A R Davis Memorial Lecture, 2007

China's Islamic Minorities: Contemporary Perspectives

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Thank you for inviting me to give the 2007 A R Davis Memorial Lecture. Although I did not do my Asian Studies degree at the University of Sydney, I knew and admired both him and his work and am honoured to contribute to the celebration of his legacy.

In this talk I aim to present some factual material relevant to the Muslims in China, especially concerning population matters. I also take up some major political and social issues involving the Muslim population of China, including the relevance of the September 11 incidents. I will also attempt to explain the importance of the Muslim population in China. This lecture focuses its main attention on the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In the context of China, however, it is not sensible to ignore the past altogether, which means that there will also be some brief historical coverage.

The Chinese state classifies all its citizens into fifty-six nationalities (minzu), according to a definition based closely on the one Stalin adopted in 1913. A nationality, states this definition, is a historically constituted community of people, having a common language, a common territory, a common economic life and a common culture. From 1953 to 1957 the newly established People's Republic of China (PRC) sent out social scientists and others to determine who belonged to which ethnic group, as well as the size and number of all these groups, establishing fifty-five. In 1979 a further one was added, which meant that the state had determined there were fifty-six ethnic groups, including the majority Han and
fifty-five ethnic minorities. According to China’s 2000 census, the ethnic minorities were 8.41 per cent of the total population of China, or about 106 million people. Among the fifty-five, ten are classified as Muslim, namely the Hui, Uygurs, Kazaks, Kirgiz, Uzbeks, Tatars, Salars, Bonans, Dongxiang and Tajiks.¹ Altogether these ten had a total population of 20,320,580 in the year 2000.² Almost all Muslims in China are Sunni, not Shi’ite.

There have been Muslims in China since the early Tang dynasty (618–907), with Arab merchants and sailors, as well as Persian traders, bringing Sunni Islam there not long after Mohammed founded the religion.³ The conversion of the Turkic peoples to Islam began with Satuk Bughra Khan (d. c. 955), the ruler of a state modern history knows as the Karakhanids (c. 840–1211), in the Kashgar region in what is now southwest Xinjiang. Muslims became acculturated with the Han majority from the time of Mongol rule onwards through intermarriage and in other ways. Though clashes between Sinic Muslims and the Han majority were frequent, the Muslims also contributed extensively to Chinese culture in a range of ways. Islam strengthened in the Turkic areas of what is now Xinjiang after Mongol rule collapsed, and a process of conquest by the Manchu Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) had brought Xinjiang under Manchu/Chinese imperial rule by 1759.⁴

As a political party espousing Marxism–Leninism, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is hostile to religion in all its forms. Yet PRC policy towards religion is more balanced that this hostility might suggest. As Human Rights Watch states: ‘The essence of current CCP policy is to tolerate religious beliefs and practices that do not threaten the Party or state but to closely regulate and, where it is deemed

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¹ See, for example, Michael Dillon, China’s Muslims (Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 5–14.
necessary, aggressively repress beliefs and practices perceived as a threat.’\(^5\) All four Constitutions, those of 1954, 1975, 1978 and 1982, state that all Chinese citizens enjoy ‘freedom to believe in religion and freedom not to believe in religion and to propagate atheism’.\(^6\)

As implied in the Human Rights Watch quotation, this freedom survives only within strictly defined parameters. When the CCP came to power, it set up its own bodies to regulate those beliefs classified as religion, including Islam, Buddhism and Protestant Christianity and Catholicism. It also stripped all religious bodies of their estates, and these were often very large, especially in the case of Buddhism. Freedom of religion does not include the right to propagate religion, and though religious schools do exist in China the government exercises substantial surveillance over them, notably in the case of the Islamic schools.\(^7\) Most important of all, any religious activity that is likely to threaten the state is forbidden, with the state itself making the ultimate decision on what constitutes a threat. As far as the ethnic minorities are concerned, the most serious and publicised of these bans is on the use of religion for separatist purposes, especially Buddhism in Tibet and Islam in Xinjiang.

In policy terms, Islam is special among religions in two ways. One is that all Muslims are counted among ethnic minorities for the very reason that they belong to that religion. It is in theory not possible to be both Muslim and Han at the same time. This is not the case for any other religion.

The second is that, especially since the September 11 incidents of 2001, Muslims are more likely to be castigated as terrorists than are any other religious believers, especially those that show any inclination at all to secede from China. In fairness I should add that

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6. This is actually Article 28 of the 1975 Constitution, which is quoted here because it is the least liberal of the four constitutions. See *Peking Review*, 18, No. 4 (24 January 1975), 17. For a highly scholarly, nuanced and thickly documented treatment of religious policy and practice in China see Pitman B Potter, ‘Belief in Control: Regulation of Religion in China’, *The China Quarterly, Special Issue: Religion in China Today*, No. 174 (June 2003), 317–37.

