



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

## China's Islam in Xinjiang: from functionalization to elimination

Spiessens, E.

### Citation

Spiessens, E. (2023, April 6). *China's Islam in Xinjiang: from functionalization to elimination*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3590432>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3590432>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## 6. From Functionalization to Elimination

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

### 6.1. Central State Policy

#### Religion's 'New Situation'

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

---

<sup>451</sup> Xinhua News, "Quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi zai jing zhaokai: Xi Jinping jianghua, Li Keqiang zhu" 全国宗教工作会议在京召开 习近平讲话 李克强主 [National Religious Work Conference Convened in Beijing: Xi Jinping Spoke and Li Keqiang Presided], April 23, 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/23/c\\_1118716540.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-04/23/c_1118716540.htm).

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

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

<sup>454</sup> Xinhua News.

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

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

---

<sup>455</sup> China Law Translate, "Religious Affairs Regulations 2017."

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

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

<sup>458</sup> James Leibold, "Creeping Islamophobia."

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

<sup>460</sup> Leibold, "Creeping Islamophobia."

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

### Loyalty to the Chinese Party-State

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

---

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

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

<sup>463</sup> "Document 9: Communiqué on the Current State of the Ideological Sphere."

<sup>464</sup> Chen Xi 陈希, "Peiyang xuanba ganbu bixu tuchu zhengzhi biao zhun (renzhen xuexi xuanchuan guanche dang de shijiu da jingshen)" 培养选拔干部必须突出政治标准（认真学习宣传贯彻党的十九大精神） [In the Training and Selection of Party Cadres we Need to Highlight Political Standards (Consciously Study, Propagandize and Implement the Spirit of the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress)], *People's Daily*, November 16, 2017, [http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2017-11/16/nw.D110000renmrb\\_20171116\\_1-06.htm](http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2017-11/16/nw.D110000renmrb_20171116_1-06.htm). Although the statement was primarily about purifying the Party leadership of dissenting ideological voices as part of its re-centralization of Party socialist ideology, the mention of sorcery and ghosts has made western observers consider the piece to be an anti-religion statement. Tom Phillips, "Believe in socialism not sorcery, China tells party members," *The Guardian*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/nov/16/chinese-officials-believe-in-sorcery-not-socialism-says-senior-minister>. "Senior China minister says some officials practice sorcery," *Reuters*, November 16, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-politics-religion/senior-china-minister-says-some-officials-practice-sorcery-idUSKBN1DG0CG?il=0>.

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

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

#### “Sinification of Religion”

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

---

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

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

<sup>467</sup> Batke, “The National People’s Congress in 2017,” 5.

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

<sup>469</sup> MacInnis, transl., “Document 19,” chapter IV.

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

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

---

<sup>470</sup> Tenzin Saldon, “Tibet, the 19th Party Congress and China's United Front work,” Central Tibetan Administration, November 1, 2017, <http://tibet.net/2017/11/tibet-the-19th-party-congress-and-chinas-united-front-work/>. Also see People's Daily Online, “10 yue 21 ri ‘dang de tongyi zhanxian gongzuo he dang de duiwai jiaowang’ jizhe zhaodaihui” 10 月 21 日 “党的统一战线工作和党的对外交往” 记者招待会 [October 21 Press Conference on the Work of the United Front and the Party's International Exchanges], October 21, 2017, [http://live01.people.com.cn/zhibo/Myapp/Html/Member/html/201710/9\\_103964\\_59e9a30d58bdc\\_quan.html](http://live01.people.com.cn/zhibo/Myapp/Html/Member/html/201710/9_103964_59e9a30d58bdc_quan.html).

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

<sup>476</sup> Batke, “The National People’s Congress in 2017,” 3.

<sup>477</sup> China Law Translate, “Religious Affairs Regulations 2017.”



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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### Legislation and Administration under Xi

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

---

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

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

<sup>483</sup> State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “White Paper Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang,” June 2, 2016, [http://english.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2016/06/02/content\\_281475363031504.htm](http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2016/06/02/content_281475363031504.htm).

<sup>484</sup> Xinhua News, “Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era,” speech by Xi Jinping, delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, October 18, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi\\_Jinping's\\_report\\_at\\_19th\\_CPC\\_National\\_Congress.pdf](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/download/Xi_Jinping's_report_at_19th_CPC_National_Congress.pdf).

