, "State and Religion in Modern China," 9.

²⁶⁶ MacInnis, transl., "Document 19," chapter IX.

²⁶⁷ Kim-Kwong Chan and Eric R. Carlson, *Religious Freedom in China: Policy, Administration, and Regulation: A Research Handbook* (Santa Barbara: Institute for the Study of American Religion, 2005), 3.

line of reasoning, Document 19 also advocates leniency towards non-religious cadres serving in minority areas who attend religious funerals, weddings and other religiously inspired festivities. If the Party would forbid them from attending, it would cause Party cadres to lose their “close links with the masses.”²⁶⁸ Also religious community leaders are seen as helpful links between state administrators and the religious communities. A 2011 book for cadre education on religion and ethnicities recalls Jiang Zemin’s welcoming of religious community leaders on Zhongnanhai in January 1991, where he said they need to “cooperate when it comes to politics, and have mutual respect when it comes to belief.”²⁶⁹ The cooperation and relation with religious clergy is described as “seeking common ground while accommodating differences” (*qiutong cunyi* 求同存异).²⁷⁰

4.2. China’s Nation Narrative and Religion’s Place in It

After the Cultural Revolution, patriotism has been a pillar of CCP legitimacy. As researcher Christopher Hughes has argued, Deng Xiaoping Theory shifted ideological orthodoxy from socialist egalitarianism to Chinese nationalism and political loyalty to the Party.²⁷¹ In 2000, Jiang Zemin introduced the theory of the “Three Represents” (*sange daibiao* 三个代表) as a means of expanding the social base of CCP rule. The Three Represents theory asserts that the CCP represents the advanced productive forces, advanced culture, and the interests of the masses. In doing this, the development into a prosperous nation was being inherently tied to CCP leadership. Hu Jintao’s ideology of a “harmonious society” (*hexie shehui* 和谐社会) equally enacted the idea of development and achieving the utopian state of a socialist society, with the CCP at its helm.

After religion had become a legitimate part of post-Mao China, religious communities gradually resumed their activities. In the CCP’s post-Cultural Revolution “trade-off,” as sinologist Pitman Potter has called it, of broader socio-economic autonomy in exchange for political loyalty, religion presented a specific challenge. In the eyes of the Chinese state, religious communities carried several risks that could undermine the idea of complete loyalty to the Chinese nation and the CCP. Religious communities were meant to participate in the development of the Chinese state, but only within the limits prescribed by the state, and not in some form of political activism that could challenge state authority.²⁷² The granting of religious autonomy served as a basis for CCP legitimacy, while at the same time, that autonomy could not be allowed to become a threat to CCP authority. In order to

²⁶⁸ MacInnis, transl., “Document 19,” chapter IX.

²⁶⁹ Chen Xiaolong 沈小龙, *Minzu zongjiao zhishi ganbu duben* 民族宗教知识干部读本 [Cadre Handbook on Ethnicity and Religion] (Guangzhou: Guangzhou Renmin Chubanshe, 2012), 78.

²⁷⁰ Chen Xiaolong, *Minzu zongjiao zhishi ganbu duben* [Cadre Handbook on Ethnicity and Religion], 77.

²⁷¹ Christopher R. Hughes, *Chinese Nationalism in the Global Era* (London: Routledge, 2006).

²⁷² See for example, Richard P. Madsen, *China’s Catholics: Tragedy and Hope in an Emerging Civil Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

ward off that threat, the Chinese state has sought a way to give religion a place in China's nation narrative. The appropriation of religious communities in China's patriotic history allows for the Chinese government to support and stimulate religious communities, and thus maintain its basis of legitimacy, while concurrently aligning the communities' interests with those of the state, averting thereby challenges to its authority.

CCP Concerns About Religion

Central government concerns are different for each religion. To the government, all religious or spiritual communities are possible platforms within civil society that could harm the political status quo, a fear that has been amplified since 1999 by the unexpected political harm done by Falungong protestors.²⁷³ But although the basic reason for state caution with religion is the same for every religion, each religion has its own specific perceived level of threat and sensitive issues. For Buddhism, Tibetan separatism and the Dalai Lama present particular challenges. For Catholicism, underground Churches and the authority of Rome are difficult issues. For Islam, the state has mostly been concerned with international terrorism and Uyghur separatism, but has also had to conform to a growing Islamophobic discourse in Chinese society. The problematics presented by Islam are also, just as is the case with Buddhism, closely connected to issues of ethnic identification.²⁷⁴

Religion and China's Minzu

An essential element of the Chinese nation narrative, as well as of religious issues, is the official categorization of China's population into "ethnicities" (*minzu* 民族).²⁷⁵ Officially, the Chinese state has 56 ethnicities, one Han majority and 55 minorities.²⁷⁶ The CCP walks a thin line between recognizing and even imposing these different ethnic identities within its borders, while at the same time demanding that these ethnicities uphold the national unity and identify as Chinese citizens. Calls for "ethnic unity" (*minzu tuanjie* 民族团结) have the aim of uniting the different ethnicities for the

²⁷³ In the early 1990s, Falungong still enjoyed official recognition. For a discussion on the crackdown on Falungong and how it relates to China's human rights protection and its emphasis on public order, see Ronald C. Keith and Zhiqiu Lin, "The 'Falun Gong Problem': Politics and the Struggle for the Rule of Law in China," *China Quarterly* 175 (2003): 623-42. For a general discussion on the Falungong, see James W. Tong, *Revenge of the Forbidden City: The Suppression of the Falungong in China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁷⁴ See for example Mackerras' observations on the entwinement of minority education and religion, where he stated that "[f]or the Islamic and Tibetan Buddhist nationalities, the religious revival is closely related to the preservation of national cultures." Colin Mackerras, "Religion and the Education of China's Minorities," in *China's National Minority Education: Culture, Schooling, and Development*, ed. Gerard A. Postiglione (New York: Palmer Press, 1999): 48.

²⁷⁵ In compliance with the customary English translation of *minzu* in PRC government documents and bodies, I will use the terms "ethnic" and "ethnicity" for *minzu*. For a brief discussion on the semantic problems of the term *minzu*, see Bovington, *The Uyghurs*, 16-17.

²⁷⁶ For an excellent account of the process of ethnic categorization in the early PRC, see Thomas S. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

greater cause of building a prosperous China. Since 1988, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC) has held six National Conferences on the Advancement and Commendation of Ethnic Unity.²⁷⁷ The *minzu tuanjie* program received an extra push after protests by Uyghurs and Tibetans in 2008 and the July 2009 rioting in Urumqi between Han and Uyghur that claimed almost 200 lives. In November 2008, the Ministry of Education and the State Ethnic Affairs Commission issued the “Guiding Program on Ethnic Unity Education in Schools (Trial),” and in 2009 included this ethnic unity program in primary, secondary and higher education examinations.²⁷⁸ The program’s goals are stated as follows:

[The goal of ethnic unity education is] to enhance the understanding of students of every ethnicity about the common cause of the great motherland history of all ethnic groups in our country, to enhance their sense of responsibility and self-awareness in safeguarding ethnic unity, safeguarding national unity and opposing separatism. [They should] recognize and understand the basic Marxist concepts on ethnic issues and the Party's and the nation's ethnic affairs policies. [They should] have the basic qualities of correctly handling and dealing with ethnic issues in their social relations. [They should] consciously safeguard the socialist relations of equality, solidarity, mutual assistance and harmony among all ethnic groups in our country and promote the common progress of all ethnic groups and the prosperity of the motherland. (Ministry of Education and State Ethnic Affairs Commission, “Guiding Program on Ethnic Unity Education in Schools [Trial],” 2008)²⁷⁹

The emphasis of *minzu tuanjie* education is on the preservation of national unity and on fighting the threat of separatism. *Minzu tuanjie* stimulates the idea of every ethnicity’s share in the building of the great Chinese nation (*zhonghua minzu* 中华民族). However, the representation of China as, in the words of anthropologist Thomas Eriksen, “a mosaic of ethnic groups” has proven difficult, and carries the potential of enhancing differences between China’s ethnic groups.²⁸⁰ It is not only the

²⁷⁷ Respectively held in April 1988, September 1994, September 1999, May 2005, September 2009, and September 2014.

²⁷⁸ Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Ethnic Policy and Common Prosperity and Development of all Ethnic Groups,” September 27, 2009, http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7078073.htm. For an account of how the *minzu tuanjie* policy was implemented in Urumqi, see David Tobin, *Nation-Building and Ethnic Boundaries in China’s Northwest* (PhD diss., The University of Manchester, 2013).

²⁷⁹ Ministry of Education and State Ethnic Affairs Commission, “Xuexiao minzu tuanjie jiaoyu zhidao gangyao (shixing)” 学校民族团结教育指导纲要（试行）[Guiding Program on Ethnic Unity Education in Schools (Trial)], November 27, 2008, <https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/guiding-program-on-ethnic-unity-education-in-schools-trial-chinese-text>. This section of the Guiding Program’s text is also found in the introduction of the 2014 ethnic unity education schoolbook: Kang Ding 康定, *Minzu tuanjie jiaoyu: 30 jiang* 民族团结教育: 30 讲 [Ethnic Unity Education: 30 Essays], Shanghai Jiading Nr. 1 High School Training Material (Shanghai: Shanghai Sociology Department Press, 2014), 2-3.

²⁸⁰ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (London and New York: Pluto Press, (2010), 141. The differentiation between “us” and “them” is a basic principle of ethnicity and of

perceived difference between different ethnicities that can prove a problem for China, but also the claim to superiority by the majority Han. From imperialist until current Communist times, Chinese politics have had a civilizing approach towards those who were considered “other,” and have considered themselves the epicenter of civilization.²⁸¹ Frank Dikötter has argued that, with the rise of Chinese modernist nationalism, cultural definitions of “civilization” versus “barbarism” were transposed into binary oppositions between “advanced” and “backward” groups of people.²⁸² In current times, Han chauvinism towards other ethnicities is very apparent. There is a distinct air of “otherness” in the portrayal of non-Han *minzu*, which negates the claim that the Chinese government considers all nationalities to be equal. The idea of Han exclusivity and superiority is apparent in one of the central tenets of *minzu tuanjie*: the concept of “the three inseparables” (*sange libukai* 三个离不开), which holds that “the Han cannot go without the ethnic minorities, ethnic minorities cannot go without the Han, all ethnic minorities can never go without each other.” This concept was reconceived by Jiang Zemin during a visit to Xinjiang in 1990, and is still present in the current *minzu tuanjie* program taught in schools.²⁸³ Although the concept is meant to counter Han nationalism and local ethnic nationalism, it reinforces the idea of Han exclusivity by upholding a categorical boundary between Han and non-Han ethnicities. Culturally, the Han are set apart and portrayed as the neutral modern spearhead of Chinese civilization, while the portrayal of minorities is mostly limited to dance, song and dress. A cadre handbook for *minzu tuanjie* education does not mention Han culture and only teaches that minority cultures (*shaoshu minzu wenhua* 少数民族文化) have to be protected and preserved.²⁸⁴ The Party does not see a problem in the patronizing role of

nationalism. According to historian Prasenjit Duara, this process entails the hardening of previously soft boundaries. When a master narrative tries to define and mobilize a group, it usually does this by privileging one or more cultural practices, such as language, religion, or a specific event, as the basic principle of the community. This enhances the awareness of the self in relation to others, and determines the lines along which the hardening of boundaries will take place. Duara claims that every available cultural practice is a potential boundary marking the community, and the narrative is the one that decides which ones will determine the group’s composition. See Prasenjit Duara, “De-Constructing the Chinese Nation,” in *Chinese Nationalism*, ed. Jonathan Unger (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 49.

²⁸¹ In an example of how the CCP portrays itself as the savior of poor, backward minorities, the State Council’s 2009 White Paper “China’s Ethnic Policy and Common Prosperity and Development of all Ethnic Groups” describes the pre-1949 situation as such: “The ethnic minorities led a life full of misery. Life was even worse for those living in the mountainous and desert areas, where a dearth of food and clothing was common. For months almost every year they would run out of grain and had to survive on wild fruits, and in the harsh winter they had nothing to keep out the cold but straw capes.” Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Ethnic Policy and Common Prosperity and Development of all Ethnic Groups,” September 27, 2009, http://www.china.org.cn/government/whitepaper/node_7078073.htm.

²⁸² Frank Dikötter, “Introduction,” in *The Construction of Racial Identities in China and Japan: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Frank Dikötter (London: Hurst & Company, 1997), 7.

²⁸³ Kang Ding 康定, *Minzu tuanjie jiaoyu: 30 jiang* 民族团结教育: 30 讲 [Nationality Solidarity Education: 30 Essays], Shanghai Jiading Nr. 1 High School Training Material (Shanghai: Shanghai Sociology Department Press, 2014), 137-42.

²⁸⁴ Yang Zhanwu 杨占武, *Minzu tuanjie jinbu duben* 民族团结进步读本 [Handbook on the Promotion of Ethnic Unity], *Xinshiqi musulin zhishi duben* (Yinchuan: Ningxia Renmin Chubanshe, 2012), 8-9.

the Han majority. The problem to them is Han nationalism (*da hanzu zhuyi* 大汉族主义), which can be summarized as “not being helpful or respectful to minority nationalities.”²⁸⁵ State development programs encourage the view that minorities such as the Uyghurs have to be given a hand to reach the same level as the Han majority.

Religion as the state views it fits this civilizing idea, since religion is considered a product of unwanted societal circumstances that will wither away in the ideal future modern socialist society. Religion is seen as a part of social behavior and tradition that needs to be rooted out with the right education and guidance. The idea of a Han majority that needs to guide minorities into a modern, prosperous lifestyle enhances the perceived link between minorities and religion. There is a certain reluctance to ascribe religiosity to the Han nationality. In the enumeration of ethnicities and their religions, a 2011 CCP cadre handbook on ethnicities and religion (Cadre Handbook on Ethnicities’ Religion (*minzu zongjiao zhishi ganbu duben* 民族宗教知识干部读本) never mentions the Han.²⁸⁶ In similar trend, Document 19 tries to soften the image of a religious Han majority, saying that although Buddhism and Daoism still exercised considerable influence, “there are a considerable number who believe in spirits, but the number of those who actually adhere to a religion is not great.”²⁸⁷ With the Han as the poster child for a modern, secular Chinese society, state categorization places ethnic minorities at the other end of the scale.

The official link between religion and ethnicity is complicated. Ethnic categorization into one of the fifty-six nationalities carries more weight than religious categorization. Ethnicity is designated on one’s identity card, and entitles one to certain rights.²⁸⁸ Religion is often treated as an aspect of ethnic issues, or at least spoken of in close connection to ethnic issues, specifically ethnic minority issues:

Freedom of religious belief involves ethnic policy, especially in China, where ethnic minorities are most problematic in religious belief issues. We must implement the correct ethnic policy, we must implement freedom of religious belief. – Deng Xiaoping (1979)²⁸⁹

²⁸⁵ Chen Xiaolong, *Minzu zongjiao zhishi ganbu duben* [Cadre Handbook on Ethnicity and Religion], 11-12.

²⁸⁶ Chen, 33-35.

²⁸⁷ MacInnis, transl., “Document 19,” chapter II.

²⁸⁸ As Frauke Drewes points out, the emphasis on ethnic categories instead of religious categories in China is in strong contrast to the situation in Europe, where religion is increasingly important in social categorization. Frauke Drewes, *Orientalisiert - Kriminalisiert - Propagiert? Die Position von Muslimen in Gesellschaft und Politik der Volksrepublik China heute* (PhD. diss., Münster University, 2016) (Würzburg: Ergon), 366.

²⁸⁹ Deng Xiaoping, “Huijian yingguo zhiming renshi daibiaotuanshi de tanhua” 会见英国知名人士代表团时的谈话 [Speech at the meeting with a delegation of British dignitaries], October 15, 1979. Published in 邓小平思想年谱 [Deng Xiaoping Thought Chronology (1975-1997)] (Central Literature Press, November 1998), 134.

Although there is a reluctance to equate ethnicities with religion, ethnicity and religion are invariably mentioned as interconnected issues. The CCP maintains a difficult differentiation between ethnic cultural practice and religion. Religion is often spoken of as culture (*wenhua* 文化) instead of religion (*zongjiao* 宗教).²⁹⁰ This culturalization of religion changes the paradigm of religious issues, in a way depriving religion of its sacred nature:

Although many of the traditional marriage and funeral ceremonies and mass festivals among these ethnic minorities have a religious tradition and significance, they have already essentially become merely a part of ethnic custom and tradition. (Document 19, 1982)²⁹¹

It thus becomes easier to think about religion as a set of practices that people perform just as part of their traditional lifestyle, or, as the abovementioned passage from Document 19 says, as “*merely* [emphasis added] a part of ethnic custom and tradition.” It allows for a separation of the practices from ideas of transcendental authority. From another viewpoint, the culturalization of religion can allow for a pragmatic management of religious activities. This culturalization of religion can be a practical tool for administrators as well as researchers to deal with religious communities without drawing unwanted questions and suspicions.²⁹² The other side of the coin is that the connection between culture and religion feeds the idea that religion naturally belongs to certain ethnic groups. There are attempts on the side of the state to counteract simplifications and prejudices, as shown by this statement in the 2011 CCP cadre handbook:

Religion is only one part of the life of ethnicities, and the religion’s characteristics are also just one part of the ethnicity’s characteristics. We cannot equate or mix up the characteristics of the religion with that of the ethnicity, and we definitely cannot say the characteristics of the ethnicity are solely determined by the characteristics of the religion.²⁹³

But these attempts are often just one drop against a tide of cultural essentialization by the state. As anthropologist Louisa Schein has argued in her work on the Miao minority, “ethnic work” (*minzu gongzuo* 民族工作) by the Chinese state is characterized by a limited conception of cultural diversity.

Republished on CPC News “Religious Work”, accessed October 29, 2017, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64171/65717/65720/4461147.html>.

²⁹⁰ Drewes, *Orientalisiert - Kriminalisiert - Propagiert?*, 96.

²⁹¹ MacInnis, transl., “Document 19,” chapter IX.

²⁹² Zhang Qianfang and Zhu Yingping have stated that because China's ethnic policy requires that the enforcement of the Criminal Law take into account ethnic customs, especially those involving religious beliefs, many local governments in minority areas modify provisions of laws or administrative regulations to adapt them to local customs. Zhang and Zhu, “Religious Freedom and Its Legal Restrictions in China,” 801. I myself was often given the advice not to mention the word religion when asked about my research while in China. Topics such as “education” or “tradition” were seen as less sensitive, although any research on Uyghur history or culture quickly became a no-go area in the years after starting the official project in 2014. For similar observations, see also Drewes, *Orientalisiert - Kriminalisiert - Propagiert*, 96.

²⁹³ Chen Xiaolong, *Minzu zongjiao zhishi ganbu* duben [Cadre Handbook on Ethnicity and Religion], 31.

Minzu gongzuo has created a specific habitus wherein notions about historical stages of social development, cultural essences of discrete groups, and naturalized official group ethnonyms have become the framework of ethnicity in China.²⁹⁴ In the end, the state's vision of a multicultural China involves a very static, essentialist idea of what these cultures are.

Religion's International Connections

The multiple ways in which members of China's religious communities can connect to foreign identities are considered both a threat and an opportunity to China. The government wishes to use the international connections of China's religious communities narrowly to promote the political and economic ties with other countries. To maintain good diplomatic relations, the state portrays a positive image of Chinese religious minorities through, for example, tours to important religious sites or through documentaries targeting international audiences that depict the situation of religious minorities to the outside world as harmonious and prosperous.²⁹⁵ This state propaganda has met with varying success. In contrast to the peaceful image presented by Chinese media, reports by international human rights associations on religious rights abuses in, for example, Tibet or Xinjiang have occasionally provoked severe international criticism. But the impact of such international outcries is limited. The Chinese administrative rhetoric tends to stress China's conformity with international standards, while at the same time stressing that religious management is an internal issue. The 1997 White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief sums up the relevant international regulations, saying that the legal protection of freedom of religious belief is "basically in accordance with the main contents of the concerned international documents and conventions."²⁹⁶ China also

²⁹⁴ Louisa Schein, *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 95. In an example of how China essentializes ethnic minority culture, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission in October 2013 announced the Ethnic Minority Film Project. The project aims to create feature films for each of China's fifty-five ethnic minorities that colorfully portray the minorities as happy and patriotic. The selection requirements include: Article 16: "The selected works must be highly ideological. The contents of the work should be positive and healthy, promote the main theme of loving the motherland, loving the ethnicity, safeguarding ethnic unity, inheriting the excellent ethnic culture, and promoting the common prosperity and development of all ethnic groups." Article 17: "The selected works shall have strong ethnic characteristics and reflect various aspects of the history, culture, geography and social life of ethnic minorities." Article 18: "The selected works shall be beautifully shot, highly artistic and ornamental." State Ethnic Affairs Commission, "Zhongguo shaoshu minzu dianying gongcheng ruxuan zuopin pingxuan banfa" 中国少数民族电影工程入选作品评选办法 [Selection Method for Selected Works of the Chinese Ethnic Minority Film Project], June 22, 2016, http://www.seac.gov.cn/art/2016/6/22/art_9551_259221.html.

²⁹⁵ For example China Global Television Network, "Buddha's Birthday celebrated in China," YouTube, May 3, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKeK-rpNFfY>. At the end of the video, the commentator calls the celebration "a display of Chinese history of 4000 years and Chinese civilization". Another example is CGTN America, "Ramadan in Xinjiang," YouTube, July 10, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjFDE-UXMBk>. The commentator remarks that the mosque community receives a free iftar meal, and the mosque imam praises the government for providing them with supplies and spacious offices.

²⁹⁶ Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "White Paper: Freedom of Religious Belief in China," Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, October 1997, trans. M.E. Sharpe, *Chinese Law and Government* 36 no. 3 (2003): 11.

uses international guidelines to justify the principle that religion needs to be loyal to the Party-state, on the grounds that international human rights conventions consider religious activities that “endanger social security” and “breed hate and intolerance” as illegal.²⁹⁷ China’s rising economic dominance increasingly quells any objections raised by foreign governments, or at the least minimizes the impact of criticism and symbolic protest, as foreign entities hold less leverage.

While the government seeks to take advantage of the international connections of its religious communities, it attempts to maintain tight control in order to avoid undesirable foreign influence:

Facts have proven over and over again that if we handle the domestic situation well, then all hostile religious forces from abroad will have little or no opportunity to exploit the situation to their own advantage. Then the international contacts undertaken by religious groups will make smoother and sounder progress and the positive function they should have will be given full play. (Document 19, 1982)²⁹⁸

Religion’s international connections are perceived as a threat to the Chinese state because they provide a way for Chinese citizens to have unwanted connections with foreign entities. Foreign connections of religious communities are not only brought about by a shared religion, but also through institutional authority (e.g. the Vatican, the Dalai Lama) or linguistic and ethnic affiliation. After the Cultural Revolution, the Reform and Opening Up campaign under Deng Xiaoping was implemented to break up China’s global isolation, but the government was aware of the challenges that this increased connectivity brought with it:

At the present time, contacts with international religious groups are increasing, along with the expansion of our country’s other international contacts, a situation which has important significance for extending our country’s political influence. But at the same time there are reactionary religious groups abroad, especially the imperialistic ones such as the Vatican and Protestant Foreign-mission societies, who strive to use all possible occasions to carry on their efforts at infiltration ‘to return to the China mainland.’ Our policy is to actively develop friendly international religious contacts, but also to firmly resist infiltration by hostile foreign religious forces. (Document 19, 1982)²⁹⁹

China has long been on guard for what it sees as ideological besiegement by the West, often termed as “peaceful evolution” (*heping yanbian* 和平演变). In the 1950s the term was used to describe U.S.

²⁹⁷ Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “White Paper,” 11.

²⁹⁸ MacInnis, transl., “Document 19,” chapter XI.

²⁹⁹ MacInnis, transl., “Document 19,” chapter XI.

tactics to turn the socialist block more democratic and capitalist,³⁰⁰ and Jiang Zemin used it in the 1990s to describe the unwanted political influence of foreign hostile forces.³⁰¹ One of the key issues surfacing in official rhetoric on religious work is the national independence of religions in China, in the sense of religious groups not being subject to any foreign interference. In the early CCP years the rhetoric's focus was on Christian missionary activities who were accused of trying to undermine internal stability in China. Party officials named the Church a tool for imperial aggressors.³⁰² To the Chinese government, the Vatican is in the first place a political entity, and attempts to strengthen papal authority within China have been seen as attempts to interfere with Chinese internal affairs "on the pretext of religious affairs."³⁰³ The Chinese government subsequently cut off administrative ties with the Vatican, saying that internal affairs such as the appointment of bishops were to be handled independently by the Chinese Catholic Church, based on the principle of independence, autonomy and self-management (*duli zizhu ziban* 独立自主自办).³⁰⁴ Since 2018, however, the Vatican and the Chinese government signed a controversial agreement which would recognize the Pope as the head of the Catholic Church in China and which allows him to veto bishop appointments in China. In return, the Pope recognized seven previously excommunicated bishops that the Chinese state had appointed. The agreement was met with mixed reactions, as critics viewed it as a knee

³⁰⁰ Chan and Carlson, *Religious Freedom in China*, 19. Mohammed Al-Sudairi, "Changing State-Religion Dynamics in Xi Jinping's China: And its Consequences for Sino-Saudi Relations," *Dirasat* 19 (2017): 10-11 and footnote 13.

³⁰¹ "Domestic and foreign hostile forces have used religious infiltration as an important means of their peaceful evolution of our country. This is essentially a political issue." (transl.) - Jiang Zemin. In Jiang Zemin, "Baochi dang de zongjiao zhengce he wendingxing he lianxuxing" 保持党的宗教政策的稳定性和连续性 [To Maintain the Stability and Continuity of the Party's Religious Policy], January 30, 1991. Published in 新时期宗教工作文献选编 [Selected Works of Religious Work in the New Period] (Religious Culture Press, August 1995), 210. Republished on CPC News "Religious Work", accessed October 29, 2017, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64171/65717/65721/4461297.html>.

"The religious question is a big problem. Because it is related to the unity and solidarity of our entire country, the unity of the nation, the reunification of the motherland, the whole of our socialist material civilization and spiritual civilization, but also related to penetration and counter-penetration, peaceful evolution and anti-peaceful evolution struggle. That is to say, if religious work is done well, it can play a good role in promoting socialist construction; if done badly, it will be used by hostile forces both at home and abroad. Therefore, doing religious work is of great significance." (transl.) - Jiang Zemin. In Jiang Zemin, "Yiding yao zuohao zongjiao gongzuo" [Must do a good job of religious work].