7. On Islamic education see Elisabeth Allès, ‘Muslim Religious Education in China’, *China Perspectives*, No. 45 (February 2003), 21–9.
this perception of association of Islam with terrorism is far from confined to China.

Islam in China is an important topic for the following reasons:

- Islam is an important and influential religion worldwide. Though Chinese Islam is less researched than that in other countries, Muslim influence extends to China.
- The Muslims of China are diverse culturally and ethnically, even though bound together by a strong religion. Some are culturally and ethnically extremely different from the dominant Han Chinese.
- China’s Muslims have an important history that bears on China as a whole, even including issues relating to China’s territorial extent and sovereignty.
- As a strong monotheistic religion in a generally inimical state, Islam has raised and continues to raise important policy issues, including those relating to terrorism and separatism.

**Ethnicity and Islam**

Under the PRC there is a system of autonomy for ethnic minorities, the notion being defined in China’s constitutions, in greatest detail in that of December 1982, and especially in the *Nationalities Law* of May 1984. The idea guarantees ethnic minorities certain rights, such as to use their own languages and develop their own culture. Politically, it states that in the ethnic autonomous places the government head must belong to the ethnic group that exercises autonomy. Under this system there are five provincial-level autonomous regions (AR), those being the Inner Mongolian, the Guangxi Zhuang, the Xinjiang Uygur, the Ningxia Hui and the Tibet ARs. There are also a range of autonomous prefectures and counties. These autonomous places may adopt their own laws, but these are subject to approval by the National People’s Congress. It is important to note that the system of autonomy does not extend to the CCP. This makes it possible for the CCP secretary in an autonomous place to be Han, rather than belonging to an ethnic minority. The fact that it is the CCP that holds real power in China, rather than the government, is a very important restriction on the effectiveness of the autonomy system in China.

In China, Muslims are included among the fifty-five ethnic minorities. Authorities regard all members of the Islamic ethnic
groups as believers in Islam. According to my personal observations, the great majority of the members of the Islamic ethnic groups do in fact adhere to Islam, although some only in a very general way.\textsuperscript{8} However, there are non-Muslim communities even among the Islamic nationalities, though numbers are very difficult to specify. Probably the total number of Muslims in 2000 was slightly but not much less than the 20,320,580 souls in the ten Islamic nationalities, in round figures a bit under 20 million.

Hui is the name given to those Muslims who are culturally similar to the majority Han Chinese, except for their religion. The Hui numbered 9,816,805 in the 2000 census. They are distributed all over China, although there are greater concentrations in the northwest of the country, including Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai and especially the Ningxia AR. There are also significant numbers of Hui in Yunnan Province.

A good number of China’s Muslims belong to Turkic ethnic groups, with the main concentrations living in Xinjiang. The two most populous of these Turkic ethnic groups are the Uygurs, whose main home is central and southern Xinjiang, their population in the 2000 census being 8,399,393, and the Kazaks of northern Xinjiang, whose population in the same census was 1,250,458. Other Turkic groups, all living dominantly in Xinjiang, are the Kyrgyz, most living near the border with Kyrgyzstan, the Uzbeks, who are culturally and linguistically very close to the Uygurs, and the Tartars. The Tajiks are unique in China in speaking an Iranian language. Their population is only 41,028, most of whom live in Xinjiang near the border with Tajikistan. Although mostly Sunni, there are a few Shi’ite Tajiks.\textsuperscript{9}

Near Linxia in southern Gansu is a community of three ethnic groups classified as Muslim. They are the Dongxiang (which means literally ‘eastern villages’, that is east of Linxia), the Salars and the Bonans. The most populous of the three are the Dongxiang, who had 513,805 members according to the 2000 census and are culturally and

\textsuperscript{8} See Dru C Gladney, \textit{Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People’s Republic} (Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1991), p. 262, where Gladney discusses an interview he held in a Fujian household claiming Hui ethnicity on the grounds of ancestry, even though they ignored Islamic dietary restrictions and their family had ‘not practiced Islam nor attended the mosque for generations’.

\textsuperscript{9} Dillon, \textit{China’s Muslims}, p. 13.
linguistically close to the Mongolians. The Bonans (2000 census population 16,505) are closer to the Tibetans. Indeed, most migrated to their present location from Tongren in Qinghai because conversion to Islam caused frictions with Tibetan neighbours, and there is still a small Buddhist Bonan community in Tongren. Another very striking feature of Bonan Islam is that some are Sunni, others Shi‘ite.\textsuperscript{10} The Salars are said to have migrated to the Linxia area from Samarkand in the fourteenth century. To this day they are reputed to be more Central Asian in culture than most of China’s ethnic minorities and to be dedicated to their religion. One writer claims that ‘Today, the Salars are by far the most devout of China’s Muslim minorities’.\textsuperscript{11}

The acceleration of internationalisation and globalisation has ensured that ethnic divisions are even more complicated in the modern age than in earlier periods. One can readily find exceptions to the general classifications offered above. One that I find very interesting is the Muslims of Lhasa. The 1990 census found 2,434 Hui people in a total population of 375,985, the great majority Tibetan, but also with 44,945 Han.\textsuperscript{12} What is striking is that the census had no entry for the culturally Tibetan Bonans. Although some of the 2,434 Hui were no doubt Han culturally, I was informed during a visit to the Lhasa mosque in 1985 that many were Muslim Tibetans counted as Hui.

