China's Islam in Xinjiang: from functionalization to elimination

Spiessens, E.

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. Güljanat 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 *mintɕjɛn*) 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, *molla*s often have other jobs on the

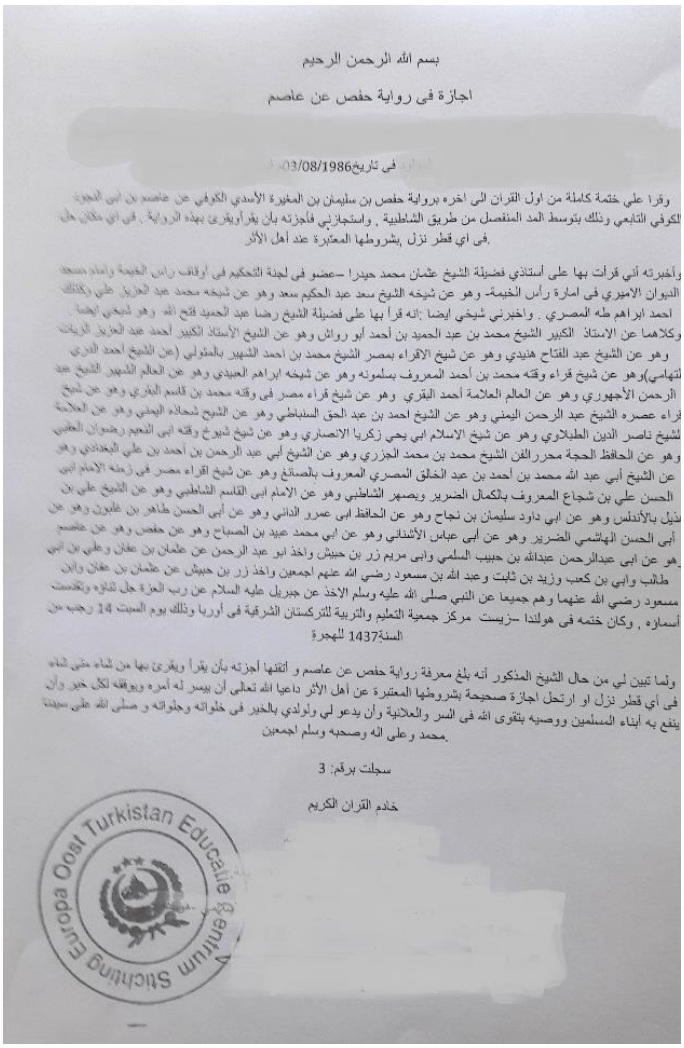
[142] Castets, "The Modern Chinese State," 233.
[143] Allès, "Muslim Religious Education in China," 2-3. MacKerras, "Religion in Contemporary Xinjiang," 207. Waite, "The Impact of the State on Islam amongst the Uyghurs," 258. Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 67.
[144] Wang, *Uyghur Education and Social Order*, 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 titulature. 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 *molla*s 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 *molla*s. 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.



بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

اجازة فى رواية حفص عن عاصم

فى تاريخ03/08/1986

وقرا علي ختمة كاملة من اول القران الى اخره برواية حفص بن سليمان بن المغيرة الأسدي الكوفي عن عاصم بن ابي النجود الكوفي التابعي وذلك بتوسط المد المنفصل من طريق الشاطبية , واستجازني فأجزته بان يقرأ ويقرئ بهذه الرواية , في اي مكان حل في اي قطر نزل بشروطها المعتبرة عند أهل الأثر.