<sup>485</sup> Hu Jintao, “Report to the Eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” November 8, 2012, [http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th\\_cpc\\_congress/2012-11/16/content\\_27137540.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/18th_cpc_congress/2012-11/16/content_27137540.htm).

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

<sup>487</sup> Batke, “PRC Religious Policy.”

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

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

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

---

<sup>488</sup> Chan and Carlson, *Religious Freedom in China*,” 235-36.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

---

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

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

United Front Work” (*zhongyang tongyi zhanxian gongzuo lingdao xiaozu* 中央统一战线工作领导小组), indicating heightened interest by central authorities.<sup>496</sup> At the same time, the United Front Work Department concerned itself more and more with religious affairs. Discussion on religious issues figured twenty-nine times during the UFWD press conference of the 19<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 2017.<sup>497</sup> In 2016, the State Administration for Religious Affairs was criticized in a CCP Central Commission for Discipline Inspection report, which blamed their lack of leadership, policy implementation and control for causing “a weakening of Party leadership and deficiencies in Party Building.”<sup>498</sup> Finally, in 2018, both the State Ethnic Affairs Commission and State Administration for Religious Affairs, were dismantled and their responsibilities brought under the authority of the United Front Work Department.<sup>499</sup> What this meant with regard to the Xinjiang policies will be discussed in the next section.

## 6.2. Xinjiang Policy

### The War on Terror

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

---

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

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

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

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

this sense of acute danger of Uyghur religiosity.<sup>500</sup> The policy shift in Xinjiang was apparent from the 2014 Central Work Forum on Xinjiang, organized after the Kunming attack. The conference emphasized ethnic unity, assimilation, stability, security and religious extremism. While it still addressed the importance of economic prosperity, which had been one of the main messages in the previous Central Work Forum of 2010, it was not considered the main policy tactic.<sup>501</sup> Researchers have shown that militarization in the Xinjiang province increased significantly since the 2009 Urumqi riots, with military spending multiplying several times in 2013 and especially after the installment of Chen Quanguo as Xinjiang's Party Secretary in 2016.<sup>502</sup> As reported by human rights organizations and researchers such as Joanne Smith Finley and Darren Byler, the War on Terror since 2014 has entailed highly intrusive means of government surveillance.<sup>503</sup> Byler reported how one of the first groups to have been targeted by heightened government surveillance was the Uyghur "floating population" in the cities.<sup>504</sup> Official cadre education taught that Xinjiang's floating population of rural migrants in cities are a "key group for religious extremist forces to penetrate," because the religious activities of this group largely take place out of state control in "underground Qur'anic schools."<sup>505</sup> Administrators were warned that "ethnic separatists and religious extremists make use of underground Qur'anic schools (in groups or single), give sermons and practice fighting and other skills to create a following."<sup>506</sup> In a move to get a grip on this group, in 2014, migrants in Urumqi were obliged to obtain a new identity card. Known officially as the People's Convenience Card, *bianminka*, also known as the Green Card among Uyghurs, people were only able to obtain it from their hometown officials after a background check. As reported by Darren Byler, it was disproportionately more difficult for Uyghur migrants to obtain the card than for Han migrants.<sup>507</sup> Another intrusive surveillance policy was the 2015 *fanghuiju* 访惠聚 (abbreviation for *fangminqing*, *huiminsheng*, *juminxin* 访民情, 惠民生, 聚民心, explore people's feelings, benefit people's livelihood, gather people's hearts) campaign, where government officials were sent to homes in southern Xinjiang to report on "extremist" behavior, which by this time included Ramadan fasting, eating *halal* and wearing a beard.<sup>508</sup>

---

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

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

<sup>502</sup> Zenz and Leibold, "Xinjiang's Rapidly Evolving Security State."

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

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

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

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

<sup>507</sup> Byler, "Convenience 方便 *fangbian*."

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



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

The Party took several steps to tighten its grip on local administration. Since Chen Quanguo's appointment as Xinjiang Party chief in 2016, the authorities have conducted campaigns against "two-faced" people (两面人 *liangmianren*), the term referring to people who are outwardly cooperative but who exhibit signs of disloyalty to the Party. This includes Party officials and patriotic Islamic clergy who have been lenient with officially illegal religious activities or who have not provided reliable reports on the religious activities in their region.<sup>509</sup> In 2017, the United Front Work Department established a separate bureau for Xinjiang, charged with the responsibility of analyzing the situation of Xinjiang's work, policy research, coordination, guidance, supervision and inspection.<sup>510</sup> The Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC), also an important power entity in Xinjiang, officially had an "XPCC Religious Affairs Department," which I found to be linked to the XPCC United Front Work Department website when checking the website in February 2018.<sup>511</sup> As we have seen, in 2018 the United Front Work Department took control of the administrative bodies

