

Islam in China: From Silk Road to Separatism

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Abstract

Islam came to China via the Silk Road, the great trading route beginning in the ancient Chinese capital of Xian. Islam flourished during the brutal but religiously tolerant Mongol Yuan dynasty. Harsh repressive measures were employed against the rebellious Muslims of the Qing dynasty. Islam has survived the tumultuous 20th century and has experienced a revival in the new millennium. Following a brief historical overview, including some of China's relevant history of insurrection, rebellion and reforms, the nature of the Muslim community in China, along with pressing contemporary issues, will be outlined and discussed.

Introduction

The Silk Road was not only the trade route by which the much coveted silk fabric of China reached the markets of Europe, it was also the gateway through which Buddhism, and much later Islam, reached China. It was the route, according to legend, by which Sa'ad ibn Waqqas, maternal uncle of the Prophet Muhammad, led a delegation into China inviting the emperor to embrace Islam. The same legend adds, that in his admiration for Islam, the emperor ordered the building of China's first mosque.¹ Fourteen hundred years later, the Memorial Mosque in China's Guangdong province stands as a true testament to the fortitude and resilience of this faith's adherents in China.

Although there is no hard evidence supporting ibn Waqqas' visit to China, since the Tang dynasty in 618^{CE} the historical presence of the Muslim people in China has been well documented. In fact, some legends place Muslims in China "before there was any Islam, or even any historical China for that matter".² The historical record of China is delineated by dynasty, each adding its own hue to the story of Islam. Some bureaucracies were more tolerant than others, some more oppressive, but woven through China's

¹ Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in North-west China* (Washington: University of Washington Press, 1997), 24.

² Raphael Israeli, "Muslims in China Between Myth and History," *The Muslim World* 91:1–2 (2001): 186.

history from the 7th century are the threads of a tale of Muslim people attempting to live their faith in a new land.

Historical Overview

The Silk Road

The Xiongnu, the nomadic people living in the harsh and uncompromising steppe lands beyond the northern border of China, presented an ominous threat to consecutive imperial governments. In defence, the first dynasties surrounded their cities with huge earthen walls such as the one around the Shang city of Zhengzhou which it is estimated took 18 years to complete.³

The man attributed with the unification of China in 221BCE — the “First Emperor of Qin” — was also responsible for the building the Great Wall of China. Considered a ruthless cruel leader, he initially dispatched military expeditions into Inner Mongolia to subdue the Xiongnu tribes — the barbarians. The focus for Qin, however, was more on consolidation than expansion hence the decision to build the Great Wall as a “demarcation between China and barbarism”.⁴

Han Gaozu, the first emperor of the Han dynasty, adopted a less aggressive stance in his dealings with non-Chinese groups bordering the empire opting instead for a more subtle approach known as *heqin* (peace and friendship). Under this policy, Han Gaozu attempted to maintain peace through a quasi bribery system of generous gifts, the offer of imperial Chinese princesses as brides and conciliatory language. Though subsequent emperors discontinued this policy of appeasement, essentially because it became too costly to sustain, the traffic of bounty moving north and tribute coming south into China contributed to the creation of the Silk Road (see Fig. 1). In time, small markets became established along the border, with traders handling a variety of goods from mundane necessities to exotic items ranging from lacquer ware and ironware to bronze mirrors and Chinese silk.⁵

³ Conrad Schirokauer, *A Brief History of Chinese and Japanese Civilisation* (South Melbourne: Nelson Thomson Learning Conrad, 1989), 10. Archaeologists believe this wall to have been 2,385 feet long, 60 feet wide and 30 feet high; the work of 10,000 labourers working 330 days for 18 years. The Shang civilisation dates from approximately 1600BCE–1027BCE.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 53. Schirokauer notes that the current wall, which dates from the 15th century, was constructed on remnants of previous defensive walls as was the one erected by Qin. The Qin dynasty dates from 221BCE–206BCE. Generally, the Chinese regarded all non-Chinese as “barbarians”.

⁵ See Schirokauer, 55, 59, 60, for further detail on the formation of this dynasty which dates 202BCE–220CE. Ultimately, the policy of appeasement, despite its attractions, failed to deliver the desired result.

The Push West

The prolonged period of division which saw China carved between numerous rulers came to an end under the leadership of the Sui.⁶ A militaristic dynasty, the Sui concomitantly unified and expanded the borders of the empire. Military expeditions extended to Central Vietnam in the south and Taiwan in the east. In the west, the nomadic peoples of Gansu and eastern Turkestan were expelled and neighbouring states such as Turfan became tributaries.⁷ The small settlements along the trade routes, which had developed ad hoc during the Han dynasty, became established colonies. The extensive reforms and financial demands of the expeditions led once again to widespread discontent bringing the Sui period to a close in 617CE.

In common with the Sui, the Tang emperors were equally determined to expand the borders of the empire.⁸ No civilisation develops in isolation, however, and just as the dynastic emperors believed they ruled China with the Mandate of Heaven, so the Islamic leaders believed they too had political and religious hegemony.⁹ As successive Tang emperors continued the push west over the Pamir Mountains into Central Asia and the Arab armies advanced east towards China, it was inevitable that the two empires should meet in conflict.

It is generally agreed by Chinese scholars that in 651CE, during the reign of the second Tang emperor Gaozong, the imperial court was presented with gifts from Caliph 'Uthman "as a prelude to the establishment of friendly relations with China".¹⁰ Gernet writes that during the first half of the Tang Dynasty, its wealthy citizens were "enamoured of anything 'barbarian' ".¹¹ With merchants arriving by land and sea to settle and trade, the major cities became melting pots of "embassies, delegations bringing tribute, missions, caravans of merchants, and bands of religious pilgrims".¹² The influence of the diverse cultures was not one way, however. Techniques developed by Chinese artisans were apparent in the Transoxiana region and also in luxury goods of Persian society.¹³

A century later, in 751CE during the reign of the "Brilliant Emperor" Xuanzong, Tang soldiers crossed the Pamirs for the second time in an attempt to stop the Arab and

⁶ Mass civil discontent led to the implosion of the Han dynasty. From 220CE to 589CE, several kingdoms rose and fell; not all were led by Chinese rulers. It was inevitable that the arrival of foreign rulers led to the introduction of new ideologies and differing cultural perspectives which left their imprint on Chinese history. See Schirokauer, 79–100.

⁷ Schirokauer, 103. Turfan — north-western China, a state led at times by the Chinese and at others by the Xiongnu.

⁸ The Tang dynasty — 617CE–907CE.

⁹ Mandate of Heaven — the concept that the right to rule was divinely bestowed.

¹⁰ Caesar E. Farah, *Islam* (Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series, Inc, 2003), 292.

¹¹ Jacques Gernet, *A History of Chinese Civilisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 281.

¹² *Ibid.*, 282.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 288. Transoxiana refers to that part of Central Asia where today Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan are situated.

Tibetan armies from combining their forces and presenting a united threat to China.¹⁴ The empire had been successful in a previous confrontation four years before but this time, on the banks of Samarkand's Talus River, they were defeated. With this loss, the way was open not only for Islam to enter China proper, but for an exchange of ideas and scientific advances which were transported across Central Asia to the Middle East and from there to the far reaches of the Islamic Empire by the 10th and 11th centuries.¹⁵ At the close of the 8th century, diplomatic relations between the Tang court and the Abbasid Caliphate halted further attacks against the Tibetans in Central Asia and the hosting of a "mission from the caliph Harun al-Rashid".¹⁶

