

Secularism with Chinese Characteristics: Xi Jinping's Sinicization of Islam in Xinjiang

Veena Ramachandran *

Abstract

China has a long history of Muslims, constituting 1.6 % of the total population. However, modern China has a complex relationship with the Uyghur Muslims, the ethnic Turks who inhabit the North-western Province of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The ethnoreligious complexity and indigeneity of Uyghur Muslims created a threat perception at the periphery. Consequently, the State employed wide-ranging strategies to assimilate or Sinicize the Uyghurs since the creation of the People's Republic of China. However, Sinicizing strategies such as the Western Development Program (WDP) alienated the Uyghurs rather than assimilated them. The Urumqi riot of 2009 exemplified the impact of such alienation.

The post-Urumqi riot scenario has impacted Xi Jinping's focus on Sinicizing foreign religions where Islam is prioritized. Xi Jinping emphasized providing Chinese orientation to religions and urged them to embrace secularism with Chinese

* Veena Ramachandran is an assistant professor at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Birla Institute of Technology and Science, Pilani, Pilani Campus, India. E-mail: veena.r@pilani.bits-pilani.ac.in.

characteristics. Consequently, the Chinese regime normalized the human rights violations of detained Uyghurs in the de-extremification camps in Xinjiang, calling it re-education or skill training. It intends to redefine the space of religion in general and Islamic faith and practices in specific. Based on this context, the article examines the conceptualization of secularism with Chinese characteristics and its impact on the Sinicization of Islam in China. The paper explores the Chinese State's design of social re-engineering of Uyghurs that enables the authorities to control the religiosity of the Uyghurs. The paper employs discourse analysis followed by descriptive and analytical methods. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part deals with conceptualizing secularization and its application in the Chinese context. The second part deals with the Sinicization of Islam in Xinjiang, which results in cultural genocide focusing on the Xi Jinping regime. The paper argues that secularism with Chinese characteristics is nothing but the new version of the old project of Sinicization. However, what differentiates it from the past is its implementation which is more institutional, coercive, and unapologetic with an organized effort of cultural genocide. The State initiated a social re-engineering program to depoliticize Uyghurs, and the de-extremification camps are one of the steps adopted in that direction. It is done by distinctively attributing representations of good and bad Muslims, thereby institutionalizing coercive strategies in Islam's adaptation to modern Chinese society and polity.

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Keywords: Uyghurs, Xinjiang, China, Secularism with Chinese Characteristics, Islam, Sinicization, Social Re-Engineering, Re-education Camps, De-politicization, Cultural Genocide.

I. Introduction

The People's Republic of China (PRC) officially recognizes 56 ethnic groups, including the Uyghurs of the Xinjiang region. Uyghurs are Turkic in origin and follow Islam. Chinese history is the most unsettled with the Uyghurs of Xinjiang, majorly because of their ethnoreligious complexity. The root cause of the problem is a complex mixture of history, ethnicity, and religion – fueled by the Uyghurs' social disparities and political grievances.¹ Since the 1990s, the fall of the Soviet Union, the formation of Central Asian states on principles of Islam, and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan have been a fresh impetus in the intensity of violence, riots, and brutal killings in Xinjiang, which threatened Beijing of seeping of Islamic Fundamentalism into its Muslim borderland.

The establishment of the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) by Hesen Messam in Kashgar, Xinjiang, in 1997 shaped the hitherto Chinese rhetoric on Islamic fundamentalism and ethnic Separatism, implying religious extremism and ethnicity as the foundation for violence, riots, and killings in Xinjiang. The Barren armed conflict of the 1990s² demonstrated Beijing's nervousness toward Islam as a source and vehicle of resistance.

¹ Elizabeth Van Wie Davis. "Uyghur Muslim ethnic separatism in Xinjiang, China," *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, 35, no. 1, (2008): 15-30. <https://doi.org/10.3200/AAFS.35.1.15-30>.

² The barren armed conflict of the 1990s resulted from Uyghur discontent and protests toward the mass immigration of Han Chinese into Xinjiang. However, reports on the incident identify varied reasons for the conflict.

Although the resistance is geographically focused based on ethnic unrest, the government mostly plays up a general Islamic terrorist threat in Xinjiang.