³⁰² See for example Deng Xiaoping: "[...], the Vatican must respect the principles of independence, autonomy and self-management of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, which is a necessary policy required by China's historical conditions. In the past imperialist aggression against China, the church was an important tool." (transl.) - Deng Xiaoping. "Huijian yidali tianzhujiao minzhudang fushuji kelongbo shi de tanhua" 会见意大利天主教民主党副书记科隆博时的谈话 [Talk at the meeting with Italian Christian Democratic Party Deputy Secretary Colombo], December 12, 1981, published in *Deng Xiaoping sixiang nianpu* 邓小平思想年谱 [Deng Xiaoping Thought Chronology (1975-1997)] (Central Literature Press, November 1998), 134. Republished on CPC News "Religious Work", accessed October 29, 2017, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64171/65717/65720/4461147.html>.

³⁰³ Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "White Paper: Freedom of Religious Belief in China," 17.

³⁰⁴ Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, "White Paper: Freedom of Religious Belief in China," 17.

bend to Beijing, while the Pope emphasized the importance of working relations.³⁰⁵ As for Buddhism and Islam, they were typically labelled as harmful because of their “system of feudalism and oppression.”³⁰⁶ Since the 1990s, the emphasis has shifted to the connection with foreign authorities. For Chinese Buddhism, the person of the Dalai Lama is seen as a special threat, which China has sought to curb by claiming the right for the official appointment of living Buddha reincarnations.³⁰⁷ For Islam, global concerns have gained prominence due to increased international communication and mobility and because of the threat of religious extremism and international terrorism after September 11, 2001. This does not only entail international terrorist organizations such as Al-Qaeda and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, but also foreign governments.³⁰⁸

One of the ways in which the CCP seeks to keep ethnic nationalism and foreign authorities in check is providing the ethnic minorities with a clear narrative telling how each religion belongs in the Chinese nation. In the second part of this chapter we will see how the state has accomplished this for Islam.

4.3. How China Seeks to Nationalize Islam

The place of religion and religious communities within the idea of a Chinese nation narrative is a challenge to the CCP. Historian Rebecca Nedostup has shown that when the Chinese Nationalist KMT government (1929-1949) tried to construct a national narrative, it deliberately wanted to create a secularist system, and separated itself from the idea of a state religion. The KMT sought to replace

³⁰⁵ The agreement was renewed in 2020. Vatican News, “Holy See and China renew Provisional Agreement for 2 years,” published October 22, 2020, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2020-10/holy-see-china-provisional-agreement-renew-appointment-bishops.html>. Bartosz Kowalski, “Vatican’s Rapprochement with China, Three Years On,” published December 29, 2021, <https://chinaobservers.eu/vaticans-rapprochement-with-china-three-years-on/>.

³⁰⁶ J “In the past reform of the religious system it was absolutely necessary and correct to reform the aspects of imperialistic manipulation and control in Catholicism and Protestantism and to form an independent, autonomic and self-managing association. And [it was absolutely necessary and correct to reform] the system of feudalism and oppression in the areas of Buddhism and Islam. It allowed our religious community to take an important step to adapt to socialist society.” (transl.) – Jiang Zemin. In Jiang Zemin, “Zai quanguo tongzhan gongzuo huiyishang de jianghua” 在全国统战工作会议上的讲话 [Speech at the National United Front Work Conference], November 7, 1993, published in “Overview of National United Front Work Conference and Literature (1988-1998)” (China Press, September 1998), 163-164. Republished on CPC News “Religious Work”, accessed October 29, 2017, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64171/65717/65721/4461297.html>.

³⁰⁷ State Administration for Religious Affairs, “Measures on the Management of the Reincarnation of Living Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism,” July 18, 2007, trans. International Campaign for Tibet for Congressional-Executive Committee on China website, <https://www.cecc.gov/resources/legal-provisions/measures-on-the-management-of-the-reincarnation-of-living-buddhas-in-0>.

³⁰⁸ The East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) was reportedly founded in late 1997 by Hasan Mahsum, a Uyghur from Kashgar. The ETIM was put on the U.S. list of terrorist organizations in 2002, but experts have expressed doubts about its size and actual operations, instead suspecting that it serves as an umbrella name for several splintered terrorist activists.

the superstitious ideas of the past with faith in the nation and in the leading party.³⁰⁹ The CCP has kept to the same avowedly secular ideological stance, but has, just like the KMT, made use of ideas and vocabulary similar to religious utopianism. Historian Vincent Goossaert goes so far as to say that the Maoist regime provided the most explicit and forceful expression of the utopian recycling of vocabulary and symbolic resources available from various religious traditions.³¹⁰ So while Chinese nationalism was deliberately built without and even partly against religion, it also bears great resemblance to it in terms of devotion and utopianism. The state wishes to inspire people with an evolutionist vision of a prosperous nation. In this vision, there is no room for irrational religion that could lead people away from productive choices. Instead, the state requires a rational devotion to the Chinese nation and the CCP.

Since the 1980s, the integration of religious communities into the Chinese nation narrative has seen a gradual increase. In the 1980s, national religious associations were reinstated and an institutional framework for religious management was rebuilt, but the state was still relatively unobtrusive towards religious communities. This changed in the 1990s under President Jiang Zemin's policy of mutual adaptation of socialism and religion.³¹¹ In 1993, Jiang Zemin called for religious communities and socialist society to "mutually adapt" (*xiangshiying* 相适应):

Religion is a historical phenomenon that will exist for a long time in a socialist society. If religion and socialist society will not mutually adapt, conflict will occur. This adaptation does not require religious believers to abandon the theistic ideas and religious beliefs, but asks of them to politically love the motherland, support the socialist system, and support the leadership of the Communist Party, as well as to reform religious systems and religious doctrine that does not adapt to socialist society, and to use the positive factors of religious doctrines, religious teachings and religious morality in service of socialism. – Jiang Zemin, Speech at the National United Front Work Conference (1993)³¹²

Since Jiang Zemin's call for mutual adaptation, the Chinese state has been very open concerning its utilitarian view of religion. Religious communities were seen as possible positive forces in Chinese society and where possible to be used to the state's advantage.³¹³ The central precondition to this

³⁰⁹ Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes*, 24.

³¹⁰ Goossaert, "State and Religion in Modern China," 4.

³¹¹ Pitman B. Potter, "Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China," *China Quarterly* 174, vol. 174 (2003): 319-324.

³¹² Jiang Zemin, "Zai quanguo tongzhan gongzuo huiyishang de jianghua [Speech at the National United Front Work Conference]."

³¹³ For example, in the harsh winter of 2008, then Politburo Standing Committee member and CPPCC chairman Jia Qinglin called upon religious communities in South China to carry forward "the religious tradition of our society to serve the community" and aid with disaster relief. CPC News, "Jia Qinglin yu quanguoxing zongjiao

idea of cooperation between the state and religious communities was unquestioned political loyalty of religious circles to the Chinese state.³¹⁴

Institutional Context: Administrative Bodies for Religious Affairs

Different departments of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission (SEAC, *guojiaminwei* 国家民委) implement ethnic affairs policies. An important task of the Culture and Propaganda Section of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission is to manage and support cultural traditions, and to make sure no conflicts arise because of cultural differences. This is but one part of an overall propaganda system, in which the United Front Work Department, the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and the Central Propaganda Department determine the themes that are to be addressed, such as, for example, religious extremism.³¹⁵ The United Front Work Department (UFWD, *tongzhanbu* 统战部), a Party body which takes its direction from the CCP Central Committee, determines the general policies towards ethnic minorities. Reestablished after the Cultural Revolution in 1979, the official task of the UFWD is to ensure good cooperation between Party and non-Party organizations such as other political parties, religious communities, and other interest groups.

The State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA, *guojia zongjiao shiwuju* 国家宗教事务局) is responsible for drafting rules and regulations on religious affairs, as well as for implementing those rules and regulations.³¹⁶ SARA and its local Religious Affairs Bureaus (RAB) are responsible for the management of religious affairs that are deemed legal, and have to coordinate with public security organs for handling illegal religious activities.³¹⁷ SARA is officially the head of seven national religious associations: the China Patriotic Catholic Association, the Chinese Catholic Bishop's College, the China Christian Council, the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, the China Buddhist Association, the China Taoist Association and the China Islamic Association. These national religious associations were not a new phenomenon. National religious associations were founded already under the Republican

tuanti zerenren juxing yingchun zuotan” 贾庆林与全国性宗教团体负责人举行迎春座谈[Jia Qinglin and the heads of the national religious groups held a spring discussion], February 3, 2008, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64093/64094/6859707.html>.

³¹⁴ Jiang Zemin, “Baochi dang de zongjiao zhengce he wendingxing he lianxuxing” [To maintain the stability and continuity of the Party's religious policy]. Duan Dezhi 段德智, *Xin Zhongguo zongjiao gongzuo shi* 新中国宗教工作史 (A History of Religion Work in New China) (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 2013), 272.

³¹⁵ Anne-Marie Brady, “‘We Are All Part of the Same Family’: China's Ethnic Propaganda,” *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 4 (2012): 161-62.

³¹⁶ SARA's predecessor, the Bureau of Religious Affairs, was founded in 1954 as a ministry under the State Council, and renamed to the State Administration for Religious Affairs in 1998. Ashiwa and Wank, “Making Religion, Making the State in Modern China,” 9, 11.

³¹⁷ Articles 42, 62, 69, 71, 73, 74 of the Religious Affairs Regulations drafted in 2016, finalized in 2017, enacted as of February 1, 2018. China Law Translate, “Religious Affairs Regulations 2017,” <http://www.chinalawtranslate.com/宗教事务条例-2017/?lang=en>. Original Chinese text consulted on http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2017-09/07/content_5223282.htm.

government. Although the associations of Republican times did not survive very long, new ones were very soon set up under the PRC. Rebecca Nedostup argues that it was a certain “cultural and governmental logic” that made the model of a national religious association equally valid for the PRC government.³¹⁸ These associations are meant to serve as bridges between state administration and religious communities.³¹⁹

The China Islamic Association (CIA, *zhongguo yisilanjiao xiehui* 中国伊斯兰教协会) has administrations on the national, provincial and local levels. It is responsible for organizing religious activities, developing Islamic literature, organizing Islamic education, organizing the pilgrimage to Mecca, and more.³²⁰ The CIA often has to work together with the local Religious Affairs Bureaus and the United Front Work Department, and in general needs to cooperate with an array of Party and state institutions.³²¹ The cooperation and power balance between these different institutions varies per region and administrative level.³²² On the national level, positions within the China Islamic Association are closely overseen by the state. In 2000, the frequency of the CIA’s national congress changed from every four to every five years, a change which was explicitly intended to agree with the National People’s Congress’ and the People’s Consultative Conference’s schedules, “so as to duly and properly consider personnel arrangement as well as the arrangement of our association’s work and conferences.”³²³ On the local level, local power politics, varying degrees of pressure from upper levels, and different responses by the communities to state measures all lead to different situations on the ground. Researchers have found that, institutionally, the horizontal financing of local China Islamic Associations strengthens this local diversity in handling Muslim communities.³²⁴ At the same time, the reliance on government funding for Islamic Associations adds to the dependence of the religious communities on political goodwill. The CIA has gradually become more and more associated with the government rather than with the religious community it is supposed to represent. In many

³¹⁸ Rebecca Nedostup, “The Transformation of the Concept of Religion in Chinese Modernity,” in *Religious Diversity in Chinese Thought*, eds. Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Joachim Gentz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 161.

³¹⁹ Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “White Paper: Freedom of Religious Belief in China,” 7-20. State Administration for Religious Affairs, “Tianzhujiao” 天主教 [Catholicism], last modified on October 23, 2017, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/zjbk/zjzs/575178.htm>. State Administration for Religious Affairs, “Jidujiao” 基督教 [Protestantism], last modified on October 23, 2017, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/zjbk/zjzs/575179.htm>.

³²⁰ China Islamic Association, “Xiehui jianjie” 协会简介 [Short Introduction to the Association], accessed January 5, 2013, <http://chinaislam.net.cn/about/xhgk/about132.html>.

³²¹ Jérôme Doyon, “The Local Islamic Associations and the Party-State: Consanguinity and Opportunities,” *China Perspectives* 4 (2014): 49.

³²² Chan and Carlson, *Religious Freedom in China*, 2.

³²³ As quoted from an amendment to Articles of the China Islamic Association (2000) in Zhang and Zhu, “Religious Freedom and Its Legal Restrictions in China,” 815-17.

³²⁴ Erie, “Defining Shari’a in China,” 98. Also see Doyon, “The Local Islamic Associations and the Party-State,” 45-52.

places, the CIA has become the mouthpiece for the government, with similar objectives, tenets and post qualifications.³²⁵ This state control over the CIA becomes more problematic when we take into consideration the association's monopoly on community representation. As anthropologist Matthew Erie has observed, the CIA marginalizes grassroots Muslim organization by monopolizing the space for civil society between the state and the Muslim communities.³²⁶ All Muslim communities within China are obliged to turn to the CIA for authorization and officiation. It is the only association that can offer legality to religious activities and sites. This leaves no room for alternative associations. It means that individual believers or groups of believers that do not comply with the CIA's directives, automatically find themselves outside of officially sanctioned Islam. This of course does not mean no organized religious activities take place outside of the CIA. It just means that these activities are pushed to a gray area of illegality, where they can become a liability, the seriousness of which depends on the political environment.

State-Led Islamic Education: Restrictions and Possibilities

Education is an important medium for the CCP to implement the state functionalization of Islam. The training and co-optation of patriotic religious clergy was already mentioned in 1982 in Document 19:

To win over, unite and educate persons in religious circles is the primary task of religious professionals. It is also the essence of the Party's religious work and most important condition and prerequisite for the implementation of the Party's religious policy. (Document 19, 1982)³²⁷

Document 19 talks about "winning over" senior religious personnel, and about training new religious personnel through seminaries, in order to "create a contingent of young religious personnel who, in terms of politics, fervently love their homeland and support the Party's leadership and the socialist system and who possess sufficient religious knowledge."³²⁸ In the 1980s, several Scriptural Institutes (*jingxueyuan* 经学院) for higher Islamic education were set up in the provinces, totaling nine institutes.³²⁹ Although the public schooling system only teaches a Marxist secularist version of religion, the state supported the education of Islamic clergy through the official Islamic Scriptural Institutes, whose graduates would often become state officials, interpreters, and imams.

³²⁵ Zhang and Zhu, "Religious Freedom and Its Legal Restrictions in China," 817.

³²⁶ Erie, "Defining Shari'a in China," 100.

³²⁷ MacInnis, transl., Document 19, chapter V.

³²⁸ Document 19, chapter VIII.

³²⁹ The first Scriptural Institute had been set up in Beijing under the CIA in 1955. Allès, "Muslim Religious Education in China," 7. Dru C. Gladney, "Making Muslims in China: Education, Islamicization and Representation," in *China's National Minority Education: Culture, Schooling, and Development*, ed. Gerard A. Postiglione (New York: Falmer Press, 1999), 84.

I interviewed a Uyghur alumnus of the Beijing Islamic Scriptural Institute who studied there between 2001 and 2006. He described aspects of the education in the Institute as skeptical of and sometimes hostile to religiosity. Some courses directly taught the idea that religion will wither away as society progresses: “They teach us in the Islamic Institute that every religion will die. It needs time, so they say we must be patient, we need to be tolerant. We just wait. ‘Why we work here, why you study here, is just control. We must control this religion developing.’ The Chinese say that if we do not control this religion, it will be a disaster.”³³⁰ The need to educate people in religious knowledge was explained by the institute in terms of making sure religion did not stray onto a path that might become harmful to society. The principle behind the institute’s curriculum was that while it was not right to ban religious content, content needed to be shaped into a form that aligned with CCP interests. Indeed, if guided correctly, Islam could be useful. The alumnus, Sultan, told of a curriculum that was replete with Arabic language instruction as well as PRC religious policies. The knowledge of Arabic was practical for international relations, while religious leaders could serve as bridges between the Party and religious communities, and Islamic scripture contained ideas that aligned well with socialism. Institute graduates were trained to be advocates for both sides: On the one hand, they could argue Islam was a valuable resource in Chinese socialist society, countering the hardline stance that argued for the elimination of religion. And on the other hand, they could argue against people who resisted state intrusion in religious affairs that religion could be abused to harm society and therefore required state guidance.

The alumnus did not regard the staff working at the China Islamic Association and the Institutes as high religious authorities, saying rather that the teachers were always “researchers on Islam [...], not religious functionaries.”³³¹ The same lack of religious authority in the CIA was noted by researcher Matthew Erie, saying that most Hui scholars did not consider the people who were selected by the China Islamic Association to compose the official interpretation of Islamic scripture as possessing the required knowledge or authority: “Most *ahong* and almost all Hui scholars discredit the EAGC as China’s *ulama*, citing the committee members’ lack of credentials to interpret shari’a.”³³² But even when not all functionaries working in the CIA or in the Institutes were regarded as religious authorities, the organization was attractive since it possessed resources not available to non-state organizations. State imams were given a salary, and the Institutes received government funds and were under certain circumstances allowed to use foreign support for their development.³³³

³³⁰ Author’s interview with Sultan, January 2016.

³³¹ Author’s interview with Sultan, January 2016.

³³² The EAGC was the Educational Administration Guidance Committee, set up by the CIA in 2001 to develop a standard curriculum for Islamic education. Erie, “Defining Shari’a in China,” 108.

³³³ Erie, *China and Islam*, 201.

Despite the general lack of legitimacy that the Institutes had in the eyes of Hui and Uyghur Muslims, it did still attract numerous students throughout the country. For the 2001 enrollments at the Beijing Islamic Institute, Sultan said there were around 5000 Uyghur applicants from Xinjiang, of whom 600 were allowed to participate in the entrance exams after background checks, and thirty eventually went on to study there. Sultan said that one of the Uyghur CIA teachers was a friend of his father, and it was he who made sure that Sultan passed the background check. Another one of my interviewees, when asked about the Institutes, said that he was not able to study there even though he had wanted to at some point. To me, this indicated not a wholesale rejection of the CIA and its Institutes, but a relationship ruled by interests.

Fellow students of Sultan have gone to work as imams, or as editors and writers at the *China Muslim* magazine. Sultan studied at the Institute to learn Arabic, motivated by the idea of helping his father do business with Arabic countries. Eventually, after his graduation, he worked in a Beijing trading company that had a project with an Arabic country. After two years he moved to Urumqi to work at the Religious Affairs Bureau as an ancient book translator and researcher.³³⁴

But working for the government did come with restrictions. Sultan said he was happy with the translation work and research work, but disliked that after a few months he also had to do translations for officials and law enforcement, such as checking online posts or checking suitcases of pilgrims returning from Hajj for Arabic works. He could not refuse those tasks, he said, for fear of getting into trouble himself.³³⁵ Sultan also experienced situations where his function as a government official conflicted with his Muslim identity:

As an official, I was not allowed to pray and fast. For the New Year's party, the commissary came to my table and told me to drink a glass of wine. I told him I never drank wine before, and that I am a graduate of the China Islamic Institute, and that it was not good for our image. You know that if I drink this, it is not good for our institute's image. He told me he wanted to speak with me later. So two weeks later, we talked, and he was very angry about me refusing his offer in front of 300 people. For the Chinese, they do not respect one another. You must completely obey.³³⁶

In the confrontation with the Party official, being a graduate of the Islamic Institute was used by Sultan to justify a level of religiosity, in this case not drinking alcohol. Even though Sultan was skeptic

³³⁴ Author's interview with Sultan, January 2016.

³³⁵ Author's interview with Sultan.

³³⁶ Author's interview with Sultan.

of the true religious nature of the Islamic Institute, he did feel that its status as an approved state institution could protect his decision not to drink as an official.

Although the CIA and the Institutes often meant restrictions and a means of control over religious activities, we should not presume that people involved in the organizations had solely abusive intentions. The State Administration for Religious Affairs, the China Islamic Association and the Scriptural Institutes enabled a pragmatism that allowed for Islam to function within the legal bounds of the Chinese state. The CIA and its Institutes were a buffer that worked both ways: On the one hand, the state could not be accused of wanting to eliminate religion, since it invested resources in the education of religious clergy. On the other hand, religious behavior could not be accused of being reactionary, since it was officially legitimized by a state institute. This allowed for people with a diversity of interests to work within the state-approved religious settings.

Scriptural Interpretation: Cultural and Political Nationalization of Islam

Around the turn of the 21st century, the state set out to standardize the curriculum of Islamic education. At a 1998 conference on Islamic education, the CIA argued that Islamic education suffered from a lack of standard textbooks.³³⁷ In 2001 they established the Educational Administration Guidance Committee (*jiaowu zhidao weiyuanhui* 教务指导委员会, EAGC) and organized a Symposium on National and Local Scriptural Study Institutes' Teaching Materials Work.³³⁸ The following year, the CIA set up the Office for Coordinating the Editing of the China Islamic Association Teaching Material (*zhongguo yisilanjiao xiehui jiaocai bianshen xietiao bangongshi* 中国伊斯兰教协会教材编审协调办公室), which was in charge of producing state-approved interpretations of Islamic scriptures, also known as the *jiejing* 解经 (scripture interpretation) project. The Committee chairman Chen Guangyuan's explanation for the *jiejing* project was that it offered explanations from the angle of religious doctrine and rules, in line with both Islamic belief as well as the needs of modern society ("*shidai fazhan de yaoqiu* 时代发展的要求").³³⁹ The *jiejing* project was a coordinated effort to communicate what the government expected Islam to profess. On the basis of the officially sanctioned curriculum, religious personnel were given instruction about what religious messages they could and should communicate to the religious community. The series of textbooks for the

³³⁷ Gao Zhanfu 高占福, "Yisilanjiao jingxueyuan tongbian jiaocai diyi jieduan renwu yuanman wancheng" 伊斯兰教经学院统编教材第一阶段任务圆满完成 [The successful completion of the first phase of Islamic textbooks], November 26, 2013, <http://wap.cnki.net/touch/web/Newspaper/Article/CMZB201311260073.html>.

³³⁸ Chinese: *Quanguo he difang jingxueyuan jiaocai zuotanhui* 全国和地方经学院教材工作座谈会. Erie, "Defining Shari'a in China," 92.

³³⁹ Li Dekuan 李德宽, *Minzu zongjiao falü zhengce duben* 民族宗教法律政策读本 [Handbook on Minority Religion Legislation and Policy] (Yinchuan: Ningxia Renmin Chubanshe, 2013), 61-62.

Islamic Institutes covered topics such as Islamic law, history, and Qur'an and Hadith, providing a uniform curriculum for all Institutes.³⁴⁰ The Handbook for Islamic Patriotism (*musilin aiguo zhuyu jiaocheng* 穆斯林爱国主义教程) which appeared in 2006 was focused on a narrative that equated Islamic piety with good PRC citizenship.³⁴¹ It used Islamic scriptural quotations as well as historic figures and events from Islamic communities in China to display what patriotic Islam looks like.

The tightening of political “guidance” (*dao 导*) over the education of Islamic clergy coincided with a wider interest in patriotic education for religious personnel in the early 2000s. Kuo Cheng-tian related how, after relations between the Chinese government and the Vatican deteriorated due to China's appointment of its own bishops in 2000, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Chinese Catholic Bishop Conference published the *Chinese Catholic Textbook of Independent, Autonomous, and Self-Management Churches* in 2002, which sought to express and stimulate the patriotic nature of the Chinese Catholic community.³⁴² State Administration for Religious Affairs employees took an interest and wanted to expand the project of religious patriotic handbooks to other religious communities. In 2005, SARA published the “Guidelines for Implementing Patriotic Education,” edited by a group of scholars at the Renmin University in Beijing specialized in Marxism and Leninism. Following SARA's guidelines, publications on patriotic education for Muslims (*Musilin Aiguo Zhuyi Jiaocheng*, Beijing: Zongjiao Chubanshe, 2006) and for Catholics (*Jidujiao Aiguo zhuyi jiaocheng*, Beijing: Zongjiao Wenhua Chubanshe, 2006) followed in 2006. These books were to be distributed among the religious communities, who had to appoint special teachers to teach the separate curriculum on religious patriotism.³⁴³

The scripture interpretation project provided a blueprint for all media aimed at Muslim communities. Several articles have appeared in Islamic publications making an effort to explicitly state the compatibility of Islam and CCP China. A 2012 article in the *China Muslim* journal aims to show how Islamic doctrine is compatible with Chinese socialist thought. The article gives an extensive overview of “harmonious” thought in Islam, going deeper into doctrinal principles saying that believing in God is the fundamental core of harmonious thought in Islamic culture which drives social development and scientific progress, and that the idea of rewards in the afterlife “requires not only the personal self-cultivation, but also the fulfillment of personal, family and social responsibilities [...]”³⁴⁴ The

³⁴⁰ Erie, “Defining Shari'a in China,” 102. Allès, “Muslim Religious Education in China,” 9.

³⁴¹ China Islamic Association, *Musilin aiguo zhuyi jiaocheng (shiyongben)* 穆斯林爱国主义教程（试用本） [Handbook for Muslim Patriotism (Trial Edition)] (Beijing: Zongjiao Wenhua chubanshe, 2006).

³⁴² Kuo Cheng-tian, “Chinese Religious Reform: The Christian Patriotic Education Campaign,” *Asian Survey* 51, no. 6 (2011): 1055.

³⁴³ Kuo, “Chinese Religious Reform,” 1042-43.