Because this article is about the Muslims of China, I have focused entirely on Muslim ethnicity within China. However, I should at least mention a totally different way of looking at the issue: the Muslims of China as part of the Islamic world. According to John Obert Voll, ‘The line of traditional Muslim analysis of the minority situation ...


makes the basic assumption of the undesirability of being a part of a minority in a non-Muslim land."\textsuperscript{13} Voll claims that the ‘standard Muslim position’ regards the ability of Muslim minorities to worship God freely as sharply constricted in all non-Muslim countries, especially one ruled by a Communist Party. According to this theory, Muslims would have to either leave their country of residence or rebel against the state.

A contemporary expression of a view relevant to the idea of Chinese Muslims as part of the worldwide Islamic community that promotes hostility or even a potential threat to China comes from the scholar Raphael Israeli. Referring to the period of the People’s Republic, especially the reform period since 1978, he writes:

Despite Chinese attempts to differentiate within the Muslim community in China between the Hui of China proper, the Uighurs [Uygurs] of Xinjiang, and the other Turkic minorities of Central Asia—Uzbek, Kirghiz, and Kazakh—a general sentiment of Islamic brotherhood potentially if not practically unites all those splinters into one social and cultural group. Under certain circumstances this group may seek political expression as well.\textsuperscript{14}

Throughout history, and still today, there are Muslims in China who have left or wish to leave and quite a few who have rebelled against the state. However, as Voll recognises, the case of China is one that makes what he claims as the traditional Islamic position impossible to sustain. In the big picture, rebels or those who leave are but a small minority.\textsuperscript{15} The state has set up its own Islamic organisation, which has support from the great majority of Muslims, although not all of them.\textsuperscript{16} Concerning Muslim brotherhood, Israeli credits the Chinese state’s ‘divide-and-rule policy’ for preventing a major threat.\textsuperscript{17} My own view is that relations among the Islamic ethnic groups are not

\textsuperscript{15} Jonathan Lipman writes in his excellent book on Hui history (\textit{Familiar Strangers}, p. 220) that ‘violence is no more natural to the Muslims of northwest China than it is to other people’.
\textsuperscript{16} Voll, ‘Soviet Central Asia and China’, p. 145.
\textsuperscript{17} Israeli, \textit{Islam in China}, p. 242.
nearly positive or stable enough to allow any Muslim brotherhood, even without a divide-and-rule policy. There will be more to say about relations below.

One might note, also, that significant Muslim minorities are quite common in the world of the twentieth and twenty-first century, including in the industrial democracies like France, Germany and Britain. Though there have been Islamist terrorist incidents, the great majority of Muslims in such countries are not rebelling against the state nor wishing to leave to live in Islamic countries. On the contrary, most are either immigrants or the descendants of immigrants.\(^{18}\)

In other words, the concept of a ‘Muslim minority’, a group of Muslims living in a non-Muslim country, is a commonly implemented one in the modern world. There is no fundamental contradiction between practising Islam and living in a non-Muslim country, even China.

**The Hui as a Muslim Ethnic Group**

The people called Hui are worthy of additional coverage here, for several reasons. They exemplify some of the major issues associated with Islam in China. They are the most populous of those ethnic groups identified as being Muslim and have accepted Islam for the longest period. Almost all speak Chinese as their background language, a major symbol of their attachment to Chinese culture. Over the centuries and continuing to this day they have contributed extensively to China and its culture. One important example illustrates the point. The genre of traditional theatre called *jingju* (a term often translated as Peking Opera) is quintessentially Chinese and a perfect example of an art form generally associated with the Chinese people. The Hui have been active on the *jingju* stage and Ma Lianliang (1901–1966) is but one among quite a few Hui famous actors.

An interesting and important issue regarding the Hui, one with many ramifications, is how integrated they are into Chinese society. Although there are many Muslims in China, there are aspects of Islam that appear quite inimical to Chinese tradition and society. In terms of

\(^{18}\) See David Westerlund and Ingvar Svanberg (eds), *Islam Outside the Arab World* (London: Curzon, 1999).
belief, the firm belief in one God that is at the heart of Islam does not sit well with traditional Chinese polytheism, let alone with atheistic Marxism–Leninism. As far as practice is concerned, pork is traditionally the most favoured of non-poultry meats among the Han, yet Muslims regard it with revulsion.

There is in contemporary scholarly literature on Islam in China a range of opinion on Muslim integration into Chinese society. I would like to highlight four views in a spectrum.

At one end is Israeli, who includes the Hui in a deep-seated Muslim hostility to the Chinese and the Chinese state. He perceives a profound and general ‘yearning’ among Muslims in China ‘to see their identity merging into that of the greater Islamic powers-to-be’.