Fierce crackdown on dissent and closure of access to the Uyghurs of Central Asia provided a new impetus among some young Uyghurs to follow state-prescribed paths toward integration into the PRC's Han-dominant culture. It also resulted in a significant number of Uyghurs immersing themselves in Islam as a means of resistance to integration.³ On the pretext of these developments, Chinese authorities claimed Uyghur separatist movements backed by ETIM, not as an act of separatism but as part of a more extensive global terrorist network operating on its soil. In June 2001, during the first Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) submission, China floated three evil principles – Separatism, Extremism, and Terrorism – driving persistent instability in Xinjiang.

China lobbied hard to convince the United Nations and the United States to officially recognize the alleged threat posed to China and the world by at least one little-known Uyghur group,

³ Joanne N. Smith Finley. *The art of symbolic resistance: Uyghur identities and Uyghur-Han relations in contemporary Xinjiang*. Leiden: Brill, (2013):81-129.

the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)⁴. In September 2002, the United States Executive Order 13224⁵ and the United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1267 and 1390 recognized ETIM as a “terrorist organization,” subsequently subjecting it to international sanctions and essentially making it a legitimate enemy in the “Global War on Terror.”

Identifying Uyghur discontent as an offshoot of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism did shape the trajectory of Chinese management of the Xinjiang region ever since. The repressive policies of the Chinese State and their responses in the form of the Urumqi riot⁶ and Kunming attacks⁷ resulted in alienating the

⁴ Rohan Gunaratna, Arabinda Acharya, and Wang Pengxin. “Uighur Separatism: East Turkistan Groups,” in *Ethnic Identity and National Conflict in China*, Rohan Gunaratna, Arabinda Acharya, and Wang Pengxin, eds. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, (2010): 52.

⁵ Executive Order 13224 defines terrorism as an activity that—(i) involves a violent act or an act dangerous to human life, property, or infrastructure; and (ii) appears to be intended—(A) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (B) to influence the policy of a government by intimidation or coercion; or (C) to affect the conduct of a government by mass destruction, assassination, kidnapping, or hostage-taking.

⁶ The Urumqi (capital of XUAR) riot of 2009 was a decisive historical and political event that framed China’s course of action in Xinjiang in the post-2009 period. The Urumqi riot transformed the nature of ethnic violence from merely a law-and-order problem to inter-ethnic violence between the Han (migrants from inland China) and Uyghurs. This riot was an unprecedented inter-ethnic violence that shattered stability by fragmenting any minimal semblance of ethnic unity.

Uyghurs, further placing the blame on Islam. Moreover, the State framed multiple strategies to manage Islam in Xinjiang.

Under Xi Jinping, the Chinese State has adopted a comprehensive tactic in dealing with the ethnoreligious complexity in Xinjiang. In addition, the regime diversified and redefined the methods to tackle religion to regulate it within the permitted space. First, the State echoes having a Chinese version of secularism facilitating the germination of Islam with Chinese characteristics. Though Sinicization is not new in the Chinese socio-political milieu, the unapologetic control over religiosity leads to cultural genocide in Xinjiang is a recent pattern. In addition, the State initiates a stability-security paradigm to socially re-engineer the Uyghurs to de-politicize Uyghur Muslims. The objective is to secularize the Uyghurs in a Chinese way.

II. Secularization in Chinese Context

The theoretical literature on secularization is deeply rooted in the specific historical experience of the West. The word secular/religious has universal application, but they do not mean the same everywhere. Different civilizations have approached

⁷ Kunming attack was a horrifying knife attack at Kunming railway station in 2014. The Chinese government identified the Kunming attack as a Uyghur terrorist attack. It successfully spread excessive fear among the Han Chinese toward the Uyghurs, which later enabled the Chinese regime to justify the “Strike Hard” Campaign in Xinjiang, reaffirming the Uyghur issue as nothing but Islamic terrorism.

sacred and profane, transcendent and immanent, and secular and religious differences while drawing boundaries between them in different ways.⁸ Many non-Western societies witnessed religious revival as a natural component of modernization that questioned the notion that religious decline is a quasi-natural consequence. Following this pattern, Casanova argues that the historical process of secularization as it occurred in European Latin Christendom cannot be a universal norm. Instead, it could be treated as an exceptional process incapable of reproduction in other parts of the world with the same “sequential arrangement and with corresponding stadial consciousness.”⁹ Asian secularism, thus, offers a different experience where in some modern Asian secular states, despite the efforts to destroy all religions, they still have religious societies.