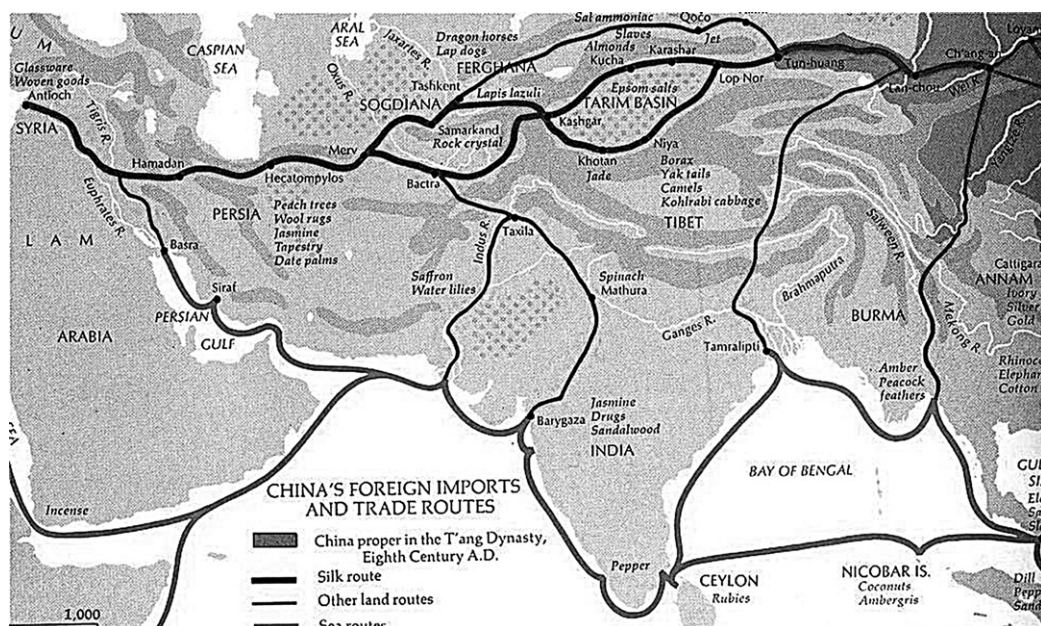


Figure 1. Map of the Ancient Silk Road and other trade routes

Muslims As "Semu Ren"

The power and dominance of neither the Chinese nor the Islamic Empire could withstand the might of the Mongol hordes as they cut a swathe of destruction, merciless killing and devastation across Central Asia and Europe in the 12th and 13th centuries. With Chinggis Khaqan's directive to continue his expansionist policies, Baghdad fell to the

¹⁴ Schirokauer, 122.

¹⁵ Gernet, 288.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Conflict between those on the periphery and central government, increasing lawlessness along with particularly brutal fighting in the northern border regions, contributed to the fall of the Tang dynasty in 907CE, see Schirokauer, 126–128.

armies of Khan Hulagu in 1258CE whilst in China the Southern Song capital of Hangzhou finally fell to Khubilai Khaqan's army in 1276CE.¹⁷

The legacy of the Mongol Empire was not simply one of highly disciplined warriors bringing fear to the hearts of the people in their path; it was also one of cultural diffusion occurring at an unprecedented rate. For cities that resisted the horde's advance, destruction was total — apart from those citizens for which the Mongols had use. Women and children were generally enslaved, men sometimes used as human shields, and artisans taken for their skills. The result of this calculated dismembering of disparate communities was an enforced blending of diverse cultures.

The founding emperor of the Yuan Dynasty, Khubilai Khaqan, proved as tolerant as his grandfather when it came to fostering religious debate amongst the discrete faiths co-existing within his empire.¹⁸ All were welcome — Nestorian and Muslims, Christians and Jews, Daoists and Buddhists. All received exemption from tax with Lamaism gaining official patronage.¹⁹ This openness towards intellectual religious-based debate and the acceptance with which the conquering Mongols welcomed those of different cultures encouraged the growth of Muslim communities throughout China.

A further distinctive feature of Mongol rule was the development of a four-class system which delineated society on the basis of ethnicity. The most favoured were the Mongols themselves followed by the *semu ren* — miscellaneous unsinicised aliens, who formed an “intermediary bureaucracy of non-Chinese administrators and merchants”,²⁰ thirdly the *han ren* — the northern Chinese and other non-Chinese groups, and finally the largest category, approximately 80 percent of the population, the *nan ren* consisting predominantly of the southern Chinese. The institutionalising of this “fourfold division of society”²¹ had direct implications on the method the Yuan rulers adopted “in the recruitment of government officials and in the conduct of legal cases and in taxation”.²² It also ultimately favoured the Muslim who, classified as *semu ren*, the second most favoured class, had access to privileges unavailable to the majority of the population.

Attendant with the establishment of the Muslim communities came the desire for places of worship and prayer, and many fine examples of distinctive Islamic architecture remain into the 21st century. With their privileged position as *semu ren*, the Muslims were not only permitted to build their own mosques, their Mongol rulers also

¹⁷ Gernet, 287. The Song dynasty, 960CE–1279CE, was in fact split — the Northern Song from the opening of the dynasty to 1127CE and the Southern Song from 1127CE to the close of the dynasty. In addition, for much of this period, the empire was not united as foreign rulers invaded in the north, creating the Liao and Jin Kingdoms along with the powerful Mongol presence, see Schirokauer, 185.

¹⁸ The Yuan dynasty — 1279CE–1368CE.

¹⁹ Lamaism — Tibetan Buddhism.

²⁰ Lipman, 32

²¹ Schirokauer, 221.

²² *Ibid.*

“entrusted the construction of their palace in [Beijing] to Muslim builders”²³ and in 1274CE, the governorship of Yunnan Province was placed with a Muslim governor from Bukhara.²⁴

By the middle of the 14th century, the Yuan emperors bore little resemblance to the harsh fighting men who established the dynasty a century earlier.²⁵ Dissolute living along with the sycophantic platitudes of less than wise counsel dulled the hawkish reflexes of inheritance. The warnings of unrest and revolution went unheeded. In 1365CE, Zhu Yuanzhang took control of Nanjing proclaiming it the capital of the new dynasty, the Ming, with the remnants of the Mongol court fleeing to Mongolia.²⁶

Chinese Renaissance

The last of the true Chinese dynasties, the Ming, is remembered for the renaissance in Chinese culture following the prolonged period of Mongol dominance.²⁷ Dillon also comments that, for the Muslim communities in China, this period marked a “crucial turning point”.²⁸ For these groups, the sense that they were foreigners in a strange land was replaced by sense of permanence — by a growing feeling that they were no longer “Muslims in China” but rather “Chinese Muslims” — a people with a distinctive culture unlike any other: the Hui.²⁹

Writers debate the degree of enforced assimilation or accommodation the rule of the first Ming emperor, Zhu Yuanzhang (Ming Taizu), exacted on the Muslim minority ethnic group.³⁰ For the traders and those who had chosen to remain in China through the centuries, a syncretisation had occurred naturally hastened in the case of intermarriage. This blending of cultures did not impact on religious belief, however. Dillon notes that whilst, in time, Hui communities were established in other areas throughout China, the minority groups maintained their beliefs in exclusive, sometimes fortified, enclaves.³¹

The martial leadership of the early Ming emperors fuelled further expansion of the Chinese Empire. The victorious land campaigns were echoed by those of the Muslim eunuch Zheng He who led several successful maritime expeditions establishing the

²³ Gernet, 382.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 380.

²⁵ Peter Brent, *The Mongol Empire* (London: Book Club Associates, 1976), 202.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 205. The Ming dynasty — 1368CE–1644CE.

²⁷ Michael Dillon, *China's Muslim Hui Community: Migration, Settlement and Sects* (Surrey, UK: Curzon Press, 1999), 27.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.* Dillon cites the work of Donald Daniel Leslie, *Islam in Traditional China: a Short History to 1800* (Canberra, Australia: Canberra College of Advanced Education, 1986), 105.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 29 — it has been posited that Zhu Yuanzhang (Ming Taizu) viewed the Muslim communities favourably based on the view that he was himself a Muslim “in secret”. Dillon cites the research of Hajji Yusuf Chang, “The Hui (Muslim) Minority in China: an Historical Overview,” *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* 8:1 (1987): 62–78.

³¹ Dillon, 27, 28.

empire as a naval force also.³² By the early middle period of the dynasty, the fervour for expansion had been replaced by a need to consolidate resources and shore up defences, particularly the Great Wall. Once again, the barbarians threatened the northern borders of China.