³⁴⁴ Ma Wenyang 马文祥, “Lun yisilan wenhuazhong hexie sixiang de qianti goucheng” 论伊斯兰文化中和谐思想的潜体系构成 [On the Formation of the Potential System of Harmonious Thought in Islamic Culture], *Zhongguo Musilin* 2 (2012): 12. DOI:10.16293/j.cnki.cn11-1345/b.2012.02.004.

article starts by saying how high Party officials have affirmed that Islam contains ideas that are in congruence with the harmonious societal view of the CCP:

On November 7, 2009, Premier Wen Jiabao pointed out in a speech at the headquarters of the League of Arab States in Cairo: “Islamic civilization also contains the concept of advocating peace and advocating tolerance. There are more than one hundred places in the Qur’an that talk about peace.” Comrade Jia Qinglin further pointed out at the 10th Anniversary Summary Meeting of the Islamic Exegesis Work held in April 2011: “Standardize the content and form of the lectures, and more effectively promote the ideas of peace, unity and patriotism in Islamic teaching among the Muslims.” This is the Party's and country's high affirmation of the harmonious ideas in Islamic culture.³⁴⁵

The focus of this patriotic narrative does not only lie in Islam’s cultural connection with China, but also very specifically with its political loyalty to the Chinese state. The 1997 White Paper of Religious Belief in China stated that “[i]n the course of the country’s long history, the various religions in China have become part of traditional Chinese thinking and culture,” and saying that it is “traditional for Chinese religious believers to love their country and religions.”³⁴⁶ As Dru Gladney has argued, the discussion on the Sinicization or Hanification of China’s minorities tends to submerge the aspect of minorities’ political integration into the Chinese state (*Zhongguo hua*).³⁴⁷ A 2011 *Cadre Handbook of Muslim Aiguo Aijiao* (“Muslim Love Your Country, Love Your Religion”) published with the Ningxia People’s Press describes historic figures of the Hui community with the help of more than 40 questions such as “Who were the three Hui heroes of the May 4th Movement [of 1919]?”, “Who was the Hui hero during the Resistance War who was known as the “one-armed warrior?” and “Why do we say that the expeditions of the Hui sailor Zheng He is one of China’s, and even one of the world’s, greatest heroic acts?”³⁴⁸ The 2006 *Handbook for Islamic Patriotism* is a good representation of the general lines of the nation narrative that the state promoted around Islam. The book is divided into several sections: the first section explains how Islamic doctrine calls for patriotism. Developing towards a socialist society is presented as being in conformity with divine will, exemplified by several scriptural extracts. The second section explains how Muslim ethnic minorities in China contribute to the country’s economy, scientific advancement, and culture. The following sections take on Muslims’

³⁴⁵ Ma Wenyang, “Lun yisilan wenhuazhong hexie sixiang de qianti goucheng” [On the Formation of the Potential System of Harmonious Thought in Islamic Culture], 10. Jia Qinglin was a high-profile CCP political figure and Politburo member who functioned as the Chairman of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference from 2003 to 2013.

³⁴⁶ Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, “White Paper: Freedom of Religious Belief in China,” 9.

³⁴⁷ Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, 318.

³⁴⁸ Wang Fuping 王伏平, *Muslim aiguo aijiao duben* 穆斯林爱国爱教读本 [Handbook for Muslim Love Your Country Love Your Religion] (Yinchuan: Ningxia Renmin Chubanshe, 2011).

history in China, explaining how Muslims have contributed to the founding and unity of the People's Republic by resisting foreign imperialist powers, advocating socialism and helping in the Liberation War. The last two sections show what patriotic actions have been taken in recent Communist times. On the one hand it focuses on policies of societal advancement such as China's Reform and Opening-up, the Western Development Program, and developing modern education. The other focus is on acts that safeguard national unity, such as resisting East Turkestan forces, taking part in the state-organized Hajj, and maintaining friendly international relations. Religion is portrayed as an integral part of the Chinese nation narrative in two ways: cultural belonging and political loyalty.

To illustrate how the state functionalized Islamic scripture to urge believers to be patriotic, here following is a selection of quotations used in the *Handbook for Islamic Patriotism* in the chapter about Patriotic Thought in the Qur'an and Hadith.³⁴⁹ The chapter says that the Prophet Muhammad "during his life when he was preaching Islam (610-623), did not only vigorously propagate Islam, but also instructed Muslims to love their hometown, to love their country."³⁵⁰ To support this point, the text recalls the following sayings by Muhammad: "I swear it by Allah! Indeed, you (Mecca) are the most beloved for Allah. You are also my most beloved land. If they would not have driven me away, then I would not have left you."³⁵¹ Several other Hadith are used to support the idea of establishing a thriving land, such as: "Lord! I ask you to give us auspiciousness in this land! I ask you to give us the rich fruits of this land! I ask that we make friends with the kind-hearted villagers."³⁵² The handbook also mentions a Hadith from Al-Bukhari in the context of prosperity: "God, make us love Medina like we loved Mecca, or even more so. I ask you to make Medina prosper, I ask you that we have ample food and clothing."³⁵³ A central topic in this patriotic narrative is the need to counter separatism. A verse that is frequently used for this purpose, not only in textbooks, but also in state-approved sermons and other propaganda texts, is Qur'an Surah 3, verse 103: "You all should hold on to the

³⁴⁹ China Islamic Association, *Muslim aiguo zhuyi jiaocheng (shiyongben)* [Handbook for Muslim Patriotism (Trial Edition)], 31-35.

³⁵⁰ Handbook for Muslim Patriotism (Trial Edition), 32.

³⁵¹ Handbook for Muslim Patriotism (Trial Edition), 32.

³⁵² Handbook for Muslim Patriotism (Trial Edition), 32.

³⁵³ Handbook for Muslim Patriotism (Trial Edition), 35. (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, 1889, Book 29, Hadith 23) Chinese: "Zhu a! Qiu ni shi women xi'ai maidina, youru xi'ai maijia huo geng shen. Zhu a! Qiu ni shi maidina fanrong, qiu ni shi women fengyi zushi ba!" 主啊! 求你使我们喜爱麦地那, 犹如喜爱麦加或更甚。主啊! 求你使麦地那繁荣, 求你是我们丰衣足食吧!

Arabic: اللَّهُمَّ حَبِّبْ إِلَيْنَا الْمَدِينَةَ كَحُبِّنَا مَكَّةَ أَوْ أَشَدَّ، اللَّهُمَّ بَارِكْ لَنَا فِي صَاعِنَاءِ وَفِي مُدَنَّا، وَصَحَّحْهَا لَنَا وَانْقُلْ خُطَاهَا إِلَى الْجُحْفَةِ

English: O Allah! Make us love Medina as we love Mecca or even more than that. O Allah! Give blessings in our Sā' and our Mudd [measures symbolizing food] and make the climate of Medina suitable for us, and divert its fever towards Aljuhfa.

rope of Allah, you should not break up.”³⁵⁴ The handbook also provides scriptural examples on how to deal with non-Muslims, most notably Surah 49, verse 13. Interestingly, the Chinese version of this Qur’anic verse differs from the Arabic and the Uyghur one. The Chinese version says that God created mankind into different peoples and religions (Chinese: *wo shi nimen chengwei xuduo minzu he zongjiao* 我使你们成为许多民族和宗族), whereas the Uyghur and Arabic versions merely mention peoples and tribes, not religions (Arabic: *wa ja’alnā kum shu ‘ūban wa qabā’ila* وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ, Uyghur: *nurghun millet we uruq* نۇرغۇن مىللەت ۋە ئۇرۇق).³⁵⁵ These quotes from the Qur’an and Hadith are used frequently in speeches, sermons and publications that expound the state’s vision on Islam.

Presenting patriotism and loyalty to the state as an act of piety is also a way to circumvent any possible troubles with regard to Islamic law. The Institute handbook on Islamic doctrine is very careful to treat Islamic law not as a transcendental universal law for humankind, but as rules of conduct applicable to the local *minzu*.³⁵⁶ Besides the Institute handbooks, the *jiejing* project also led to the publication of collections of fatwas (*jiaowu zhidao tongxun* 教务指导通讯). By the time of my fieldwork in 2015, however, the six collections of fatwas that were published between 2001 and 2011 had been taken out of circulation. Scholar Matthew Erie remarks they have most likely been censored by the state because of their sensitive content.³⁵⁷

Another type of publication to come out of the *jiejing* project are the collections of sermons (*xinbian wo’erzi yanjiangji* 新编卧儿兹演讲集 *Collections of Newly Edited Wa’z Sermons*). The collections of sermons have proven to be the most important medium for the state to spread its narrative of a

³⁵⁴ China Islamic Association, *Musilin aiguo zhuyi jiaocheng (shiyongben)* [Handbook for Muslim Patriotism (Trial Edition)], 33. Chinese: “*Nimen dang quanti jianchi zhenzhu de sheng suo, bu yao ziji fenlie.*” 你们当全体坚持真主的绳索，不要自己分裂。

This is the full Qur’anic verse 103 in Arabic: *وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا ۚ وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءً فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ بِنِعْمَتِهِ إِخْوَانًا وَكُنْتُمْ عَلَىٰ شَفَا حُفْرَةٍ مِّنَ النَّارِ فَأَنقَذَكُم مِّنْهَا ۚ كَذَٰلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ آيَاتِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ*

Full Qur’anic verse 103 in English: And hold firmly to the rope of Allah all together and do not become divided. And remember the favor of Allah upon you - when you were enemies and He brought your hearts together and you became, by His favor, brothers. And you were on the edge of a pit of the Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus does Allah make clear to you His verses that you may be guided.

³⁵⁵ China Islamic Association, *Musilin aiguo zhuyi jiaocheng (shiyongben)* [Handbook for Muslim Patriotism (Trial Edition)], 33. Qur’an surah 49, verse 13. For the Uyghur and Arabic version, I consulted Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Islamic Association, *Quran Kerim - Uyghurche terjimisi* قۇرئان كەرىم – ئۇيغۇرچە تەرجىمىسى [The Qur’an – Uyghur translation] (Urumqi: Xinjiang People’s Press, 2012), 517.

³⁵⁶ Editorial Committee for the China Islamic Association National Institutes’ Uniform Teaching Materials 中国伊斯兰教协会全国经学院统编教材编审委员会, ed., *Yisilan jiaofa jianming jiaocheng (shiyongben)* 伊斯兰教法简明教程 (试用本) [Concise Handbook on Islamic Doctrine (Trial Edition)], (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2008, 2013), 103-5. Also see Erie, *China and Islam*.

³⁵⁷ Topics discussed included the definition of *jihad* and dress codes. The editors said that foreign authorities were consulted in the writing process. Erie, “Defining Shari’a in China,” 104-8.

nationalist Islam. We will go deeper into the contents of such speeches in the following chapter on the implementation of the functionalization policy in Xinjiang.

4.4. Conclusion

The CCP's ideas of how religion fits into Chinese society as laid down by the 1982 Document 19 have held ground throughout the years. Officially, religion is an unwanted factor in society, but it should not and cannot be done away with overnight. And so, religion is provisionally allowed to hold a place in society, as long as it does not stand in the way of the political and social goals of the CCP. Due to its potential for social organization, its connection to issues of ethnicity, as well as the possibilities it offers for connecting to foreign authorities, religion remained an object of political scrutiny.

The government kept religious communities in check through administration and legislation. But it also saw the need to align religious communities' interests with those of the Chinese nation. This has driven initiatives to educate its own religious staff, who were seen as an instrumental link between the government and local communities. There was a need for a professional, patriotic group of religious leaders who could ensure that religious teachings were always deployed in the interest of China, and not in the interest of foreigners or ethno-nationalists. Projects such as the *jiejing* were efforts at aligning religious discourse with ideas about social order as envisioned by the CCP. This nationalist religious discourse was twofold: it not only intended to bind religious communities to China in a historical and cultural sense, but also emphasized political loyalty to the CCP.

5. Functionalizing Islam in Xinjiang

In this chapter we will see how the Chinese state implemented the functionalization of Islam in Xinjiang. It builds on the previous chapter's discussion of central policies and the functionalization of religion, showing how the policies were translated under Xinjiang's specific conditions and in what shape the state has allowed Islam's continued existence in the region. Based on field observations in Xinjiang in Urumqi, Turpan, Kashgar and Khotan, as well as official textbooks, publications by the China Islamic Association and interviews with Uyghur religious scholars, we will see how the state not only oppressed many religious activities, but also enlisted religious doctrine and religious sites into its nation narrative.

As we have seen in the previous chapter there was a project since the early 2000s that developed a nationalist narrative for Islam, suitable for training Islamic clergy and CIA officials in leading religious communities to fit into Chinese society. Xinjiang, as a border province with a majority Muslim population and a distinct socio-cultural history, presented a challenge to this narrative. Uyghur dissatisfaction with Chinese rule has troubled the region since the 1980s with repeated protests and often with calls for more autonomy or independence. As open protests were shut down ever more effectively in the 1990s, Uyghurs sought other ways to express themselves vis-a-vis the Chinese. Over time, Islam gained traction as a symbol of resistance against Chinese rule.³⁵⁸ To meet the threat of Uyghur unrest in the region, the state has sought to drain the power of Islam as a platform for anti-Chinese identity expression. While restriction and repression of religious activities were a way to eliminate any platforms which the state could not control, the state did not consider those measures sufficient to counter the perceived danger of Islam and its relation to Uyghur dissent. With the functionalization policy, the state offered a counter-narrative of an Islam that was defined by participation in the Chinese nation. We will take a look at what message the state-directed version of Islam wanted to convey and what means were used spread this message, before considering the problems that arose with this policy in the Xinjiang context.

5.1. The Message

The state sought to communicate three main messages through the Islamic narrative in Xinjiang. First and foremost, it emphasized that patriotism is an Islamic virtue, and that historically and doctrinally Islam is loyal to China. Second, it cautioned against harmful interpretations, warning against other forces that use Islam as a vessel for damaging messages. In contrast, state-approved Islam was equated with good Islam. And third, it identified a good Muslim with someone who strives for a

³⁵⁸ See especially Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*.

modern, wealthy China. This implied that Muslims should support the state's social and economic initiatives.

Islam is Culturally and Politically Loyal to China

The dominant message preached via state Islam was that patriotism was a Muslim's obligation. The Islamic Institute's textbook used for an imam's education clearly stipulated that one of the "basic requirements of an imam in the new period" was patriotism:

Fiercely loving the motherland and abiding by the law are basic requirements of every citizen of a cultured country. They are also the social criterion that every God-respecting and prophet-obeying Muslim needs to adhere to. It also is one of the qualities that a suitable *ahong* needs to possess. This is the test which shows whether or not an imam conforms to the standards of the New Era society.³⁵⁹

This claim was backed with scriptural examples such as Qur'anic verse 4:59: "O you who have believed, obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority among you. And if you disagree over anything, refer it to Allah and the Messenger, if you should believe in Allah and the Last Day. That is the best [way] and offers the best result."³⁶⁰

Besides using Islamic scripture, the state carefully constructed a historiography of the region that supports a China-centered story of Xinjiang and regarded it as something that "holds an important position in the anti-separatist struggle in the ideological field."³⁶¹ It embarked upon projects to appropriate local history and local historic figures for the construction of its patriotic Islamic narrative of Xinjiang. The Chinese state proffered works of cultural importance by Uyghur Muslim intellectuals as examples of Islamic patriotism, on the grounds that they lifted the cultural level of society. One of the Uyghur scholars praised in the *Handbook for Muslim Patriotism* is Mahmud Kashgari, an 11th-century scholar whose tomb lies in Opal in the Kashgar region (see Figures 15 and 16). Kashgari's *Compendium of the Language of the Turks* (*Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk*), a comprehensive dictionary of Turkic languages composed in Baghdad, was seen as national treasure of international renown. One of the main reasons Kashgari's work is hailed as an example of Uyghur Islamic

³⁵⁹ Editorial Committee for the China Islamic Association National Institutes' Uniform Teaching Materials 中国伊斯兰教协会全国经学院统编教材编审委员会, ed., *Ahong jiaowu zhidao jianming jiaocheng (shiyongben)* 阿訇教务指导简明教程 (试用本) [Concise Handbook for Imam Educational Administration and Guidance (Trial Edition)], (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2013), 6.

³⁶⁰ Editorial Committee for the China Islamic Association National Institutes' Uniform Teaching, *Ahong jiaowu zhidao jianming jiaocheng (shiyongben)* [Concise Handbook for Imam Educational Administration and Guidance (Trial Edition)], 6.

³⁶¹ China Islamic Association, "Xinjiang ge minzu shi zhonghua minzu xuemaixianglian de jiatong chengyuan" 新疆各民族是中华民族血脉相连的家庭成员 [Each ethnic group in Xinjiang is a family member of the Chinese nation], April 29, 2019, <http://www.chinaislam.net.cn/cms/news/jujiaoredian/201904/29-13165.html>.

patriotism, is that Mahmud Kashgari allegedly claimed that “Kashgar was an inseparable part of Chinese territory”.³⁶²



Figure 15: Pictures at the Mahmud Kashgari site showing state celebrations and administrator visits in 2008 (photo by author, Opal [Kashgar] 2015)



Figure 16: Entrance of the mosque at the Mahmud Kashgari mazar (photo by author, Opal [Kashgar] 2015)

³⁶² China Islamic Association, *Muslim aiguo zhuyi jiaocheng (shiyongben)* [Handbook for Muslim Patriotism (Trial Edition)], 40. The section that is referred to in Kashgari’s *Compendium* says that “Şīn [i.e., China] is originally threefold; Upper, in the east which is called Tawjāch; middle which is Khitāy, lower which is Barkhān in the vicinity of Kashgar.” See Michal Biran for a discussion of 11th- and 12th-century Islamic works referring to the boundaries of China in Central Asia. Michal Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History: Between China and the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 98-101.

Another work that the *Handbook for Muslim Patriotism* hails as a work of Xinjiang patriotic Islam is *Stories of Efendi* (*afanti de gushi* 阿凡提的故事). Efendi, also known as Nasrdin Avanti, was a popular protagonist of humorous and satirical short stories that circulated throughout Central Asia, including Xinjiang.³⁶³ He became well-known throughout China after the Shanghai Art Film Studio made him a popular cartoon character in the 1980s, when it produced an animated series called *Stories of Efendi*. He is portrayed as a turbaned man with a pointy curly beard and a white turban, accompanied by his well-known sidekick donkey. Up until today, he remains a well-known character, with a 3D animation film produced in 2017.³⁶⁴ The *Handbook for Muslim Patriotism* praises him for being “the embodiment of cleverness, wisdom, humor, justice and courage. He represents the fine aspiration and ideal of the numerous lower-ranking common people daring to fight all evil forces and overcome difficulties.”³⁶⁵ Being a witty figure of humorous short stories, he lacks much of the solemnity that surrounds other figures of patriotic Islam. His image is used to embody the kind, harmless, almost Disneyesque Muslim.³⁶⁶ In a 2014 anti-extremism booklet, an image very similar to the commercialized depiction of Efendi was used to show the dangers of religious extremism (see Figure 17).³⁶⁷

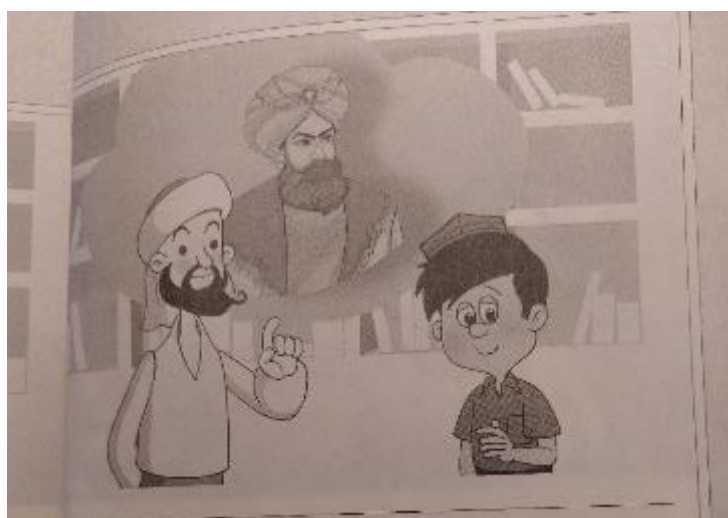


Figure 17: Efendi image (left) used in a 2014 anti-extremism booklet. Here, the Efendi figure is praising another patriotic Islamic scholar, Yusuf Khas Hajip, and his well-known work *Wisdom of Royal Glory*, to say that people should study because knowledge gives hope and usefulness.

³⁶³ The personage was known under several names throughout Central Asia, such as Nasrdin Avanti, Nasrdin Khoja, and served as a popular wit figure. Wei and Luckert published several Efendi short stories that circulated among the Uyghurs in Cuiyi Wei and Karl W. Luckert, *Uighur Stories from along the Silk Road* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1998), 283-310.

³⁶⁴ Xu Qin, “The legend of Afanti lives on in exhibition,” *Shanghai Daily*, August 21, 2017, <https://archive.shine.cn/feature/The-legend-of-Afanti-lives-on-in-exhibition/shdaily.shtml>.

³⁶⁵ China Islamic Association, *Musilin aiguo zhuyi jiaocheng (shiyongben)* [Handbook for Muslim Patriotism (Trial Edition)], 38.

³⁶⁶ During my 2015 visit, I noticed what looked like an “Efendi” tourist theme park on the outskirts of Kashgar. Unfortunately I could not explore it, and when passing it by it was unclear whether it was open.

³⁶⁷ Zhang Yubo 张玉波, Dai Yaxiong 戴亚雄, Lan Zedong 兰泽东, *Zongjiao jiduan haisi ren* 宗教极端害死人 [Religious Extremism Harms People] (Urumqi: Xinjiang Renmin Chubanshe, 2014), 55.

One of the more controversial and famous historic figures is Apaq Khoja, whose family shrine lies on the outskirts of Kashgar (see Figure 18). The shrine belongs to one of the most famous Sufi orders of Xinjiang, the White Mountain Khojas, an order which the state sought to defame in their rejection of the feudal nature of the Khojas. Despite the state's disapproval of Khoja rule, the shrine has become a popular tourist destination, sponsored by the authorities. Choosing not to do away with a place that proved a popular landmark in the region, and which was a profitable source of revenue, the state instead adapted the story attached to the shrine. Since Apaq Khoja's personage was very controversial due to conflicting views concerning his role in the story of Uyghur nationalism,³⁶⁸ the state focused on another figure that was linked to the shrine: the famous concubine Xiang Fei (Iparkhan in Uyghur). Iparkhan was a woman from Kashgar who became a concubine to the Qianlong emperor in the 1760s. Even though Iparkhan's grave is actually located in Beijing, the state has pushed the association of Iparkhan with the Apaq Khoja shrine, which was based on popular claims that the concubine was buried in Kashgar. Becoming a leading story at the shrine, Iparkhan is portrayed as the perfect symbol of China as an ethnically diverse country united under Chinese rule.³⁶⁹ The concept of multi-ethnicity is an important one for the nation narrative in Xinjiang. An oft-quoted notion is that of the "three inseparables," the concept launched in 1990 by Jiang Zemin whereby "The Han cannot go without the ethnic minorities, ethnic minorities cannot go without the Han, all ethnic minorities can never go without each other."³⁷⁰ I encountered the concept multiple times in articles, handbooks, and street propaganda (see Figure 20). As remarked by Rian Thum, a similar tactic was applied to another Sufi order shrine, the one from the Black Mountain Khojas, where the state again chose to shift the attention to a more harmless, feminine personage: the sixteenth-century queen Amannisakhan.³⁷¹ Both Amannisakhan and Xiang Fei were pulled from an obscure past and used to exhibit a patriotic religious landscape of Xinjiang.

³⁶⁸ A biographical novel of Apaq Khoja published by Xinjiang Press in 2000 was deemed dangerous and consequently banned and publicly burned in 2001. Edmund Waite, "From Holy Man to National Villain: Popular Historical Narratives About Apaq Khoja amongst Uyghurs in Contemporary Xinjiang," *Inner Asia* 8, no. 1 (2006): 5-28. Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 216.

³⁶⁹ Waite, "From Holy Man to National Villain," 15-16. Fuller and Lipman, "Islam in Xinjiang," 320-22. Rian Thum remarks that, ironically, at Xiang Fei's actual grave, she is given far less attention. Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, 234.

³⁷⁰ Kang Ding 康定, *Minzu tuanjie jiaoyu: 30 jiang* 民族团结教育: 30 讲 [Nationality Solidarity Education: 30 Essays], Shanghai Jiading Nr. 1 High School Training Material (Shanghai: Shanghai Sociology Department Press, 2014), 137-42.

³⁷¹ Thum, *The Sacred routes of Uyghur History*, 235. For more information on Amannisakhan and her development as a popular Uyghur historic figure connected to the *muqam* musical tradition, see Elise Anderson, "The Construction of Āmānnisā Khan as a Uyghur Musical Culture Hero," *Asian Music* 43, no. 1 (2012): 64-90.



Figure 18: Apaq Khoja tomb which holds the graves of the White Mountain Khojas (photo by author, Kashgar 2018).



Figure 19: Sign at Apaq Khoja shrine, illustrating the association with Xiang Fei/Iparhan (photo by author, Kashgar 2018)



Figure 20: Poster in Urumqi street promoting the “Three Inseparables” (photo by author, Urumqi 2018)

Be Vigilant Against Harmful Interpretations

The narrative of Islam in Xinjiang was inextricably tied to the need to be vigilant. The state tried to point out the harm religion can do when following the wrong authority, i.e. when not holding to state-approved religious expressions. These warnings targeted practices that were deemed incompatible with socialist society, such as the “feudalist” practices often associated with Sufism. The term “three forces” (*san gu shili* 三股势力), referring to separatism, religious extremism and terrorism, has been used by Beijing since the early 2000s to describe the threats in Xinjiang.³⁷² Bovingdon remarked how protests and separatist tendencies were increasingly labelled as “terrorism” in the early 2000s.³⁷³ For example, the January 2002 document called “East Turkestan Terrorist Forces Cannot Escape with Impunity” tried to argue that Xinjiang had had a terrorist problem for years, which is linked to a global terrorist network. As Bovingdon remarked, this rhetoric served to assure foreign support of Beijing’s strict policy in the region in a post-9/11 world.³⁷⁴ The state labelled Hizb al-Tahrir, also known as Izbot (*Yizhabute* 伊扎布特), as a terrorist organization in 2007, and targeted it for organizing demonstrations and accused it of producing weapons.³⁷⁵ Later on, the most prominent enemy of correct, i.e. state-approved, Islam became “Islamic extremism.” In

³⁷² Patrik Meyer, “China’s De-Extremisation of Uyghurs in Xinjiang,” *New America: International Security* (June 2016): 5, <https://www.newamerica.org/international-security/policy-papers/china-de-extremization-uyghurs-xinjiang>.

³⁷³ Bovingdon notes how in 2004 the 1990 Baren protests, the 1995 Khotan protest, and the 1997 Ghulja protests were called the work of “terrorists” instead of the previous “splittists.” Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 120.

³⁷⁴ Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 71-72, 135-136.