In the case of post-cold war China, the State had a superficial secular façade. However, it failed to successfully mask the deep inner spirit of religion as these religious spirits or religiosities were not a matter of personal choice. Nevertheless, it is associated with a collective ritual with a certain amount of social

⁸ Andrzej Bronk. “Secular, secularization, and secularism: A review article,” *Anthropos* *H*, no. 2, (2012): 578-583. <https://doi.org/10.5771/0257-9774-2012-2-578>.

⁹ José Casanova. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, (1994):64.

embeddedness.¹⁰ The position of religion in Chinese society is obscure as, traditionally, Chinese religions lack the structural prominence of organized religions. Even Max Weber describes Chinese religion as the chaotic mass of functional Gods. The problem is that the Chinese religions have been interpreted as per the pattern of the Christian World, where religion has an organizational setup that occupies a prominent structural role in the organizational scheme of Western society.¹¹ However, Chinese religions are diffused religions where rituals, concepts, and structures are diffused to perform an integral part of the social system.¹² The non-critical usage of Western frameworks to comprehend other societies focuses more on secularization as a historical project heeding zero attention to secularism as a historical project.

The concept of secularization is hardly applicable in the case of unorganized religions like Confucianism or Taoism because of its cosmological transcendence in Chinese or East Asian societies. Moreover, they are not considered as organized religions. Therefore, Euro-centric secularization must make more sense in

¹⁰ Richard Madsen. "Secular State and Religious Society in Mainland China and Taiwan," in *Social Scientific Studies of Religion in China: Methodology, theories, and findings*, Graeme Lang and Fenggang Yang, eds. Leiden: Brill, (2011): 273-96. <https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004182462.i-312.80>.

¹¹ Ching Kun Yang. *Religion in Chinese society: A study of contemporary social functions of religion and some of their historical factors*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, (1967).

¹² See Yang, *Religion in Chinese Society*.

the Chinese civilizational context. Naturally, Chinese society, from a Euro-centric religious perspective, is profoundly irreligious and secular. However, the State Administration of Religious Affairs oversees and monitors the five state-approved religions (Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism), which is quite the opposite of the Western conceptualization of secular, secularism, and secularization.

In the Sociology of religion, secularization has multiple definitions, and the dimension of that definition is bewildering.¹³ Phenomenologically secular is a modern category constructing, codifying, and experiencing a realm of reality differentiated from religious. Different types of secularities exist based on how transformations occur in modern religions and spiritualities.¹⁴ Secularization marks a historical shift in Western Europe which later globalized, reflecting progressive human and societal development from “primitive sacred” to “modern secular.”¹⁵ As prescribed in the Western European context, a decline in faith, religious belief, or privatization of religion is a natural

¹³ William H. Swatos and Daniel V.A. Olson, eds. *The secularization debate*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, (2000): 1-20; Rodney Stark and Roger Finke. *Acts of faith: Explaining the human side of religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press, (2000); Peter L. Berger. “A sociological view of the secularization of theology,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 6, no. 1, (1967): 3-16. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1384189>.

¹⁴ José Casanova. “The secular and secularisms,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 76, no. 4, (2009): 1049-1066. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2009.0064>.

¹⁵ Casanova, “The secular and secularisms,” 1050.

consequence of modernity. However, unlike this understanding, religious revival is a critical development corresponding to modernization in non-European to post-colonial non-Western societies.

This paper deals with secularism, a wide-ranging modern perspective, and ideologies consciously and elaborately collected and designed into normative and ideological state projects of modernity. Modern secularism comes from multiple historical forms as diverse normative models of institutional separation occur between secular state and religion. Correspondingly there is cognitive differentiation between science, philosophy, and theology following the functional differentiation between law, morality, and religion.¹⁶ In the globalized state project of modernity, secularism universally stipulates the following requirements: firstly, the separation between the secular State and religion as the foundation or ideal prerequisite of modernity, and secondly, devoid of religion which does not happen automatically but occurs because of specific historical experiences.

Secularization's central argument of advancement in modernity causing religions' decline is contested. At the same time, the contrary view assumes it has no sociological significance as a concept and should be eliminated. Exploring secularism in China is different from that of the West because,

¹⁶ Casanova, "The secular and secularisms."

unlike the West, where the State was concerned about dealing with a strong Church, the Chinese had a secular outlook of not establishing a Church so that it did not challenge the political authority.¹⁷ The Chinese State had the monopoly of direct access to the transcendent, and therefore there was no institutional separateness of the church, priests, monks, or the ulama. Consequently, the Chinese State not only reserved the right to define the space and the purpose of religion but was also subjected to the political ecosystem.