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

<sup>510</sup> Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, "Zhongyang tongzhanbu zai tian xin bumen qunian ba ju gang chengli" 中央统战部再添新部门 去年八局刚成立 [The Central United Front Department added another new department, after adding the eighth one last year], May 5, 2017, [http://cppcc.china.com.cn/2017-05/05/content\\_40751637.htm](http://cppcc.china.com.cn/2017-05/05/content_40751637.htm). See also the Xinjiang Work webpage of the United Front Work Department of CPC Central Committee: [http://www.zytzb.gov.cn/tzb2010/xinjiang/sjgz\\_index.shtml](http://www.zytzb.gov.cn/tzb2010/xinjiang/sjgz_index.shtml).

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

responsible for religious and ethnic affairs on a national level. Researcher Jessica Batke remarked that this did not mean a sudden power shift in Xinjiang, but rather constituted a formal confirmation of existing power relations.<sup>512</sup> Researchers have shown that the China Islamic Association in Xinjiang had always been under the tight control of government administration because of its relatively low budget and the interpenetration of the staff by different administrative departments.<sup>513</sup> But while SARA's disbanding in 2018 did not signify an abrupt power shift in Xinjiang, it did signify a high-level official retraction of the Party's mandate for religious infrastructure to manage and communicate CCP policy. The state purging SARA and targeting "two-faced" Uyghurs and officials was an admission by the state that the tactics of functionalizing Islam did not work. The state admitted that even people who were able to outwardly follow the official narrative could not be trusted to be loyal to the CCP. Its answer to that problem became control and deep-level surveillance.

## Religious Extremism and Re-education

Xi Jinping's new stress on the possible dangers of religious communities and the directive to "maximally suppress the negative role of religion" provided the political rationalization for the suppression of any signs of religiosity.<sup>514</sup> The revised Regulations on Religious Affairs, drafted in 2016 and implemented in 2017, emphasized the dangers of religion and the state's mandate to provide countermeasures by adding the stipulation that "the principle of religious management is to uphold and protect legitimate religious affairs, while curbing the penetration of illegality and extremism."<sup>515</sup> Seeing danger in tolerance towards Uyghur religious expressions, the state shifted the narrative by demonizing religion. Since 2014 "religious extremism" became the main label for unwanted behavior. What were considered signs of religious extremism differed from time to time. The "main manifestations of religious extremism" on the multiple posters encountered throughout Xinjiang in 2015 and 2018 included men wearing beards, forbidding people to smoke and drink, opposing official media channels, using the terms *halal* and *haram* to describe what people can do, not letting children attend "dual language" schools (meaning schools where they learn Chinese), saying that you cannot consume things that are made by Han or produced in *neidi* China, and saying children cannot eat the food at schools because it is unclean (see Figure 30).

---

<sup>512</sup> Batke, "Central and Regional Leadership for Xinjiang Policy in Xi's Second Term."

<sup>513</sup> Castets, "The Modern Chinese State and Strategies of Control over Uyghur Islam," 242-44. Doyon, "The Local Islamic Associations and the Party-State," 51.

<sup>514</sup> Xinhua News, "Quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi zai jing zhaokai: Xi Jinping jianghua, Li Keqiang zhu" [National Religious Work Conference Convened in Beijing: Xi Jinping spoke and Li Keqiang presided], April 23, 2016.

<sup>515</sup> China Law Translate, "Religious Affairs Regulations 2017."





Figure 30: Poster in Kashgar about the main manifestations of religious extremism (photo by author, Kashgar 2015)



Figure 31: Propaganda poster in Khotan 2015 warning against twenty-one manifestations of religious extremist ideology (photo by author, Khotan 2015)



Figure 32: Poster depicting anti-extremism propaganda. When driving through the Khotan and Kashgar region in 2015 I saw some of the propaganda images displayed in the poster above placed along village streets (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Khotan 2015)



Figure 33: Propaganda poster warning against the dangers of religious extremism (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Khotan 2015)