A lack of leadership in the middle and later stages of the dynasty saw a rise in corruptive practices in both the imperial court and in the regions on the periphery. Once again, civil discontent was on the rise and those who sought to rectify inequalities in the state structures were dealt with severely by those who retained power.³³ With the calls for reform by and large unheeded, the wealthy were able to take further advantage, leaving the peasant freeholders to pay taxes to support the government machinery.³⁴ As the situation spiralled to its inevitable conclusion, and groups from within the Ming were unable to grasp control of the empire, the way was left open for the Qing, a people who crossed into China from Manchuria.³⁵

Resistance, Insurrection and Rebellion

During the 17th and 18th centuries, a call for a purification of Islam permeated the Muslim world, purging the faith from the taint of “local cultural accretions”.³⁶ In China, Muslim communities questioned the degree to which their faith had become sinicised. This led, in some provinces, to a strengthening of Muslim identity. There was a renewed focus on “mosque-based education”³⁷ whilst in major cities, such as Beijing and Nanjing, the “Sino-Muslim literati created a new genre of texts, the *Han kitāb*” — a synthesis of Chinese and Arabic, their content accurately reflected by the half-Chinese, half-Arabic name — the Sino-Islamic canon”.³⁸

The western front of the Chinese Empire was far from quiet through the long period of Qing Manchu rule. Over the centuries, Xinjiang or the “new frontier” (Chinese Turkestan) region had become the centre of expansion for successive rulers, not only for the Chinese, but for the Xiongnu, the Arabs and the Mongols. Muslim discontent stemmed from an inherent desire to institute authority with a differing spiritual focus than that of the existing imperial court.³⁹ The situation was further exacerbated by an influx of new people, some were refugees from the Tsarist regime in Russia, others were Han Chinese shifting from the overcrowded area as the population swelled.⁴⁰

³² Schirokauer, 237, 241.

³³ *Ibid.*, 244, 245.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

³⁵ The Qing dynasty — 1644CE–1911CE.

³⁶ Lipman, 86.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 73, 74. Lipman adds that “the books reflected their author’s surroundings, religious convictions, and intellectual preferences”.

³⁹ Immanuel C.Y. Hsü, *The Rise of Modern China Fifth Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc, 1995), 318 — in the century following the Qing conquest in 1759, Hsü notes that “no less than a dozen uprisings and invasions took place”.

⁴⁰ Gernet, 488.

Systemic corruption and repressive practices exhibited towards the end of Emperor Qianlong's reign in the late 18th century were not a reflection of his earlier rule. Hsü describes the emperor's military record as "splendid".⁴¹ He records Qianlong's success against the Muslims in western Xinjiang in 1758 and south of Lake Balkhash in 1795 once and for all bringing the entire area within Chinese rule.⁴²

At the dawn of the 19th century the situation in the west remained "precarious and dangerous"⁴³ for the imperial court. Any military presence remaining in the region from the accession and repression campaigns of the previous century was considerably reinforced by the imperial court when, in 1825, the Muslims of western Xinjiang seceded under the leadership of Jehangir.⁴⁴ Jehangir's forebears, rulers in Turkestan prior to the Qing expansion, had been exiled to Kokand (west of the Pamirs).⁴⁵ The rebellion was precipitated by the central government's refusal to give the Kokandian merchants preferential terms. Described as a "dynamic conjunction of faith and commerce",⁴⁶ order was not restored until 1828.

From 1850–1864, the Taiping Rebellion, with its basis in the messianic beliefs of Hong Xiuquan, provided the "most formidable threat to the dynasty".⁴⁷ Hong attracted many thousands to his fundamentalist form of Christianity, eventually proclaiming himself leader of the Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace dynasty in 1851.⁴⁸ The defeat of the Taiping insurrectionists in July 1864 was led by a coalition of Chinese and Western leadership.⁴⁹ Zeng Guofan, Zuo Zongtang and Li Hongzhang, belonged to a new breed of military leaders who personally recruited soldiers from their own home areas or who were members of their clans. These were well paid, well disciplined and high in morale.⁵⁰

Following the bloodbath at the fall of the Taiping, Zuo Zongtang was commissioned by a severely weakened Qing government to similarly suppress Muslim rebels in Yunnan in 1855 and Dongan in 1862.⁵¹ The Yunnan revolt grew out of a sense of injustice the

⁴¹ Hsü, 40.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Gernet, 534.

⁴⁴ Hsü, 318 — Hsü notes that Xinjiang had been governed as a military colony post-1759 with soldiers stationed on either side of the Tianshan Mountains.

⁴⁵ John K. Fairbank, Edwin O. Reischauer, Albert M. Craig, *East Asia: The Modern Transformation* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1967), 197; Hsü, 318 — the rulers, or *kbojas*, were religious leaders from the line of the Prophet, who "perpetually encouraged their co-religionists . . . to revolt, while they . . . organised invasions".

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ See Schirokauer, 398–402 for further detail on the Taiping Rebellion.

⁴⁸ Fairbank *et al.*, 208.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 401.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ From 1853 to 1868, the government was also involved in stifling the Nian movement in the border regions. It is believed that the Nian originated in the 12th century White Lotus Buddhist Society. Gernet, 373, defines the White Lotus Buddhist Society as "a sect dedicated to the worship of the Buddha . . . [which] drew its recruits mainly from the ranks of poor peasants".

community had experienced as a minority persecuted “for their religion and different way of life”.⁵² In 1856, many Muslims were massacred at the hands of those “responsible for suppressing the revolt”⁵³ and in 1861, Imam Ma Mingxin, founder of the Jahriyya Sufi order and a leader of the insurrection, was executed by imperial Chinese troops.⁵⁴ Ma Mingxin’s successor proclaimed himself sultan of a new kingdom — Pacification of the South — amassing a large army which resisted government troops for 18 years.⁵⁵ The rebellion was finally suppressed in 1873 “after a slow reconquest accompanied by general destruction and massacres”.⁵⁶

The Dongan Rebellion, initially in support of the Taiping rebels, “spread rapidly from the Wei Valley across western Gansu to the borders of Mongolia”.⁵⁷ Zuo Zongtong regarded Ma Hualong, one of the leaders of the uprising and follower of Ma Mingxin, to be “the most serious threat to imperial power”.⁵⁸ For this reason, Zuo Zongtong ordered the execution of Ma Hualong, his son and 80 other rebel leaders in March 1871.⁵⁹

Whereas China’s initial foreign relation problems had arisen over the West’s desire for trade, in the 20-year period prior to the Sino-Japanese War in 1894 the imperial court was also preoccupied with the threat of foreign incursion in the periphery of the empire.⁶⁰ While to the east the court was watchful of Japan’s intentions with regard to Taiwan, in the problematic western border region the growing dominance of Russian and British interests further complicated the issue.

Just as the Muslim, Chinese and Mongol rulers had fought to expand the borders of their respective empires in the preceding centuries, from the middle of the 17th century, Russia too looked to new lands. Groups of Cossacks exploring eastern Siberia often came into conflict with the people of the area. By the mid-19th century the Russian Empire extended to the western side of the Pamirs — Russian Turkestan. Land on the eastern side of the range was Chinese Turkestan. To facilitate trade, in 1851 Russia was granted permission to “station consuls”⁶¹ on the eastern side of the Pamirs — in Chinese Turkestan.

In the midst of the turmoil and violence generated by the rebellions, in 1865 a second attempt at establishing an independent Muslim state in southern Xinjiang was made by a leader from Kokand. Within five years, Yakub Jacob Beg ruled over a large

⁵² Hsü, 255. The Yunnan revolt is also referred to as the Panthay Rebellion “being a corruption of the Burmese term for Moslem”. Gernet, 558, notes that the rebellion attracted followers from Burma.

⁵³ Gernet, 558.

⁵⁴ See section on Sufi Influences.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 559.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 588.

⁵⁸ Dillon, 48.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Schirokauer, 462.