Marxist-Leninist-Maoist atheism considers religion as the opium of the masses and assumes it will eventually die out as society progresses. Based on this assumption, the PRC is officially an atheist State and expects its members to be atheists; however, they could individually carry out or follow some supernatural beliefs or engage in certain religious or spiritual practices. With the socio-political and economic transformation, the Chinese State has acknowledged political secularism conceding a positive view of religion contributing to the moral good or creating an ethical communitarian reservoir. Furthermore, it contains the religion within the permitted spaces defined by the State to maintain a secular public sphere. In the case of China, religion is assumed or expected to perform the social functions of religion, like offering moral guidance to believers and

¹⁷ Mingsheng Wang. *The History and Logic of Modern Chinese Politics*. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, (2021).

contributing to building a harmonious socialist society. Harmonious in the Chinese context means conserving a hierarchical moral order in the state-society relationship.¹⁸ Indeed, it nurtures an institutional hierarchy in which the State reserves the right to define, determine and dispose of religious affairs following its contribution to social stability and order, unity, and happiness of the people.

The party-state insists that religions operate legally through “patriotic” associations. Traditionally, secularism in Chinese society is not antireligious though some elements are evident in Communist China; in actual practice, secularism aims to transform religion into the moral source of citizenship and national belonging.¹⁹ Within this context, the Chinese State is susceptible to the rapid expansion of those foreign religions, which are highly transnational. For example, the Chinese State views the increasing spike in Catholicism and Islam as a cultural and political legitimacy challenge due to the possibility of foreign penetration. Unlike his predecessors, Xi Jinping is strident about the foreign origin of these religions, even though Catholicism and

¹⁸ Robert Weatherley. “Harmony, hierarchy and duty-based morality: The Confucian antipathy towards rights,” *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 12, no. 2, (2002): 245-267. <https://doi.org/10.1075/japc.12.2.04wea>.

¹⁹ Peter Van der Veer. “Smash temples, burn books: comparing secularist projects in India and China,” in *Rethinking Secularism*, Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2011): 280.

Islam have been part of the Chinese socio-cultural and political milieu for centuries.

Furthermore, Xi promulgates measures to tighten control on religious affairs and, more precisely, religiosity, indicating Sinicization as the only remedy. Through Sinicization, the Chinese authorities mean to bring the religions in line with the policies of the Communist Party of China (CPC). Since 2014, with an orchestrated effort, China has adopted the Sinicization of all faiths, justifying its reflection of a Chinese version of secularism. The paper explores the space of Uyghur Muslims within Xi Jinping's conceptualization of secularism with Chinese Characteristics. Xi reimagines Sinicization as a means of secularization. The paper argues that Xi's renewed Sinicization marks the realization of China's second-generation ethnic policy, while one of its main targets is Uyghur Muslims. Xi's China imposes foreign status on Islam, although Muslims belonging to distinct ethnicities are part of China's civilizational to modern-day multi-national State makeup. However, the de-politicization of Uyghurs was the purported objective of second-generation ethnic policy; the cultural genocide in the name of invoking Chineseness de-ethnicize the Chinese Muslims, in general, constructing the narrative of Islam as a threat repudiates Islam's civilizational legacy and heterogeneity.

III. Conceptualizing Secularism with Chinese Characteristics

Secularism often becomes a topic of debate in the context of the Chinese State's attempts to define the relationship between the State and religion following incidental preferences. The relationship between the Chinese State and religions has been complex. The CPC's official (traditional) position on religion is based on Marxist-Leninist-Maoist atheism considering religion as the opium of the masses and assuming it would eventually die out as society progresses. Based on this assumption, the CPC still insists that its members must be atheists though party members individually carry out or follow some supernatural beliefs or engage in certain religious or spiritual practices. Religions in China have gone through complex and inconsistent phases in the first thirty years of Communist history since 1949. Post-Mao China has adopted a relatively tolerant approach toward religion.²⁰ The reform era reveals that socialism and religion do not have to be at loggerheads. Religion was resurgent in the post-Mao period, which was also the "reform and Opening" era (1978-2013).²¹ Because of the socio-political and economic transformation, the Chinese State has acknowledged certain social functions of religion, like offering moral guidance to believers

²⁰ Donald E. MacInnis. *Religion in China today: policy and practice*. New York: Maryknoll, (1989).