In conformity with the Xi administration's focus on ideology work, the state portrayed the battle against unrest in Xinjiang as a battle against extremist thought. To give an example of how the War on Terror was communicated in Chinese media, a 2017 *New Silk Road* article by Xinjiang Party School member Qiu Yuanyuan concerning "de-extremification" in Xinjiang says that Xinjiang was "deeply poisoned by extreme thoughts" and that a crackdown on criminal activities and a transformation through education were the two pillars of anti-extremism work.<sup>516</sup> The article emphasized the importance of expanding and strengthening the transformation-through-education work because "religious extremism is extremely poisonous" and "the seeds, soil, and market of the current extreme thoughts have not been eliminated, the penetration of religious extremism is still prominent, and the damage is still serious."<sup>517</sup>

The new discourse stated that the way to be sure that people are good, reliable citizens does not go through Islam, but through Chinese culture and Party spirit. The 2016 "White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang" promotes patriotism and "Chinese cultural concepts" among religious communities as primary tools against extremism:

Xinjiang encourages religious organizations and believers to promote patriotism, peace, unity, moderation, tolerance and benevolence through their sermons and preaching, to spread the Chinese cultural concepts of advising people to perform good deeds, teaching people morality and being merciful, and to lead religious believers in maintaining proper faith and honest deeds, and resisting religious extremism.<sup>518</sup>

Throughout Xinjiang, government propaganda promotes Chinese cultural values, for example with posters as in Figure 34, which display the Chinese cultural value of filial piety. Researchers have observed that since the start of the War on Terror and especially since the intrusive re-education policies, there has been an increasingly aggressive demand that Uyghurs perform Han-oriented

---

<sup>516</sup> Qiu Yuanyuan 邱媛媛, "Jinjin weirao zong mubiao zuohao ,qu jiduanhua' jiaoyu zhuanhua gongzuo" 紧紧围绕总目标做好 "去极端化" 教育转化工作 [Do a good job of "de-extremification" transformation through education work], *New Silk Road* 新丝路 12 (2017), <http://www.zjdata.net/literature/detail/657545.html>. *New Silk Road* is a comprehensive social science journal approved by the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television. It emerged with the national "One Belt, One Road" development strategy and was first published in 2015. The link I used to access the article seemed to be invalid by the time of copyediting the thesis. The same article is referenced, with two alternative links, in Adrian Zenz, "The Xinjiang Papers – Document No. 2," November 27, 2021, page 15, <https://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Transcript-Introduction-02.pdf>.

<sup>517</sup> Qiu Yuanyuan, "Jinjin weirao zong mubiao zuohao ,qu jiduanhua' jiaoyu zhuanhua gongzuo" [Do a good job of "de-extremification" transformation through education work].

<sup>518</sup> State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "White Paper Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang."



cultural expressions.<sup>519</sup> The 2018 White Paper on “Cultural Protection and Development in Xinjiang” states that ethnic, in the sense of minority, cultures are not something different from Chinese culture, but are an organic part of Chinese culture: “Various ethnic cultures of Xinjiang have their roots in the fertile soil of Chinese civilization, advancing their own cultural development while enriching the overall culture of China.”<sup>520</sup> Belonging to Chinese culture is presented as the source of prosperity and development in the region. A 2019 China Islamic Association article promoted the state narrative that development in the region has for centuries been driven by China: “After the Western Han Dynasty unified Xinjiang, the prosperity of the Silk Road trade promoted the rapid development of the local economy and society. [...] The Han people set up fields in Xinjiang and built water conservancy projects, bringing advanced production tools and technologies from the Central Plains, which greatly promoted the development of agriculture and handicraft industry in ancient Xinjiang.”<sup>521</sup> As the propounded source of prosperity, Chinese culture has become the way for Uyghurs to get cured from Islamic extremism. A 2017 Xinhua newspaper article reports of the outcome of a patriotic training course in Urumqi for minority religious clergy meant “to enhance their cultural identity and awareness of the Chinese nation.”<sup>522</sup> The article reports fascinated and awed participants who were fulfilled with the idea of China’s greatness, which was spurred by Chinese language classes and study trips to the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, the Great Hall of the People, and the birthplace of Confucius. The students were convinced of the great benefits of belonging to the Chinese nation and how this helps Xinjiang: “Abb Abit, a student, said: ‘Much of the content mentioned by General Secretary Xi Jinping in the report relates to how we can get out of poverty and how to ensure people’s livelihood ... This is a solution to the development problems of our people and changes in the villages’ backwardness.’” Students are quoted to have been impressed by the Great Hall of the People: “In the hall of Xinjiang, I saw the familiar Heavenly Lake, the Tianshan and the singing and dancing Xinjiang people, and I felt the Party and state attach great importance to

---

<sup>519</sup> For example in musical performances, see Amy Anderson and Darren Byler, ““Eating Hanness”: Uyghur Musical Tradition in a Time of Re-Education” *China Perspectives* no. 3 (2019): 17-26, <https://www.cefc.com.hk/issue/china-perspectives-20193/>.