³⁷⁵ De Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context*, 22.

the 2013 handbook for Xinjiang Party cadres on religious affairs, Izbet was described as an extensive international organization of religious extremists who aim to recruit and train people for a holy war. According to official Chinese sources, the organization first came to Xinjiang from abroad in 1998, and in July 1999 set up its first branch in Urumqi, after which others followed in every locality. It also says it spread further inward to the mainland in Muslim-populated areas such as Ningxia, Qinghai and Shaanxi.³⁷⁶ Next to Izbet, the 2013 handbook on religious affairs listed other groups and individuals of religious extremism such as Hijrat, Jama'at al-Tabligh and prominent reformist *molla* Ablikim Makhsum.³⁷⁷ Hijrat (*Yijilate* 伊吉拉特) was profiled as a terrorist organization that arose in the early 21st century and which trains people in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The handbook warned that in Xinjiang it seeks a holy war and Xinjiang independence and that since crossing the border became ever more difficult, the focus has been on spreading the ideology into Xinjiang. The description went on to say that the organization's ideology is based on false scriptural interpretation, and that it holds a false worldview dividing the world into believers and non-believers. Jama'at al-Tabligh (*Tabilike* 台比力克, Tablighi Jamaat) was described as currently the world's largest Islamic missionary organization, with a network that covers every country in the world and that proselytizes an Islam with extremist ideas. The book states that they are present in Xinjiang and Gansu. The one individual in the cadre handbook described as an Islamic extremist is Ablikim Makhsum from Karghilik. Ablikim was a prominent reformist *molla*, whose schools in Karghilik were closed in 1987 and 1988.³⁷⁸ Some of my interviewees mentioned him as a popular figure who brought new ideas to the Uyghur community and encouraged criticism of existing Islamic practices.³⁷⁹ The state profiled him as a religious extremist criminal:

He is a convicted felon who was convicted up to 20 years, who after his release from jail in the 1980s was a member of the standing committee of Xinjiang's Islamic Association and the head of Karghilik's Islamic Association. He illegally set up an Islamic school and an Islamic college and successively took on about 800 pupils. He preached extremist ideologies to them such as pan-Islamism, fundamentalism, and the holy war. He instigated ethnic hostility and harmed the youth in no small measure. He carried out so-called military trainings with bombings, assassinations, looting, poisoning, and producing weapons, training a large number of violent terrorists. A large part of Xinjiang's terrorist incidents happened at the

³⁷⁶ Third Bureau of National Religious Affairs 国家宗教事务局, *Xinjiang zongjiao gongzuo jichu zhishi ganbu duben* 新疆宗教工作基础知识干部读本 [Basic Knowledge Cadre Textbook on Religion Work in Xinjiang] (Beijing: Zongjiao Wenhua Chubanshe, 2014), 220-21.

³⁷⁷ Third Bureau of National Religious Affairs, *Xinjiang zongjiao gongzuo jichu zhishi ganbu duben* [Basic Knowledge Cadre Textbook on Religion Work in Xinjiang], 220-22.

³⁷⁸ Castets, "Uyghur Islam," 223. Castets, "The Modern Chinese State and Strategies of Control over Uyghur Islam," 233.

³⁷⁹ Author's interview with Isa and Jusupjan, December 2016.

hand of his pupils or his pupils' pupils. According to statistics, since the beginning of the 1990s, around 300 of his "talibs" have been involved in separatist activities, illegal religious activities and terrorist activities.³⁸⁰

Makhsum was used as the poster figure representing the possible danger of popular religious leaders in spreading violent separatist ideology. The cadre handbook also described the most important media through which "religious extremism" from inside and outside of China was spread in Xinjiang such as illegal publications, broadcasting stations, the internet, etc. The handbook warned about the internet and audiovisual materials on cell phones and MP3 players as wide-reaching media through which extremist content could be shared, warning of the infectious nature of extremist religious thought which could infect all areas of life in Xinjiang.³⁸¹

The cadre handbook explains how religion and ethnic culture are tied up in Xinjiang, and how the danger of the three forces of separatism, religious extremism and terrorism is acutely present there: "In Xinjiang, the biggest characteristic of religion is that ethnic issues and religious issues are intertwined, and that ethnic feelings and religious feelings are intertwined. Religion is a very important part of the people's traditional culture. The second big characteristic of religion in Xinjiang is that the 'three forces' are in the habit of using religion to engage in separatist harmful activities. The religious world must be clearly demarcated from separatist and extremist forces."³⁸² Seeing threats in pan-Turkism and transnational Islam, the China Islamic Association spread an official interpretation of Xinjiang history that binds the Islamic minorities' loyalty to the Chinese mainland.

This narrative tries to weaken any claimed ties between Turkic people living in Xinjiang and those living across the border. The handbook claims that Western hostile forces make use of the two forces of pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism to organize separatist activities.³⁸³ It uses two arguments to counter the claims of pan-Turkists that the motherland of Turkic-speaking minorities in Xinjiang is the continent-spanning Turan. First, it says that the area has belonged to China since the Han dynasty, and carried names such as Western Territories (*xiyu* 西域) and Hui Border Territories (*huijiang* 回疆) until finally in 1884 it was called Xinjiang. Second, it asserts that the Han minority has been an

³⁸⁰ Third Bureau of National Religious Affairs, *Xinjiang zongjiao gongzuo jichu zhishi ganbu duben* [Basic Knowledge Cadre Textbook on Religion Work in Xinjiang], 221-22.

³⁸¹ Third Bureau of National Religious Affairs, *Xinjiang zongjiao gongzuo jichu zhishi ganbu duben* [Basic Knowledge Cadre Textbook on Religion Work in Xinjiang], 220-22. On page 220 the textbook states that "since 2000, we have confiscated over 300 types of illegal publications, counting up to over one million copies. We have confiscated over 100 types of audiovisual material, adding up to about 100,000 copies."

³⁸² Third Bureau of National Religious Affairs, *Xinjiang zongjiao gongzuo jichu zhishi ganbu duben* [Basic Knowledge Cadre Textbook on Religion Work in Xinjiang], 199.

³⁸³ Third Bureau of National Religious Affairs, *Xinjiang zongjiao gongzuo jichu zhishi ganbu duben* [Basic Knowledge Cadre Textbook on Religion Work in Xinjiang], 158.

important part of the province's inhabitants since the 9th century.³⁸⁴ As an example of the dangers of foreign ideas entering the country, the book explains how students who went to study in Turkey in the early 20th century returned to Xinjiang with pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic ideas. One student it mentions was Masud Sabri, a pupil of the New Method schools in Ghulja who traveled across Europe and Turkey for his studies.³⁸⁵ He came back to Xinjiang in 1905 after studying in Turkey and founded a Turan school together with Turks, of which it is said that they taught that "our forefathers are the Turks, and our motherland is Turkey."³⁸⁶ These types of examples as provided by the official narrative emphasize the importance of correct, state-led schooling for the Xinjiang population, since unsupervised schooling will mislead the population to thinking they are not part of the Chinese nation.

Strive for a Modern and Wealthy Xinjiang

Finally, the functionalization narrative aligned Islamic doctrine with ideas that promoted modern citizenship and that disqualified ways of life deemed to obstruct Xinjiang's development. It tried to show that the Chinese drive for modernization and development under CCP leadership was in line with being a good Muslim. Following Jiang Zemin's principle of mutual adaptation, Chinese policy stated that people should implement the positive elements of religious doctrine, observance and virtue in order to serve the development and progress of a socialist society.³⁸⁷

One of the main pathways for the promotion of modern citizenship was through education. Two 2009 articles in the *China Muslim* journal, the official journal of the China Islamic Association, provide insight into how the state sought to modernize Islamic education in Xinjiang. Traditional religious education in the region was judged as being too irregular and unstructured. It was also said to be ill-equipped to prepare students for participation in a modern society, with the curriculum focusing on passive knowledge of religious scripture. The article entitled "The history and influence of Uyghur mosque education in Xinjiang," spelled out the "historical limitations" (*lishi juxianxing* 历史局限性) of traditional Uyghur Islamic education. Most of the arguments focused on claims that the education was too unstructured, too dependent on the individual teacher's knowledge, and ultimately of little social value because of the almost exclusive emphasis on religious knowledge. Such education, it

³⁸⁴ Third Bureau of National Religious Affairs, *Xinjiang zongjiao gongzuo jichu zhishi ganbu duben* [Basic Knowledge Cadre Textbook on Religion Work in Xinjiang], 159.

³⁸⁵ Later becoming a KMT official in the region, he was known to strive for a Turkic identity for Xinjiang, together with Isa Yusuf and Muhammad Imin Bughra. See David Brophy, *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 95, 267-268.

³⁸⁶ Third Bureau of National Religious Affairs, *Xinjiang zongjiao gongzuo jichu zhishi ganbu duben* [Basic Knowledge Cadre Textbook on Religion Work in Xinjiang], 160.

³⁸⁷ Ren Hong 任红, "Xinjiang yisilanjiao jiaoyu xianzhuang yanjiu" 新疆伊斯兰教教育现状研究 [Research into Contemporary Islamic Education in Xinjiang], *Zhongguo Musilin* 2 (2009): 50.

claimed, took place at the cost of other kinds of education such as official state schooling.³⁸⁸ The other article, entitled “Research into Contemporary Islamic Education in Xinjiang,” explained how Islamic education organized by the state provided a good knowledge of Islamic teachings, while also preparing students for productive positions in modern society.³⁸⁹ The article focused on students who were made aware of the importance of science as well as economics, stating that “[m]any religious scholars gasp when they witness the results of the motherland’s modernizing structure, and have a firsthand experience of the grand power of science and technology.”³⁹⁰ The following excerpt is one of the profiles that the article hailed as a good example of religious leaders “leading the religious masses to a situation of relying on science and hard work to become wealthy”:

Patriotic religious scholar Abduljan Karachi from Qaraqash county [in Khotan prefecture], who participated in the 1991 training for patriotic religious scholars, took inspiration about how to get wealthy by relying on science after visiting Urumqi’s modern factories and enterprises. That same year, he scraped together 4600 yuan, bought 10 “high yielding” sheep, used artificial fertilizing technique, which made every sheep able to produce 5 to 6 sheep. In less than three years, he had made more than 30.000 yuan. In 1995, he and his son went to study how to raise chickens with a veterinarian. They bought 500 German chickens, which soon became 3000 chickens. He further studies breeding techniques, and learned how one rooster could fertilize 24 chickens. By the year 2000, his yearly income had reached 50.000 to 60.000 yuan. The news of Abduljan becoming wealthy by science spread quickly throughout the whole Khotan region, and religious scholars of local religious communities went to his house, calling on the religious masses to study science like him. There was an endless stream throughout the year of people wanting to study science there with him. However, many people started to protest against his artificial fertilizing and breeding technology, saying that one sheep producing five or six sheep was not possible, and that it could not be sheep but pigs. To answer this, Abduljan sought a verse from the hadith where the Prophet Mohammad said that “a sheep that produces one sheep is good, a sheep that produces many sheep is good, but I would not follow the person that kills the sheep that produces many sheep.” In this way, Abduljan brought Islamic doctrine and science together,

³⁸⁸ Ren Hong 任红, “Xinjiang weiwuerzu yisilanjiao jingtangjiaoyu de lishi ji qi yingxiang” 新疆维吾尔族伊斯兰教经堂教育的历史及其影响 [The history and influence of Uyghur mosque education in Xinjiang], *Zhongguo Musilin* 5 (2009): 39.

³⁸⁹ Ren Hong, “Xinjiang yisilanjiao jiaoyu xianzhuang yanjiu” [Research into Contemporary Islamic Education in Xinjiang], 49.

³⁹⁰ Ren Hong, “Research into Contemporary Islamic Education in Xinjiang,” 51.

preaching to the people. Now everybody has accepted his science, and they address him respectfully as their teacher.³⁹¹

Taking inspiration from the state-provided training, Abduljan became the emblem of a successful entrepreneur as well as a knowledgeable religious leader who inspired his community. The message that Islam and modern science did not contradict each other was supported by Abduljan's Hadith quote, thereby portraying Abduljan as a man with religious knowledge, who knew how to cite and correctly interpret Islamic doctrine. State portrayals of their ideal patriotic religious leaders were carefully dotted with signs of their religiosity, while also making sure to focus on the leaders' capability to bring wealth to their communities. A 2015 China Daily article published during Ramadan meant to show "a day in the life of Muslims," hailed a Hui imam as "a transmitter of modern culture," being "first to drive a motorbike, first to put TV in his office, first to use a mobile phone, first to drive a car and first to open a WeChat account. Besides tending to religious services in the mosque, Yang spends most of his time answering phone calls, checking his WeChat, visiting rural tourist enterprises and helping low-income families."³⁹²



Figure 21: Propaganda poster promoting modern housing (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Khotan 2015)

³⁹¹ Ren Hong, "Research into Contemporary Islamic Education in Xinjiang," 51.

³⁹² China Daily, "A day in the life of Muslims during Ramadan in NW China," July 14, 2015, http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/60thxjannivesary/2015-07/14/content_21271913.htm.

5.2. The Methods

Educating Religious Leaders

Religious leaders were seen as key figures in battling social unrest among the Uyghurs.

Anthropologist Bellér-Hann writes that in the 1980s and 1990s *mollas* were invited to join study sessions similar to those held for government officials, in which they were informed about “new campaigns, policies and what is required from them to support these,...”.³⁹³ Several *mollas* whom I interviewed mentioned state-organized “training sessions” after local unrest. One *molla* explained how his father, who preached and taught at a local mosque, had to attend a state-organized gathering after the 1991 Baren unrest: “After that conflict, all *mollas* had to gather, of all villages and cities. And there they let the *mollas* say what they think of the situation, whether it is good or bad. They just let them talk.” The interviewee remembered *mollas* being intimidated or taken to prison if they said something which the state did not approve of. This, he said, put many religious leaders in a difficult position: “If they say their own opinion, they go to prison. If they say things that go against their own opinion, then people will hear it and they will be against them. They [the people] will say ‘How can he say that? He is no *molla*.’”³⁹⁴ When not long after the first course another course was organized, he remembered that his father refused to go: “When the second course took place, [my father] left home. They came for him several times, but my father was not at home, he just left.” A 1994 Chinese study on Islamic schools in Xinjiang said that it was worried that many of the private Uyghur religious institutes were spreading counterrevolutionary ideas.³⁹⁵ Trying to get a grip on the activities of religious leaders, the state limited the possibilities for religious leaders to preach and teach. “Underground” religious schools for adults were suppressed, labeled as illegal and accused of stimulating religious extremism and splittism.³⁹⁶ Since 2002, regulations stipulated that imams in Xinjiang could only take on one or two students, and only with the approval of the Religious Affairs Bureau and local government. Researchers visiting the region have found that since the early 2000s increasingly fewer spaces that had previously been approved as spaces for religious education were currently open and functioning.³⁹⁷ Although the level of restrictions and monitoring of Islamic clergy and sites of Islamic education differed throughout Xinjiang and were dependent on the perceived threat they presented and on the local administration’s relation with the religious community, researchers agree that overall, the tight monitoring of the clergy and religious education since 1990

³⁹³ Bellér-Hann, *The Written and the Spoken*, 78-79.

³⁹⁴ Author’s interview with Jusupjan, December 2016.

³⁹⁵ Castets, “Uyghur Islam,” 223.

³⁹⁶ Third Bureau of National Religious Affairs, *Xinjiang zongjiao gongzuo jichu zhishi ganbu duben* [Basic Knowledge Cadre Textbook on Religion Work in Xinjiang], 216.

³⁹⁷ MacKerras, “Religion in Contemporary Xinjiang,” 207.

seems to have successfully eradicated antigovernmental discourses encountered in mosques and *medrese*.³⁹⁸

In the 2000s, the state aimed to increase the reach of state control over and through religious leaders with a more comprehensive education program for Islamic clergy. Keeping a check on religious authorities was considered an important way to counter unrest in the Xinjiang province, as stated in the 2009 *China Muslim* article about Islamic education in Xinjiang:

In reality, whether or not it is effective in withstanding the infiltration of hostile forces, to a large extent depends on the numerous patriotic religious scholars. They only need to imbue the religious masses with the correct thoughts, and guide them in the correct direction, and then the religious masses will not follow the path of splittist extremists. They only need to be able to discern right from wrong and then they can lead the masses in discerning right from wrong.³⁹⁹

The state sought to reach the masses by making their religious leaders go through a state-approved training. The trainings and courses of the program could range from months-long specialized training courses to public propaganda campaigns to individual corrective sessions. At the end of such courses, imams had to write a study report, which was then used in their evaluation.⁴⁰⁰ In 2001, the Xinjiang government launched a first round of the Xinjiang-wide training program, where religious scholars in Xinjiang had to take patriotic training courses meant to correct unwanted behavior.⁴⁰¹ Every locality, prefecture and municipality was responsible for training imams within the next four years through this patriotic education program. Official numbers state that around 28,600 religious scholars were trained within that four-year campaign.⁴⁰² More comprehensive classes were organized for older, influential religious scholars. These courses took four months to complete, and included lessons on legislation concerning ethnicity and religion, contemporary politics, history, culture, and science and technology.⁴⁰³ A second round of training started in late 2008 and was aimed at training 290,000 people.⁴⁰⁴ Some training courses had a specific focus, such as sensitizing clergy and other community

³⁹⁸ As we saw in chapter three, this meant that the discourses were moved to other platforms. Castets, "Uyghur Islam," 230. Waite, "The Impact of the State on Islam amongst the Uyghurs," 258.

³⁹⁹ Ren Hong, "Xinjiang yisilanjiao jiaoyu xianzhuang yanjiu" [Research into Contemporary Islamic Education in Xinjiang], 50.

⁴⁰⁰ De Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context*, 27.

⁴⁰¹ Ren Hong, "Xinjiang yisilanjiao jiaoyu xianzhuang yanjiu" [Research into Contemporary Islamic Education in Xinjiang], 48. See also Castets, "The Modern Chinese State and Strategies of Control over Uyghur Islam," 236-237. De Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context*, 27. Castets, "Uyghur Islam," 225-226.

⁴⁰² Ren Hong, "Xinjiang yisilanjiao jiaoyu xianzhuang yanjiu" [Research into Contemporary Islamic Education in Xinjiang], 48.

⁴⁰³ Ren Hong, 48.

⁴⁰⁴ Ren Hong, 48.

leaders to Wahhabi ideological infiltration.⁴⁰⁵ In order to increase the official program's reach throughout the vast province, the state did still allow for limited, state-regulated teacher-apprentice training, but only with the approval of the Religious Affairs Bureau and local government.⁴⁰⁶

Besides the locally organized courses, Xinjiang was home to the Islamic Scriptural Institute (*jingxueyuan* 经学院) in Urumqi for training religious clergy and religious affairs administrators.⁴⁰⁷ The Institute offered an undergraduate (*benke* 本科) education of five years as well as semester-long specialization courses.⁴⁰⁸ The selection and recommendation of applicants for the Xinjiang Islamic Institute was done by the religious departments of the province's various states, districts, counties and cities, with the United Front Work Department and the Religious Affairs Bureau cooperating to set up regional enrollment workforces.⁴⁰⁹ The school only recruited from Xinjiang and was not open to other Chinese provinces. Official regulations stated that the recruits must be unmarried male Muslims between 18 and 25, politically patriotic, support CCP leadership and the socialist system, maintain national unity and ethnic unity, have good character and good health, be willing to engage in a religious career, and understand Uyghur.⁴¹⁰ According to regulations, the Institute could apply for employment of foreign professionals, but they could never take up administrative leadership positions "to ensure that foreign forces do not interfere with mainland religions."⁴¹¹ The school did send some of its students to institutes in countries such as Egypt and Oman, and in 2007, the provincial government set up a scholarship for the students to apply to Al-Azhar in Cairo.⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁵ Yili News Online, "Xinjiang Yili juban diyu 'Wahabi' yisilanjiao yuanjiaozhizhuyi sixiang shentou peixun" 新疆伊犁举办抵御“瓦哈比”伊斯兰原教旨主义思想渗透培训 [Xinjiang Yili Holds Training Course to Resist "Wahabi" Islamic Fundamentalism Infiltration], April 21, 2013, http://www.guancha.cn/local/2013_04_21_140136.shtml.

⁴⁰⁶ Allès, "Muslim Religious Education in China," 2-3. Ren Hong, "Xinjiang yisilanjiao jiaoyu xianzhuang yanjiu" [Research into Contemporary Islamic Education in Xinjiang], 48-49.

⁴⁰⁷ Located at Yan'an Road in Urumqi, the Xinjiang Institute was founded in 1987. They speak Uyghur and Chinese at the Institute, and it is the only Islamic Institute that uses a minority language. The first undergraduate class officially started school on November 28, 1987 with 45 students, and the Institute has had yearly enrollments since. Liu Dengzhong 劉燈鐘, Liu Zhifeng 劉志峰. "Xinjiang yisilanjiao jingxueyuan banxue ji qi chengxiao xitan" 新疆伊斯蘭教經學院辦學及其成效析探 [A Study of Functions and Achievements of the Xinjiang Islamic Institute], *Prospect and Exploration* 10, no. 5 (2012): 62.

⁴⁰⁸ Ren Hong, "Xinjiang yisilanjiao jiaoyu xianzhuang yanjiu" [Research into Contemporary Islamic Education in Xinjiang], 48.

⁴⁰⁹ Liu Dengzhong and Liu Zhifeng, "Xinjiang yisilanjiao jingxueyuan banxue ji qi chengxiao xitan" [A Study of Functions and Achievements of the Xinjiang Islamic Institute], 64.

⁴¹⁰ Liu and Liu, "A Study of Functions and Achievements of the Xinjiang Islamic Institute," 63-64.

⁴¹¹ Liu and Liu, "A Study of Functions and Achievements of the Xinjiang Islamic Institute," 66-67.

⁴¹² China Islamic Association, "Xinjiang yisilanjiao jingxueyuan jianjie" 新疆伊斯兰教经学院简介 [Xinjiang Islamic Institute Introduction], July 27, 2012, <http://www.chinaislam.net.cn/cms/zjyy/xylist/3/jianjie/201207/27-2734.html>. See also Liu Dengzhong and Liu Zhifeng, "Xinjiang yisilanjiao jingxueyuan banxue ji qi chengxiao xitan" [A Study of Functions and Achievements of the Xinjiang Islamic Institute], 72.

The Institute's classes were managed by the China Islamic Association and were focused on providing the students with knowledge of the state's religious policies. Students studied to become imams, translators and interpreters of Arabic, or state administrators of religious affairs.⁴¹³ When the first cohort of the Xinjiang Islamic Institute began in 1987, their curriculum contained the Qur'an, Hadith, religious doctrine, religious law, history of religion, Qur'anic recitation, Qur'anic exegesis, Arabic, modern Uyghur, modern Chinese, basic knowledge of political legislation, history and geography, gymnastics, science and technology.⁴¹⁴ In the late 2000s, the textbooks produced for the *jiejing* project led to a uniform, state-approved curriculum and the Xinjiang program seems to have resembled the program of China's other Islamic Institutes: officially 30% of the classes at the Xinjiang Islamic Institute were oriented towards politics (Deng Xiaoping Theory, ethnic religious policy, law, current political affairs, moral education, etc.), Chinese and Uyghur, literature, computer skills, geography, history and sports, while 70% of classes concerned religion (Arabic, Qur'anic recitation, Hadith, law, ethics, officially sanctioned sermons, etc.).⁴¹⁵ The unified curriculum placed significant emphasis on patriotism and socialism, and especially the ways in which society could be shaped according to socialist ideas.⁴¹⁶ Activities at the Urumqi Institute included annual sports games, a national flag raising, national anthem ceremonies, students visiting the mainland to study, and museum visits.⁴¹⁷ Sultan, the Uyghur graduate of the Islamic Institute in Beijing that I interviewed, who later worked for the Religious Affairs Bureau in Urumqi, said that the Institute's program in Urumqi emphasized politics far more than the Institute in Beijing: "The Islamic Institute in Urumqi training is worse than Beijing. In Beijing it is a bit free. In Urumqi, you had to learn Chinese politics every day."⁴¹⁸ The 2009 *China Muslim* article on state-led religious education in Xinjiang reports of Islamic Institute students who have been convinced of the benefits and the necessity of the "mutual adaptation" policy:

[...], among the religious personnel at the Xinjiang Islamic Scriptural School, there are those who say: "Before, I thought that the mutual adaptation of religion and socialism meant wanting to destroy religion, but now I recognize that was wrong. Socialism not only does not want to destroy religion, it actually allows for the long-term existence of religion. By

⁴¹³ Author's interview with Islamic Institute alumnus Sultan, January 2017.

⁴¹⁴ Ren Hong, "Xinjiang yisilanjiao jiaoyu xianzhuang yanjiu" [Research into Contemporary Islamic Education in Xinjiang], 48.

⁴¹⁵ "Xinjiang Islamic Institute Introduction". See also Liu Dengzhong and Liu Zhifeng, "Xinjiang yisilanjiao jingxueyuan banxue ji qi chengxiao xitan" [A Study of Functions and Achievements of the Xinjiang Islamic Institute], 67.

⁴¹⁶ Ren Hong, "Xinjiang yisilanjiao jiaoyu xianzhuang yanjiu" [Research into Contemporary Islamic Education in Xinjiang], 49.

⁴¹⁷ Liu Dengzhong and Liu Zhifeng, "Xinjiang yisilanjiao jingxueyuan banxue ji qi chengxiao xitan" [A Study of Functions and Achievements of the Xinjiang Islamic Institute], 67-68. Ren Hong, "Xinjiang yisilanjiao jiaoyu xianzhuang yanjiu" [Research into Contemporary Islamic Education in Xinjiang], 49.

⁴¹⁸ Author's interview with Sultan, January 2017.

operation of law it protects religious activities. Religious officials need to do a good job of mutually adapting religion and socialism, rebuking the slander of people with other motives, and attacking the different kinds of falsehoods regarding the mutual adaptation of religion and socialism. In this way, they can communicate well to the religious masses, and guide them well.”⁴¹⁹

The students are also said to now welcome China’s laws and regulations on religion: “‘In the past, I thought regulating religious affairs by law meant limiting freedom of religious belief. Now I realize that regulating religious affairs by law is a necessity of a legalist country to rule the country by law (*yige fazhi guojia yifa zhiguo* 一个法制国家依法治国), and it essentially serves to protect legal religious activities.’”⁴²⁰ With traditional Uyghur Islamic education being blamed for ethnic discord and stimulating “an attitude of repulsion towards Han culture and other cultures,” the state’s education was portrayed as a place where misguided clergy are enlightened.⁴²¹

Preaching in the Mosque

Religious clergy were not only targeted because of the perceived danger of unofficial religious schools. They were also seen as community leaders who could communicate state policy to the population. A mosque’s Democratic Management Committee, consisting of persons active in the religious community who are considered patriotic, appoints an imam. Imams at larger mosques receive a state salary and are responsible for the appointment of imams in the smaller neighborhood mosques.⁴²² Imam accreditations are annually revised by the state. One of the conditions for approval is that the imams attend patriotic education courses and seminars.⁴²³ Whether or not a mosque and an imam are considered qualified by the government can be seen on engraved copper shields at a mosque’s entrance (see Figures 22 and 23).