²¹ Ian Johnson. *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion after Mao*. New York: Pantheon, (2018).

and contributing positively to building a harmonious socialist society.

The 1982 Constitution, through Article 36,²² ensures freedom of religious belief but does not refrain from suggesting the State protects only “normal” religious activity, leaving the scope for defining what constitutes “normal” and “abnormal” in the religious sphere. Also, it ensures the following: public order should not be challenged; no interference in the State’s educational system; impair the health of citizens; insist religions be Chinese both in spirit and practice abandoning any foreign domination or influence. Apart from the 1982 Constitution, a 1982 document, document 19[3], also represents China’s approach to religion and its affairs. The document reaffirms the five characteristics of religion prescribed by Zhou Enlai and the theoretician of religion, Li Weihai. These five characteristics of religion are the following: a “complex, mass-based, long-lasting phenomenon, which has implications both for ethnic relations within China and for China’s international relations.”²³ Moreover, Document No.6 intends to “curb religious activities that engage in disruptive activities, stir up trouble, endanger public safety, and weaken the unification of the country and national unity, or

²² MacInnis, *Religion in China today: policy and practice*, 8-26.

²³ MacInnis, *Religion in China today: policy and practice*, 11, 30, 113.

collude with hostile forces outside the country to endanger national security.”²⁴

The Chinese State’s pragmatic approach to religion concerns the relations between religion, society, and political stability.²⁵ Therefore, religious groups are expected to promote social stability, unity, and happiness. Consequently, the party-state insists that religions operate legally through “patriotic” associations. The party foresees the religions’ crowd-pulling capability and the ability to initiate parallel authority.²⁶ The State, hence, adopts the co-option and control in its management of religion.²⁷ Regulations on Religious Affairs (RRA) elaborately showcased how the State controls religious affairs, from registering religion and religious sites to selecting and training religious personnel. It includes formulating the curriculum and content of religious schools and religious publications. Notwithstanding these regulations, there is no guarantee of

²⁴ Pitman B. Potter. “Belief in control: Regulation of religion in China,” *The China Quarterly*, 174, (2003): 317-337. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009443903000202>.

²⁵ Fuk-Tsang Ying. “New wine in old wineskins: An appraisal of religious legislation in China and the regulations on religious affairs of 2005,” *Religion, State & Society*, 34, no. 4, (2006): 350-51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637490600974427>.

²⁶ Jason Kindopp. *The politics of Protestantism in contemporary China: State control, civil society, and social movement in a single party-state*. Washington DC: The George Washington University, (2004):3-5.

²⁷ Beatrice Leung. “China’s religious freedom policy: The art of managing religious activity,” *The China Quarterly*, 184, (2005): 894-913. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S030574100500055X>.

freedom to worship or practice religion. Only “normal” religious activities are allowed to perform in Chinese society, but the definition of “normal” (legal) is left unattended.

The State reserves the right to define normal or abnormal aspects of religious affairs. Any attempt to use religion to disrupt public order, public security, stability, and harmony of various ethnoreligious groups is defined as a criminal act, and it is the responsibility of the State to decide upon the disqualification of religious affairs and personnel (Regulations on Religious Affairs 2005). Overall, during the reform and the opening era, official religions are connected through the contestation between the authority and legitimacy of the State, invoking loyalty questions. The Chinese regime expects any religion that functions within the boundaries not to cross the red lines, adapt to the Chinese socialist system, and be Chinese in orientation. Scholars have argued that the current State’s control over religion is part of China’s long historical association with religions.²⁸ The pattern is defined as the foundation of secularism with Chinese characteristics.

In April 2016, addressing a conference on religion, Xi Jinping called for managing religious beliefs to work in line with Chinese laws and assisting religions in adapting to the core values

²⁸ Daniel H. Bays. “A Tradition of State Dominance,” in *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions*, Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamrin, eds. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, (2004): 25-39.