<sup>520</sup> State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “Cultural Protection and Development in Xinjiang,” published November 15, 2018, [http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white\\_paper/2018/11/15/content\\_281476391524846.htm](http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/11/15/content_281476391524846.htm).

<sup>521</sup> China Islamic Association, “Xinjiang ge minzu shi zhonghua minzu xuemai xianglian de jiatong chengyuan,” [Each ethnic group in Xinjiang is a family member of the Chinese nation], April 29, 2019.

<sup>522</sup> Xinhua News, “Zuo chuanbo zhonghua wenhua de zhongzi – zhongyang sheyuan diyi qi Xinjiang zhongqingnian aiguo zongjiao renshi peixunban xuanyuan zuotan ceji” 做传播中华文化的种子——中央社院第一期新疆中青年爱国宗教人士培训班学员座谈侧记 [Spreading the Seed of Chinese Culture - A Discussion with the Students of the First Phase of Xinjiang Middle-aged Patriotic Religious People in the Central Academy of Social Sciences], December 7, 2017, <http://www.zyztb.gov.cn/tzb2010/S1821/201712/3b3bf032327d47aab012dedb5bbd4d29.shtml>.

Xinjiang.” The article concludes that the students’ “thoughts and hearts had been baptized” by Chinese culture.<sup>523</sup>



Figure 34: Propaganda in the streets of Urumqi promoting the Chinese value of filial piety (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Urumqi 2018)



Figure 35: Sign outside of a school in Urumqi. The Uyghur version of “hello” is only shown in transcription, the Arabic-based Uyghur script having been removed. The same sign was noticed by Smith Finley in her 2018 visit to the city.<sup>524</sup> (photo by author, Urumqi 2018)

<sup>523</sup> Xinhua News, “Zuo chuanbo zhonghua wenhua de zhongzi,” [Spreading the Seed of Chinese Culture], December 7, 2017.

<sup>524</sup> Smith Finley, “Securitization, Insecurity and Conflict in Contemporary Xinjiang,” 11-12.

“Love your country, love your religion” Becomes “Love your Party, love your country”

In the Xinjiang context, the push to “tap deeper into the content of teachings and doctrines”<sup>525</sup> led to overwriting the Islamic discourse with Party tenets. Mosque visitors were reported to have to sing the CCP classic song “Without the Communist Party, There is No New China” while imams were to preach about “resolutely walking the Chinese-style path, reviving the Chinese-style spirit, and solidifying Chinese strength, while stressing how religious believers can be devoted citizens.”<sup>526</sup> The state became very blunt in supplanting religious discourse with nationalist Party rhetoric. An example of this is the stripping of any religious message or symbolism in the large Idkah mosque in Kashgar, which has long served as the symbol of Islam in Xinjiang. During my visit in the summer of 2018, on the outside of the main prayer hall, there was a large picture of Xi Jinping, and in the middle of the courtyard, there was a large LED screen with slogans in Uyghur and Chinese calling people to uphold the nineteen principles of the Communist Party. Nothing appeared about religious doctrine or practice, only a reference to the mutual adaptation of religion and socialism. The mosque’s guide, who never spoke about the religious practices that took place in the mosque, elaborated about the interior of the mosque’s main prayer hall and a large wall tapestry that hung on its back wall. He explained that the pattern of the tapestry, with three flowers as one of its main elements, symbolized the “Three Inseparables,” meaning the state narrative that advocates ethnic unity. The mosque entrance, in place of the previous “Love your country, love your religion” (*aiguo aijiao* 爱国爱教), now showed the banner “Love your Party, love your country” (see Figure 36). I did not see these banners during my fieldwork in 2015, and there are reports of them appearing on mosques in 2017.<sup>527</sup>

---

<sup>525</sup> Xinhua News, “Quanguo zongjiao gongzuo huiyi zai jing zhaokai: Xi Jinping jianghua, Li Keqiang zhu” [National Religious Work Conference Convened in Beijing: Xi Jinping spoke and Li Keqiang presided], April 23, 2016.