⁴¹⁹ Ren Hong, “Xinjiang yisilanjiao jiaoyu xianzhuang yanjiu” [Research into Contemporary Islamic Education in Xinjiang], 50.

⁴²⁰ Ren Hong, “Xinjiang yisilanjiao jiaoyu xianzhuang yanjiu” [Research into Contemporary Islamic Education in Xinjiang], 50.

⁴²¹ Ren Hong, “Xinjiang weiwuerzu yisilanjiao jingtangjiaoyu de lishi ji qi yingxiang” [The History and Influence of Uyghur Mosque Education in Xinjiang], 39.

⁴²² A larger mosque is associated with an area that more or less corresponds with the administrative category of hamlet (Chin.: *dadui*), see De Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context*, 26-27.

⁴²³ De Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context*, 27.



Figure 22: Signs at the entrance of a mosque in Khotan. One shows the qualifications of the mosque's clergy and the other the qualifications as a religious site (photo by author, Khotan 2015)



Figure 23: A mosque in Khotan displaying the copper shields with its qualifying stars. In 2015, almost all mosque entrances had closed entrances outside of prayer times (photo by author, Khotan 2015)

Anthropologist Bellér-Hann explains that in the 1980s and 1990s the Friday prayer was used to communicate regulations and decisions among the village community. Besides practical administrative issues, principles and morals were also promoted from the mosque, such as campaigns against excessive spending on weddings and funerals.⁴²⁴ Edmund Waite reports that in the early 1990s state propaganda would be inserted in mosque sermons in Hezret once a month and covered topics like family planning policies and “the supposed Muslim ethic of respect for, and loyalty towards, political authorities.”⁴²⁵ One of my interviewees, who served as an imam in

⁴²⁴ Bellér-Hann, *The Written and the Spoken*, 78.

⁴²⁵ Waite, “The Impact of the State on Islam amongst the Uyghurs,” 257.

Üchürpan, recounted how the state began pressing harder to insert state ideology in his mosque sermons in the 1990s. When he refused this, he was sent to jail for 1.5 years. After his release, he was placed under house arrest, which meant weekly police visits, and he could not travel farther than thirty kilometers from his home. With unrest increasing in the region, the pressure became heavier and he decided to flee the country.⁴²⁶ With tension in the province rising in the 1990s and the perceived danger of terrorism in the 2000s, the pressure on religious leaders to fall in line with the state's propaganda intensified. In his survey of public propaganda in Xinjiang in 2008-2013, researcher Frederick De Jong observed several public texts explaining the requirements for an imam and a mosque to win state approval. Among the requirements are their support for the Party and socialist principles, their consent to state monitoring and supervision, their commitment not to engage in or organize private education or pilgrimage activities, and their rejection of fanatical religious ideas.⁴²⁷ It also included requirements aimed at avoiding citizen activism such as a prohibition on legal petitioning and "engaging in public disputes."⁴²⁸ As De Jong observed, state approval was always conditional: "In practice, the status of "qualified" can be withdrawn almost overnight for whatever reason, as happened to at least two hundred mosques in the Khotaen region following the series of violent incidents in 2011."⁴²⁹

One of the conditions for a mosque to be labeled as a qualified "safe" mosque was that official sermons were used. Official sermons were considered one of the main tools of the *jiejing* project for influencing the religious masses. The *Collections of Newly Edited Wa'z Sermons* (*xinbian wo'erzi yanjiangji* 新编卧尔兹演讲集) are compilations of speeches arranged by a wide range of topics. The first topic is "nationalism is part of faith," and other topics include "what is *jihad* and how to interpret *jihad* correctly," "respecting and protecting women," "do not jump to unfounded conclusions with *halal* and *haram*," and "Muslims have to seek knowledge and advocate science."⁴³⁰ The foreword to every published volume of *Collections of Newly Edited Wa'z Sermons* names two main reasons for the necessity of state-approved sermons.⁴³¹ First, that societal progress since the Reform and Opening Up campaign in the 1980s had raised new situations and questions and that

⁴²⁶ Author's interviews with Emet, July and November 2016.

⁴²⁷ Matching other researchers' observations, interviewees and persons I spoke to in Xinjiang in 2015 and 2018 spoke of the universal awareness that government officials registered the people who entered a mosque, sometimes openly, sometimes covertly. Also see De Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context*, 23.

⁴²⁸ See text "Norms of the City of Aqsu for Establishing a 'Safe Mosque' in De Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context*, 153-56.

⁴²⁹ De Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context*, 23.

⁴³⁰ China Islamic Educational Administration Guidance Committee 中国伊斯兰教教务指导委员会, *Xinbian wo'erzi yanbian jiangji (1-4 heji)* 新编卧尔兹演讲集 (1-4 合辑) [Collections of Newly Edited Wa'z Sermons (Vol. 1-4)] (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2013), 1-10.

⁴³¹ Foreword written in 2001 by Chen Guangyuan, head of the China Islamic Association. China Islamic Educational Administration Guidance Committee, *Collections of Newly Edited Wa'z Sermons (Vol. 1-4)* (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2013), 2-4.

religious clergy were not equipped to answer these questions. It says that the advice given by clergy did not fit the realities of modern times, and that, if questions were raised, clergy would either give advice based on ancient cases, or they would copy things from Arabic countries without differentiation. In this way, the authors claimed, it was very easy to mislead the Muslim masses. Hence, the China Islamic Association started organizing the first national competitions for Qur'anic reading in 1994 and the first national *wa'z* sermon competition in 1995. Out of the best speeches of the *wa'z* competition, the Association compiled the first *Collections of Sermons* (*wo'erzi yanjiangji* 卧尔兹演讲集). The second reason mentioned in the foreword for the new compilation of state-approved sermons was that religious extremism had begun to have an unhealthy influence in China. It mentions false proselytizers of "true Islam" and imams that have, because of their ignorance and lack of deep understanding of Islam, harmed the religious communities. That is why, the foreword says, "it is necessary to have a deep understanding of the Qur'an, the Hadith and the Islamic tradition. Not just so we can meet the demands of current society, but also to guard against religious extremism and to protect ethnic unity."⁴³² At the opening speech of the second conference of the China Islamic Educational Administration Guidance Committee in 2005, the Xinjiang government was lauded for integrating the state-approved sermons that were compiled under the *jiejing* project in religious clergy training: "At present, imams and khatibs of 8000 Friday mosques and 16,000 middle and small mosques all over the region have studied the first two volumes of *Collections of Newly Edited Wa'z Sermons* and have gradually applied it in practice and have achieved great results."⁴³³ Besides the *Collections of Newly Edited Wa'z Sermons* books, Xinjiang had also published an own compilation of sermons (*wo'erzi xuanbian* 卧尔兹选编). Both publications were used as model speeches for Friday mosques in Xinjiang.⁴³⁴

Public Propaganda

While taking over the system of Islamic education in the name of protecting correct religion and helping religious education become more modern, the most visible, public message of the state for the wider public was that religion is an unwanted component in Chinese society. The state only allowed the use of Islamic symbolism and scripture for the nationalist project in environments

⁴³² China Islamic Educational Administration Guidance Committee 中国伊斯兰教教务指导委员会, "Xinbian wo'erzi yanbian jiangji (1-4 heji)" 新编卧尔兹演讲集 (1-4 合辑) [Collections of Newly Edited *Wa'z* Sermons (Vol. 1-4)] (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2013), 2-4.

⁴³³ Jiang Jianshui 蒋坚水, "Zai zhongguo yisilanjiao jiaowu zhidao weiyuanhui di er jie huiyi kaimuhui shang de jianghua" 在中国伊斯兰教教务指导委员会第二届会议开幕会的讲话 [The opening speech of the second conference of the China Islamic Educational Administration Guidance Committee], *China Muslim* 6 (2005): 14.

⁴³⁴ Jin Rubin 金汝彬, "'Jiejing' yu 'wo'erzi' jingyan jiaoliuhui zai Wulumuqi zhaokai" "解经" 与讲新 "卧尔兹" 经验交流会在乌鲁木齐召开 [The conference on *jiejing* and new *wa'z* sermons convenes in Urumqi], *Zhongguo Muslim* 5 (2003): 5-6. DOI: 10.16293/j.cnki.cn11-1345/b.2003.05.001.

specifically designated for religion, i.e., mosques and Islamic educational institutes. It opposed bringing Islamic symbolism out into the non-religious public sphere, such as public schools, and actively worked against tendencies to do so. Party members were not allowed to partake in religious activities or show any public signs of religiosity. Although this had always been official CCP policy, many Xinjiang CCP officials believed and practiced Islam. Bovingdon reports that throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s there were several instances in Xinjiang of CCP cadres making a public statement about their religiosity. The Party grew more intolerant towards these expressions of religiosity, insisting that Party members “only enjoy the freedom not to believe.”⁴³⁵ In 2011, holding an Islamic funeral for a Party official even became an illegal, punishable religious activity.⁴³⁶ Signs on the streets warned against unwanted forms of religion, in particular. Different types of dress, such as the *jilbāb*, which became more popular in the 2000s, were considered possible signs of religious extremism. In 2011, the Xinjiang government launched “Project beauty,” which was a five-year campaign meant to discourage women from wearing veils.⁴³⁷ In 2012, chairman of the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee Zhu Weiqun blamed the spread among Xinjiang's Uyghurs of clothing such as *jilbāb*-style black robes on foreign extremist ideas, stating that such clothing had never been part of “Chinese Islamic tradition.”⁴³⁸ I encountered many posters during my Xinjiang visits in 2015, stating what type of dress was considered appropriate and what clothing was considered a sign of religious extremism (see Figures 24 and 25).

⁴³⁵ 1997 Xinjiang Party Committee Propaganda Bureau statement, quoted in Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 69.

⁴³⁶ De Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context*, 32.

⁴³⁷ De Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context*, 20. In 2015, the *burqah* was banned from public places in Urumqi. Mackerras, “Religion and the Uyghurs,” 66. Byler, “Uyghur Migrant Life in the City During the ‘People’s War’.”

⁴³⁸ Leibold and Grose, “Islamic Veiling in Xinjiang,” 80.



Figure 24: Poster on a school playground in the Turpan area. It explains what Uyghur traditional clothing is and what is considered illegal (photo by author, Turpan prefecture 2015)



Figure 25: Sign at the entrance of the Mahmud Kashgari site explaining the types of "incorrect" (非正常) clothing (photo by author, Opal (Kashgar) 2015)

State propaganda and slogans are nothing new in the streets of Xinjiang. Bellér-Hann described how in the 1980s and 1990s the walls of township office buildings were one of the main channels of written communication between the state and villagers. While old production brigade headquarters

still bore slogans from pre-1980s collectivization campaigns, new campaigns were being added to public buildings. Topics ranged from family planning and national unity to environmental protection and economic principles.⁴³⁹ According to Bellér-Hann's account, the reception of propaganda posters and banners by the Uyghur audience ranged between indifference and contempt.⁴⁴⁰ As she explains, Uyghurs had no problems with the state's public propaganda, except when it touched too close on issues such as family planning.⁴⁴¹ A study by Frederick De Jong on public propaganda in Xinjiang between 2008 and 2013 also showed a wide range of topics, such as healthcare and regulations, and also showed a great concern with Islam.⁴⁴² De Jong reported that announcements containing rules and directives were read, while texts with ideological contents were countered with indifference.⁴⁴³ While I encountered several propaganda topics in 2013, 2015, and 2018, the number of new posters in 2015 and 2018 aimed at the dangers of religious extremism was striking. As we will see in the next chapter, this was part of the Chinese government's focus on the negative elements of Islam and the War on Terror.



Figure 26: Part of a larger propaganda mural in Turpan, explaining that one should not protect religious fanatics, hold illegal religious activities or conduct religious activities in public spaces (illustrated here by a man praying on a public square) (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Turpan 2015)

⁴³⁹ Bellér-Hann, *The Written and the Spoken*, 81-82.

⁴⁴⁰ Bellér-Hann, 82.

⁴⁴¹ Bellér-Hann, 81-82.

⁴⁴² De Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context*, xv.

⁴⁴³ Bellér-Hann, *The Written and the Spoken*, xv-xvi.



Figure 27: Sign outside a Turpan mosque that shows “26 Manifestations of Illegal Religion” (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Turpan 2015)



Figure 28: Sign in Turpan explaining the prohibition to perform an unofficial religious marriage or a religious divorce (left), as well as an explanation of the new fines for violating the family planning regulation that states that urban families are only allowed two children and rural families three children (right) (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Turpan 2015)

5.3. The Problem

The paradox of China’s functionalization of Islam, especially in Xinjiang, is the state’s use of Islam’s role as a source of social normativity, on the one hand, and its rejection of it, on the other hand. The

state was very clear in only accepting parts of the Uyghur Islamic tradition that met their terms. More importantly, while a part of the state's Islamic narrative aimed at using "the positive factors of religious doctrines, religious teachings and religious morality in service of socialism,"⁴⁴⁴ that was only a secondary purpose of state control over the religious narrative. The *jiejing* project of scripture interpretation was meant to provide the state with a way to claim that Islam and Chinese society were compatible. This compatibility was only possible with obedience to the Chinese government. We should keep in mind that the main target of state functionalization of Islam in Xinjiang is combating Uyghur dissent, not controlling religious orthodoxy. The primary goal of an official interpretation of Islamic tenets was to have a tool for outlawing unwanted opinions and for vilifying voices and actions that undermined the Chinese state. This primary motive of state control overruled the secondary motive of convincing people that God's message supports Chinese rule, with the result that the first often undermined the second.

The state picked out some local historical figures or local sites to be part of the unified canon, as it tried to promote a China-oriented history of Xinjiang. But the use of Uyghur religious figures and sites proved to be controversial. As we saw in Gregory Starrett's study, state functionalization of Islam does not lead per se to a conformity with the formulated social normativity, even when a state does identify with Islam. For example, Rian Thum has noticed that both of the previously obscure personages of Ammanisakhan and Xiang Fei proved to be very popular with Han tourists, but were not picked up by the Uyghur population in the form that the Chinese state had in mind. They did enter the Uyghur historical consciousness, albeit not necessarily with the story and the image preferred by the government.⁴⁴⁵ Reconstruction of historic sites does not always invoke the associations intended by the state, but does serve as a trigger of historical awareness among the local residents. Bellér-Hann has argued that, in Xinjiang, such projects can actually contribute to the "further externalization of the state, which, however, does not remain a distant abstraction but is experienced in its materiality through its attempts to appropriate and control local space."⁴⁴⁶ Bovingdon also showed that state rhetoric is far from successful among Uyghurs, and often has the adverse effect of alienating Uyghurs from any official state version of Xinjiang's history: "While the

⁴⁴⁴ Following the mutual adaptation policy of Jiang Zemin, "Zai quanguo tongzhan gongzuo huiyishang de jianghua" 在全国统战工作会议上的讲话 [Speech at the National United Front Work Conference], November 7, 1993, published in "Overview of National United Front Work Conference and Literature (1988-1998)" (China Press, September 1998), 163-164. Republished on CPC News "Religious Work", accessed October 29, 2017, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64162/64171/65717/65721/4461297.html>.

⁴⁴⁵ Thum has noted that whereas official standard dynastic histories as created in Chinese universities do not stand a chance of finding resonance with the larger Uyghur population, the shrine's traditional function as a place for historical remembrance has made it possible for the personages to enter the Uyghur historical imagination. Thum, *The Sacred routes of Uyghur History*, 232-44.

⁴⁴⁶ Bellér-Hann, "The Bulldozer State: Chinese Socialist Development in Xinjiang," in *Ethnographies of the State in Central Asia: Performing Politics*, eds. Madeleine Reeves Johan Rasanayagam and Judith Beyer (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2014): 191. See also Bellér-Hann, "Feudal Villains or Just Rulers?," 319.

Party appears to have persuaded the Han population that Xinjiang and its peoples are part of China, it has not persuaded Uyghurs, nor can it hope to do so by means of nationalist history.”⁴⁴⁷ Just as is the case with the construction of a state-oriented history of Xinjiang, the policy on Islam has backfired. What is more, the state's use of Islam to fortify its authoritative position enhanced the threat to Islam as the supreme site of social normativity in Uyghur society. To understand this, we need to consider what it means for the state to appropriate Islamic symbols. Shared discursive concepts make it easier for others identifying themselves as acting within the same discursive tradition to accept or support the stated ideas and purposes. In a way, working within the same discursive tradition can provide people with more social capital. But just adopting a narrative does not guarantee a positive reception. Using someone else's vocabulary can in fact have the opposite effect. Simon Harrison, in his article “Identity as a Scarce Resource” (1999), argues that there are situations in which the similarities, “the sharing of a common culture, or of aspects of a common cultural symbolism,” can be the cause of divisive action.⁴⁴⁸ Too close an identification by others with things considered to be distinct elements of one's own ethnic identity can lead to its fervent protection against imitation or appropriation by others. The Chinese state appropriating Islamic figures and sites for its own purposes has arguably enhanced the gap between the state and the Uyghur citizens and has aggravated the perceived threat on Islam for the Uyghurs.

The appropriation of the Islamic discourse in service of the Chinese state's socialization goals was unsuccessful among most Uyghurs in Xinjiang. In its most common form, Uyghur rejection of the state narrative was shown by avoiding it and paying no attention to it. In its most extreme form, resistance was revealed through violent attacks and assassinations of so-called “red imams,” who were considered to be the administration's puppets.⁴⁴⁹ For Uyghurs, there is a distinct otherness to

⁴⁴⁷ Bovingdon, “The History of the History of Xinjiang,” 123-25.

⁴⁴⁸ This idea runs against the general assumption in studies on ethnic conflict at the time that it is the perceived cultural *differences* between groups that play a pivotal role in creating and maintaining ethnic strife. Simon Harrison, “Identity as a Scarce Resource,” *Social Anthropology* 7, no. 3 (1999): 249-50. Harrison bases his idea on Annette Weiner's economical anthropological work *Inalienable Possessions* (1992), whereby inalienable possessions “are those felt to represent the identities of the transactors themselves.” Harrison, “Identity as a Scarce Resource,” 239. Harrison states that all practices are capable of being copied, with or without the consent of their possessors. He talks about for example modes of dress, entitlement to specific collective memories, discourses of indigeneity, or forms of religious devotion. But also physical objects like monuments, religious sites, museum objects can be claimed or copied by different groups. In these conflicts over identity symbols, Harrison sees two main issues in these competing groups' interaction: a group is either in power over or powerless against the other group whose symbols it copies, and the group either wishes to eliminate or widen the gap between the groups. Harrison, “Identity as a Scarce Resource,” 249.

⁴⁴⁹ Mackerras, “Religion and the Uyghurs: A Contemporary Overview,” 75. De Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context*, 28. Joanne Smith, “Four Generations of Uyghurs: The Shift towards Ethno-political Ideologies among Xinjiang's Youth,” *Inner Asia* 2, no. 2 (2000): 198. Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance*, 262. In July 2014, the well-known imam of the Id Kah Mosque, Juma Tayir, was assassinated in front the mosque in Kashgar. See Cui Jia and Gao Bo, “Islamic institute steps up training to fight extremism,” *China Daily*, March 30, 2015. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-03/30/content_19947499.htm.

the Chinese state as well as to the nation narrative of Islam that the state promotes, an otherness that is exacerbated by Chinese policy and discourse. Transforming historic figures and sites into examples of Chinese patriotism and equating a good Muslim with a patriotic, modern Chinese citizen has only served to further estrange Uyghurs from the idea that they and Islam belong to the Chinese nation.

Struggling to mold the Uyghur experience into the Chinese nation narrative, the CCP has further alienated Uyghurs from Chinese citizenship. As we will see in the next chapter, the failure to contain Uyghur discontent as well as changing political orientations in Beijing has led the Chinese government to move away from the functionalization policy in Xinjiang.

6. From Functionalization to Elimination

Seeing how the functionalization policy did not contribute to pacifying Xinjiang's ethnic minorities and how Islam gained prominence as a symbol of Uyghur resistance, the state chose to abandon the functionalization effort. Instead, it decided to exploit the idea of Islamic extremism as a justification for extreme surveillance measures in the region. This chapter examines first the central policy factors that contributed to the new approach in Xinjiang, and then explores what this new approach entailed.

6.1. Central State Policy

Religion's 'New Situation'

The basic views of the 1982 Document 19 are still present in 21st century religious policy. They include the recognition of a constitutional freedom of religious belief, on condition that it takes place within the parameters determined by the state, whose main concern lies with social and political stability. They also emphasized the right *not* to believe in religion, which is used as grounds to ward off conspicuous religious presence in public life. The CCP policy officially holds that religion cannot be forcefully removed from society but instead will disappear with societal evolution. State administrators in 2016 proclaimed that the circumstances for religion's disappearance were still far from being reached:

China is still in the primary stage of socialism, where the degree of material civilization and the development of spiritual civilization, as well as the level of people's ideological understanding is far from reaching the level where there are roots for the elimination of religion. Religion will remain for a long time to come. Since the presence of religion is long-term, and many people believe in religion, we must respect the laws of religion's being, establish long-term work concepts, and cannot forcibly suppress or even artificially eliminate religion, attacking it as an "irritable illness" or a "radical disease." – Wang Zuoan, Chairman State Administration for Religious Affairs (2016)⁴⁵⁰

But while the tenets of Document 19 remained valid policy, the situation of the religious communities, and the perception of them by the Chinese government, was shifting. Religion was changing due to different factors, which included a changed international environment, heightened

⁴⁵⁰ State Administration for Religious Affairs, "Xuexi Shibao - Wang Zuoan: Zongjiao gongzuo guanjian zai 'dao'" 《学习时报》—王作安：宗教工作关键在“导” [Study Times – Wang Zuoan: Religious Work is Decisive in "Guiding"], August 17, 2016, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/ztzz/xxgchyjs/xxgc/376556.htm>.

mobility and new communication platforms. At the 2016 National Religious Work Conference Xi Jinping warned of specific dangers of religion's "new situation": the infiltration of external powers in China and the influence of extremist ideas.⁴⁵¹ Besides these external threats, the internal situation of religion was also found to be changing:

[...] we must accurately grasp the profound changes in religion in our country. The number of religious figures in our country has continued to increase, and this trend will continue.

Whereas in the past, the religion was "five or more" (*wuduo* 五多), that is, the elderly, women, rural population, people of low income, and people with low level of culture, it is now more and more young people, urban populations, people of high income, and highly educated people. With the advancement of urbanization and the floating population, the geographical distribution of religious people is changing. In some places the folk beliefs (*minjian xinyang* 民间信仰) are more active. Religions that originally were not found in our country have gradually appeared. These new changes and the new situation (*xin bianhua xin qingkuang* 新变化新情况) greatly influence our religious relations and ethnic relations (*woguo zongjiao guanxi, minzu guanxi* 我国宗教关系、民族关系). – Wang Zuoan (2016)⁴⁵²

This "new situation" called for an adapted religious policy. There was a new stress on the possible dangers of religious communities, and the new slogan became "To give maximum full play to the positive role of religion, to maximally suppress the negative role of religion" (*zuida xiandu fahui zongjiao de jiji zuoyong, zuida xiandu yizhi zongjiao de xiaoji zuoyong* 最大限度发挥宗教的积极作用, 最大限度抑制宗教的消极作用).⁴⁵³ The fear of religion's disruptive potential led the state to be increasingly interventionist in religious management. At the 2016 National Religious Work Conference, Xi Jinping stressed the dangers of foreign interference, extremism, and digital communication channels.⁴⁵⁴ The heightened sense of risk that the Chinese state attached to religious communities was shown through its connection to national security issues in legislation and policy documents. Religious work had always been related to issues of national unity, but it was only in recent years that it was consistently a concern of national security. The new Religious Affairs regulations, drafted in 2016, emphatically stress that religion was not to be used to endanger

⁴⁵¹ Xinhua News, "Quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi zai jing zhaokai: Xi Jinping jianghua, Li Keqiang zhu" 全国宗教工作会议在京召开 习近平讲话 李克强主 [National Religious Work Conference Convened in Beijing: Xi Jinping Spoke and Li Keqiang Presided], April 23, 2016, http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/23/c_1118716540.htm.

⁴⁵² State Administration for Religious Affairs, "Xuexi Shibao - Wang Zuoan: Zongjiao gongzuo guanjian zai 'dao'." [Study Times – Wang Zuoan: Religious Work is Decisive in "Guiding"].

⁴⁵³ Xinhua News, "Quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi zai jing zhaokai: Xi Jinping jianghua, Li Keqiang zhu" [National Religious Work Conference Convened in Beijing: Xi Jinping spoke and Li Keqiang presided], April 23, 2016.

⁴⁵⁴ Xinhua News.

national security.⁴⁵⁵ The regulations mentioned public security (*gong'an* 公安) ten times, while the 2005 regulations did not mention it at all.⁴⁵⁶

Political concerns about religion, popular fears for religiosity among Chinese Islamic communities and the discourse on Islamic extremism in Xinjiang put officials on a sharper edge in their dealings with Muslim communities, whether they were Hui or Uyghur. While research on the depiction of Islam in China in the early 2010s by Frauke Drewes showed that official Chinese news media did not criminalize Muslims or Islam, other researchers have argued that Chinese state officials had to accommodate a rising Islamophobic domestic milieu, wherein Islam was increasingly being considered a threat to Chinese society.⁴⁵⁷ A 2016 article by James Leibold showed that social media platforms intensified the criminalization and distrust of Uyghurs and Hui alike. This happened, for instance, through videos of children dressed in hijab reciting the Qur'an, or videos and photos that suggest Hui society's violent nature.⁴⁵⁸ A study that analyzed the depiction of Islam and Muslims in the *People's Daily* between 2014 and 2018 demonstrated how the state medium emphasized the ethnic identity of China's Muslims and depicted extremist Muslims as being under the influence of dangerous foreign ideology. The author suggests that the downplaying of ethnic minorities' religious identities contributed to the idea that any sign of religiosity was a sign of dangerous extremism.⁴⁵⁹ Leibold pointed out that after the 2016 National Religious Work Conference, terms such as halalization (*qingzhenhua* 清真化), muslimification (*musilinhua* 穆斯林化) and arabisation (*alabohua* 阿拉伯化), became popular on social media, and people criticized the great quantity of halal products, Arabic signs, and Arabic schooling. Local government officials in Ningxia and Gansu, provinces with a large Hui population, reacted to this social media discourse with statements on the dangers of religious indoctrination of children, including warnings suggesting that too many halal products can harm national security and that the presence of too many Islamic signs is undesirable.⁴⁶⁰ There are also reports that until the 2010s, issues of religious education or mode of dress in Hui communities were handled with flexibility, but in the last few years there are instances

⁴⁵⁵ China Law Translate, "Religious Affairs Regulations 2017."

