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

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[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 slam 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

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[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 Chinee 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 Engesœth, 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.