<sup>526</sup> Radio Free Asia, “Xinjiang Authorities Convert Uyghur Mosques Into Propaganda Centers,” August 3, 2017, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/mosques-08032017153002.html?searchterm=utf8:ustring=+uyghur+imam>

<sup>527</sup> AP Photo of a child rests near the entrance to a mosque where a banner reads 'love the party, love the country' in Kashgar city, Nov. 4, 2017 in Radio Free Asia, “Xinjiang Authorities Jail Uyghur Imam Who Took Son to Unsanctioned Religious School,” May 10, 2018, <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/imam-05102018155405.html>.



Figure 36: Entrance of the Idkah Mosque (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Kashgar 2018)

Not just in the mosques, but especially also in the streets, Islam had to make way. Smith Finley reported that Urumqi residents had seen crescents being removed from city mosques, only to be put back some days later.<sup>528</sup> She suspects, as I do, that it reflects clashing government concerns of a political wish to remove Islam from public view in contrast to the image that tourists expect to see. During my visit in 2018, both in Turpan and in Kashgar, I encountered the same conflicting interests with regard to the public display of Islamic symbols. In the city of Turpan, indications of Islam or Islamic heritage sites on doorway decorations were spray-painted. Even depictions of the well-known Turpan tourist site of the Emin minaret were painted over due to the Islamic association (see Figures 38 - 41). Instead, doorway decorations of Chinese-style landscapes were more prevalent (see Figures 42 - 43). One Han hotel owner in Turpan told me that he was not allowed to sell any postcards containing images of Muslims (see Figure 37).

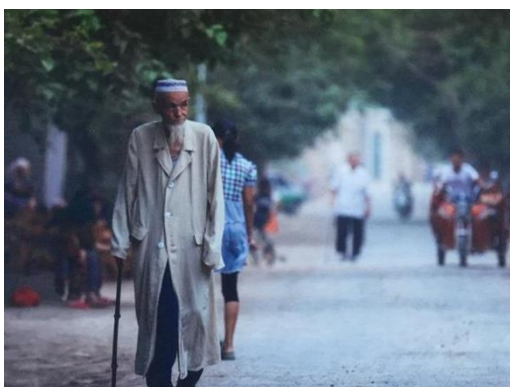


Figure 37: Postcard image which a Turpan hotel owner said he was now forbidden to sell (photo by author, Turpan 2018)

<sup>528</sup> Joanne Smith Finley, "Now We Don't Talk Anymore: Inside the 'Cleansing' of Xinjiang," *ChinaFile*, December 28, 2018, <https://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/now-we-dont-talk-anymore>.





Figure 38



Figure 39



Figure 40



Figure 41

Figures 38-41: Signs above house entrances in Turpan had been spray-painted to remove any Islamic elements (photos by MJ De Maeseneer, Turpan 2018)





Figure 42



Figure 43

*Figures 42-43: Signs above house entrances in Turpan displaying Chinese-style scenery (photos by MJ De Maeseneer, Turpan 2018)*

In 2013 and 2015, the Kashgar city center, that had over the last decade been almost completely torn down and rebuilt in “traditional” style, contained several mosques with new, carved mosque entrances and minarets (see Figure 44). During my 2018 visits, most of those mosques that were not located on any tourist main road had had their minarets removed and entrances blocked (see Figures 45 – 47). Only a few mosques located on routes which tourists passed were preserved in their integrity. Above them waved the national flag, and a banner announcing “Love your Party, love your country” stood over the entrance, along with LED screens featuring Party slogans and a large picture of Xi Jinping (see Figures 48-50).



Figure 44: Mosque in the Kashgar city center in 2013. Throughout the Kashgar city center, mosques had uniform, recently built fronts (photo by author, Kashgar 2013)



Figure 45: Mosque in Kashgar city center, with remaining minarets, but removed crescents (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Kashgar 2018)