وأخبرته أني قرأت بها على أستاذي فضيلة الشيخ عثمان محمد حيدرا –عضو في لجنة التحكيم في أوقاف رأس الخيمة وامام مسجد الديوان الاميري في امارة رأس الخيمة- وهو عن شيخه الشيخ سعد عبد الحكيم سعد وهو عن شيخه محمد عبد العزيز علي وكذلك احمد ابراهم طه المصري . واخبرني شيخي ايضا :انه قرأ بها على فضيلة الشيخ رضا عبد الحميد فتح الله وهو شيخي ايضا وكلاهما عن الاستاذ الكبير الشيخ محمد بن عبد الحميد بن أحمد أبو رواش وهو عن الشيخ الأستاذ الكبير أحمد عبد العزيز الزيات وهو عن الشيخ عبد الفتاح هنيدي وهو عن شيخ الاقراء بمصر الشيخ محمد بن احمد الشهير بالمتولي (عن الشيخ أحمد الدري التهامي)وهو عن شيخ قراء وقته محمد بن أحمد المعروف بسلمونه وهو عن شيخه ابراهم العبيدي وهو عن العالم الشهير الشيخ عبد الرحمن الأجهوري وهو عن العالم العلامة أحمد البقري وهو عن شيخ قراء مصر في وقته محمد بن قاسم البقري وهو عن شيخ قراء عصره الشيخ عبد الرحمن اليمني وهو عن الشيخ احمد بن عبد الحق السنباطي وهو عن الشيخ شحاذه اليمني وهو عن العلامة الشيخ ناصر الدين الطبلاوي وهو عن شيخ الاسلام ابي يحي زكريا الانصاري وهو عن شيخ شيوخ وقته ابي النعيم رضوان العقبي وهو عن الحافظ الحجة محرر الفن الشيخ محمد بن محمد الجزري وهو عن الشيخ أبي عبد الرحمن بن أحمد بن علي البغدادي وهو عن الشيخ أبي عبد الله محمد بن أحمد بن عبد الخالق المصري المعروف بالصائغ وهو عن شيخ اقراء مصر في زمنه الامام ابي الحسن علي بن شجاع المعروف بالكمال الضرير وبصهر الشاطبي وهو عن الامام ابي القاسم الشاطبي وهو عن الشيخ علي بن هذيل بالأندلس وهو عن ابي داود سليمان بن نجاح وهو عن الحافظ ابي عمرو الداني وهو عن أبي الحسن طاهر بن غلبون وهو عن أبي الحسن الهاشمي الضرير وهو عن أبي عباس الأشناني وهو عن ابي محمد عبيد بن الصباح وهو عن حفص وهو عن عاصم وهو عن ابي عبدالرحمن عبدالله بن حبيب السلمي وابي مريم زر بن حبيش واخذ ابو عبد الرحمن عن عثمان بن عفان وعلي بن ابي طالب وابي بن كعب وزيد بن ثابت وعبد الله بن مسعود رضي الله عنهم اجمعين واخذ زر بن حبيش عن عثمان بن عفان وابن مسعود رضي الله عنهما وهم جميعا عن النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم الاخذ عن جبريل عليه السلام عن رب العزة جل ثناؤه وتقدست أسماؤه , وكان ختمه في هولندا –زيست مركز جمعية التعليم والتربية للتركستان الشرقية في أوربا وذلك يوم السبت 14 رجب من السنة1437 للهجرة

ولما تبين لي من حال الشيخ المذكور أنه بلغ معرفة رواية حفص عن عاصم و اتقانها أجزته بأن يقرأ ويقرئ بها من لقاه متى شاء في أي قطر نزل او ارتحل اجازة صحيحة بشروطها المعتبرة عن أهل الأثر داعيا الله تعالى أن ييسر له أمره ويوفقه لكل خير وأن ينفع به أبناء المسلمين ووصيه بتقوى الله في السر والعلانية وأن يدعو لي ولوالدي بالخير في خلواته وجلواته و صلى الله على سيدنا محمد وعلى اله وصحبه وسلم اجمعين.

سجلت برقم: 3

خادم القران الكريم

Stichting Oost Turkistan Educatie Centrum Europa

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 *molla*s having too many pupils and *mollas* being laterally appointed, the 2001 law on religion was revised, stating that *molla*s 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 Apaq 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 Satuq 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, *tazkirah*s 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 *tazkirah*s was preserved and passed on.[163]

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[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 Shinjang 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 *molla*s 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 *tazkirah*s 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 shirkitide tüzüldi, 2011. Tursunbeg Ibrahim Taymas, Qurbanjan Baqi, *Bilqut balilar shekhis hékayiliri - Ibn Sina*, Shinjang éléktron ün-sin neshriyati / Shinjang bilqut shirkitide 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* ۋندىدار) 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."

Theory: Islamic Orthodoxy

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 Uyghur*s, 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 *molla*s 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 Uygur 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. *Molla*s 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] Zarcone, "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. Zarcone, "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. Zarcone, "La Naqshbandiyya," 456-57. Harris, "Harmonizing Islam in Xinjiang." Zarcone, "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 50s[241]

One of the most frequently criticized aspects was the unquestioned loyalty one had to show to the *shaykh*s. 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 40s[242]

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 *molla*s and *damolla*s. – Jusupjan[243]

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 *mawlids* [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* mawlids *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.