⁶¹ Schirokauer, 396.

area of Xinjiang from his base in Kashgar, uniting Muslims across the entire region. His actions also attracted the interest of Britain and Russia nations intent on ensuring neither gained the upper hand in the region.⁶²

In July 1871, Russia, in a strategic move to forestall British influence in the area, occupied land near the Ili River promising the Qing government it would withdraw once imperial rule was restored.⁶³ Britain, concerned that Russia presented a threat to its northern border of British India planned to expand its southern border and fostered closer relations with Yakub Beg, supplying him with weapons along with, from the Sultan of Turkey, the title “Commander of the Faithful”.⁶⁴ For its part, Britain was supporting Turkey as “would-be leader of the Islamic world in a common front against Russian expansion”.⁶⁵ With the imperial government focused on stifling the various rebel movements, thus unable to intervene, Britain and Russia granted Yakub Beg “recognition in exchange for trade privileges”.⁶⁶

For the Qing government, the situation in the north-west was at a crisis point. With court advisers concerned with strengthening the east coast against “seaborne aggression,”⁶⁷ Zuo Zongtang’s expedition to the west to restore Qing rule was financed partly by the sale of some of his own business holdings, and partly by foreign interests. In any event, in 1876 Zuo Zongtang together with some 60,000 men “mercilessly slaughtered the Chinese-speaking Muslim rebels . . . treating them as domestic traitors”.⁶⁸

Yakub Beg committed suicide in 1877 and in 1878 the Treaty of St Petersburg was signed returning most of the Ili region to China though not without a little political wrangling.⁶⁹ Rather than remain in areas where Qing rule was to be reimposed, Millward comments that thousands of local Uyghurs moved to lands still governed by Russia.⁷⁰ There is little doubt that the human cost in quashing these rebellions is “unparalleled in history”.⁷¹ Estimates put the death toll at between 20 and 30 million with “more than half the population of Yunnan . . . [believed to have] disappeared during the suppression”.⁷² Gernet notes that demographic pressure was reduced with the vacuum in the region slowly filling over the last half of the 19th Century as immigrants moved from the densely populated provinces of eastern China.

⁶² Gernet, 318; Schirokauer, 464.

⁶³ The Ili River flows through the Chinese Kazakhstan border just south of Urumqi.

⁶⁴ Fairbank *et al.*, 469.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Gernet, 319.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 370.

⁶⁹ Schirokauer, 464; Gernet, 321. The manner of Yakub Beg’s death is disputed, either suicide or stroke.

⁷⁰ James Millward, Violent Separation in Xinjiang: A Critical Assessment,” *East-West Center Washington, Policy Studies* 6, (2004): 3. <<http://www.eastwestcenterwashington.org>>

⁷¹ Gernet, 560.

⁷² *Ibid.*

Reform, Revolution, Revival

Attempts by court officials to institute reform in the closing years of the 19th century were too little too late. In addition to the violent insurrections which had the potential to destabilise the empire, the Chinese government was overwhelmed by foreign encroachment and mounting nationalism in the south.⁷³ The decision to “concentrate power in the hands of the minority Manchus”⁷⁴ failed and the dynasty imploded. On 1 January 1912, Sun Yat-sen was proclaimed the first president of the Republic of China with the imperial court finally abdicating on 12 February, 1912.⁷⁵

In the first half of the 20th century Christianity made great gains, largely in the cities, primarily because Dr Sun Yat-sen and his successor Chiang Kai-shek were both Christian.⁷⁶ The religious revival following the demise of the Cultural Revolution owes much to the evangelical churches of Chinese revivalism of the 1930s and 1940s.⁷⁷

In the second half of the 20th century, the true cost Mao Zedong’s zeal to transform the country — “sometimes through extraordinary feats of will” — was borne by approximately 30 million lives taken by violent reforms, widespread famine, and harsh cultural repression.⁷⁸ People’s lives were constantly disrupted by an almost ceaseless series of new movements. The Great Leap Forward (1958–60) brought famine to the land which was particularly severe in the Muslim provinces of the north-west: Qinghai, Gansu, Henan and Anhui. The Cultural Revolution (1966–76) then “produced cruelty and oppression on a horrific scale”.⁷⁹ All religious buildings of any faith were closed, put to secular use, or destroyed by the Red Guards obedient to the “Four Olds” campaign: the rooting out of old ideas, old culture, old customs, and old habits. There was a prohibition on the use of Arabic script and an expectation for some Muslims that they should both rear pigs and eat the pork, driving some to armed opposition.⁸⁰ However, the reform era of the late 1980s brought about an acknowledgement that there could never be a question of “eradicating religious belief”.⁸¹

With the arrival of the new century, China is experiencing a religious revival. Churches and mosques have been re-opened and “religious communities have resurrected once dangerous ties with believers overseas”.⁸² Tensions remain, however. The major faiths are feeling the loss of trained leaders and in many areas disputes over

⁷³ Graham Hutchings, *Modern China: A Companion to a Rising Power* (London, England: Penguin Group, 2001), 348. The dynasty also had to contend with the Boxer Rebellion of 1899–1900, which began as a peasant revolt against what was perceived as weak leadership and the growing presence of a foreign element within Chinese culture.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁷⁶ John Gittings, *Real China: From Cannibalism to Karaoke* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 70.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Hutchings, 294.

⁷⁹ Gittings, 90.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 359.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁸² *Ibid.*

confiscated property linger. Though the people have the constitutional right to religious belief, this freedom does not extend to proselytising; the regime remains opposed to religion.⁸³ For the majority of China's people, life is considerably easier than ever before; "but the question of how it should be lived remains unanswered".⁸⁴ From this, albeit cursory, overview of pertinent Chinese history and allied developments, we turn now to look more closely at the nature of the Muslim community in this land.



Figure 2. China and her neighbours today. Note the Muslim lands to the immediate West of China

Muslims in China

China in the 21st century is a leading global as well as regional power (see Fig. 2). China face challenges on many fronts. Few people in the West are aware of the existence of China's Muslim community, a people who have lived and practised their faith for the past thirteen to fourteen centuries within the confines of a vast country whose culture is fundamentally so different to their own. This ignorance is also shared by many Han Chinese unaware that they share the Middle Kingdom with a people who have chosen to isolate themselves to ensure that their faith remains unadulterated by local custom, and in doing so, are able to trace their lineages back through many generations.⁸⁵ Further, for the majority of Chinese Muslims, their speech has been enriched with words and phrases from the ancient tongues of Islam. Arabic remains the "language of religious

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 359.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 360.

⁸⁵ Middle Kingdom — alternate name for China: *Zhongguo* — *Zhong* meaning "middle" and *guo* meaning "land".

life”⁸⁶ and whilst the concern that Islamic texts should remain written in the original Arabic form is not solely a contemporary issue, the relative isolation of the Muslim communities from the rest of the Islamic world has meant that “knowledge of Arabic has been in consistent decline, even among imams”.⁸⁷

Muslim communities, with their unique Islamic aspect — the “mosques, *madrasa*, halal butchers and foodstalls”⁸⁸ — are located throughout most of China from the coastal provinces of Guangdong and Fujian, to the north-eastern provinces of Liaoning and Heilongjiang and down to the south-western Yunnan province with its “large and influential Muslim population”.⁸⁹ Beijing, with least 40 mosques within the city confines, has its own Muslim quarter — the area around Niujie (Ox Street) Mosque.⁹⁰ But it is in the north-west, the historic region of the Silk Road, with a past enriched by the many peoples who have called this part of China home — those who spoke different languages, whose faiths differed and whose art remains in the ruined cities and caves to remind us of their presence in a time long past — which has the greatest number of Muslim communities.

Though the People’s Republic of China does not record numbers of those who practise Islam, or in fact of any faith, under its nationalities policy it identifies ten Muslim nationalities on the basis of “tradition and culture or their current religious adherence”.⁹¹ Of the ten nationalities, six live in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region: the Uyghurs — indigenous to the Xinjiang, though small communities also live in Kazakhstan, Turkey, Germany and in former Soviet states; the Kazaks — the people of Kazakhstan living the Chinese side of the border; the Kyrgyz — who live through southern and western Xinjiang with a significant number living in the Kizilsu Kyrgyz Autonomous Prefecture in the foothills of the Tianshan range; the Uzbeks — related to the Uzbeks of both Uzbekistan and Afghanistan; the Tatars — a small group living mainly in northern Xinjiang; and the Tajiks — adherents of the Ismaili Shi’a sect for whom the majority live in the Tashkorgan region, while some have remained in seclusion in the Pamirs.⁹²

Of the four remaining groups, three are generally found in the provinces of Gansu and Qinghai: the Salars — who claim descent back to the arrival of two brothers from Samarkand during the Ming Dynasty; the Bao’an — a small ethnic group who, until 1952,