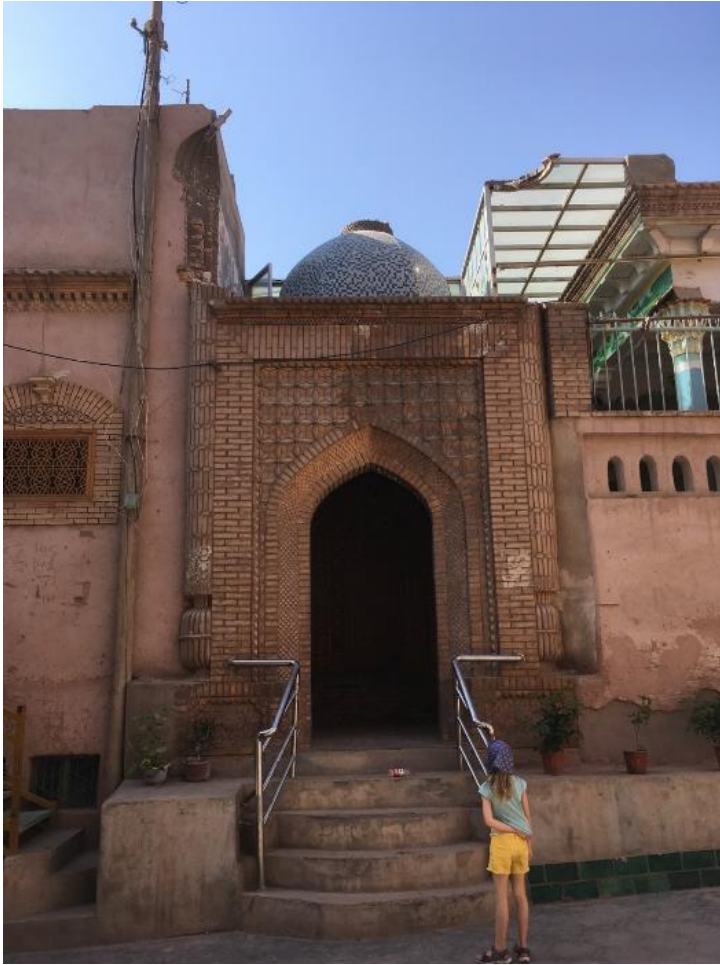


Figure 46: Mosque stripped of its minarets in a back alley in central Kashgar City, July 2018. Photo by MJ De Maeseneer.

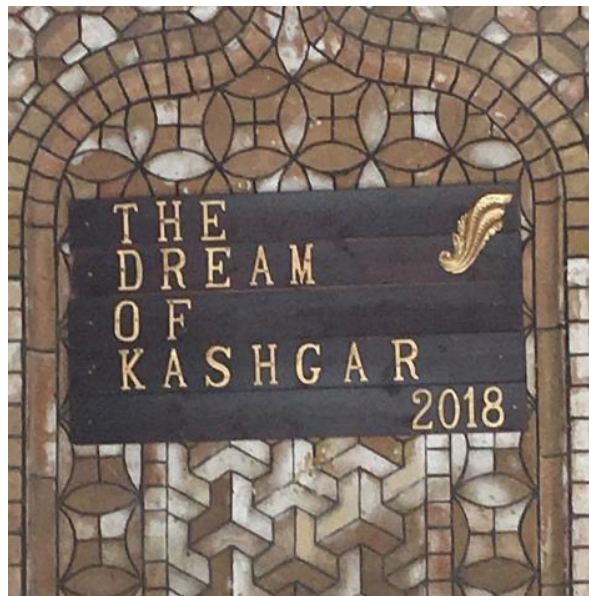


Figure 47: Former mosque now turned into a cafe called "The Dream of Kashgar." The minarets have partially been removed, and one side of the entrance has been closed off (photos by author, Kashgar 2018)





Figure 48: Patriotic mosque on one of the main tourist roads of the Kashgar city center. Mosques in the street's side alleys were all stripped of their minarets and locked (photo by author, Kashgar 2018).



Figure 49: Mosque at Apa Khoja tombs site in Kashgar. Note the removed crescents on the minarets (photo by author, Kashgar 2018)



*Figure 50: Touristic area of Kashgar city center. The area comprises several blocks, in which tourists are guided around on the main streets in small tour carts. The main streets are lined with souvenir shops (photo by MJ De Maeseneer, Kashgar 2018)*

While I encountered several books on Islam in 2013 and 2015, all Uyghur religious literature in Xinhua bookstores in Urumqi and Kashgar had disappeared by the time of my last research trip in July 2018. Under the functionalization policies, the state had tried to rally the religious sources of authority around the Party-state's ideas of citizenship. Doing away with functionalization, the state now moved on to a policy that stripped religious expressions of any authority. Where before, religious expression was recognized, or at least tolerated, now it was, often literally, eliminated in many places.

For What Audience?

Officially, the state still upholds the idea that religion is not per se harmful for Chinese socialism. The 2016 White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang stated that "Religious extremism is not religion, but tries to make use of religion."<sup>529</sup> There still is a layer of state discourse portraying an

---

<sup>529</sup> State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "White Paper Freedom of Religious Belief in Xinjiang."