⁴⁵⁶ Jessica Batke, "PRC Religious Policy: Serving the Gods of the CCP," *China Leadership Monitor* 52 (2017): 3, February 14, 2017, <http://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm52jb.pdf>.

⁴⁵⁷ Drewes, *Orientalisiert - Kriminalisiert – Propagiert*, 368-369. Al-Sudairi, "Changing State-Religion Dynamics in Xi Jinping's China," 27. James Leibold, "Creeping Islamophobia: China's Hui Muslims in the Firing Line," *China Brief* 16, no. 10 (2016), <https://jamestown.org/program/creeping-islamophobia-chinas-hui-muslims-in-the-firing-line/>. David R. Stroup, "Good Minzu and bad Muslims: Islamophobia in China's state media," *Nations and Nationalism* 27 (2021): 1231-1252.

⁴⁵⁸ James Leibold, "Creeping Islamophobia."

⁴⁵⁹ Stroup, "Good Minzu and bad Muslims: Islamophobia in China's state media," 1231-1252.

⁴⁶⁰ Leibold, "Creeping Islamophobia."

of increased control and stricter implementation of laws.⁴⁶¹ All of this indicates a rising atmosphere of suspicion and criminalization of Muslims across China by both state and society.

Loyalty to the Chinese Party-State

Under Xi Jinping's "socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era," political observers have noticed a greater stress on political loyalty and nationalism. Ideological memos such as the internal Party communiqué of April 2013, known as Document 9, expounded ideas of resisting the infiltration of western ideas of constitutional democracy and neoliberalism, explaining that it all constitutes an attempt to wrench control from the Communist Party. It rejected the idea of a civil society that claims that individual rights are paramount and ought to be immune to obstruction by the state.⁴⁶² According to Document 9, the issues requiring pressing attention are: strengthening leadership in the ideological sphere, guiding Party members and leaders to distinguish between true and false theories, unwavering adherence to the principle of the Party's control of media, and conscientiously strengthening management of the ideological battlefield.⁴⁶³ In November 2017 Chen Xi, Politburo member, head of the Party Organization Department and of the Central Party School, issued a statement on ideological perversion by Party cadres. He chided Party cadres who doubted Marx and Lenin and instead believed in "ghosts," "sorcery" or ideals of western governance such as a "multi-party system."⁴⁶⁴ This Party rhetoric was followed up in policy measures, such as the regulation introduced in 2017 that allows China to bar entry to foreigners who are suspected of "endangering

⁴⁶¹ Erie, "Defining Shari'a in China," 99. A February 17, 2018 article by Reuters signals a stricter implementation of regulations banning religious education for Hui children in Gansu: Michael Martina, "China's Hui Muslims fearful Chinese New Year education ban a sign of curbs to come," Reuters, February 17, 2018, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-china-islam/chinas-hui-muslims-fearful-chinese-new-year-education-ban-a-sign-of-curbs-to-come-idUKKCN1G1044>.

⁴⁶² "Document 9: Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere. A Notice from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China's General Office," original publication April 22, 2013. ChinaFile translation November 8, 2013, <http://www.chinafile.com/document-9-chinafile-translation>.

⁴⁶³ "Document 9: Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere."

⁴⁶⁴ Chen Xi 陈希, "Peiyang xuanba ganbu bixu tuchu zhengzhi biao zhun (renzhen xuexi xuanchuan guanche dang de shijiu da jingshen)" 培养选拔干部必须突出政治标准（认真学习宣传贯彻党的十九大精神） [In the Training and Selection of Party Cadres we Need to Highlight Political Standards (Consciously Study, Propagandize and Implement the Spirit of the 19th Party Congress)], *People's Daily*, November 16, 2017, http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2017-11/16/nw.D110000renmrb_20171116_1-06.htm. Although the statement was primarily about purifying the Party leadership of dissenting ideological voices as part of its re-centralization of Party socialist ideology, the mention of sorcery and ghosts has made western observers consider the piece to be an anti-religion statement. Tom Phillips, "Believe in socialism not sorcery, China tells party members," *The Guardian*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/16/chinese-officials-believe-in-sorcery-not-socialism-says-senior-minister>. "Senior China minister says some officials practice sorcery," *Reuters*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-politics-religion/senior-china-minister-says-some-officials-practice-sorcery-idUSKBN1DG0CG?il=0>.

national security,” or the ever-tightening control over media outlets that provide a platform for the promotion of alternative political ideas.⁴⁶⁵

In addition to profiling China’s counter-identities, the government sought its own national “spirit” (*jingshen* 精神) by trying to construct a positive and inspiring nation narrative. People were instructed to have “cultural confidence” (*wenhua zixin* 文化自信)⁴⁶⁶ and to believe in the “core socialist values.”⁴⁶⁷ Xi Jinping’s appeals to the “Chinese Dream” (*zhongguo meng* 中国梦), popularized in 2013, were part of the larger national narrative of development and prosperity. Propaganda slogans such as “The Chinese Dream, My Dream” tried to tie the individual aspirations to the national aspirations. In this narrative, individual goals are not necessarily secondary to the national interest, but rather are expected to be in line with the national needs of prosperity and orderliness. Red propaganda banners and billboards showed slogans such as “The people have faith. The nation has hope. The state has strength.”⁴⁶⁸ The Party sees itself at the center of the Chinese nation project, as already formulated in Document 19: “[...] the Party’s basic task is to unite all the people (and this includes the broad mass of believers and non-believers alike) in order that all may strive to construct a modern, powerful Socialist state.”⁴⁶⁹ The CCP, it implies, is at the forefront of achieving this socialist utopia of a rejuvenated China, and if China ever wants to reach it, all must unite under its banner.

“Sinification of Religion”

Under this new tide of Chinese nationalism in the 21st century, the CCP has granted religion increased importance, as reflected in the number of references to religion in the Party Congresses. While Hu Jintao’s 2012 report to the 18th Party Congress mentioned religion three times, Xi Jinping’s report to the 19th Party Congress in 2017 had eight references to religion or religious work. Xi’s report painted a clear message of what the direction of religious policy should be, namely that they would “uphold the principle that religions in China must be Chinese in orientation and provide active guidance to

⁴⁶⁵ China Digital Times, “State Council Expands State Security Agents’ Powers,” December 8, 2017, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/2017/12/state-council-expands-state-security-agents-powers/>.

⁴⁶⁶ Many Koetse, “100 Terms the Communist Party Wants You to Know for the 19th National Congress: 100 “must-know” terms for the 19th National Congress, propagated by People’s Daily,” What’s on Weibo, October 18, 2017, <https://www.whatsonweibo.com/100-terms-communist-party-wants-know-19th-cpc-national-congress/>.

⁴⁶⁷ Batke, “The National People’s Congress in 2017,” 5.

⁴⁶⁸ Javier C. Hernández, “The Propaganda I See on My Morning Commute,” *The New York Times*, January 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/28/world/asia/beijing-propaganda-xi-jinping.html>.

⁴⁶⁹ MacInnis, transl., “Document 19,” chapter IV.

religions so that they can adapt themselves to socialist society.”⁴⁷⁰ In 2016, State Administration for Religious Affairs chairman Wang Zuoan reiterated that the main priority of religious work lies with political loyalty to the Party-state: “[...] the fundamental criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of religious work is to be able to unite the broad masses of religious people around the party and the government.”⁴⁷¹ The religious communities are to be explicit in their political loyalty and have to “consciously agree with the political.”⁴⁷² We see that the state's approach to religious communities with its demand of political loyalty has changed over time. While in the 1980s and the 1990s the government focused on advocating the independence of religions from foreign institutions, under the nationalizing policies of the 21st century the call for independence and self-reliance has turned into a call for cultural and political inclusion. Jiang Zemin's statement at the 1993 United Front Work Conference, where he advocated mutual adaptation of religion and society, was a relatively reserved demand to reform religious systems and religious doctrine to adapt to socialism. The 1997 White Paper on Religious Belief in China stated that the adaptation of religion to the society in which it is prevalent “does not require citizens to give up religious belief, nor does it require any religion to change its basic doctrines.”⁴⁷³ In the 1990s the emphasis lay on patriotism, administrative control of religious activities and preventing foreign interference. Statements at and after the 2016 National Religious Work Conference made clear that the Chinese government had moved away from this managerial policy of the 1990s and early 2000s, and was resolved to look at religious doctrine itself:

[We have to] tap deeper into the content of teachings and doctrines that are conducive to social harmony, the progress of the times, and a healthy civilization, and [have to] further explore the interpretations of the doctrines and teachings that conform to the requirements of

⁴⁷⁰ Tenzin Saldon, “Tibet, the 19th Party Congress and China's United Front work,” Central Tibetan Administration, November 1, 2017, <http://tibet.net/2017/11/tibet-the-19th-party-congress-and-chinas-united-front-work/>. Also see People's Daily Online, “10 yue 21 ri ‘dang de tongyi zhanxian gongzuo he dang de duiwai jiaowang’ jizhe zhaodaihui” 10 月 21 日 “党的统一战线工作和党的对外交往” 记者招待会 [October 21 Press Conference on the Work of the United Front and the Party's International Exchanges], October 21, 2017, http://live01.people.com.cn/zhibo/Myapp/Html/Member/html/201710/9_103964_59e9a30d58bdc_quan.html.

⁴⁷¹ State Administration for Religious Affairs, “Renmin ribao – Wang Zuoan: Zuohao xin xingshixia zongjiao gongzuo de xingdong zhinan” 《人民日报》—王作安：做好新形势下宗教工作的行动指南 [People's Daily Front Page – Wang Zuoan: Do a Good Job Guiding Religious Work under the New Conditions], August 17, 2016, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/ztzz/xxgchyjs/xxgc/376557.htm>.

⁴⁷² State Administration for Religious Affairs, “Xuexi Shibao - Wang Zuoan: Zongjiao gongzuo guanjian zai ‘dao’” [Study Times – Wang Zuoan: Religious Work is Decisive in “Guiding”].

⁴⁷³ Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, “White Paper: Freedom of Religious Belief in China,” 12.

the development and progress of contemporary China and that are in accordance with the fine traditional Chinese culture.⁴⁷⁴

In 2016, State Administration for Religious Affairs chairman Wang Zuoan underscored that it was important to support Islamic education “to deepen the work of scriptural interpretation and guide Muslims to stick to the middle road, to be faithful, to prevent ideological violations springing from religious extremism, and to prevent the ‘halalization’ phenomenon.”⁴⁷⁵ High officials showed a heightened interest in educational affairs and in its capacity to curb unwanted ideological currents.⁴⁷⁶ The new Regulations for Religious Affairs, drafted in 2016 and implemented as of February 2018, also pointed to a higher attention for education. There is an explicit mention of “religious schools” in all of the relevant articles, whereas in the 2005 regulations only “organizations,” “religious groups,” “sites” and “citizens” were mentioned. Article 64 now considers as punishable the “[f]ailure of religious schools to uphold the goals of training; schools and curriculum are not up to standard,” providing legal grounds to criminalize religious schools that do not make use of officially sanctioned material.⁴⁷⁷

The “Chinese Islamic tradition” is portrayed as the apex of correct religious behavior and discards unwanted religious behavior as not being part of this national religious tradition. Certain aspects of Islamic culture specific to China are hailed as examples of the successful blending of Islamic and Chinese culture. For example, a 2017 United Front Work Department article about calligraphic signs in Hui mosques asserts that “The Hui people in our country have long accepted the influence of Han culture, speak Chinese and learn Chinese characters, and have absorbed a large amount of traditional culture in our country. Among them, the special literary and artistic form of plaque and couplets has long been loved by the Hui Muslim masses.” The article used examples of mosque plaques from all over the country to display Islamic doctrine’s positive message as well as the influence of Chinese cultural traditions such as Confucianism. It continues: “The majority of Hui Muslims have long consciously or unconsciously accepted the influence of the Han and other *minzu* cultures, and creatively developed Arab Islamic culture into a Chinese Islamic culture with Chinese characteristics

⁴⁷⁴ Xinhua News, “Quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi zai jing zhaokai: Xi Jinping jianghua, Li Keqiang zhu” [National Religious Work Conference Convened in Beijing: Xi Jinping spoke and Li Keqiang presided], April 23, 2016. This statement was repeated by SARA chairman Wang Zuoan after the conference, see State Administration for Religious Affairs, “Xuexi Shibao - Wang Zuoan: Zongjiao gongzuo guanjian zai ‘dao’” [Study Times - Wang Zuoan: Religious Work is Decisive in “Guiding”].

⁴⁷⁵ State Administration for Religious Affairs, “Renmin ribao - Wang Zuoan: Zuohao xin xingshixia zongjiao gongzuo de xingdong zhinan” [People’s Daily Front Page - Wang Zuoan: Do a Good Job Guiding Religious Work under the New Conditions].

⁴⁷⁶ Batke, “The National People’s Congress in 2017,” 3.

⁴⁷⁷ China Law Translate, “Religious Affairs Regulations 2017.”

from form to content, making it a splendid integral part of China's national culture."⁴⁷⁸ In June 2016, the State Council's "White Paper on the Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang", which sought to paint a positive image of Chinese religious policy in the region, explicitly connected the region's Islamic clergy to this narrative of a rich, nationally bound Islam:

Xinjiang religious circles, taking root in the local soil and culture, have furthered scripture study with Chinese characteristics, inherited and carried forward the fine traditions of patriotism, peace, unity, moderation, tolerance and benevolence, opposed violence and advocated the rule of law.⁴⁷⁹

The lack of clarity about whether "taking root in the local soil and culture" is referring to Uyghur or Chinese soil and culture can be seen as an attempt to invoke the idea of locality in not only a national, but also definitely in an international context. The reference to "scripture study with Chinese characteristics," however, very clearly provides the connection to the narrative of a national Chinese tradition. Despite widely differing religious practices, scriptural traditions and communities in China and the undeniable influence of foreign connections, the state is striving to bind all of these communities' roots to Chinese soil.

In addition to the idea that religions should be China-oriented, problems with religious communities are often blamed on outside forces trying to destabilize and corrupt Chinese society:

Foreign forces use religion to penetrate our country, trying to change our ideology and political system. The "three forces" [of terrorism, separatism and extremism] wearing the religious banner spread extreme ideas in our country and incite violent activities. The Dalai clique uses religion to carry out national separatist activities, disrupting the normal order of Tibetan Buddhism. These circumstances show that we cannot adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude towards religion; otherwise it will cause serious consequences. – Wang Zuoan (2016)⁴⁸⁰

Researcher Mohammed Al-Sudairi reports that for example Saudi Arabia is seen as a promotor of the unwanted Wahhabi and Salafi creed through its multiple publications, Saudi-supported educational charity events sponsored by the Muslim World League and the Haramain Foundation, and Saudi

⁴⁷⁸ China Islamic Association, "Cong qingzhensi hanwen bianlian kan zhongguo yisilan wenhua tese" 从清真寺汉文匾联看中国伊斯兰文化特色 [Viewing the Characteristics of Chinese Islamic Culture from Mosque's Chinese Tablet], July 18, 2017. Accessed February 2, 2018 via United Front Work Department website, originally published on the website of the China Islamic Association.

<http://www.zyztzb.gov.cn/tzb2010/s1340/201707/129b82ab964842968bf74b7bbf385e47.shtml>.

⁴⁷⁹ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "White Paper Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang."

⁴⁸⁰ State Administration for Religious Affairs, "Xuexi Shibao - Wang Zuoan: Zongjiao gongzuo guanjian zai 'dao'." [Study Times - Wang Zuoan: Religious Work is Decisive in "Guiding"].

preachers visiting China.⁴⁸¹ “Foreign” religions are not only encouraged to cut off unwanted ties with foreign entities, but also to fully identify as part of the Chinese nation:

Adhere to the direction of Sinification (*Zhongguohua* 中国化) of religion in our country, requiring every religion in our country to truly become a Chinese religion, rather than “religion in China.” We should use the core values of socialism to lead the development of our country’s religions, and use our excellent Chinese culture to cultivate our country’s religious culture. – Wang Zuoan (2016)⁴⁸²

The 2016 White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang is very explicit in its expectations that Muslims should orient themselves towards the Chinese nation. It states that “[a] religion should adapt itself to the times and human environment, and achieve localization, so that it can continue” and “[t]hat religions must be adapted to the socialist society is not only the requirement of China’s national conditions but the intrinsic requirement of religions for their own existence and development.”⁴⁸³

Legislation and Administration under Xi

Legislation has become a dominant instrument in Chinese governance. Calls for legal conformity are growing ever more prominent in China’s push for a “distinctively Chinese socialist rule of law,”⁴⁸⁴ which can be practically understood as rule *by* law. Current CCP leadership openly rejects the idea of an independent judiciary, instead pleading that law has to serve the political, as described in the 2012 18th Party Congress Work Report: “We should make good use of legal procedures to turn the party’s propositions into the will of the state.”⁴⁸⁵ As China’s legislative body increasingly conforms to CCP policy directives, the law increasingly becomes a managerial tool in the service of CCP policy.⁴⁸⁶ The legalistic push is also prevalent in the state management of religion.⁴⁸⁷ In the 1990s, Beijing

⁴⁸¹ Al-Sudairi, “Changing State-Religion Dynamics in Xi Jinping’s China,” 29.

⁴⁸² State Administration for Religious Affairs, “Renmin ribao – Wang Zuoan: Zuohao xin xingshixia zongjiao gongzuo de xingdong zhinan” 《人民日报》—王作安：做好新形势下宗教工作的行动指南 [People’s Daily Front Page – Wang Zuoan: Do a Good Job Guiding Religious Work under the New Conditions].

⁴⁸³ State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “White Paper Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang,” June 2, 2016, http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2016/06/02/content_281475363031504.htm.

⁴⁸⁴ Xinhua News, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” speech by Xi Jinping, delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf.

⁴⁸⁵ Hu Jintao, “Report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” November 8, 2012, http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th_cpc_congress/2012-11/16/content_27137540.htm.

⁴⁸⁶ As researcher Jessica Batke remarked, regardless of whether or not the laws have their intended effect, they are a useful indicator of central policy due to the high compliance of the legislative body with CCP directives. Batke, “The National People’s Congress in 2017.”

⁴⁸⁷ Batke, “PRC Religious Policy.”

sought to expand the legal framework in its push to enter the international market, a trend that was picked up by administrators of religious affairs.⁴⁸⁸ Provinces with large religious populations, such as Xinjiang and Tibet, issued some of the first regulations on religious affairs, such as the 1988 Xinjiang “Temporary Rules for the Management of Venues of Religious Activities” or the 1991 Tibet “Temporary Measures for the Management of Religious Affairs.”⁴⁸⁹ The regional religious regulations drafted in 1995 by the Shanghai Religious Affairs Bureau served as an example for many other local Religious Affairs Bureaus. After the proliferation of local regulations, the state sought to implement a more comprehensive national framework, and in 2005 the State Administration for Religious Affairs published the Regulations on Religious Affairs.⁴⁹⁰ By the beginning of the 21st century, the juridicization of religious affairs had expanded to a considerable degree, and law has become, in consequence, a tool for the government to advance and self-authorize CCP policy. Beijing encourages officials to “be good at using rule-of-law thought and a rule-of-law manner to deal with issues in the religious sphere. They should take the lead in working according to law, and avoid racking their brains over policy decisions.”⁴⁹¹ In 2016, religious regulation was thoroughly revised in order to deal with new challenges posed by digital communication and the threat of religious extremism in China.⁴⁹² Religious communities have been urged to conform to the new legal framework, with the clear statement that otherwise they forfeit their right to freedom of religious belief:

For the religious community, it is the greatest protection for them to comply with the regulations and to carry out religious activities within the limits permitted by law, which is the prerequisite and guarantee for the full enjoyment of the right of freedom of religious belief. (State Administration for Religious Affairs, 2017)⁴⁹³

While the new regulatory revisions of 2016 support the tighter and more uniform management of religious charity events, for example, or financial management, legislation on religion is still

⁴⁸⁸ Chan and Carlson, *Religious Freedom in China*,” 235-36.

⁴⁸⁹ Eric C. Carlson, “China’s New Regulations on Religion: A Small Step, Not a Great Leap, Forward,” *BYU Law Review* 3 (2005): 755. Castets, “The Modern Chinese State and Strategies of Control over Uyghur Islam,” 235-36.

⁴⁹⁰ Castets, “The Modern Chinese State and Strategies of Control over Uyghur Islam,” 237-238. This rising concern with regulation is linked to the wider idea of rule of law in China, which in turn is connected to the Chinese government’s wish to join the World Trade Organization. Chan and Carlson, *Religious Freedom in China*, 20.

⁴⁹¹ State Administration for Religious Affairs, “Renmin ribao – Wang Zuohan: Zuohao xin xingshixia zongjiao gongzuo de xingdong zhinan” 《人民日报》—王作安：做好新形势下宗教工作的行动指南 [People’s Daily Front Page - Wang Zuohan: Do a Good Job Guiding Religious Work under the New Conditions].

⁴⁹² State Administration for Religious Affairs, “Renmin ribao touban ganwen: zongjiao gongzuo fazhizhuo maishang xin taijie” 人民日报头版刊文：宗教工作法治化迈上新台阶 [People’s Daily Front Page: Religious Work to a New Level of Rule of Law], September 8, 2017, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/xwzx/szyw/570845.htm>.

⁴⁹³ State Administration for Religious Affairs, “Renmin ribao touban ganwen: zongjiao gongzuo fazhizhuo maishang xin taijie” 人民日报头版刊文：宗教工作法治化迈上新台阶 [People’s Daily Front Page: Religious Work to a New Level of Rule of Law].

overflowing with ambiguous terms, leaving room for arbitrary interpretation. Vagueness in policy and regulatory formulation is sometimes used by administrators to creatively handle local circumstances, but with issues that are considered especially sensitive by Beijing, such as religion and Xinjiang, it can lead to overzealousness and self-censorship. An inherent contradiction in this prevailing idea of rule by law, instead of rule of law, is that the political agenda still stands above any legislative framework. Whether something is legal or illegal is of less relevance than its perceived degree of political sensitivity. Illegal activities that are forbidden by law but usually tolerated because they are of no particular political interest, such as bringing children to the mosque, can become highly subversive acts of political defiance. For example, while the importation of religious literature has been illegal for many years, Muslim stores in China were openly selling numerous religious books published in South Asia or the Middle East. But there is an increased awareness that this can become a liability when dealing with state authorities. As a telling example, researcher Mohammed al-Sudairi reported in 2017 that the Saudi cultural attaché in Beijing who for years imported religious literature from abroad without much difficulty, had in recent years started to register the books under a different label in order to avoid unwanted hindrances.⁴⁹⁴

Next to legislation, an important method for the CCP to “maximally suppress the negative role of religion” was to put it under tighter political control, as stated by State Administration for Religious Affairs chairman Wang Zuoan in 2016:

It is necessary to incorporate religious governance into the national governance system to ensure that no organization or individual uses religion to carry out activities that undermine social order, impair the health of citizens, or impede the national education system. It cannot undermine national interests, social and public interests and the legitimate rights and interests of citizens. We have to ensure that religious groups and religious affairs are not interfered with by foreign forces. – Wang Zuoan (2016)⁴⁹⁵

The tightening of the Party ropes in the management of religion is perhaps most evident in the annexation of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and State Administration for Religious Affairs on the national level by the United Front Work Department in 2018. As we have seen in chapter four, the United Front Work Department is a body under the direct control of the CCP Central Committee, and is responsible for the cooperation between Party and non-Party organizations. Under the Xi administration, the importance of the United Front Work Department has risen. In 2015, the Party established a coordinating Leading Small Group, the “Central Committee Leading Small Group for

⁴⁹⁴ Al-Sudairi, “Changing State-Religion Dynamics in Xi Jinping’s China,” 22, note 49.

⁴⁹⁵ State Administration for Religious Affairs, “Xuexi Shibao - Wang Zuoan: Zongjiao gongzuo guanjian zai ‘dao’” [Study Times - Wang Zuoan: Religious Work is Decisive in “Guiding”].

United Front Work” (*zhongyang tongyi zhanxian gongzuo lingdao xiaozu* 中央统一战线工作领导小组), indicating heightened interest by central authorities.⁴⁹⁶ At the same time, the United Front Work Department concerned itself more and more with religious affairs. Discussion on religious issues figured twenty-nine times during the UFWD press conference of the 19th Party Congress in 2017.⁴⁹⁷ In 2016, the State Administration for Religious Affairs was criticized in a CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection report, which blamed their lack of leadership, policy implementation and control for causing “a weakening of Party leadership and deficiencies in Party Building.”⁴⁹⁸ Finally, in 2018, both the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and State Administration for Religious Affairs, were dismantled and their responsibilities brought under the authority of the United Front Work Department.⁴⁹⁹ What this meant with regard to the Xinjiang policies will be discussed in the next section.

6.2. Xinjiang Policy

The War on Terror

Although measures in Xinjiang since the 1990s, and especially since 9/11, reveal a heightened sensitivity in regard to religious activities, the local administration showed a widespread sense of urgency and alarm in dealing with Uyghur religiosity since the 2009 Urumqi riots. The suicidal car crash on Tiananmen square in 2013 and the knife attack in Kunming railway station in 2014 enhanced

⁴⁹⁶ Leading Small Groups are temporary or permanent small units of functionaries and advisors from relevant societal sectors, mandated to coordinate a specific issue considered of special importance to the central government. Matthias Stepan and Jessica Batke, “Policy-making and Political Leadership in China: Party and State Leading Small Groups in the PRC (May 2017),” Mercator Institute for China Studies, accessed October 27, 2017, https://www.merics.org/fileadmin/user_upload/pic/China-Mapping/170608_LSG_full_list.pdf. For more information on Leading Small Groups, see Alice Miller, “The CCP Central Committee’s Leading Small Groups,” *China Leadership Monitor* 26 (2008), <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/CLM26AM.pdf>. Also, Alice Miller, “More Already on the Central Committee’s Leading Small Groups,” *China Leadership Monitor* 44 (2014), <https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/research/docs/clm44am.pdf>.