⁸⁶ Dillon, 24.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ Michael Dillon, *China’s Muslims* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press (China) Ltd, 1996), 1.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Dillon, 4.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 4–14. The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, a vast area of 1.6 million square kilometres, was established by central government in 1955. This region was historically referred to as Chinese Turkestan and is known as Eastern Turkestan by many non-Chinese. See Hutchings, 470–473. Ismaili Shi’ism is regarded a synthesis of Islamic principles with ancient Persia beliefs, see Cyril Glassé, *The New Encyclopedia of Islam* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2001), 222.

were considered as belonging to the Hui; and the Dongxian — some of whom claim descent from the Mongol troops of the 13th century.⁹³

The Hui, who live in many parts of China's urban and rural centres, represent by far the largest group of Chinese Muslims. This is the tenth Muslim nationality so far as the Chinese authorities are concerned. In point of fact, "Hui" is a term used to define all other Muslims not ethnically linked to one of the above categories. Though the Hui can be found throughout China, the Chinese government has designated two autonomous Hui regions: an area west of Lanzhou, known as the Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture; and the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region.⁹⁴ It is interesting to note that whilst the other groups have retained their own language, which is largely Turkic except for the Iranian Tajiks, the Hui have tended to use the dialect of the area in which they live.⁹⁵

Religious Traditions

There is consensus that the majority of Muslims in China, including those who belong to the Sufi Brotherhood, are orthodox Sunni Muslim. It has not been easy, however, to define the presence of other branches of Islam. At the turn of the 19th and early into the 20th centuries, Western missionaries noted the existence of different groups within the Muslim community — groups referred to as "the Old Teachings (*Laojiao*), the New Teachings (*Xinjiao*) and even the New New Teachings (*Xinxinjiao*)".⁹⁶ The difficulty lies in linking these terms to established sects. Not only do language and transliteration present hurdles, the challenge is further complicated by a lack of agreement across the range of sources as to which groups belong within each classification.⁹⁷

Dillon identifies "four major divisions within Chinese Islam":⁹⁸ the *Gedimu*; the Sufi; the Ikhwan (Muslim Brotherhood) or *Yibewani*; and the Xidaotang — a sect unique to China. The first, the *Gedimu*, (Chinese for the Arabic *al-qadīm* — the ancient) is the largest and most traditional form of Islam introduced to China.⁹⁹ This suggests that the Old Teachings (*Laojiao*) refers to this group. Dillon and Lipman both comment, however, that in different parts of China, most notably in the north-west, the *Gedimu* may also include the Khufiyya Sufi order which appears to conflict with the conservative view of this oldest form.¹⁰⁰

⁹³ Dillon, 4–14.

⁹⁴ The Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture, one of several prefectures established; the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region — originally established in 1928.

⁹⁵ Dillon, 6.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 20. Dillon writes that the missionaries believed the conversion of the Chinese Muslims to Christianity would be "easier" as the Chinese were "already committed to the worship of one god".

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*; Lipman, 220.

It is generally accepted that the Sufi and Ikhwani organisations are identified as the New (*Xinjiao*) and New New Teachings (*Xinxinjiao*) groups. Initially it was proposed that followers of both the New and New New Teachings were Shi'a groups. There are, in fact, very few Shi'a Muslims in China apart from the Tajiks in the Kashgar/Pamir region.¹⁰¹ Despite the lack of Shi'a communities in China, leading Islamic scholars claim that the Shi'a influence on "Sunni Islam [in China] has been subtle but profound"¹⁰² — a view supported by the significant number of Chinese Muslims who "are given the names of leading Shi'a figures rather than . . . mainstream Sunni personalities".¹⁰³

Sufi Influences

The Sufi orders, or brotherhoods, are today securely established within the provinces of Gansu, Ningxia and Qinghai, to the east of Xinjiang. Here they are known as *menhuan* which, it is believed, relates to the Arabic word *silsila*, being the "chain of hereditary *shaykhs* (Sufi masters) who trace their ancestry back to the Prophet Muhammad".¹⁰⁴ In Xinjiang, the orders are known as *yichan*, transliterated from the Persian *ishan* meaning "they", with their leaders referred to as *khoja* "rather than *shaykh*".¹⁰⁵ It appears that the *menhuan* are Chinese-speaking Hui and the *yichan* denotes Turkic speakers, primarily the Uyghurs. There is little, if any, interaction between these two groups.¹⁰⁶

Dillon has defined "four main groups of Sufi orders in China".¹⁰⁷ The Khufiyya (*Hufiyye*) and the Jahriyya (*Zheherenye*), along with other orders in Xinjiang, belong to the Naqshabandiyya. The second two are the Qadiriyya (*Gadelinye*) and Kubrawiyya (*Kuburenye*).¹⁰⁸ The Naqshabandiyya order is believed to have been introduced to China early in the 17th century by Muhammad Yusuf.¹⁰⁹ His son, Khoja Afaq, "known to the Chinese as Hidāyat Allah (*Xidayetonglabe*)", twenty-fifth generation descendant of the Prophet¹¹⁰ travelled extensively through several north-western provinces. His form of Naqshabandiyya was known for its silent meditative *dhikr*; hence they became known as the Silent Ones, or Khufiyya.¹¹¹

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

¹⁰² Dillon, 21.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*; Dillon, 93.

¹⁰⁴ Taher, 22.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Dillon, 105.

¹⁰⁸ Dillon, 22.

¹⁰⁹ The history of the Naqshabandiyya order is discussed by J. Ter Haar, "The Spiritual Guide in the Naqshabandi Order," in *The Heritage of Sufism, Volume II The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150–1500)*, Leonard Lewisohn (Ed) (Oxford, England: Oneworld Publications, 1999), 312.

¹¹⁰ Lipman, 59.

¹¹¹ Dillon, 64 — *dhikr* is defined as the vocal or silent repetitions of "remembrances" of God.

Of the various Sufi institutions that were established following Khoja Afaq's preaching, "the most politically active new group stemmed from his initiation of Ma Taibaba"¹¹² and his successor Abū 'l Futūḥ Ma Laichi.¹¹³ Ma Laichi proved to be a brilliant student "mastering the Islamic curriculum before his eighteenth year".¹¹⁴ After preaching in the Hezhou region for 30 years, in 1728 he undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca. Whether he studied in India, Bukhara or the Yemen, it is agreed he remained absent from China for a number of years. He is regarded today as a "spiritual master, the one who converted their ancestors to Islam".¹¹⁵

In the 1740s, Ma Laichi became involved in a dispute between two communities over the breaking of the Ramadan fast: should one pray then eat (*boukai*); or eat then pray (*qiankai*)? Ma Laichi supported the second group and, in 1747, was accused by the leader of the first group of "*xiejiao* (heterodoxy) and *huozhong* (deluding the people)".¹¹⁶ Within an Islamic-majority country, the case would have been subject to *sharī'a* interpretation.¹¹⁷ Qing law however, dismissed the case with Zhang Guangsi, the governor-general, accusing the *boukai* group leader of slander. Under *fan-zuo* law a false accuser would receive the punishment of the victim, had he been found guilty. In the end, adherents of either group were "forbidden to conduct funerals together and ordered to respect their ancestral religion without conflict".¹¹⁸

This episode did not end Ma Laichi's political involvement or his desire to bring change. He established hereditary succession to the *baraka*, the sect's spiritual and secular power which was held by the leader, thus ensuring that "the family's accumulated wealth would not dissipate nor its religious power wane".¹¹⁹ The prestige of the family of the leader was further reinforced by establishing the *gongbei* cult as an influence upon the lives of its adherents.¹²⁰

Naqshabandiyya and Ma Mingxin

Aziz Ma Mingxin, a leading advocate of the Sufi renewal in the north-western provinces of China, like Ma Laichi, also studied in the Middle East for many years. Though of the same order as Ma Laichi, Ma Mingxin received a "quite different version of their order's tradition".¹²¹

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 65.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 66 — Dillon discusses the interesting story of Ma Laichi's birth and childhood.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

¹¹⁷ *Sharia* — Islamic jurisprudence regarded as divine.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹²⁰ Dillon, 47; in north-west China, it is not only the mosques that provide a centre for Islamic worship but also the tombs of Sufi masters and other religious leaders. In Chinese-speaking areas, the tombs are known as *gongbei* from the Arabic word *qubba* meaning dome or cupola which is often the shape given them.