Islam that is nationalist and modern and which receives official state support. One can ask how this holds up in a region that is not only characterized by the suppression of religious expression, but where it is actually portrayed as an enemy of the state. One answer is that, even if the credibility of Chinese support for Islam can be challenged, it provides the state with sufficient justification for their policies in Xinjiang. The state assuming the role of judge in defining the line between good and bad Muslims gives the state flexibility in naming its targets. By making nationalism the first condition of good religiosity, moreover, anyone who resists this official religious narrative can be labeled as harmful to society.

Important to note here is that Uyghurs are not the only audience intended for the “patriotic Islam” narrative. Studying state propaganda posters in Xinjiang since 2008, researcher Frederick de Jong has noticed during his fieldwork that the use of Uyghur in posters seemed to be in decline, with often only the caption appearing in both Uyghur and Chinese and the directive only in Chinese.<sup>530</sup> The increased use of the Chinese language for state propaganda, with only a sparse use of Uyghur, can signal an unwillingness or incapacity to administer the region in Uyghur. But one cannot but entertain the possibility that the message is mainly intended for a Han audience, who must be made aware of government measures for public safety in Xinjiang. As Byler mentioned, surveillance measures such as the grid of checkpoints served to “provide feelings of security and convenience” for Han residents in Xinjiang.<sup>531</sup> Seeing the state’s overwhelming presence serves to provide a sense of assurance that everything is under control and any possible threat has been neutralized. Han immigrants in the region have been a key element in the state’s policy in Xinjiang. If the state manages to make the immigrants in Xinjiang feel like their interests are served, the state holds a loyal stabilizing force in the region. In that sense, the government has more to gain by the loyalty of its Han citizens than with its Uyghur citizens.

### 6.3. Conclusion

In 2016, the National Religious Work Conference presented a clear sign that the Party increasingly considered religious activities a liability. While Party leadership did not officially move away from the basic policies as formulated in Document 19, it now emphasized the danger of religion’s “new situation,” i.e. foreign influence, digital communication, religious extremism, and the continued or even increased presence of religious activities in Chinese society. The changed rhetoric was complemented by new legislation that emphasized security issues and education, as well as a different administrative structure to handle religious affairs. The central apprehension about religion

---

<sup>530</sup> De Jong, *Uyghur Texts in Context*, xviii.

<sup>531</sup> Byler, “Convenience 方便 fangbian.”

fed into a wider societal milieu of Islamophobia and has led to increased criminalization of Muslim religious expressions. Simultaneously, under the Xi presidency the Party has started to demand more conformity to central Party demands. This was combined with a heightened nationalist rhetoric which promotes the vision of a strong Chinese national identity under CCP leadership. The nationalist push was also prevalent in the Party's new approach to religious communities, and explicit demands were made for the Sinification of religion.

In Xinjiang, the Party has withdrawn its support for the functionalization policy. The shifting policy towards Islam among Uyghurs was initiated with the 2014 Central Work Forum on Xinjiang and the launching of the "War on Terror." The oppressive policies intensified under Chen Quanguo's tight-gridded surveillance network, the crackdown on "two-faced people" since 2016, and the start of "re-education" in 2017. These measures represented the central wish of ideological conformity and the intrusive means it was willing to utilize to achieve more control. As under the functionalization policy, cultural and political nationalism was a central element with which religious communities could show their conformity to Party wishes. However, in Xinjiang the administration did not leave this up to the religious clergy anymore. Signs of religious expression in themselves had become marks of disloyalty and possible extremism. The overwriting of Islamic discourse with Party discourse under Xi and Chen almost seems like an overwrought logic of the functionalization policy: the only good Islam was a patriotic, Party-loyal Islam. So then, logically, Party tenets needed to be at the center of religion. But the difference is that in the functionalization policy, the loyalty to the Party tenets could be shown by loyalty to state-approved Islam. Under the new policy, the need to be aware of any hidden disloyalty requires doing away with the coating of religious wording. Mosques have been transformed into places where state ideology is the central message. Censorship has taken on extreme levels, like the removing of minarets in Kashgar and the spray-painting over Islamic door signs in Turpan. Any protest against this would signal resistance against the Chinese state and be labeled as a zealous attachment to Islam. While the functionalization policy and the elimination policy both were concerned with controlling Muslim communities, the former made use of Islam's platforms and symbols, and the latter treated them as a liability.