

RB4011: The Religions of Asia

2019

Assessment Cover Sheet for the Critical Essay

Assessment Due Date: 9th January 2020

Please complete the following

I confirm that this assignment which I have submitted is all my own work and the source of any information or material I have used (including the internet) has been fully identified and properly acknowledged as required in the school guidelines I have received.

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Word Count	4,235 words

Critical analysis of the presence of Islam in China and the current plight of the Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang

Introduction

The central postulation made in this essay is that the current plight of the Uighur Muslims in the Xinjiang province of China is two-pronged in its cause. The first involves a deeply-rooted historical rejection, or at least suspicion, of any religion that is not Chinese in origin and secondly involves a concerted effort on behalf of the Chinese Communist Party to gain greater control over a people group whom it sees as representing a threat to its authority and dominance in the province of Xinjiang.

To justify the validity of this statement, this essay will be divided into three distinct parts; the first two parts will explore the historical background and present day context of Islam in China with the aim of clarifying the Chinese worldview on foreign religions and people groups. These will act as important contributions to culminate into the third part which will focus on the current occurrence of sinofication/sinicisation in the Xinjiang province (Ruwitch, 2018) to the detriment of the human rights, religious and cultural liberties, and the very existence of the Uighur Muslim ethnic group (Rahman, 2005). The essay will provide a historical context by explaining the timeline of the presence of Islam across different parts of China where it experienced the most activity and adherence. This particularly includes the southwestern ports where it was brought into the country by Arab traders as well as in the westernmost reaches as a result of being part of the outer edges of different Islamic empires that held territory across Central Asia.

The idea that China is suspicious of foreign people, foreign religions, and that the Communist Party considers any group with outside connections to a wider community (such as Christians or the Muslims) to be a threat to the stability of their rule is central to our discussion (NowThis World, 2016). However, we shouldn't mistake China as being alone in this kind of xenophobia for the evidence of this worldview is pertinent on the continent of Europe currently with significant undertones of its presence in the vote for Brexit in the United Kingdom (Rzepnikowska, 2018) as well as in the rise of the far right in continental Europe (Immerzeel & Muis, 2017; Lazaridis, 2016). Aversion to foreignness is therefore widespread, but it is the way in which an organisation deals with foreignness that is indicative of its approach to diversity and its respect for human rights.

The third and final part will act as the climax for the essay as a thorough analysis is conducted on the current affairs of the Communist Party in the Xinjiang province resulting in the plight of the Uighur Muslims. The processes involved in the sinofication of the province will be highlighted with the aim of understanding the range of reasons as to why the Communist Party may be acting in this way by drawing on the current Chinese economic and political landscape. The essay will close by considering the future of the Uighur Muslims and the intentions of the Communist Party for the entire Xinjiang province by analysing the most recent news escaping from the region and as a means to understand the distinction between Islam and Muslims.

History of Islam in China

Introduction of Islam to China

The introduction of Islam into China is evident from the early 7th century onwards, primarily due to the missionary efforts of Sa'd Ibn Abī Waqqās, one of the companions to the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Just six years after Muhammad's first revelation in 610 AD, Waqqās had already begun preaching in China and having left an important mark on the country, he later returned in 650 after Caliph 'Uthman had asked for him to be the head of an embassy to China (Gladney, 1987). The rapid expansion of Islam during and after the lifetime of its founder is most demonstrative of its swift introduction into the distant land of China, especially in comparison to Christianity whose own entry into China also occurred in the 7th century, but this was some 600 years after that religion's founding (Hammond, 2019).

Islam during the Imperial dynasties

Despite the fact that the Tang Dynasty Emperor Gaozong, at the time of Waqqās, received his envoy with grace (Khamouch, 2005), Islam was nevertheless a foreign religion. Its language was Arabic, its beliefs were relatively foreign to the humanistic Confucian society of China (Clydesdale, 2019), and the people introducing the religion were not of Chinese ethnicity. It is this "foreignness" that will continue to dominate the discussion surrounding the introduction of Islam into Chinese society and still to this day holds a significant impact on the success of religions in the country, perhaps more so than ever before (Cone, 2018).