At the other end of the spectrum are scholars like Jonathan Lipman, who describes the Hui as ‘unequivocally Chinese’ and is at pains to present them as citizens of China who have become ‘normal and familiar’ in the Chinese context.

Between these two I might locate Dru Gladney and Zang Xiaowei. Gladney was a pioneering scholar in the study of the Hui after the reform period led to the opening of China’s doors to Western scholars, allowing detailed field study for anthropologists. In the first of several books relevant to this paper he coined the term ‘ethnic nationalism’ to apply to the Hui and proposed a revived identity for them so that, ‘through interacting with changing social contexts and state policy [the Hui] now very much see themselves as a bona fide ethnic group’.

Zang Xiaowei considers that these approaches to the study of the Hui put undue weight either on the similarities or the differences between Han and Hui, terms the former approach ‘assimilation’ and the latter ‘pluralism’. He proposes that this might be a false dichotomy and, through exhaustive quantitative research in the urban society of the Gansu capital Lanzhou in 2001, argues that both similarities and differences might exist in the same person at the same time. One person might report ‘a very high level of ethnic

22. Gladney, Muslim Chinese, p. 323.
consciousness', being at the same time 'well integrated into mainstream society'. He calls this approach 'pluralist assimilation'.

Personally, I see merit in all of these approaches and have learnt from all four. Zang's quantitative approach is convincing because it subjects social enquiry to rigorous measurements, but has the weakness that it takes only urban life into account, leaving aside the countryside, where more people still live and where the homogenising processes of modernisation are still much less developed. Gladney's research takes far more regions into account than does either Lipman's or Zang's, while Lipman's focus is more historical than contemporary. Israeli's approach puts much more emphasis on conflict than do any of the other three, and also much more than my own research. I would add a personal impression that confirms Gladney's research, which is that there is great diversity among the Hui, especially in rural areas, with the devotion to Islam far from consistent in all Hui communities.

An interesting question with some relation to the assimilation versus pluralism debate is the extent to which it is possible to see ethnic minorities as more traditional than majorities in their thinking and practice. Are the Hui more traditional than the Han because they are an identifiable ethnic minority and believers in Islam? The contradiction between modern and traditional behaviour is defined in terms of concepts like individual versus communal, and cosmopolitan versus parochial. His quantitative research in one city suggests that they are in some respects, not in others. He also finds that such a claim is unsustainable across the board and that 'social status is a better explanatory variable of ethnic behavior in urban China' than either culture or tradition.

One interesting facet of this discussion is the rise of consumerism among urban Hui. Research carried out in the mid-1990s among the Hui people of the Shaanxi capital Xi'an suggests that part of the major impact modernisation had created on the people was a rise in consumerism and a change in consumption patterns. The region's Hui are much in favour of modernisation, which they believe fully in line

25. Ibid., p. 145.
with the *Qu’ran, both* the reform policies of the Chinese government and Muslim practices from Arabia exercising significant impact.\(^{26}\)

The findings quite explicitly *include* traditional as well as modern influences. In this context I find it very interesting that the Hui claim a long-standing tradition of expertise in commerce.\(^{27}\) To this day, according to Dru Gladney, ‘Hui are known in every small town in China for certain ethnic specializations: butchering beef and lamb, tanning leather, cobbling shoes, running small restaurants, processing wool, and carving stones and jewelry.’\(^{28}\) Perhaps the rise of consumerism is as much an issue of continuity as it is of influences from the reforms or from Arabia and Islam, and the tradition itself may be in part attributed to Islam.

**The Uygurs and Xinjiang**

In a book published in 2007, Xinjiang has been dubbed the ‘Eurasian crossroads’.\(^{29}\) For the last few centuries, Xinjiang has been subject to cultural and political pulls both from China and from Central Asia. This has influenced the Islam of the region, as it has most aspects of its development. Although the Uygurs are far from being the only Muslims in Xinjiang, it is their ethnic and religious identity that has dominated the recent history of Islam there.

The name Xinjiang is Chinese and means ‘new territory’ or ‘new frontier’. It dates from the eighteenth century, but became the formal name of China’s most north-western political unit in 1884, when Xinjiang Province was established. The term Uygur applied in Chinese sources (Huihe then Huihu) to a people that dominated what is now Mongolia over the century 744 to 840 and then migrated west, setting up or being part of other states. The term Uygur went out of use, and had disappeared completely by about the middle of the


\(^{27}\) See, for example, Lai Cunli, *Huizu shangye shi* (Beijing: Zhongguo shangye chubanshe, 1988).


fifteenth century. It was not until 1921 that a meeting in Tashkent revived the name for use in the new Soviet Union; and in the mid-1930s the Xinjiang government headed by the pro-Soviet Han Sheng Shicai formally adopted the name to apply to the settled Turks of the region.  