¹²¹ Lipman, 87.

In 1761, Ma Mingxin returned to China with the aim of purifying Islam. His reform programme brought him into direct conflict with the Khufiyya order of Sufis, the descendants of Ma Laichi. Whereas Khufiyya doctrine called for a silent *dhikr*, the teaching Ma Mingxin had received came from the school of Ibrahīm ibn Hasan al-Khūrānī who “taught that the dhikr of God could be chanted aloud as well”.¹²² The Jahriyya took its name from the Arabic for aloud, “*jahr*”, and was often “accompanied by rhythmic swaying, hand movements, even ecstatic dancing”.¹²³ The manner in which the *dhikr* was made was not the only contentious issue between the rival Naqshabandi sub-groups at this time; they also differed in their commitment to *tajdīd* (renewal) and “other ritual minutiae”.¹²⁴

By 1781, the rivalry between the two orders had risen to such a degree that Qing officials travelled to Xunhua to investigate the unrest. As the Khufiyya order had not come to the notice of government officials prior to the founding of the Jahriyya, the decision was made to arrest Ma Mingxin and his followers for “apparently subversive activities . . . and end their threat to social harmony”.¹²⁵ The situation escalated rapidly, resulting in the hasty beheading of Ma Mingxin in Lanzhou by Qing officials. The violence which followed involved Muslim adherents from both orders as well as armed militia from the imperial government. Unfortunately, it also provided motivation for further armed forays, thus “stimulating hatred against cultural or religious ‘Others’ and desire for revenge on all sides”.¹²⁶

Just as interpretation of the *sharia* has led to conflict in other countries, so it did between the Sufi brotherhood and orthodox *Gedimu* during the 18th century when Sufism was at its height. It appeared that the *Gedimu* and the *tariqa*, “the mystical pathway, which was at the centre of the Sufi belief system”¹²⁷ were fundamentally opposed, doctrinally speaking. A fundamental tenet for the *Gedimu* believers was that this life and the next were inseparable. In order to be happy in the next, it was necessary to gain merit in the present. This led them, in some instances, “to compromise with non-Muslim authorities”.¹²⁸ During Qing rule, this difference in belief led to conflict between the *Gedimu* leadership and the Sufi *shaykhs* over Sufi veneration of *gongbei* tombs. The *Gedimu* felt that this veneration was tantamount to idol worship. The problem was finally resolved with the *Gedimu* accepting the tombs as those of saints and as such “should be respected and that followers could visit [the] sites”.¹²⁹

¹²² *Ibid.*, 87, 64.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 88; Dillon, 48 — the Jahriyya is the largest of the Sufi Brotherhood in China.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 88, 103. The groups differed over such things as the accumulation of wealth, succession by merit, and the length of beards or moustaches.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹²⁷ Taher, 23.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

Referred to by their opponents as “China’s Wahhabis,”¹³⁰ the Ikhwan sect was founded by Ma Wanfu sometime after his return to the north-west in 1893. In 1888, Ma Wanfu undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca. He remained there a further four years undergoing “advanced studies in Islamic languages, law, and liturgy”.¹³¹ It was also in Mecca that Ma Wanfu became influenced by the teachings of ‘Abd al-Wahhab who promulgated severe adherence to “original Koranic principles”.¹³² Ma Wanfu attracted many followers eventually naming his movement Ahl as-Sunna (*Aibailisunnai*) — “the Kinsmen of the Tradition” — which was subsequently amended to al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin, the Muslim Brotherhood, “to signify the unity of all Muslims”.¹³³

Considered the most typically Chinese, the Xidaotang, or “Hall of the Western Pathway”, was “sometimes known as the *Hanxeupai*, the Sinological sect” because its religious texts are either written in Chinese or translated from Arabic.¹³⁴ The origins of the Xidaotang are far removed from the concentrations of Muslims in the north-west, with their roots in the Tao River area in the north-western regions of Tibet. Historically, Islam was introduced to the people of Old Taozhou — “the more ancient and strategically located of two walled towns”¹³⁵ — by the Muslim soldiers sent by the first Ming emperor to “subdue the eighteen lineages of the Turfan (Tibetan)”¹³⁶ who then remained and established trade between the both nomadic and the sedentary peoples of the region.

Centres of Muslim Concentration

While, today, Muslims can be found in any rural or urban centre throughout China, in earlier centuries they were situated in more defined areas. During the Tang and Song dynasties, the provinces with the major Muslim focus were those on the south-eastern coast and, in the Ming dynasty, Nanjing became a “major centre of Islamic learning”.¹³⁷ In time, however, it was the far west of China which proved the greatest magnet for adherents of the Muslim faith. Not only was the Silk Road traffic predominantly Muslim, during the 13th century under Mongol rule Muslim soldiers were posted to the frontiers. In the 15th century, many indigenous peoples converted to Islam, and during the 17th and 18th centuries Sufism made its entrance which, as a consequence, reinforced the authority of the religious bodies of the region, edifying the status of Islam.¹³⁸ Xinjiang, homeland to the Uyghur, was designated the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 1955.

¹³⁰ Lipman, 205.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 204.

¹³⁴ Dillon, 24.

¹³⁵ Lipman, 187.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹³⁷ Dillon, 28.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

Kashgar, a major centre between the Chinese border and the Taklimakan Desert, has great historical significance. It was the capital of Yakub Beg's unsuccessful revolt in 1865 as well as "an independence movement in the 1930s".¹³⁹ Over recent years, Kashgar has been the site of several terrorist incidents and anti-Chinese demonstrations.¹⁴⁰ Turpan, to the east of Xinjiang, is rich with evidence of China's turbulent history. In the immediate environs of the city the Buddhist cave temples of Bezelik, unfortunately damaged during a "period of Islamization", can be found along with the ruins of the Han-dynasty city of Baohe; a little further out lies the ruins of the city of Gaochang.¹⁴¹ In the 18th century, Linxia was a major centre for both Sufi and "other dynamic Islamic orders".¹⁴² Those living in Linxia can trace their descent back to soldiers stationed on the frontier during the Yuan dynasty. This is also the region which witnessed the development of the Sufi brotherhoods and the *gongbei* tomb cult.¹⁴³

Yinchuan and its surrounding counties was redesignated as the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in 1958. The tombs of the Sufi shaykhs are respected and cared for by the Hui, who number approximately a third of the population. In a scheme which the Chinese authorities hoped would undermine their Islamic identity, poorer Hui families from the mountains were resettled within the provinces. Yet the Islamic Academy is also located in Yinchuan. The Academy was built in the 1980s with funds from the Islamic Development Bank to train students wishing to become imams. The institution also financed an Arabic language school in Tongxin, a city in the Ningxia Autonomous Region, "the only specialist school of Arabic in the state sector".¹⁴⁴ The establishment of Islamic schools was a matter of contention as they traditionally only catered for boys, whereas schools in the People's Republic of China were normally co-educational.

Islamic Architecture

China's mosques conform to Islamic practice and are known as *qingzhen* or "temples of pure truth". Whereas the older mosques were built in the style of the era, contemporary mosques are styled on that of major Islamic countries.¹⁴⁵ Of particular note are the 14th century Grand Mosques of Xian and Tongxin. Both mosques have been regularly refurbished through the centuries. Xian's Huajue Xiang Mosque occupies "12,000 square metres . . . [and] is one of the largest traditional mosques still existing in China".¹⁴⁶ Tongxin's, built in the style of Mongol Lama Buddhism was, after the defeat of the Yuan dynasty, taken over by the Chinese Hui and today follows the Ikhwani sect.¹⁴⁷

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ Dillon, 36.

¹⁴⁵ Dillon, 40.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 42.