Following on from the initial works of Waqqās, we can understand Islam's entrance into China having occurred on two fronts. The first was on China's South Coast where Islam appeared under the banner of mercantile interactions between the Arabs and Persians with the Chinese. Evidential of this interaction was the construction of China's first mosque in Guangzhou in 627AD (Steinhardt, 2008). Perhaps more important though is that the Arabs and Persians remained segregated from the Han Chinese majority whose interaction with the merchants remained strictly commercial with little interest of Islam demonstrated by the Han. This segregation early on in Islamic history is ironically reflective of the entire history of the religion in China as it has never gained significant popularity with the Han Chinese, unlike Christianity in more recent years (Dunch, 2001, p195-216; Financial Times, 2014).

Despite Islam's continued presence in China for near to 1,400 years, it would be inaccurate to interpret this as Islam holding significant influence in Chinese society, especially over the religious affairs of the Han Chinese majority. Notably, Islam is not part of the collection of religions known as the Three Teachings which include Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism (It's History, 2015; Teiser, 1996, p1-18) which demonstrates another example of Islam's relative foreignness. The segregation of Muslims from the Han was and still is indicative of the isolated presence of Islam in China and the distinct separation of all that is Islamic from all that is Chinese. However, if the cultural and religious influence of Muslims in China was stunted, the same cannot be said for their economic impact. Returning to the context of the Song Dynasty (960–1279), Muslims dominated foreign trade especially in the south and west of the country (BBC, 2002).

Meanwhile, the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) held a mixture of successes for the influence of Islam in China, one positive of which was that the city of Nanjing had become a centre of Islamic learning. Despite this, issues regarding the integration of Muslims into Chinese society reared themselves and it is during this period that we see one of the first instances of the sinification of Muslims (Caprioni, 2011). For example, Muslims in China became isolated from the rest of the Islamic world and began adopting Chinese language and dress. Islamic customs became integrated and maintained as part of a wider Chinese cultural framework, but in contrast to the affairs of the Uighur today, this sinification took place as part of a natural and arguably inevitable process of integration.

A conclusion that can be made about Islam's presence in China and perhaps that of any foreign religion is that for a non-Chinese religion to be successful in China, it is required to be sinicised before it can truly hold any influence in the country (Ishfaq, 2018). This process of sinification is

not evident just only in Islam, but in the context of Buddhism and Christianity's entrances into China; each have had to alter themselves over the course of centuries to allow for their comprehension by people with a distinctly Chinese and often Confucian worldview.

Islam During Communist Rule

The most pertinent period in Chinese history to give context to the plight of the Uighur Muslims today took place following the 1949 takeover of the Communist Party across China which dramatically changed and put largely into jeopardy the existence of organised religions in China as a result of the Cultural Revolution (Alles et al., 2003, p1-30). Examples of an organised effort to eliminate Islam and religion in general came with the proclamation that religions promote "anti-socialist trends". Following this anti-religion trend, mosques were defaced, destroyed or closed, and copies of the Quran were destroyed by the Red Guards (Israeli, 2002, p241-260).

However with the 1979 reforms, new legislation gave all minorities rights to freely practice their faith and to write and speak in their own languages, to develop their own culture and education and Chinese Muslims were permitted to participate in the Hajj (Goldman, 1986, p146-156). However, from this point onwards, a divergence emerged between the difference in the way that Hui Muslims were treated by the government in comparison to the Uighur Muslims (Beech, 2014). Hui Muslims still to this day have considerably more freedom than their Uighur counterparts, for example, Hui Muslims are allowed to have religious education for their children; Hui Muslim secondary school students also have the freedom to be taught religious education under an imam while Uighurs do not share this freedom (Brophy, 2016; p22-26, p204-210, p271-278).

There are five highlighted reasons for why these two Muslim ethnic groups are treated markedly different from one another. The first of which is that Uighur Muslims have an ethnic and linguistic connection to Turkey and although China maintains good relations with Turkey, a foreign government holding cultural connections to a Turkic ethnic group may be the cause of some concerns. Another point of contention may be the geography of the Uighurs in comparison to the Hui, of which the former are proximate to Muslim-majority countries in Central Asia while the latter are concentrated in the Ningxia, Gansu and Qinghai provinces (known as the Quran Belt) which are closer to the Han Chinese heartland.