30 Only in modern times did the term have any connection with any Islamic identity. According to Gladney, Islam has now become ‘a fundamental aspect’ of Uygur identity, but not the only one, ‘attachment to land and language’ also being crucial.  

31 The PRC recognised the Uygurs as an ethnic group from the beginning and consolidated the identity of the people called Uygurs when it set up the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in 1955. At the same time, they sent many Han to Xinjiang to promote economic development and China’s national security.  

32 This policy had the effect of strengthening Chinese control in Xinjiang and, although the CCP leadership continued to complain about ‘local nationalism’, in fact separatism was not particularly strong during the early decades of CCP rule. Initially, Islam was tolerated, as long as it did not threaten the state, but the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976 saw persecution that was probably fiercer than at any other time in Xinjiang’s history.  

33 The period of reform from the end of 1978 brought a much more liberal policy towards Islam and Uygur identity. To the Chinese government’s dismay, it also brought a new hostility and even rebellion and separatism. Rudelson, who carried out field research in Xinjiang in the late 1980s, comments: ‘The majority of Uyghur intellectuals consider China’s liberalization of religious policy, which has fostered positive feelings among the Uyghur peasantry toward the Chinese government, detrimental to the future of the Uyghur people’, because it undermines a sense of struggle.  


33. Rudelson, Oasis Identities, p. 122.
However, it was Islamic radicals who caused the main problem for China. In 1990, a Uyghur-led jihadist rebellion broke out in south-western Xinjiang that aimed to set up an independent republic separate from China. Although quickly suppressed, it led on to a whole series of violent anti-Chinese incidents, the most serious probably being early in 1997 in Yining in the north-west, a city the Uygurs know as Gulja. Although the Chinese authorities permitted the open practice of Islam, they clamped down severely on any use of it against Chinese rule. This actually gave rise to further resistance, such as had not been seen in Xinjiang under the PRC; sparking even worse retaliation from the powerful Chinese state.\(^{34}\) Although Tibet continued to gain much more notice outside China, in fact secessionism and hatred of Chinese rule were more serious problems for the Chinese leadership in Xinjiang than anywhere else in the country.

Meanwhile, the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991 had created a new situation in Central Asia, which the Chinese used skilfully to stifle secessionism. In 1996, the presidents of China and four of the republics of the old Soviet Union—Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—began a series of meetings that aimed to discuss and solve mutual problems, among them separatism and Islamic extremism. In June 2001, these meetings resulted in the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a body that has so far tended to expand both in influence and size.

The September 11 incidents and the succeeding ‘war on terror’ gave the Chinese government the excuse it wanted to crack down even more heavily on separatism and religious extremism it associated with Islamism. The Uygurs were the ethnic group to suffer most under this policy because, among China’s Muslims, it was they who had the strongest tradition of separatism. The other Muslim ethnic groups in Xinjiang, including the Hui and Kazaks, showed very little interest in separating from China and have been little affected,

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\(^{34}\) There is now a significant literature that encompasses Uyghur resistance and the general situation in Xinjiang in the 1990s. It includes several chapters and parts of chapters in Xinjiang, ed. Starr; Nicolas Becquelin, ‘Xinjiang in the Nineties’, The China Journal, No. 44 (July), 65–90; Michael Dillon, Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Far Northwest (London: Routledge, 2003); and Rémi Castets, ‘The Uyghurs in Xinjiang: The Malaise Grows’, China Perspectives, No. 49 (September–October 2003), 34–48.
with some Uygurs referring to the Hui disparagingly as ‘watermelons’, that is, green (Muslim) on the outside but red (communist) on the inside. In political terms, the number of serious disturbances has actually gone down in the twenty-first century. The only really serious reported event was on 5 January 2007 when, according to a spokeswoman for the Xinjiang Public Security Bureau, a gun battle took place near the Pakistan border at a camp run by the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, taking the lives of eighteen terrorists and one policeman, with armaments seized.

The Chinese government has consistently blamed for these separatist disturbances religious (Islamic) extremism and foreign interference, especially American. Others have called it, rather, resistance against Chinese repression of Islam and Uygur culture, exacerbated by the immigration of Han people to Xinjiang, marginalisation of Uygurs in terms of power and wealth, and growing inequalities. As Dru Gladney has written, ‘The vast majority of incidents apparently arise not from separatist sentiment but from more general forms of alienation’. Whatever the reasons, China’s response has been a carrot-and-stick approach. This means economic investment, especially through the Great Western Development Strategy, and zero tolerance for religious extremism, terrorism and separatism, as well as working with foreign governments, such as those of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, against any hint of secession. The Chinese government has also taken advantage of George W Bush’s ‘war on terror’ to gain American support for its crackdown on Islamist separatism. In August 2002, the United States froze all the assets of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement on the grounds that it was a terrorist organisation, the United Nations following shortly thereafter.

A complete treatment of Uygur separatism since 1990 is well outside the scope of this lecture. I offer brief comments on just two of the issues mentioned above as factors exacerbating resentment against China: Han immigration and ethnic minority political participation as expressed in membership of the CCP in Xinjiang.