The cemetery at the rear of the mosque contains the shrines of two Sufi saints and also provides an excellent view of “two other mosques: one a representative of the *Gedimu* tradition, the other attended by members of the Jahriyya Sufi brotherhood”.¹⁴⁸

The mosques in Xinjiang reflect the culture of the Uyghur. Today, Kashgar has approximately 6,000 mosques. Despite a rebuilding programme commenced in 1980, this is only half the number the city had prior to the Cultural Revolution.¹⁴⁹ The mosques are also classified according to the function they predominantly provide. The main religious festivals are held in the *Id Gab* mosques and it is believed that Kashgar’s first *Id Gab* mosque was built in 1442. The one standing today was rebuilt in 1874 during the period of secession under the leadership of Yakub Beg. It is the largest mosque in China and its prayer hall is “said to be able to hold ten thousand worshippers”.¹⁵⁰ The *Jāmi*‘ mosques are where Friday prayers take place while the *Masjid* mosques are for daily use. *Mazār* mosques are attached to the tomb or *mazār* of a Sufi or some other saint, while the *Yatīm* or orphan mosques are “scattered about the steppe, in the desert, or by the side of the road . . . [and] are available to the passing Muslim for prayer”.¹⁵¹

The Honglefu *daotang* (religious centre) is situated north-west of Jinjibao which was a centre of the 1869 Hui revolt. The *daotang* is maintained by the descendants of Ma Hualong. It is believed that both Ma Hualong and his son were buried at Honglefu where a *gongbei* was erected. Since the 1980s, Honglefu has become a centre for the thousands of followers of the Jahriyya sect.

Daily Life in Muslim China

As is common in all cultures, it is ethnic markers which often assist in identifying one social group from another. For the Muslim peoples of China, recognising these markers assists in identifying one sect, or discrete community, from another particularly in the rural areas where people have retained the more traditional style of clothing. Often the different ethnic groups distinguish themselves by the colour of their apparel. Hui men tend to wear a white cap with those of Chinese Jewish descent wearing the blue cap. Uyghur men tend to wear “colourful embroidered square caps known as flower caps”, while the Kazakh and Kyrgyz men wear “tall fur or felt hats or caps”.¹⁵²

The situation is similar for Muslim women although their clothing is also governed by “the way the Koranic injunction to dress modestly is interpreted”.¹⁵³ There are definite regional colour choices in headscarves for the women, differentiated by their marital status. In Kashgar, and regions in southern Xinjiang, the expectation is that women will

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 51.

cover their heads and faces whilst the Uyghur and Uzbek women “favour, light, brightly coloured dresses and skirts, often white with flashes of orange, blue and green”.¹⁵⁴

Ethnic identification amongst the Islamic peoples of China is aided also by both the family and first names chosen. While some ethnicities select names in their own language, the Hui tend to follow the traditional Chinese manner of a single syllable family name followed by the first or given name.¹⁵⁵ They may also have a “religious or Koranic name” placed before their Chinese name.¹⁵⁶ Whilst these names were not used during the Cultural Revolution, they started to reappear during the 1980s. It also seems that some Hui adopted family names derived from either Muhammad — Ma; or from Nasruddin — Na and Ding. Whilst identities are ethnically nuanced, they are nevertheless solidly Muslim.

Having outlined the contours of the Muslim community in China and discussed some of its features and diversities, we turn finally to three key contemporary issues that have an impact upon Muslim life, namely separatism, religious fundamentalism and terrorism which, in the Xinjiang context, are difficult to tease apart.

Contemporary Issues

The 1970s witnessed the advent of the term “Islamist”, one which became synonymous with the radical Muslim discourse. Islamists considered that the influence of the West had led to the disintegration and exploitation of Islamic cultures.¹⁵⁷ In response, Islamist ideology called for the resurrection of an Islamic state based on a strict interpretation of *sharia*. Jihad, understood as “holy war defined by specific circumstances”, accordingly demanded “the blood of the faithful in the defence of their faith”.¹⁵⁸ Since the 1980s a new generation of jihadists has increasingly been exhorted to self-purification through martyrdom. Reform is no longer a matter of moral rearmament but the strictures “of armed struggle”.¹⁵⁹

Jihadist training grounds are not limited to the *madrasahs* of the Middle East. International authorities, concerned at the globalisation of conflict, recognised the propensity of particular militant organisations for recruiting jihadists from the extremist *madrasahs* in countries often far removed from zones of conflict. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the newly autonomous Central Asian states were confronted with a formidable array of challenges not the least being Islamic fundamentalism. With extremes of poverty and wealth, the Islamist ideology had become firmly

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁵⁷ Kahlil Duran, *Children of Abraham: An introduction to Islam for Jews* (New Jersey: KTAV Publishing House, Inc, 2001), 51.

¹⁵⁸ M.J. Akbar, *The Shade of Swords* (London: Routledge, 2002), xv.

¹⁵⁹ Duran, 73.

entrenched, spawning a number of radical groups active in states contiguous with Chinese Turkestan, renamed Xinjiang in 1955.¹⁶⁰

For the Chinese authorities, the possibility that civil unrest or violent conflict might erupt in the far western reaches of the state was not a new prospect, sporadic outbreaks having occurred throughout the centuries.¹⁶¹ Neither were calls from separatist organisations for Xinjiang to secede from China to form an independent East Turkestan state, also new. Twice in the first half of the 20th century East Turkestan had been established, albeit comparatively fleetingly.¹⁶² The presence of militant Islamic organisations which have reportedly collaborated with the Taliban and al Qaeda, and who have declared their intent of establishing a “united Islamic nation”¹⁶³ and, from statements made since September 11, appear to have become more radicalised, has further heightened the concerned attention of the Chinese authorities. This vigilance was warranted by reports that Uyghur Islamists were not only being trained by their co-religionists in camps run by leading organisations across Central Asia, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Hizb-ut-Tahrir, but that Uyghur groups were mounting incursions into Xinjiang from bases in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁶⁴

The situation has been made more complex due to the presence of several of the world’s leading powers pursuing objectives which cause them to compete in some respects, and come together as allies in others.¹⁶⁵ Inasmuch as regional security remains a priority for the political elite, both internationally and in Central Asia sub-state actors work to undermine stability. With extremist groups promoting ethnic unrest in states lacking a strong, resilient leadership, both Russia and the United States maintain military bases in the area.¹⁶⁶ China for its part has signed bilateral agreements with the leaders of neighbouring states on “border security, military cooperation, and counterterrorism with provisions for joint law enforcement operations, police training, and intelligence sharing”.¹⁶⁷ The 21st century’s New Great Game has more players than that of the original of two centuries ago.

¹⁶⁰ Subodh Atal, “Central Asian Geopolitics and U.S. Policy in the Region: The Post–11 September Era,” *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 14:2 (2003): 95.

¹⁶¹ Detailed in the first section, above.

¹⁶² In 1933 and 1944, the local Uyghurs, Kazakhs and Kyrgyzs declared the Xinjiang region a “homeland free of Chinese influence”. The second attempt was more successful due in part to the departure from the province of the powerful warlord Sheng Shicai. However, the separatist state did not survive the arrival of the Communist troops in 1949, nor the fact that most of the leadership was killed in a mysterious plane crash en route to Beijing. See David Levinson and Karen Christensen (Eds), *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia: Volume 6* (New York: Berkshire Publishing, 2002), 470.

¹⁶³ Atal, 99.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 97, 99. Hizb-ut-Tahrir has been banned in several countries in the Middle East.

¹⁶⁵ Richard Weitz, “Averting a New Great Game in Central Asia,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 29:3 (2006): 156. Weitz states that Russia, China and the United States “compete for local allies, energy resources, and military advantage . . . [and form allies over] reducing terrorism and drug trafficking”. See Weitz, 163, for information on multi-lateral security measures adopted.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 157, 158.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 159.

Scholars question the purported level of Uyghur dissidence in Xinjiang, a debate fuelled by the fact that the Chinese government refuses to grant access to representatives of international human rights organisations. While Amnesty International began monitoring the situation in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in the early 1990s, reports of the harsh measures adopted by the authorities to suppress unrest in Xinjiang, including “arbitrary detention, unfair trials, torture and executions”¹⁶⁸ were obtained, in many instances, from Uyghur nationals living abroad.

The government also imposed a number of restrictions which directly inhibited the religious freedom of Muslims. Several mosques and independent religious schools perceived as a “focal point of anti-Chinese activity” were closed and control of Islamic clergy was increased.¹⁶⁹

Human rights organisations have expressed concern at the forcible return of asylum seekers and refugees to China from neighbouring countries. The International Principle of Non-Refoulement forms part of international treaties including the Refugee Convention and the Convention against Torture. This instrument states that “No State Party shall expel or return (‘refouler’) or extradite a person to another State where there are substantial grounds for believing that he would be in danger of being subjected to torture”.¹⁷⁰ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has regularly monitored the number of Uyghur nationals returned to Chinese security forces — very much against their will, and often done clandestinely.