Another geographical aspect is the strategic importance particular to the Xinjiang province, especially regarding the Belt and Road Initiative and the success of that initiative across Central

Asia and the wider world. Pivotal, Xinjiang is the largest Chinese province by land area and holds the most resources of oil and natural gas which distinguishes it from other regions and escalates its value to the Chinese government. This importance is further exemplified through the fact that Xinjiang acts as the bridge between China and the economies of Central Asia, Turkey, and Europe (Wang, 2016). There exists a longer tradition of political separatism of Uighurs from Chinese rule than there does amongst the Hui Muslims. Finally, there exists a significant movement to recreate the East Turkestan state as a deeply embedded campaign amongst many Uighurs as advocated for both internal and external organisations, some of which have been designated as terrorist organisations (Tschantret, 2018).

In conclusion, from considering the history of Islam in China, we can accurately deduce that Islam and its followers have experienced fluctuating levels of acceptance in the country. However, even with the tolerance and curiosity of dynastic emperors towards the early Muslims, Islam can be said to have always existed in distinct separation from the rest of Chinese culture and religious life. Regarding the evolution of religions in countries, they often enter as foreign entities, but over time they grow to become the dominant cultural force as is also indicative of the spread of Christianity in Pagan Europe. In the case of Islam in China, it has always existed as an outcast; a pariah in contrast to those religions of Chinese origin like Confucianism and Taoism; a religion with a presence in the country, yet remains separated, isolated and otherwise unfamiliar to Chinese society.

Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang

Introduction to the Uighur Muslims

Uighurs are a Turkic ethnic group that have resided in Central Asia as we know them today since 6th century AD during which time the Uyghur Khaganate formed the modern Uighur identity (Benson & Starr, 2004, p40-42). It was from the tenth century onwards that the Uighur population started to become Islamised, but it was not until the 16th century that Islam became the dominant religion of the ethnic group (Soucek & Soucek, 2000, p17). Following the Chinese Communist consolidation of power after the declaration of the People's Republic and the subsequent incorporation of Xinjiang as a province of China, the Uighur population and the Chinese government have experienced numerous clashes.

Examples of such tensions can be seen since the very founding of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in 1949 as declared by Mao Zedong. The then-Chairman of the Communist Party of China combined the northern region of Dzungaria which is dominated by a Han Chinese population with the southern region of East Turkestan into a single province. Since then, a separatist movement formed and continues to claim that China illegally occupies East Turkestan. It is these movements that continue to call for independence from the People's Republic of China, thus igniting the political instability that the Chinese government is attempting to stabilise albeit in ways that are contrary to human rights laws.

The Chinese government sees the religiosity of the Uighurs to be single-handedly igniting the wider political and social upheavals that the Xinjiang region is facing. The Communist Party calculates that if the religious fervour of the Uighur population is reduced through the de-centralisation of the role of Islam in society, that the main force driving the independence movement will have been eliminated thus creating a more "stabilised" Xinjiang (Weekes, 2018). To achieve such a goal, China's government has initiated a vigorous campaign focused on the re-education of the Uighurs and the de-Arabisation and de-Islamisation of the province.

In more recent times, religious education is highly restricted in Xinjiang and the Chinese authorities have sought to eradicate any religious school they consider 'illegal' (Armijo, 2006). This is another direct tactic used to decentralise the role of religion in the province and is a result of the Communist Party's conflation that the practice of Islam constitutes a separatist movement (Amijo, 2008). By 2002, Xinjiang University, originally a bilingual institution, had ceased offering courses in the Uyghur language (Armijo, 2018). The policy of the government is now that educational instruction should be given in Chinese in all possible situations (Dwyer, 2005; Grose, 2010).

Although the circumstances of the Uighurs is particularly astonishing, an important aspect to consider is the status and treatment of other religious groups in the country to provide wider context to religious freedoms in China. For example, China's Catholic population has been under close supervision of the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA) since 1957. The Catholic Church headquartered in Rome was quickly excluded from holding any operable role in the running of Mass, the appointing of bishops etc. Despite a Holy See-China agreement signed in 2018 now allowing the Pope to veto any bishop appointed by the CPCA, the government-funded demolition of two Marian shrines occurred later that year and reaffirmed China's hostility towards public religious expression (Gisotti, 2019).