⁴⁹⁷ People’s Daily Online, “10 yue 21 ri ‘dang de tongyi zhanxian gongzuo he dang de duiwai jiaowang’ jizhe zhaodaihui” 10 月 21 日 [October 21 Press Conference on the Work of the United Front and the Party’s International Exchanges].

⁴⁹⁸ Central Commission for Discipline Inspection 中共中央纪律检查委员会, “Zhongyang dishi xunshizu xiang guojia zhongjiao shiwuju dangzu fankui zhuanxiang xunshi qingkuang” 中央第十巡视组向国家宗教事务局党组反馈专项巡视情况 [The 10th central inspection team feedbacks the special inspections to the Party Group of the State Administration of Religious Affairs], June 8, 2016, <https://archive.fo/tuDj3>. Cited in Alex Joske, “Reorganizing the United Front Work Department: New Structures for a New Era of Diaspora and Religious Affairs Work,” May 9, 2019, *China Brief* 19, no. 9 (2019), <https://jamestown.org/program/reorganizing-the-united-front-work-department-new-structures-for-a-new-era-of-diaspora-and-religious-affairs-work/>.

⁴⁹⁹ Jessica Batke, “Central and Regional Leadership for Xinjiang Policy in Xi’s Second Term,” May 11, 2018, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/features/central-and-regional-leadership-xinjiang-policy-xis-second-term>.

this sense of acute danger of Uyghur religiosity.⁵⁰⁰ The policy shift in Xinjiang was apparent from the 2014 Central Work Forum on Xinjiang, organized after the Kunming attack. The conference emphasized ethnic unity, assimilation, stability, security and religious extremism. While it still addressed the importance of economic prosperity, which had been one of the main messages in the previous Central Work Forum of 2010, it was not considered the main policy tactic.⁵⁰¹ Researchers have shown that militarization in the Xinjiang province increased significantly since the 2009 Urumqi riots, with military spending multiplying several times in 2013 and especially after the installment of Chen Quanguo as Xinjiang's Party Secretary in 2016.⁵⁰² As reported by human rights organizations and researchers such as Joanne Smith Finley and Darren Byler, the War on Terror since 2014 has entailed highly intrusive means of government surveillance.⁵⁰³ Byler reported how one of the first groups to have been targeted by heightened government surveillance was the Uyghur "floating population" in the cities.⁵⁰⁴ Official cadre education taught that Xinjiang's floating population of rural migrants in cities are a "key group for religious extremist forces to penetrate," because the religious activities of this group largely take place out of state control in "underground Qur'anic schools."⁵⁰⁵ Administrators were warned that "ethnic separatists and religious extremists make use of underground Qur'anic schools (in groups or single), give sermons and practice fighting and other skills to create a following."⁵⁰⁶ In a move to get a grip on this group, in 2014, migrants in Urumqi were obliged to obtain a new identity card. Known officially as the People's Convenience Card, *bianminka*, also known as the Green Card among Uyghurs, people were only able to obtain it from their hometown officials after a background check. As reported by Darren Byler, it was disproportionately more difficult for Uyghur migrants to obtain the card than for Han migrants.⁵⁰⁷ Another intrusive surveillance policy was the 2015 *fanghuiju* 访惠聚 (abbreviation for *fangminqing*, *huiminsheng*, *juminxin* 访民情, 惠民生, 聚民心, explore people's feelings, benefit people's livelihood, gather people's hearts) campaign, where government officials were sent to homes in southern Xinjiang to report on "extremist" behavior, which by this time included Ramadan fasting, eating *halal* and wearing a beard.⁵⁰⁸

⁵⁰⁰ Smith Finley, "Securitization, insecurity and conflict in contemporary Xinjiang," 1-2.

⁵⁰¹ Batke, "Central and Regional Leadership for Xinjiang Policy in Xi's Second Term." Smith Finley, "Securitization, Insecurity and Conflict in Contemporary Xinjiang," 9-10.

⁵⁰² Zenz and Leibold, "Xinjiang's Rapidly Evolving Security State."

⁵⁰³ Smith Finley, "Securitization, insecurity and conflict in contemporary Xinjiang," 3-4. Byler, "Uyghur Migrant Life in the City During the 'People's War.'" Byler, "Convenience 方便 *fangbian*."

⁵⁰⁴ Byler, "Uyghur Migrant Life in the City During the 'People's War.'"

⁵⁰⁵ Third Bureau of National Religious Affairs, *Xinjiang zongjiao gongzuo jichu zhishi ganbu duben* [Basic Knowledge Cadre Textbook on Religion Work in Xinjiang], 220.

⁵⁰⁶ Third Bureau of National Religious Affairs, *Xinjiang zongjiao gongzuo jichu zhishi ganbu duben* [Basic Knowledge Cadre Textbook on Religion Work in Xinjiang], 220.

⁵⁰⁷ Byler, "Convenience 方便 *fangbian*."

⁵⁰⁸ Smith Finley, "Securitization, Insecurity and Conflict in Contemporary Xinjiang," 3-4.



Figure 29: One of the police stations found on every street corner as part of the surveillance grid implemented under Chen Quanguo (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Turpan 2018)

The Party took several steps to tighten its grip on local administration. Since Chen Quanguo's appointment as Xinjiang Party chief in 2016, the authorities have conducted campaigns against "two-faced" people (两面人 *liangmianren*), the term referring to people who are outwardly cooperative but who exhibit signs of disloyalty to the Party. This includes Party officials and patriotic Islamic clergy who have been lenient with officially illegal religious activities or who have not provided reliable reports on the religious activities in their region.⁵⁰⁹ In 2017, the United Front Work Department established a separate bureau for Xinjiang, charged with the responsibility of analyzing the situation of Xinjiang's work, policy research, coordination, guidance, supervision and inspection.⁵¹⁰ The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), also an important power entity in Xinjiang, officially had an "XPCC Religious Affairs Department," which I found to be linked to the XPCC United Front Work Department website when checking the website in February 2018.⁵¹¹ As we have seen, in 2018 the United Front Work Department took control of the administrative bodies

⁵⁰⁹ Smith Finley, "Securitization, Insecurity and Conflict in Contemporary Xinjiang," 4-5. Radio Free Asia, "Xinjiang Authorities Jail Uyghur Imam Who Took Son to Unsanctioned Religious School," last updated May 10, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/imam-05102018155405.html?searchterm=utf8:ustring=+uyghur+imam>.

⁵¹⁰ Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, "Zhongyang tongzhanbu zai tian xin bumen qunian ba ju gang chengli" 中央统战部再添新部门 去年八局刚成立 [The Central United Front Department added another new department, after adding the eighth one last year], May 5, 2017, http://cppcc.china.com.cn/2017-05/05/content_40751637.htm. See also the Xinjiang Work webpage of the United Front Work Department of CPC Central Committee: http://www.zytzb.gov.cn/tzb2010/xinjiang/sjgz_index.shtml.

⁵¹¹ State Administration for Religious Affairs, "Zongjiao gongzuo bumen wangzhan" 宗教工作部门网站 [Religious Work Department Websites], accessed February 2, 2018, <http://www.sara.gov.cn/yqlj/zjgzbmwz20170831180717029765/index.htm>.

responsible for religious and ethnic affairs on a national level. Researcher Jessica Batke remarked that this did not mean a sudden power shift in Xinjiang, but rather constituted a formal confirmation of existing power relations.⁵¹² Researchers have shown that the China Islamic Association in Xinjiang had always been under the tight control of government administration because of its relatively low budget and the interpenetration of the staff by different administrative departments.⁵¹³ But while SARA's disbanding in 2018 did not signify an abrupt power shift in Xinjiang, it did signify a high-level official retraction of the Party's mandate for religious infrastructure to manage and communicate CCP policy. The state purging SARA and targeting "two-faced" Uyghurs and officials was an admission by the state that the tactics of functionalizing Islam did not work. The state admitted that even people who were able to outwardly follow the official narrative could not be trusted to be loyal to the CCP. Its answer to that problem became control and deep-level surveillance.

Religious Extremism and Re-education

Xi Jinping's new stress on the possible dangers of religious communities and the directive to "maximally suppress the negative role of religion" provided the political rationalization for the suppression of any signs of religiosity.⁵¹⁴ The revised Regulations on Religious Affairs, drafted in 2016 and implemented in 2017, emphasized the dangers of religion and the state's mandate to provide countermeasures by adding the stipulation that "the principle of religious management is to uphold and protect legitimate religious affairs, while curbing the penetration of illegality and extremism."⁵¹⁵ Seeing danger in tolerance towards Uyghur religious expressions, the state shifted the narrative by demonizing religion. Since 2014 "religious extremism" became the main label for unwanted behavior. What were considered signs of religious extremism differed from time to time. The "main manifestations of religious extremism" on the multiple posters encountered throughout Xinjiang in 2015 and 2018 included men wearing beards, forbidding people to smoke and drink, opposing official media channels, using the terms *halal* and *haram* to describe what people can do, not letting children attend "dual language" schools (meaning schools where they learn Chinese), saying that you cannot consume things that are made by Han or produced in *neidi* China, and saying children cannot eat the food at schools because it is unclean (see Figure 30).

⁵¹² Batke, "Central and Regional Leadership for Xinjiang Policy in Xi's Second Term."

⁵¹³ Castets, "The Modern Chinese State and Strategies of Control over Uyghur Islam," 242-44. Doyon, "The Local Islamic Associations and the Party-State," 51.

⁵¹⁴ Xinhua News, "Quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi zai jing zhaokai: Xi Jinping jianghua, Li Keqiang zhu" [National Religious Work Conference Convened in Beijing: Xi Jinping spoke and Li Keqiang presided], April 23, 2016.

⁵¹⁵ China Law Translate, "Religious Affairs Regulations 2017."



Figure 30: Poster in Kashgar about the main manifestations of religious extremism (photo by author, Kashgar 2015)



Figure 31: Propaganda poster in Khotan 2015 warning against twenty-one manifestations of religious extremist ideology (photo by author, Khotan 2015)



Figure 32: Poster depicting anti-extremism propaganda. When driving through the Khotan and Kashgar region in 2015 I saw some of the propaganda images displayed in the poster above placed along village streets (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Khotan 2015)



Figure 33: Propaganda poster warning against the dangers of religious extremism (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Khotan 2015)

In conformity with the Xi administration's focus on ideology work, the state portrayed the battle against unrest in Xinjiang as a battle against extremist thought. To give an example of how the War on Terror was communicated in Chinese media, a 2017 *New Silk Road* article by Xinjiang Party School member Qiu Yuanyuan concerning "de-extremification" in Xinjiang says that Xinjiang was "deeply poisoned by extreme thoughts" and that a crackdown on criminal activities and a transformation through education were the two pillars of anti-extremism work.⁵¹⁶ The article emphasized the importance of expanding and strengthening the transformation-through-education work because "religious extremism is extremely poisonous" and "the seeds, soil, and market of the current extreme thoughts have not been eliminated, the penetration of religious extremism is still prominent, and the damage is still serious."⁵¹⁷

The new discourse stated that the way to be sure that people are good, reliable citizens does not go through Islam, but through Chinese culture and Party spirit. The 2016 "White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang" promotes patriotism and "Chinese cultural concepts" among religious communities as primary tools against extremism:

Xinjiang encourages religious organizations and believers to promote patriotism, peace, unity, moderation, tolerance and benevolence through their sermons and preaching, to spread the Chinese cultural concepts of advising people to perform good deeds, teaching people morality and being merciful, and to lead religious believers in maintaining proper faith and honest deeds, and resisting religious extremism.⁵¹⁸

Throughout Xinjiang, government propaganda promotes Chinese cultural values, for example with posters as in Figure 34, which display the Chinese cultural value of filial piety. Researchers have observed that since the start of the War on Terror and especially since the intrusive re-education policies, there has been an increasingly aggressive demand that Uyghurs perform Han-oriented

⁵¹⁶ Qiu Yuanyuan 邱媛媛, "Jinjin weirao zong mubiao zuohao ,qu jiduanhua' jiaoyu zhuanhua gongzuo" 紧紧围绕总目标做好 "去极端化" 教育转化工作 [Do a good job of "de-extremification" transformation through education work], *New Silk Road* 新丝路 12 (2017), <http://www.zjdata.net/literature/detail/657545.html>. *New Silk Road* is a comprehensive social science journal approved by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television. It emerged with the national "One Belt, One Road" development strategy and was first published in 2015. The link I used to access the article seemed to be invalid by the time of copyediting the thesis. The same article is referenced, with two alternative links, in Adrian Zenz, "The Xinjiang Papers – Document No. 2," November 27, 2021, page 15, <https://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Transcript-Introduction-02.pdf>.

⁵¹⁷ Qiu Yuanyuan, "Jinjin weirao zong mubiao zuohao ,qu jiduanhua' jiaoyu zhuanhua gongzuo" [Do a good job of "de-extremification" transformation through education work].

⁵¹⁸ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "White Paper Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang."

cultural expressions.⁵¹⁹ The 2018 White Paper on “Cultural Protection and Development in Xinjiang” states that ethnic, in the sense of minority, cultures are not something different from Chinese culture, but are an organic part of Chinese culture: “Various ethnic cultures of Xinjiang have their roots in the fertile soil of Chinese civilization, advancing their own cultural development while enriching the overall culture of China.”⁵²⁰ Belonging to Chinese culture is presented as the source of prosperity and development in the region. A 2019 China Islamic Association article promoted the state narrative that development in the region has for centuries been driven by China: “After the Western Han Dynasty unified Xinjiang, the prosperity of the Silk Road trade promoted the rapid development of the local economy and society. [...] The Han people set up fields in Xinjiang and built water conservancy projects, bringing advanced production tools and technologies from the Central Plains, which greatly promoted the development of agriculture and handicraft industry in ancient Xinjiang.”⁵²¹ As the propounded source of prosperity, Chinese culture has become the way for Uyghurs to get cured from Islamic extremism. A 2017 Xinhua newspaper article reports of the outcome of a patriotic training course in Urumqi for minority religious clergy meant “to enhance their cultural identity and awareness of the Chinese nation.”⁵²² The article reports fascinated and awed participants who were fulfilled with the idea of China’s greatness, which was spurred by Chinese language classes and study trips to the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, the Great Hall of the People, and the birthplace of Confucius. The students were convinced of the great benefits of belonging to the Chinese nation and how this helps Xinjiang: “Abb Abit, a student, said: ‘Much of the content mentioned by General Secretary Xi Jinping in the report relates to how we can get out of poverty and how to ensure people’s livelihood ... This is a solution to the development problems of our people and changes in the villages’ backwardness.’” Students are quoted to have been impressed by the Great Hall of the People: “In the hall of Xinjiang, I saw the familiar Heavenly Lake, the Tianshan and the singing and dancing Xinjiang people, and I felt the Party and state attach great importance to

⁵¹⁹ For example in musical performances, see Amy Anderson and Darren Byler, ““Eating Hanness”: Uyghur Musical Tradition in a Time of Re-Education” *China Perspectives* no. 3 (2019): 17-26, <https://www.cefc.com.hk/issue/china-perspectives-20193/>.

⁵²⁰ State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “Cultural Protection and Development in Xinjiang,” published November 15, 2018, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/11/15/content_281476391524846.htm.

⁵²¹ China Islamic Association, “Xinjiang ge minzu shi zhonghua minzu xuemai xianglian de jiatong chengyuan,” [Each ethnic group in Xinjiang is a family member of the Chinese nation], April 29, 2019.

⁵²² Xinhua News, “Zuo chuanbo zhonghua wenhua de zhongzi – zhongyang sheyuan diyi qi Xinjiang zhongqingnian aiguo zongjiao renshi peixunban xuanyuan zuotan ceji” 做传播中华文化的种子——中央社院第一期新疆中青年爱国宗教人士培训班学员座谈侧记 [Spreading the Seed of Chinese Culture - A Discussion with the Students of the First Phase of Xinjiang Middle-aged Patriotic Religious People in the Central Academy of Social Sciences], December 7, 2017, <http://www.zyztb.gov.cn/tzb2010/S1821/201712/3b3bf032327d47aab012dedb5bbd4d29.shtml>.

Xinjiang.” The article concludes that the students’ “thoughts and hearts had been baptized” by Chinese culture.⁵²³



Figure 34: Propaganda in the streets of Urumqi promoting the Chinese value of filial piety (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Urumqi 2018)



Figure 35: Sign outside of a school in Urumqi. The Uyghur version of “hello” is only shown in transcription, the Arabic-based Uyghur script having been removed. The same sign was noticed by Smith Finley in her 2018 visit to the city.⁵²⁴ (photo by author, Urumqi 2018)

⁵²³ Xinhua News, “Zuo chuanbo zhonghua wenhua de zhongzi,” [Spreading the Seed of Chinese Culture], December 7, 2017.

⁵²⁴ Smith Finley, “Securitization, Insecurity and Conflict in Contemporary Xinjiang,” 11-12.

“Love your country, love your religion” Becomes “Love your Party, love your country”

In the Xinjiang context, the push to “tap deeper into the content of teachings and doctrines”⁵²⁵ led to overwriting the Islamic discourse with Party tenets. Mosque visitors were reported to have to sing the CCP classic song “Without the Communist Party, There is No New China” while imams were to preach about “resolutely walking the Chinese-style path, reviving the Chinese-style spirit, and solidifying Chinese strength, while stressing how religious believers can be devoted citizens.”⁵²⁶ The state became very blunt in supplanting religious discourse with nationalist Party rhetoric. An example of this is the stripping of any religious message or symbolism in the large Idkah mosque in Kashgar, which has long served as the symbol of Islam in Xinjiang. During my visit in the summer of 2018, on the outside of the main prayer hall, there was a large picture of Xi Jinping, and in the middle of the courtyard, there was a large LED screen with slogans in Uyghur and Chinese calling people to uphold the nineteen principles of the Communist Party. Nothing appeared about religious doctrine or practice, only a reference to the mutual adaptation of religion and socialism. The mosque’s guide, who never spoke about the religious practices that took place in the mosque, elaborated about the interior of the mosque’s main prayer hall and a large wall tapestry that hung on its back wall. He explained that the pattern of the tapestry, with three flowers as one of its main elements, symbolized the “Three Inseparables,” meaning the state narrative that advocates ethnic unity. The mosque entrance, in place of the previous “Love your country, love your religion” (*aiguo aijiao* 爱国爱教), now showed the banner “Love your Party, love your country” (see Figure 36). I did not see these banners during my fieldwork in 2015, and there are reports of them appearing on mosques in 2017.⁵²⁷

⁵²⁵ Xinhua News, “Quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi zai jing zhaokai: Xi Jinping jianghua, Li Keqiang zhu” [National Religious Work Conference Convened in Beijing: Xi Jinping spoke and Li Keqiang presided], April 23, 2016.

⁵²⁶ Radio Free Asia, “Xinjiang Authorities Convert Uyghur Mosques Into Propaganda Centers,” August 3, 2017, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/mosques-08032017153002.html?searchterm:utf8:ustring=+uyghur+imam>

⁵²⁷ *AP Photo of a child rests near the entrance to a mosque where a banner reads 'love the party, love the country' in Kashgar city, Nov. 4, 2017* in Radio Free Asia, “Xinjiang Authorities Jail Uyghur Imam Who Took Son to Unsanctioned Religious School,” May 10, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/imam-05102018155405.html>.



Figure 36: Entrance of the Idkah Mosque (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Kashgar 2018)

Not just in the mosques, but especially also in the streets, Islam had to make way. Smith Finley reported that Urumqi residents had seen crescents being removed from city mosques, only to be put back some days later.⁵²⁸ She suspects, as I do, that it reflects clashing government concerns of a political wish to remove Islam from public view in contrast to the image that tourists expect to see. During my visit in 2018, both in Turpan and in Kashgar, I encountered the same conflicting interests with regard to the public display of Islamic symbols. In the city of Turpan, indications of Islam or Islamic heritage sites on doorway decorations were spray-painted. Even depictions of the well-known Turpan tourist site of the Emin minaret were painted over due to the Islamic association (see Figures 38 - 41). Instead, doorway decorations of Chinese-style landscapes were more prevalent (see Figures 42 - 43). One Han hotel owner in Turpan told me that he was not allowed to sell any postcards containing images of Muslims (see Figure 37).

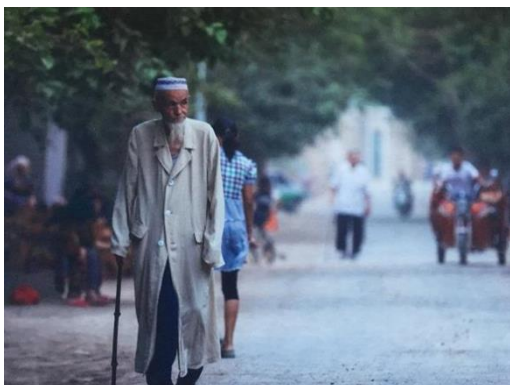


Figure 37: Postcard image which a Turpan hotel owner said he was now forbidden to sell (photo by author, Turpan 2018)

⁵²⁸ Joanne Smith Finley, "Now We Don't Talk Anymore: Inside the 'Cleansing' of Xinjiang," *ChinaFile*, December 28, 2018, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/now-we-dont-talk-anymore>.



Figure 38



Figure 39



Figure 40



Figure 41

Figures 38-41: Signs above house entrances in Turpan had been spray-painted to remove any Islamic elements (photos by MJ De Maeseneer, Turpan 2018)



Figure 42



Figure 43

Figures 42-43: Signs above house entrances in Turpan displaying Chinese-style scenery (photos by MJ De Maeseneer, Turpan 2018)

In 2013 and 2015, the Kashgar city center, that had over the last decade been almost completely torn down and rebuilt in “traditional” style, contained several mosques with new, carved mosque entrances and minarets (see Figure 44). During my 2018 visits, most of those mosques that were not located on any tourist main road had had their minarets removed and entrances blocked (see Figures 45 – 47). Only a few mosques located on routes which tourists passed were preserved in their integrity. Above them waved the national flag, and a banner announcing “Love your Party, love your country” stood over the entrance, along with LED screens featuring Party slogans and a large picture of Xi Jinping (see Figures 48-50).



Figure 44: Mosque in the Kashgar city center in 2013. Throughout the Kashgar city center, mosques had uniform, recently built fronts (photo by author, Kashgar 2013)



Figure 45: Mosque in Kashgar city center, with remaining minarets, but removed crescents (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Kashgar 2018)

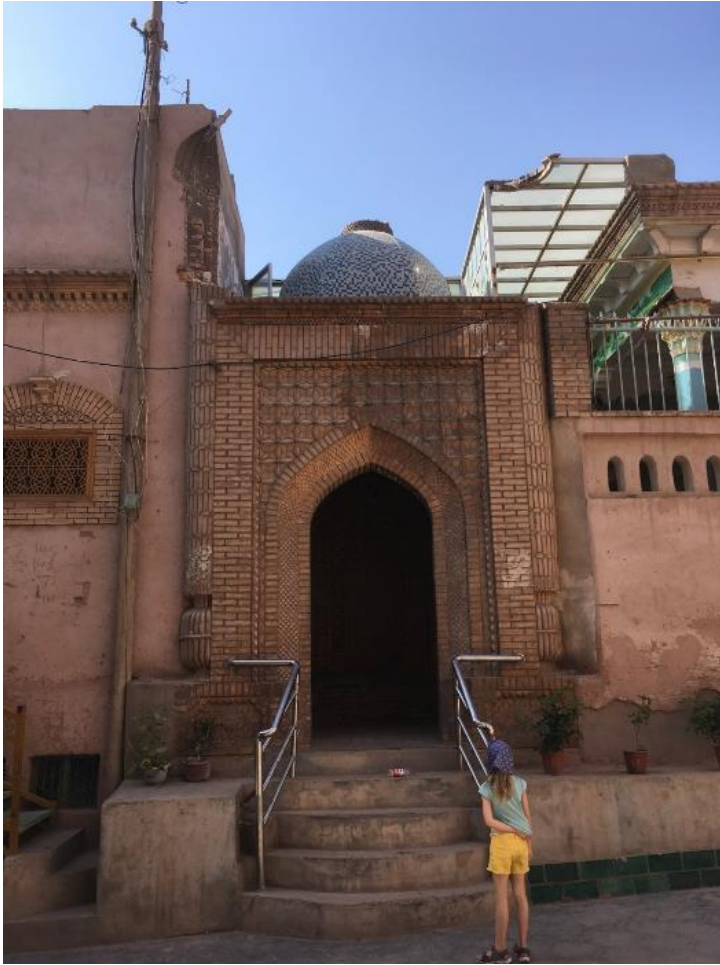


Figure 46: Mosque stripped of its minarets in a back alley in central Kashgar City, July 2018. Photo by MJ De Maeseneer.

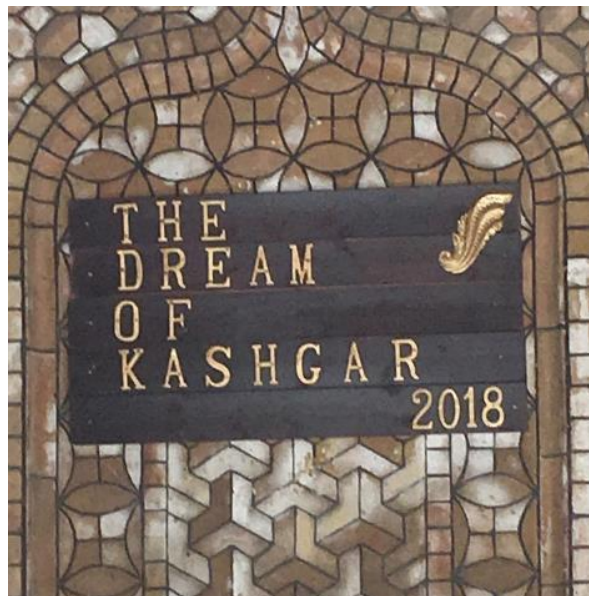


Figure 47: Former mosque now turned into a cafe called "The Dream of Kashgar." The minarets have partially been removed, and one side of the entrance has been closed off (photos by author, Kashgar 2018)



Figure 48: Patriotic mosque on one of the main tourist roads of the Kashgar city center. Mosques in the street's side alleys were all stripped of their minarets and locked (photo by author, Kashgar 2018).