There has been very extensive Han immigration into Xinjiang under the CCP. In 1941, the Uygurs numbered nearly 2.984 million in a total population of 3.73 million, or 80 per cent, while the Han numbered only 326,000 or 5 per cent. The 1953 census had the Uygurs at 74.7 per cent, the Han rising slightly to 6 per cent, in a total population of 4.874 million. The proportion of Han to the total population of Xinjiang reached its height in 1978 when, with 5.13 million people, the Han were 41.6 per cent of the total population of 12.33 million. Between the 1990 and 2000 censuses, the Han proportion of the Xinjiang population rose by 3 per cent from 37.6, while the Uygur proportion fell by 2.3 per cent from 47.5. Table 1 shows the proportions of the four most populous of Xinjiang’s ethnic groups in the total population in 2000, 2002 and 2005.

Table 1
Xinjiang’s Four Most Populous Ethnic Groups by Proportion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnic group</th>
<th>2000 census</th>
<th>2002 census</th>
<th>2005 census</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uygurs</td>
<td>45.2%</td>
<td>45.62%</td>
<td>45.94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Han</td>
<td>40.6%</td>
<td>39.87%</td>
<td>39.58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kazak</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>7.00%</td>
<td>7.03%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hui</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>4.49%</td>
<td>4.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (absolute)</td>
<td>18,459,511</td>
<td>19,051,900</td>
<td>20,103,500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


40. See the figures for the 1990 census in Toops, ‘The Demography of Xinjiang’, p. 246.
What the figures suggest is that, under Mao Zedong, Han immigration into Xinjiang was intensive but declined in the 1980s. There was another push for immigration in the 1990s, but while it has continued in the twenty-first century it has slackened, with the Han proportion of the total population falling slightly, at least so far. It is important to note a major difference between immigration under Mao and later: in the earlier period it was entirely state driven, with participation in the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps the main reason, but in the reform period it has been largely voluntary. I suspect the extent of rotation has increased also; in other words, under Mao most Han were permanent settlers, whereas in the reform period many go to Xinjiang temporarily and then return to the east.

We turn next to the issue of ethnic CCP membership in Xinjiang. A few figures are available on this matter. Government Chairman Saifudin reported in autumn 1965 that there were over 220,000 CCP members in Xinjiang, of whom 48 per cent, or 106,000, belonged to minority nationalities.41 In 1997 the total CCP membership in Xinjiang was 958,000, of whom 358,000 (37.37 per cent) were members of ethnic minorities,42 while at the end of 2000 total CCP membership in Xinjiang had risen to 1,037,701, among whom 400,388 (38.58 per cent) were members of ethnic minorities.43 In other words, ethnic membership was somewhat higher in terms of proportion before the Cultural Revolution, but it was rising again slightly at the turn of the century.

In all cases, ethnic membership is somewhat below their proportion in the total population, so CCP membership is to some extent concentrated among Han people. It is true that there is a strong secular tradition among the Uygurs and Rudelson goes so far as to say that the majority of intellectuals ‘are indifferent to the religious faith and are opposed to conservative Islam’.44 Nevertheless, it is hardly surprising that ethnic membership of the CCP is comparatively low,

44. Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, p. 137.
because the great majority of non-Han people in Xinjiang are Muslims; and, since belief in one God is central to Islam and the CCP is explicitly atheist, most minorities do not willingly join the CCP or are not accepted by the CCP as members. There is also the factor of power and prestige, which often goes together with CCP membership. It is likely that Han people are more trusted politically than are Muslims, especially Uyghurs.

It has been my strong impression that a few Muslims do join the CCP to show loyalty to the Chinese state, but may not see any particular contradiction, because membership of the CCP facilitates working both for China and for one’s own ethnic group, but ethnic identity of such groups as the Hui and Uyghurs necessitates being Muslim. I have heard Uyghurs say: ‘If you are not Muslim, you are hardly Uyghur.’ I also have friends who are willing to say: ‘When you are at the Party meeting, you believe in Marxism–Leninism–Mao Zedong Thought–Deng Xiaoping Theory, but when at home you are more likely to believe in Islam.’ CCP members who were Uyghur or another Islamic minority would never hesitate to take part in religious activities that were part of social functions, such as wedding or funerals. However, in 2000 new rules were introduced making religious belief more difficult for CCP members in Xinjiang and imposing sanctions against participation in religious activities.\footnote{45. Human Rights Watch, ‘Devastating Blows’, 32–3.} Although such rules are actually aimed more against separatism than against Islam, they do have the effect of making it more difficult for Muslims in Xinjiang to belong to the CCP.