This is a further demonstration, not only of a Chinese suspicion towards non-Chinese religions, but of the Communist Party's persistent campaign to firstly undermine the authority of religious organisations headquartered outside China. Secondly, to maintain loyalty of its citizens to the Party and its Communist ideology foremost and their particular culture and religion second.

Socioeconomic concerns

The circumstances for the Uighurs in Xinjiang must also be considered from a socio-economic perspective, namely involving the topics of poverty and lack of development in the province and the impacts of the socioeconomic situation. This demonstrates another dimension to the obvious divisions between Uighurs and the rest of China which likely fuels the political instability in the region. The most pertinent example of this is found in the lack of industrialisation and development in Southern Xinjiang (East Turkestan), which is where the Uighurs are concentrated. Examples of such a lack of infrastructure in the southern portion of the province include a lack of road and transport connections and the fewer job opportunities for residents (Attané & Guo, 2019).

As a direct consequences of these examples, the ruralisation of the Uighur labour force seems to have occurred, perhaps in an attempt to distance themselves from the city centres where government control is heightened. This distinct immobility of labour in Xinjiang has significantly stagnated the economic development that is able to take place, particular in Southern Xinjiang (Fischer, 2014, p. 29-34). By contrast in Northern Xinjiang, the government has installed greater transport connections to the provincial capital of Urumqi which stands as the principal link in these western reaches of China to the governmental headquarters in Beijing.

Wherever there exists socioeconomic unrest, political instability is likely to follow. With the lack of job prospects and with much of the Uighur labour force migrating to rural regions in an effort to evade the government, discontent is only set to rise amongst the Uighur youth. Thus, we see the formation of separatist political organisations and even the rise of terrorist groups bent on forcing Beijing out of Xinjiang.

Assimilation of the Uighurs

Uighurs practice a unique form of Islam, one that has largely developed in isolation from the rest of the Muslim world. Such religious practices largely unique to Uighur society include women performing cleansing rituals, commemorations integrated from Uighur culture, in addition to the

preparation of deceased women for burial by other women all while reciting the Quran and performing dhikr; these are known as būwi. Harris (2014, p. 293-300) explored the unique ethnomusicology that has developed amongst the Uighur and the importance provided to music to their unique practice and interpretation of Islam, one such example is that there is no call to prayer (adhan).

However, much of these practices and beliefs unique to Uighur Islam have, particularly in recent years, fallen into danger of extinction. Following years of internal social upheavals, this culminated in the 2009 Urumqi riots that panned several days and remains one of the largest demonstrations of Uighur opposition to the Chinese government since the Xinjiang conflict began. It was after these riots that a police state in Xinjiang began to form under guidance of the Chinese government whereby extensive controls and restrictions were put in place that significantly changed the religious, cultural, and social ways of life for all Uighur populations in the province. This police state was fully implemented by 2014 (Chan, 2018; Kuo, 2018; Zand, 2018).

If the world thought that the situation Xinjiang would not intensify beyond the extensive surveillance, the restriction of religious clothing, and the closing down of mosques, then the escalation of the situation in Xinjiang in 2017 would come to defy all expectations and would result in unprecedented levels of human rights violations (The Economist, 2019). A multitude of functions for the camps in Xinjiang exist. A significant function is the instillation of patriotism into the Uighurs as a tactic to include them within and to connect them to the Chinese national identity. Many Uighurs see Beijing's actions in Xinjiang as an invasion from a foreign power into the lands that Uighurs have settled for hundreds of years. Beijing's method is to instil patriotism in Uighurs so that they no longer see their society as separate from the Chinese society, but instead as part of China. Examples of such a patriotic instillation include getting Uighurs to sing hymns praising the Chinese Communist Party as part of a wider set of alterations to the religious, political, and cultural identity of all detainees (Sudworth, 2018).

A second function for the camps is to impose demographic change onto the Uighurs because the lengthy isolation periods forced upon Uighur men and women are no less than another tactic to inhibit Uyghur procreation in order to change the ethnic demographics of the province. Another less subtle measure is the forced separation of children from parents so as to severely limit the influence parents can have over the way their children are raised and educated (ITV News, 2018). Furthermore, the use of researchers and companies in DNA technology to help track down Uighurs who are resisting the re-education camps has been reported which demonstrates Beijing's

determination to achieve its goals of the cultural assimilation of the Uighurs into Chinese society (BBC, 2019). One website has even gone as far to say that Beijing's actions in Xinjiang is a form of cultural genocide (Cronin-Furman, 2018).