The primacy the Chinese government has given to Islam, the religion of the Uyghurs, over other aspects of their identity is also debated. In 2004, James Millward stated that “episodes of resistance to rule from Beijing, while relatively common, have been discontinuous and characterized by a variety of ideologies, Islam being only one of them”.¹⁷¹ Throughout the centuries, there are few, if any, reports from the dynastic rulers objecting to Uyghur adherence to Islam. The presence of radical Muslim groups in Central Asia ready, willing and able to provide assistance to separatist Uyghur groups has escalated the Islamic threat to prominence in the contemporary era. Independent self-rule for the people of Xinjiang, or East Turkestan as the various secession movements would prefer, is a concept the Chinese authorities cannot countenance in the belief that it would set a precedent for others to follow.

Details of civil unrest, whether generated by university students, separatist groups or religious fanatics, are difficult to accurately ascertain. As previously mentioned, not only does the Chinese government deny entry to human rights organisations, media freedom is constrained by a range of organisations, the most powerful being the Communist Party’s Central Propaganda Department (CPD) which “gives media directives restricting

¹⁶⁸ “People’s Republic of China: Uighurs fleeing persecution as China wages its ‘war on terror’”, *Amnesty International*, 6 July 2004 <<http://web.amnesty.org/library/print/ENGASA170212004>>

¹⁶⁹ Levinson and Christensen, 469.

¹⁷⁰ See Amnesty International report.

¹⁷¹ Millward, 2.

coverage of politically sensitive topics — such as protests . . . which the CPD considers dangerous to state security and party control”.¹⁷²

Media censorship means that official reports, occasional foreign press releases or anecdotal accounts from the Uyghur diaspora are the major sources of conflict data. These sources confirm that sporadic outbreaks of violence, along with non-violent civil action, occurred through the 20th century and into the new millennium. The Chinese authorities claimed that from 1951–1981 “19 revolts and 194 cases of ‘counterrevolutionary’ separatist activities occurred”¹⁷³ — but no explanation of the terms “revolt” or “counterrevolutionary” were given. While student protest, both Han and non-Han, dominated the 1980s, an upsurge in ethnic conflict in the early 1990s, concomitant with the breakup of the Soviet Union, led the government to impose a number of strategies to curb the escalating tension.

In March 1996, the government issued a secret directive alerting authorities in western China of “illegal religious activities and foreign influence and infiltration into Xinjiang”.¹⁷⁴ The following month, the Shanghai Five was established with partner states signing a “mutual tension-reducing and security treaty”.¹⁷⁵ The government also implemented the Strike Hard (*yan da*) campaign targeted at reducing crime and quashing separatist sentiment. The campaign meant that greater scrutiny was given to the activities of Uyghur and other non-Han groups, particularly religious activities considered “illegal”.¹⁷⁶

In February 1997, two Uyghur religious students, or *talips*, in Yining City were arrested by local police as part of an ongoing programme.¹⁷⁷ Relations between the authorities and the community were already heightened due in part to the decision to proscribe the *mashrap*, traditionally Uyghur gatherings involving music. In this instance, elders had revived the concept as a means of instilling in young men the traditional ideals of Islamic conduct — through soccer tournaments.¹⁷⁸ Police response to large public demonstrations in protest was to use “dogs, tear gas, fire hoses, beatings and live ammunition”. Reports assert the arrest of “thousands of people, particularly those associated with Islam”. The repercussions of the violence continued for

¹⁷² Preeti Bhattacharji, Carin Zissis and Corinne Baldwin, “Media Censorship in China,” *Council on Foreign Relations*. 27 May 2010. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/11515/media_censorship_in_china.html#p2>

¹⁷³ Millward, 6.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 16. Chien-peng Chung notes that “all imams in mosques are state employees and graduates of a single state-run Islamic seminary in China” — see Chien-peng Chung, “Confronting Terrorism and Other Evils in China: All Quiet on the Western Front?,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 4:2 (2006): 80.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.* The original five states — China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan — were later joined by Uzbekistan.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.* Yining — the historical area of Ili where ancient battles were fought.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

several years through “trials, public sentencings, and executions of people allegedly involved”.¹⁷⁹

Post-September 11, the US-led “war on terror” legitimised the Chinese government’s continued repression within the Uyghur ethnic community. Whereas, in early September 2001, Xinjiang officials stated that the “society . . . [was] stable and people . . . [were] living and working in peace and contentment,”¹⁸⁰ the situation was reversed shortly after the attacks on the American homeland. Millward writes that what “had generally been described as a handful of separatists was now a full-blown “terrorist organisation”.¹⁸¹ China stood alongside the United States in the war against terrorism.

In January 2002, the Chinese government issued a comprehensive document, *East Turkistan Terrorist Forces Cannot Get Away with Impunity*, detailing terrorist activity in Xinjiang.¹⁸² This led the US government to consider “all groups espousing independence, even nonviolent ones to be terrorists”¹⁸³ placing them on the State Department’s terrorist watch list. The following year, the Chinese authorities released the names of organisations considered responsible for terrorist activity in Xinjiang. In addition to the more widely recognised groups, organisations with distinct Islamic nomenclature were listed: the East Turkistan Islamic Party of Allah, the Shock Brigade of the Islamic Reformist Party, the East Turkistan Islamic Party and the Islamic Holy Warriors.¹⁸⁴

It is difficult to gauge the success of the government’s consolidated grip on Xinjiang. The authorities assert conflict is lessening due to the initiatives introduced to mitigate poverty and lack of opportunity in the region.¹⁸⁵ Proponents for self-rule, with an associated Islamic overtone, contend that continued oppression of dissidents does little to nullify separatist aims.

Violent unrest continues. According to the Xinjiang Daily, in 2005 18,227 people were arrested “for endangering state security”.¹⁸⁶ In 2009, it is believed that approximately 200 individuals were killed in violence between Uyghur and Han Chinese, stoking fears of escalating inter-ethnic tension in Urumqi, Xinjiang’s capital city. And as recently as August 2010, bomb blasts killed a reported seven people while injuring twice as many, in Aksu, a city in north-western Xinjiang.¹⁸⁷

History has shown that violence, or the threat of physical harm, does not diminish the determination of the human spirit. The people of East Turkistan wish to be legally

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 27. The leading groups included were the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, the East Turkistan Liberation Organisation and the Uyghur Liberation Organisation.

¹⁸⁵ Chien-peng Chung, 79.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁸⁷ “Blast kills seven in China’s Xinjiang,” *BBC News Asia-Pacific*, 19 August 2010. <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-pacific-11021645>>

detached from Chinese control, much like their compatriots in the former Soviet Union. From the central government's perspective, the granting of independence to a region annexed through expansion centuries ago is untenable. The socio-political drivers for unity which underpin much of Chinese policy and response treats any and all hint of Muslim separatism as a direct threat to the sovereignty of China. To the Chinese psyche, the secession of Xinjiang would signal the end of the Middle Kingdom — an eventual implosion as other regions also chose self-rule freed from Beijing's authority.

Conclusion

Little in this world develops in isolation. As the master craftsman carefully places each tile to create an intricate and beautiful mosaic, so the stories of the “children of Abraham” form the mosaic of a community's life. Any study of China's history will reveal a past that is sometimes rich and at times extremely poor; at times glorious and at times quite inglorious. Islam, along with other faiths, has existed in China for many centuries, often under trying circumstances, through periods of relative stability, even advantage.

In this paper we have sketched a brief overview of China's political history focussing on the expanses far to the west of the dynastic centres of power — to the land where the ancient Silk Road crossed the Pamir Mountains. It is the sovereignty of this region which is disputed by the people of the land, the Uyghur, and the Chinese authorities in Beijing. The snapshot of the Muslim communities in China revealed that the contemporary challenges the groups face today have origins deep in the past. In the 21st century of the Common Era, the political and economic power of this most ancient of lands will ensure the country's historical mosaic will be further enriched and amongst those tiles added to the story will be those of the Ummah in China, once strangers in a foreign land.

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