**Brief Comments on Interethnic Relations**

Here I make no attempt to cover the various permutations of relations between the Han on the one hand and the Islamic ethnic groups on the other, or among the Muslim groups. I later expand slightly on the general issues of interethnic relations by considering intermarriage, but here highlight a few points, which deal mainly with trends in relations. They are in general based on survey and impressional material, as well as interpretations of political and social events and trends.
The late 1980s and 1990s were a period of considerable tension in Chinese Islam. In 1989, a series of large-scale demonstrations took place in protest against the publication of a book entitled Xing fengsu (Sexual customs), one section in which likened the structure of a mosque to male genitalia, with a small number of other negative sexual references to Muslim practices. 46 In 1993, protest demonstrations again broke out over the publication, in Sichuan Province, of a Taiwanese comic book, a part of which showed Muslims praying near a pig. In both cases, the government intervened on the side of the Muslims.47 Authorities banned both publications, burned 95,240 copies of Sexual Customs and fined the publisher (Shanghai chubanshe) out of business. The differing reactions of the government towards the Muslim protests and the student demonstrations occurring at the same time suggest the growing political impact of Islam. Perhaps more importantly, the government believed that, whereas the student demonstrations were a direct threat to the state, those of the Muslims were not. In any case, the government action probably assuaged Muslim antagonisms to some extent.

However, during the 1990s there were sharp differences between the Uygurs and the Hui in terms of relations with the Han, especially in Xinjiang, where relations between the Uygurs and the Han remained very tense indeed throughout the 1990s. A survey carried out in 2000 by a team led by Professor Herbert Yee of Hong Kong Baptist University found a low level of integration between the Uygurs and the Han in Xinjiang, strong identity feelings among the Uygurs, implying hostility towards the Han, and prejudice among cadres of each ethnic group towards those of the other.48 The political developments discussed earlier, including terrorist incidents by Uygurs and repression by the Han-dominated state, confirm the impression of tense interethnic relations. Research Joanne Smith has carried out in Xinjiang suggests inequalities as a primary reason for reduced and much less friendly interactions between Uygurs and Han.

46. Gladney, Muslim Chinese, pp. 1–6.
in the 1990s. She adds that the Uygurs trusted the Han newcomers much less than they did those of the first generation who came in the earlier decades. The reason is that the older generation of Han have taken more trouble to learn about Uygur culture, and even the Uygur language, than have the newcomers, who have the reputation for wanting to make a quick buck and get out.

The fact that the Hui of Xinjiang have no wish to separate from China, while secessionist feeling was quite strong among the Uygurs during the 1990s suggests quite poor relations between Uygur and Hui, even though both are Muslim. It is likely that in terms of trust and general attitudes, the many Hui feel closer to the Han than they do to the Uygurs. For their part, quite a few Uygurs see the Hui simply as a front for the Han, because they speak Chinese and are closer to the Chinese culturally than they are to the Turkic peoples.

Although interethnic relations do not change quickly, there are signs that as the 2000s have progressed, young Uygurs are less and less willing to support any struggle for independence. They may still not particularly like the Han, but believing these are in Xinjiang to stay and that independence has no prospects of early success, there is a necessity to at least get on with them. One researcher finds that ‘the strong political resistance of the former decade [the 1990s] has been gradually replaced, first by a forced acquiescence in the existing political order and then by an ideological re-orientation and pragmatic adaptation to that order’. The way he reaches this conclusion is by examining popular singers and youth reaction to them in the two decades. In the 1990s the most popular Uygur idol was Askar, whose songs are replete with resentment against the Han, calls to expel them from Xinjiang and strong dislike, even hatred, for the Han people and their culture. But by the 2000s Askar had declined in popularity and been replaced by a new pop idol called Arken, whose songs show contentment with the existing situation and positive attitudes towards the Han, with no hint of the kind of hostile message that drove Askar

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51. Ibid., 62–8.
not so long before.\textsuperscript{52} It is possible that political pressure has made Arken believe that singing songs about political resistance is simply not worth the risk involved. What is most interesting, however, is that surveys found that the non-political songs are genuinely popular among students, which was not the case in the 1990s.\textsuperscript{53}

Given the repression of Uygurs following September 11 and the continuing, even worsening, inequalities between the Han and Uygurs,\textsuperscript{54} one wonders why the tension should have begun to ease, at least in the cities. One possible reason is the improvement in the economy following the beginning of the Great Western Development Strategy in 2000. Another is that the prospects for the success of an independent East Turkestan now seem far more remote than they did in the 1990s and the sensible approach is therefore to make the best of a situation over which ordinary people have little control, and which could be much worse than it is anyway.

I add, finally, that in 2001 a survey was undertaken on neighbourhood interaction among Uygurs and Han in the Xinjiang capital Ürümqi. Interpreting the data, Zang Xiaowei ‘found no evidence that the inter-group differences in neighbourhood interaction are directly attributable’ to Uygur culture. He continues that ‘social status seems to be a better predictor of neighbouring behaviour’, at least in the context of Ürümqi.\textsuperscript{55} This would suggest that, in considering ethnic relations, it is necessary to consider variables other than culture, which includes religion. The fact that Uygurs in general still enjoy a lower social status than Han may affect relations more than do factors like religion.