The Sinofication of Xinjiang

Sinofication, or sinicisation, is the process of making non-Chinese societies more Chinese in their characteristics, namely impacting on culture, language, religion, politics and law, ethnicity, as well as on diet and education (Israeli, 2002, p113-132). The sinofication of a society therefore effects all aspects of that society and we are witnessing this process taking place currently in the Xinjiang province. Examples of this process include the changing the names of towns, signs and roads to Chinese-like names, removing non-Chinese script like Arabic from shop windows, placing Chinese flags throughout public spaces, as well as replacing traditional housing with high-rise apartment blocks synonymous with Chinese cities.

Like in all contemporary religious discussions, political motivations are often closely associated with the actions of governments. Tensions between the Uighurs and the Chinese government have existed for over one hundred years since the founding of the Republic of China in 1912. This raises the question of why China is only now robustly cracking down on the presence of Islam in its Xinjiang province.

The most probable answer can be found in Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative, a development strategy focused on re-establishing the trade routes of the traditional Silk Road. Alongside its maritime division which will stretch to Africa and Europe, the overland portion of the strategy will see significant usage of the far Western provinces of China. It is therefore not improbable that the Chinese government calculates that by strengthening its political and cultural control over the province, that the chances of the success of its strategy will significantly increase.

Xi Jinping has oriented his entire presidency on the success of this strategy as central to the future growth of the Chinese economy, hence the political and social independence movements festering in Xinjiang have been prioritised by the government to resolve even if this means violating the human rights and rights of religious freedom for millions of Muslims in the region (Harris, 2019).

One tactic that the Chinese government has used is the justification of its actions as counter-terrorism measures which is building on the already highly charged debate currently taking place

across Europe and North America. The Chinese government presents itself as protecting the people of Xinjiang from various terrorist organisations like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, both of which have shown support for the Uighur independence movement (Read & Walters, 2019).

Extremist parties like the Turkistan Islamic Party have only further justified the actions of the Chinese government by the numerous terrorist attacks that they have conducted since 1988. For example, the most recent attack attributed to this group was conducted on 14th February 2017 wherein knife-wielding attackers killed five civilians. However, like amongst some groups and governments in the Western world, the Chinese Communist Party has knowingly equated the terroristic actions of an extremist fringe with the entirety of the Muslim population as further justification for continuing its sinofication of the province (Finley, 2019, p1-26).

Conclusion

As the attention of the world increasingly closes in on the news reports and scrambled videos that are slowly escaping from out of the fog of Chinese censorship, our minds turn to the future of Islam and the future of Muslims themselves in China. From the most recent reports coming out of the several provinces in the country, the situation is seeing no signs of deceleration, but in fact, acceleration (Johnson, 2019).

Uighur Muslims are just one ethnic group affected by the recent actions of the Chinese government, but it seems that the attention of the government is turning towards other provinces such as Gansu and Ningxia where significant Muslim populations also reside (Duanjiaping, 2019). Evidence of this spreading of China's suppression of the Islamic faith is demonstrated by the increase in demolitions of mosques carried out in the provinces of Inner Mongolia, Henan, and Ningxia (Myers, 2019). Meanwhile, in the southwestern province of Yunnan, three mosques have been closed down in addition to a nationwide ban on public use of Arabic script has also been enforced in recent years. These examples demonstrate the Communist Party's expansion of its sinofication policy to a nationwide scale beyond the initial provincial level that has been demonstrated in Xinjiang (Shih, 2019).

To conclude, Islam itself will always exist in China because Islam is a set of beliefs and practices separate from those whom follow it. However, the same cannot be said of these ethnic minority groups whose not only religious but cultural and ancestral identity is undergoing a process of sinofication. If the Chinese Communist Party succeeds in their plans, this leaves the Uighur culture

and ethnic population vulnerable to being completely wiped out by the government. The Uighur population in China would become more Chinese and significantly less Uighur in their cultural and religious identity. As a result, the Uighur ethnic group may one day be something we only read about in our history books.

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