Figure 49: Mosque at Apa Khoja tombs site in Kashgar. Note the removed crescents on the minarets (photo by author, Kashgar 2018)



Figure 50: Touristic area of Kashgar city center. The area comprises several blocks, in which tourists are guided around on the main streets in small tour carts. The main streets are lined with souvenir shops (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Kashgar 2018)

While I encountered several books on Islam in 2013 and 2015, all Uyghur religious literature in Xinhua bookstores in Urumqi and Kashgar had disappeared by the time of my last research trip in July 2018. Under the functionalization policies, the state had tried to rally the religious sources of authority around the Party-state's ideas of citizenship. Doing away with functionalization, the state now moved on to a policy that stripped religious expressions of any authority. Where before, religious expression was recognized, or at least tolerated, now it was, often literally, eliminated in many places.

For What Audience?

Officially, the state still upholds the idea that religion is not per se harmful for Chinese socialism. The 2016 White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang stated that "Religious extremism is not religion, but tries to make use of religion."⁵²⁹ There still is a layer of state discourse portraying an

⁵²⁹ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "White Paper Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang."

Islam that is nationalist and modern and which receives official state support. One can ask how this holds up in a region that is not only characterized by the suppression of religious expression, but where it is actually portrayed as an enemy of the state. One answer is that, even if the credibility of Chinese support for Islam can be challenged, it provides the state with sufficient justification for their policies in Xinjiang. The state assuming the role of judge in defining the line between good and bad Muslims gives the state flexibility in naming its targets. By making nationalism the first condition of good religiosity, moreover, anyone who resists this official religious narrative can be labeled as harmful to society.

Important to note here is that Uyghurs are not the only audience intended for the “patriotic Islam” narrative. Studying state propaganda posters in Xinjiang since 2008, researcher Frederick de Jong has noticed during his fieldwork that the use of Uyghur in posters seemed to be in decline, with often only the caption appearing in both Uyghur and Chinese and the directive only in Chinese.⁵³⁰ The increased use of the Chinese language for state propaganda, with only a sparse use of Uyghur, can signal an unwillingness or incapacity to administer the region in Uyghur. But one cannot but entertain the possibility that the message is mainly intended for a Han audience, who must be made aware of government measures for public safety in Xinjiang. As Byler mentioned, surveillance measures such as the grid of checkpoints served to “provide feelings of security and convenience” for Han residents in Xinjiang.⁵³¹ Seeing the state’s overwhelming presence serves to provide a sense of assurance that everything is under control and any possible threat has been neutralized. Han immigrants in the region have been a key element in the state’s policy in Xinjiang. If the state manages to make the immigrants in Xinjiang feel like their interests are served, the state holds a loyal stabilizing force in the region. In that sense, the government has more to gain by the loyalty of its Han citizens than with its Uyghur citizens.

6.3. Conclusion

In 2016, the National Religious Work Conference presented a clear sign that the Party increasingly considered religious activities a liability. While Party leadership did not officially move away from the basic policies as formulated in Document 19, it now emphasized the danger of religion’s “new situation,” i.e. foreign influence, digital communication, religious extremism, and the continued or even increased presence of religious activities in Chinese society. The changed rhetoric was complemented by new legislation that emphasized security issues and education, as well as a different administrative structure to handle religious affairs. The central apprehension about religion

⁵³⁰ De Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context*, xviii.

⁵³¹ Byler, “Convenience 方便 fangbian.”

fed into a wider societal milieu of Islamophobia and has led to increased criminalization of Muslim religious expressions. Simultaneously, under the Xi presidency the Party has started to demand more conformity to central Party demands. This was combined with a heightened nationalist rhetoric which promotes the vision of a strong Chinese national identity under CCP leadership. The nationalist push was also prevalent in the Party's new approach to religious communities, and explicit demands were made for the Sinification of religion.

In Xinjiang, the Party has withdrawn its support for the functionalization policy. The shifting policy towards Islam among Uyghurs was initiated with the 2014 Central Work Forum on Xinjiang and the launching of the "War on Terror." The oppressive policies intensified under Chen Quanguo's tight-gridded surveillance network, the crackdown on "two-faced people" since 2016, and the start of "re-education" in 2017. These measures represented the central wish of ideological conformity and the intrusive means it was willing to utilize to achieve more control. As under the functionalization policy, cultural and political nationalism was a central element with which religious communities could show their conformity to Party wishes. However, in Xinjiang the administration did not leave this up to the religious clergy anymore. Signs of religious expression in themselves had become marks of disloyalty and possible extremism. The overwriting of Islamic discourse with Party discourse under Xi and Chen almost seems like an overwrought logic of the functionalization policy: the only good Islam was a patriotic, Party-loyal Islam. So then, logically, Party tenets needed to be at the center of religion. But the difference is that in the functionalization policy, the loyalty to the Party tenets could be shown by loyalty to state-approved Islam. Under the new policy, the need to be aware of any hidden disloyalty requires doing away with the coating of religious wording. Mosques have been transformed into places where state ideology is the central message. Censorship has taken on extreme levels, like the removing of minarets in Kashgar and the spray-painting over Islamic door signs in Turpan. Any protest against this would signal resistance against the Chinese state and be labeled as a zealous attachment to Islam. While the functionalization policy and the elimination policy both were concerned with controlling Muslim communities, the former made use of Islam's platforms and symbols, and the latter treated them as a liability.

7. Conclusion

The core of CCP policy on religion since the post-Cultural Revolution reforms has been to tolerate religion's existence as long as it does not pose a threat to the political status quo. Institutions like the China Islamic Association were reinstated in the 1980s and were tasked with keeping religious activities within the bounds of CCP control. The state had a general weariness of religion's capacity to instigate civil society movements and also had specific concerns about certain religions. Islam's connection to foreign authorities was considered a threat, as well as its connection to ethnic identities, and the possibility it created of separatist movements that made use of Islamic identity politics. In the early 2000s, inspired by patriotic literature produced for Christians in China as well as the Chinese Islamic community's own proclaimed need for well-trained religious leaders, the China Islamic Association created a state-approved curriculum for Islamic education. The association also organized sermon and recitation competitions, resulting in edited volumes of curated sermons. With this material, the state trained new religious affairs administrators and imams and organized workshops for established religious leaders. These were expected to communicate state-approved interpretations and state policies to their communities and to convey the message that being a good Muslim constituted being a good citizen of the Chinese nation. The narrative on Islam forged by the state was meant to stimulate a positive attitude towards CCP policy and simultaneously ensured that the state could label any behavior it deemed undesirable as un-Islamic. At its core, the system presented a pragmatic tool to control what was said by religious leaders and made sure the state could outlaw them if they did not conform to the state-approved program. Important to note is that the actual use of this official narrative and the state's educational settings were not solely determined by the interests of the state. Religious community leaders and members of the religious community all had different ways to engage with the state's narrative and institutional arrangements. Being educated at state institutions meant access to resources, having a state diploma meant official recognition and wages, and using state-approved terminology and sermons could assure state support for community needs. But in terms of state intentions, the functionalization policy that made use of Islamic scripture and figures and locations endowed with Islamic authority were part and parcel of the state-initiated circumscription of religious activity. The policy did go further than the more liberal approach of the 1980s and 1990s, in which the state mainly controlled religious activities through legislation and administration. By claiming the authority of religious interpretation, the state had a more intrusive tool to take control of what happened in religious communities. The position of religion as an unwanted factor in society remained unchanged with this policy. The Chinese state's appropriation of the Islamic tradition for social engineering cannot not be seen as the state granting Islam any social authority, but rather as the state trying to get a grasp on

Islam's authority and subjecting it to official control. Rather than from any degree of social acceptance of the state-approved orthodoxy, state control stemmed from the state's power to outlaw specific persons or activities on the basis of that prescribed orthodoxy.

In Xinjiang, religious leaders were expected to attend classes under the "love your country, love your religion" program. Hundreds of imams were trained and expected to preach the CCP message to their mosque communities. While the program ensured a stricter control over what was said in mosques, it amplified the already existing resentment among Uyghurs about Chinese government intrusion. To Uyghurs, the post-Cultural Revolution period had meant new opportunities to reconnect to Islam and re-educate people in Islamic teachings. These new freedoms were met with large-scale socio-economic shifts, which meant that new social issues arose, and new questions were being asked within the Uyghur Islamic discursive tradition. In this time of reinvention and rekindling of the Islamic tradition, the relation between the Chinese state and Uyghurs was difficult. Social, economic and political conditions had widened the rift between the state and Uyghurs, Uyghur protests were not uncommon in the 1980s, and the Chinese fear of separatist movements increased after Central Asian Soviet states gained independence in 1991. Several Uyghur leaders that stirred the status quo at the time had spent time studying abroad in Central Asia, Turkey or the Middle East and became teachers and imams in Xinjiang upon their return. The state found itself struggling with the social authority and the foreign connections of these figures and shut down the platforms that these people used to spread their ideas. Uyghur social activities embedded in the Islamic discursive tradition have been increasingly repressed and outlawed since the early 1990s. In this context, the state's creation of an official curriculum of Islamic teachings and its certification of mosques and imams did not give Uyghurs the idea that the state was working in their benefit to modernize the institutions of Islam. On the contrary, the state reinforced the fear among Uyghurs that the state sought to undermine Islam as a source of social normativity. Similar to what happened to official state versions of Xinjiang historiography, Uyghurs distrusted the state narrative that was presented to them. Lacking the authority to make any claims on normative values using the Islamic discursive tradition, the state's intrusion did not accomplish a rapprochement between the state and the local religious communities, but rather revealed another way for the state to control what happened in Uyghur communities.

The state's apprehension of Uyghur unrest in Xinjiang grew as technology and socio-economic changes diversified the platforms and spaces for Uyghurs to communicate and Internet-use exploded in Xinjiang in the early 2010s. At around the same period, several violent terrorist incidents such as the Kunming knife attack in 2013 and the bombing at Urumqi train station in 2014 raised the stakes for state action in Xinjiang. Meanwhile, under Xi Jinping, CCP central leadership became less tolerant of dissident voices and demanded an ideological tightening of the political and public arena. The

Chinese state showed a greater ambition to become the focal point of economic, political, as well as social leadership. The CCP touted its social and political principles, of which the core was the importance of the nation and loyalty to CCP leadership. In this era of new politics, the unrest in Xinjiang became an ever more urgent topic.

Up until the early 2010s there was space for pragmatics and ambiguity even in Xinjiang. It allowed citizens and, in some circumstances, low-level administrators as well to be involved with religion or religion-related affairs without insurmountable hazard. While the functionalization policy was not rooted in the idea that the state approved of Islamic teachings and recognized Islamic authority, the policy followed the pragmatic governance principle whereby the state needed to work with and take into account the importance of Islam as a site of social normativity. But while the state considered it safe to use religious doctrine and religious authority to strengthen its grip on religious communities, it was not prepared to accept the existence of ethno-Islamic identities as strong as that of the Uyghurs. State-instigated religious repression in the 1990s and the early 2000s was plentiful, but the hardline stance that was kicked off with the People's War on Terror in 2014 and implemented on an increasingly intrusive scale since the installment of Chen Quanguo as provincial Party head in 2016 meant the Beijing-led sacrifice of a policy of ambiguity in favor of using Islam as a scapegoat in coping with the Xinjiang problem. The state decided not to tolerate Islam anymore as a meaningful social symbol, let alone make use of its social significance. References to Islam were seen as a threat to the social order and needed to be replaced with CCP symbolism. The slogan "love your country, love your religion" was replaced with "love your Party, love your country," identifying Chinese culture—as defined by the Party—as the source and focal point of social normativity. The only aspect of the functionalization policy that remained in place in Xinjiang was the public display of Islam's loyalty to China and to the CCP. The display of loyalty is no longer a means for religious communities to ensure that they can conduct religious activities, but rather a state tool to demonstrate that the Islam that is allowed to exist in China does not pose a danger. For large-scale intrusive state action Islamic extremism was a convenient target, since it was an established evil in both local and global narratives and any anti-state aggression could be labeled as stemming from it. The emphasis on religious extremism as the root problem instead of terrorism also enabled the state to focus on ideology and education and provided a reason for the deep societal penetration by the state. This was fully in line with the more general emphasis on ideological conformity emerging from Beijing.

While this thesis argues that Islamic extremism was not the core problem in Xinjiang, but was presented as such to mitigate the threat of Uyghur dissent, this also does not nullify the point that Matthew Erie, researcher on Islamic law in China, rightly names: ethics is not apolitical, and religious

traditions can stand in conflict with state sovereignty.⁵³² This is a central point of friction that any state seeks to navigate, with varying degrees of success. Post-Cultural Revolution China was trying to find a new balance with religion, navigating a grey area of pragmatism and ambiguity. Now under Xi Jinping, the Party's demand to be the center of social normativity for its citizens has heightened, and the role of Islam as a symbol of Uyghur identification as well as a platform for social organization became a threat. And so a conflict that has been potentially inherent in a state's relation with religion has been driven to full confrontation.

What the consequences of this persecution of Islam in Xinjiang are, cannot be judged at this point. It is improbable that the violent re-education measures introduced in Xinjiang will be applied to the same degree among other Muslim minorities in China. Uyghur unrest had its origin in broader social, economic and political issues, and as one of the largest ethnic minorities in China at the fringes of the Chinese nation, the Uyghurs constituted a specific threat that the Chinese state sought to eliminate. However, with regard to other Muslim minorities in China, we already see a rising hostility towards Islam and a fear of Islam as a force that could threaten Chinese social order. This translates into stricter administration and less tolerance for Islamic practices and communities in local administrations, as well as a rising self-censorship among the communities themselves. What role the narrative of a patriotic Chinese Islam assumes in the rising tensions surrounding China's Muslim communities remains to be seen. It is a legitimate question to ask for the other Muslim minorities in China whether the rising intolerance towards religious expressions, combined with demands of political loyalty, will have the reverse effect of alienating Muslims from the Chinese nation.

⁵³² Erie, *China and Islam*, 184-85.

Samenvatting

CHINA'S ISLAM IN XINJIANG: VAN FUNCTIONALISERING TOT ELIMINATIE

Dit proefschrift onderzoekt de praktijk en de effecten van het religieuze en minderhedenbeleid van de Chinese Communistische Partij in Xinjiang aan de vooravond van de grootschalige onderdrukking van islam en de Oeigoerse cultuur na 2016. Het is gebaseerd op overheidsdocumenten, toespraken, publicaties, en mededelingen van de China Islamic Association, alsmede veldwerk in Xinjiang zelf en onder de Oeigoerse diaspora in Europa tussen 2013 en 2018, en kijkt specifiek naar de verschuiving in het islambeleid van de Chinese Communistische Partij in de context van het "Xinjiang probleem".

De vrees van de Chinese staat voor de islam als instrument en oorzaak van Oeigoerse onrust bestond al sinds de jaren negentig. Het beleid van repressie en controle in Xinjiang is in verschillende studies aan de orde gesteld, die aantoonen dat dit onderdrukkende beleid het gebruik van de islam als anti-Chinees symbool van verzet juist heeft aangewakkerd. Maar er was ook een nationaal, door de staat gesteund, positief beleid ten aanzien van de islam, dat trachtte religieuze gemeenschappen sterker aan de partijstaat te binden. Dit werd gedaan door islamitische geschriften en religieuze leiders te gebruiken om culturele en politieke loyaliteit onder moslims te stimuleren. Dit proefschrift onderzoekt deze "functionalisering" van de islam door de Chinese staat en hoe deze in Xinjiang werd omgezet om te begrijpen wat er precies veranderde in de benadering van Oeigoerse islam door de Partij, waarom het veranderde en of het nieuwe beleid een diepere verschuiving betekende in de omgang van de Partij met religie.

Kijkend naar de boodschap en de methoden van de functionalisering van de islam en naar de beleidslogica erachter, zien we dat het aan de ene kant diende als een instrument voor de staat om controle te krijgen over wat er gebeurde in religieuze gemeenschappen, maar aan de andere kant ook zorgde voor officiële erkenning van religiositeit. Dit was gebaseerd op het pragmatische bestuursprincipe dat de staat rekening moest houden met het belang van de islam als plaats van sociale normativiteit in de samenleving. Als we kijken naar hoe het functionaliseringsbeleid in Xinjiang werd uitgevoerd, zien we niet alleen hoe het beleid er niet in slaagde de Oeigoeren aan de Chinese natie te binden, maar ook hoe het de spanningen die al in de regio aanwezig waren vergrootte. In de context van het bredere beleid van de staat in Xinjiang van kolonialistisch paternalisme en onderdrukking van protest, overheerste het primaire motief van staatscontrole. Dit ondermijnde het secundaire motief van mensen ervan te overtuigen dat de boodschap van God de Chinese heerschappij ondersteunt. De "wederzijdse aanpassing" tussen religie en Chinees socialisme, die werd gepropageerd door het functionaliseringsbeleid van de staat, was een eenrichtingsverkeer.

Hierbij was de staat terughoudend in het voeren van een dialoog met het lokale islamitische verhaal, dat in hun ogen veel achterlijk of opruiend potentieel herbergde. Bovendien versterkte de staat, door legale religie gelijk te stellen aan politieke en culturele loyaliteit aan China, het idee dat Oeigoerse niet door de staat gereguleerde religiositeit een bedreiging vormde voor de Chinese natie.

Ondertussen vergrootte de sociale, economische en politieke marginalisering van Oeigoeren de kloof tussen de Oeigoeren en de Chinese staat. Ook werd het centrale leiderschap van de CCP onder Xi Jinping minder tolerant tegenover dissidente stemmen en werd het discours van het door de partij geleide Chinese socialisme geïntensiveerd. Vervolgens verhoogden verschillende gewelddadige incidenten, zoals de mesaanval in Kunming in 2013 en de bomaanslag op het treinstation van Urumqi in 2014, het belang van de staatsaanpak in Xinjiang. Al deze factoren leidden ertoe dat de functionalisering van de islam in Xinjiang werd teruggedraaid en dat in 2014 de *War on Terror* begon. De centrale staat richtte zich nu op de gevaren van religie, en bracht het bestuur van religieuze zaken strakker onder centrale partijcontrole. Ambigu bestuur van religie werd door Beijing opgeofferd om de islam als zondebok voor het Xinjiang probleem te kunnen gebruiken. De nadruk op religieus extremisme als het kernprobleem in Xinjiang bood een reden voor de diepe maatschappelijke penetratie van de staat en de noodzaak van "heropvoeding". In dit proces van diepgaande *social engineering* vervingen de dogma's van de CCP volledig die van de islam.

Wat de gevolgen van deze profilering van islam als *enemy of the state* in Xinjiang zijn, kan in dit proefschrift niet volledig worden overzien. Het is onwaarschijnlijk dat de in Xinjiang ingevoerde gewelddadige maatregelen in dezelfde mate zullen worden toegepast bij andere moslimminderheden in China. De onrust onder de Oeigoeren vond zijn oorsprong in bredere sociale, economische en politieke kwesties, en als een van de grootste etnische minderheden in China aan de rand van de Chinese natie vormden de Oeigoeren een specifieke bedreiging die de Chinese staat wilde elimineren. Met betrekking tot andere moslimminderheden in China zien we echter al een toenemende vijandigheid tegenover de islam en een angst voor de islam als een kracht die de Chinese sociale orde zou kunnen bedreigen. Dit vertaalt zich in een strenger bestuur en minder tolerantie voor islamitische praktijken en gemeenschappen bij lokale overheden, evenals een toenemende zelfcensuur bij de gemeenschappen zelf. Hierdoor lijkt de boodschap van het functionaliseringsbeleid, dat moslimgemeenschappen deel uitmaken van de Chinese natie, effectief verstoten.

Zusammenfassung

CHINAS ISLAM IN XINJIANG: VON DER FUNKTIONALISIERUNG ZUR ELIMINIERUNG

Diese Arbeit untersucht die Praxis und die Auswirkungen der Religions- und Minderheitenpolitik der Kommunistischen Partei Chinas in Xinjiang am Vorabend der groß angelegten Unterdrückung des Islam und der uigurischen Kultur nach 2016. Auf der Grundlage von Regierungsdokumenten, Reden, Veröffentlichungen, und Mitteilungen der China Islamic Association sowie Feldforschung in Xinjiang selbst und in der uigurischen Diaspora in Europa zwischen 2013 und 2018 wird insbesondere der Wandel der Islampolitik der Kommunistischen Partei Chinas im Kontext des "Xinjiang-Problems" untersucht.

Die Furcht des chinesischen Staates vor dem Islam als Instrument und Ursache der uigurischen Unruhen bestand bereits seit den 1990er Jahren. Die Politik der Unterdrückung und Kontrolle in Xinjiang wurde in mehreren Studien untersucht, die zeigten, dass diese repressive Politik die Verwendung des Islam als antichinesisches Symbol des Widerstands förderte. Es gab aber auch eine nationale, staatlich geförderte, positive Politik gegenüber dem Islam, die darauf abzielte, die Religionsgemeinschaften stärker an den Parteistaat zu binden. Dazu wurden islamische Schriften und religiöse Führer eingesetzt, um die kulturelle und politische Loyalität der Muslime zu fördern. Die vorliegende Arbeit untersucht diese "Funktionalisierung" des Islams durch den chinesischen Staat und wie sie in Xinjiang umgesetzt wurde, um zu verstehen, was genau sich in der Haltung der Partei gegenüber dem uigurischen Islam geändert hat, warum sie sich geändert hat und ob die neue Politik eine tiefgreifende Veränderung im Umgang der Partei mit der Religion darstellt.

Betrachtet man die Botschaft und die Methoden der Funktionalisierung des Islam und die dahinter stehende politische Logik, so stellt man fest, dass sie einerseits dem Staat als Instrument zur Kontrolle der Religionsgemeinschaften diene, andererseits aber auch eine offizielle Anerkennung der Religiosität ermöglichte. Dies beruhte auf dem pragmatischen Prinzip des Regierens, dass der Staat die Bedeutung des Islams als Ort der sozialen Normativität in der Gesellschaft berücksichtigen musste. Wenn wir uns ansehen, wie die Funktionalisierungspolitik in Xinjiang umgesetzt wurde, sehen wir nicht nur, dass es der Politik nicht gelang, die Uiguren an die chinesische Nation zu binden, sondern auch, wie sie die in der Region bereits vorhandenen Spannungen noch verschärfte. Im Kontext der allgemeinen staatlichen Politik in Xinjiang, die auf kolonialer Bevormundung und Unterdrückung von Protesten beruhte, überwog das Hauptmotiv der staatlichen Kontrolle. Dies untergrub das sekundäre Motiv, die Menschen davon zu überzeugen, dass die Botschaft Gottes die chinesische Herrschaft unterstützt. Das "gegenseitige Entgegenkommen" zwischen Religion und chinesischem Sozialismus, das durch die Funktionalisierungspolitik des Staates gefördert wurde, war

eine Einbahnstraße. Dabei scheute der Staat den Dialog mit dem lokalen islamischen Narrativ, das seiner Ansicht nach ein hohes Maß an rückständigem oder aufrührerischem Potenzial enthielt. Indem der Staat die legale Religion mit politischer und kultureller Loyalität gegenüber China gleichsetzte, verstärkte er zudem die Vorstellung, dass die nicht staatlich regulierte Religiosität der Uiguren eine Bedrohung für die chinesische Nation darstelle.

Gleichzeitig vergrößerte die soziale, wirtschaftliche und politische Marginalisierung der Uiguren die Kluft zwischen den Uiguren und dem chinesischen Staat. Die zentrale Führung der CCP unter Xi Jinping zeigte sich zudem weniger tolerant gegenüber Andersdenkenden und intensivierte den Diskurs über den parteigeführten chinesischen Sozialismus. In der Folgezeit haben mehrere gewalttätige Vorfälle wie der Messerangriff in Kunming im Jahr 2013 und der Bombenanschlag auf den Bahnhof von Urumqi im Jahr 2014 die Bedeutung der Staatlichkeit in Xinjiang erhöht. All diese Faktoren führten zu einer Umkehrung der Funktionalisierung des Islams in Xinjiang und zum Beginn des Kriegs gegen den Terror im Jahr 2014. Der Zentralstaat konzentrierte sich nun auf die Gefahren der Religion und unterstellte die Verwaltung der religiösen Angelegenheiten stärker der zentralen Parteikontrolle. Ambigüe Verwaltung der Religion wurde von Peking geopfert, um den Islam als Sündenbock für das Problem in Xinjiang zu benutzen. Die Betonung des religiösen Extremismus als Kernproblem in Xinjiang lieferte eine Begründung für die tiefe soziale Durchdringung des Staates und die Notwendigkeit der "Umerziehung". In diesem Prozess des tiefen *social engineering* ersetzten die Dogmen der CCP die des Islam vollständig.

Welche Auswirkungen diese Profilierung des Islams als Staatsfeind in Xinjiang hat, kann im Rahmen dieser Arbeit nicht vollständig erörtert werden. Es ist unwahrscheinlich, dass die in Xinjiang eingeführten Gewaltmaßnahmen in gleichem Maße auf andere muslimische Minderheiten in China angewendet werden. Die Unruhen der Uiguren hatten ihre Wurzeln in umfassenderen sozialen, wirtschaftlichen und politischen Problemen, und als eine der größten ethnischen Minderheiten Chinas am Rande der chinesischen Nation stellten die Uiguren eine besondere Bedrohung dar, die der chinesische Staat beseitigen wollte. In Bezug auf andere muslimische Minderheiten in China ist jedoch bereits eine wachsende Feindschaft gegenüber dem Islam und eine Angst vor dem Islam als einer Kraft, die die chinesische Gesellschaftsordnung bedrohen könnte, zu beobachten. Dies äußert sich in einer strengeren Staatsführung und weniger Toleranz für islamische Praktiken und Gemeinschaften seitens der lokalen Regierungen sowie in einer zunehmenden Selbstzensur der Gemeinschaften selbst. Infolgedessen scheint die Botschaft der Funktionalisierungspolitik - dass die muslimischen Gemeinschaften Teil der chinesischen Nation sind - praktisch verworfen zu werden.

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Curriculum Vitae

Elke Spiessens was born September 30, 1987 in Leuven, Belgium. She attended the Sint-Theresiacollege in Kapelle-op-den-Bos, graduating in 2005. From 2005 until 2008 she studied Sinology at the Catholic University of Leuven, with an exchange year at Leiden University, and graduated cum laude in 2008. She received her Master in Sinology in 2009 at the Catholic University of Leuven cum laude. After her studies in Leuven, she studied Middle Eastern Studies at Leiden University, finishing her Bachelor degree in 2013. After graduating, she worked as a study coordinator for the MA Chinese Studies at Leiden University. In 2014, she started a cotutelle project with the University of Münster and Leiden University, researching Chinese policy towards Uyghur Islam at the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics” in Münster.

Front cover: Mosque at the Apaq Khoja site in Kashgar, 2018.
Photo by author.