\textbf{Interruption}

Interruption can be regarded as an indicator of integration between ethnic groups. A high rate may even show something about the state of relations, because it indicates ability to socialise among ethnic groups, tolerance of cultures and other factors.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid., 69–74.
\item Ibid., 74–8.
\item Mackerras, ‘Ethnicity in China’, 6–7.
\item Zang Xiaowei, ‘Minority Ethnicity, Social Status and Uyghur Community Involvement in Urban Xinjiang’, \textit{Asian Ethnicity}, 8, No. 1 (February 2007), 39.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
Intermarriage between Muslim ethnic groups and Han is generally very rare. A major reason for this is that Islam frowns strongly on marriage between a Muslim and a non-Muslim. Referring mainly to marriage between a Han man and a Muslim woman in China, one work has the following to say:

Many Muslims are worried that such a mixed marriage might make Muslim women forget their religious belief. Even when a Han nationality man is willing to convert to Islam, the relatives of the Muslim woman continue to create a great fuss, and she and her family easily become the target of criticism in the local Muslim community, sometimes the pressure being so unbearable that plans for the marriage are cancelled.\(^{56}\)

Concrete surveys confirm the general proposition that intermarriage between Muslim ethnic groups and the Han are rare. In Xinjiang, the 1990 census found that of a total of 3,348,900 families, only 1.06 per cent were mixed Han and minority, while 56.97 per cent were entirely minority and 41.97 per cent were entirely Han.\(^{57}\) In Xinjiang, Han appear to be more open to intermarriage than Uygurs. Herbert Yee’s survey found that, whereas 77.9 per cent of Han respondents were amenable to marriages between Uygurs and Han, the comparable figure for Uygurs was only 32.4 per cent. They found very few cases of intermarriage, putting the obstacles down to ‘religion, language, tradition and culture as well as mutual biases and distrust’.\(^{58}\)

A survey carried out in Lanzhou in 2001 of marriages contracted since 1949 found only 16 (0.92 per cent) of 1,745 marriages were between Han and Hui and, although the proportion was slightly greater for marriages dating from the 1980s and 1990s than in earlier decades, it remained extremely small.\(^{59}\) Gladney found that Han–Hui intermarriage in Beijing was very rare, though substantially higher in the south. For instance, he claims that among twenty Hui households he interviewed in Shanghai, ‘there was not one without a member of the extended family married to a Han’.\(^{60}\) So there are regional

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\(^{57}\) *Kua shiji de Zhongguo renkou. Xinjiang juan*, p. 307.

\(^{58}\) Yee, ‘Ethnic Relations in Xinjiang’, 437.


\(^{60}\) Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, p. 213.
variations, despite a generally very low overall incidence of intermarriage.

I may add that in Xinjiang impressional evidence suggested to me that marriage between Uygur and Kazak is also quite rare, even though both ethnic groups are Muslim. In 2003 I interviewed several Uygurs who stated flatly that they would never allow a child of theirs to marry a Kazak, adding that they regarded the Kazaks as backward culturally. I also interviewed Kazaks who expressed opposition, though with less vehemence. The sorts of obstacles to intermarriage Herbert Yee’s team found weigh heavily, even if religion is left aside.

**Conclusion**

Islam is still a political and social force in China. It appears to have benefited greatly from the general religious revival in China that has occurred since the 1980s. It is my impression that the revival persisted into the 1990s and may have stopped accelerating in the 2000s, but it is still far from spent.

The state tolerates this revival, as long as it poses no threat to the continuing power of the CCP or Chinese unity. In the case of Xinjiang, there are quite a few Uygurs who would welcome independence and a very small number prepared to undertake violent action to secure an independent East Turkestan Republic. The CCP adopts a zero tolerance towards such groups. Although this is directed against independence movements, not against individual ethnic groups or religions, many Uygurs and Muslims in fact feel targeted, especially because of the global ‘war on terror’.

Chinese Muslims are very diverse, in terms of ethnicity, culture, place of abode, history and religious practice. In general, they cannot be typecast as either more or less violent than anybody else, even though China shares a problem with many other countries in that many of its citizens have an image of Muslims as more generally violent than other citizens. Although there are some problems of inter-ethnic relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, and within Islamic ethnic minorities, in general people of different ethnic groups do work and live together in peace. Even in Xinjiang, which since 1990 has seen more incidents that any other province-level unit in

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61. See also Mackerras, ‘Ethnicity in China’, 11–12.
China, there is no danger of anything remotely resembling civil war, and any such threat seems to me to be receding rather than increasing at present.

Modernisation and globalisation are gradually bringing the Islamic groups closer to the rest of China and the rest of the world. The impact of the rest of China, of the West and of the Islamic world is strong or very strong, with some of these influences increasing. These modernisation and globalisation processes could impact badly on the cultures of the Islamic ethnic groups over the next decades. However, though some aspects of Muslim life could weaken as a result, I expect Islam as a religion to remain strong into the indefinite future.