of a socialist society,²⁹ meaning an atheist party trying to maneuver religions. Meanwhile, Xi has explicated the Chinese version of secularism or secularism with Chinese characteristics. Xi has proposed the following postulates for secularism with Chinese characteristics, and they are as follows: firstly, politics and religion must be separated; secondly, religion should not interfere with the government administration, judiciary, and education; thirdly, religious affairs must be in line with the laws, and legitimate rights of the religious people must be protected; the fourth and the most distinctive one is that the State should develop leadership within these religions who are “politically trustworthy, democratic in conduct and efficient in their daily work.” The religious leadership expects to prevent “overseas infiltrations via religious means and ideological infringement by extremists.”³⁰ Thus, the trajectory of Chinese secularism was palpable and explicit with a projection of new regulations on religious affairs, which were implemented in 2018. These new regulations are an absolute reversal of Deng’s liberal attitude toward religions to reclaim Mao-era hostility toward organized religions in China. What is different in terms of China’s religious management under Xi Jinping is no longer the government limiting threats to its power in chosen cases. Xi’s emphasis on loyalty is meant for foreign religions. Sinicization under Xi

²⁹ “Xi calls for improved religious work.” Xinhua, last modified April 24, 2016. http://www.china.org.cn/china/2016-04/24/content_38312410.htm.

³⁰ Xinhua, “Xi calls for improved religious work.”

Jinping is more about religions' loyalty toward the regime rather than cultural assimilation.³¹

IV. Sinicization under Xi Jinping

Sinicization,³² in its broadest terms, is understood as making the world suitable for China and the Chinese. The Chinese version

³¹ Sinicization of religion is a key phrase in the religious policy of Xi Jinping. Xi first used this phrase at the Central United Front Work Conference in May 2015. By Sinicization of religion, Xi means actively guiding the religions to adapt to the socialist society. At the Conference, Xi announced that regulating religion is also a means of governance. Therefore, the Communist Party could offer that operational guidance, thereby increasing the standard of the regulations controlling religion. Moreover, in 2015 Xi also proposed the need for religions to prioritize loyalty to the Chinese Communist Party over religious beliefs. Consequently, mosques and churches that do not follow the party's guidance have been torn down (Xi Jinping. 鞏固發展最廣範的愛國統一戰線, ” *Xinhuanet*, May 20, (2015). http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-05/20/c_1115351358.htm ; Miho Tamura. “China Emphasizes ‘Sinicization of Religion’ at Annual Congress.” *The Japan News*, March 6, (2023) <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/world/asia-pacific/20230306-95468/>). The argument here is the consolidation of religions, especially the consolidation of foreign religions such as Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism (relatively at a lower risk than the other two)

³² Sinicization is a contested topic in China's political history. The famous debate between Ping-ti Ho (1967, 1998) (Ping-ti Ho. "The significance of the Ch'ing period in Chinese history," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 26, no. 2, (1967): 189-195. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2051924>.; Ping-ti Ho. "In defense of Sinicization: A Rebuttal of Evelyn Rawski's 'Reenvisioning the Qing,'" *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 57, no. 1, (1998): 123-155. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2659026>.) and Evelyn S. Rawski (Evelyn S. Rawski. "Presidential address: Reenvisioning the Qing: The significance of the Qing period in Chinese history," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 55, no. 4, (1996): 829-850. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2646525>.) exemplifies how scholars differ in their understanding and interpretations of Sinicization. Ping-ti Ho argues that the Qing dynasty was the most successful one in terms of their conquest in Chinese history, and he identifies systematic Sinicization as the key to their success. While Evelyn Rawski, on the other hand, suggests the Qing empire's ability to expand on its cultural links with the non-Han peoples of Inner Asia enabled the administration of the non-Han regions. Based on the archival research, Rawski argues that Manchus disseminated different images of rulership to the different subject peoples of their empire.

Sinicization is often represented by other terminologies such as Sinicisation, Sinofication, or Sinification and is used interchangeably as synonyms. Despite the plurality, the terminology represents the process by which the non-Han and non-Sinitic people enter the Chinese realm as conquerors or the conquered. There are debates on which Chinese terminology reflects the meaning of Sinicization effectively. The commonly used word is *Shenhua* (漢化), but the Han in *Shenhua* limits itself to the Han ethnicity. Scholars like Ping-ti Ho (1998) and Chen Yuan (2000) preferred the word *huahua* (華化) as it appropriately matches the English word. *Huahua* means Sinicizing the non-Sinitic people, and such expressions even existed before the idea of the Republic of China in 1912. The theory of Sinicization has always found itself in the middle of academic debates where Western scholars rejected them, suggesting it as the Han nationalist interpretation of China's past.

is that Sinicization is a process by which the non-Han people who entered the Chinese realm were inevitably assimilated as Chinese. It also had the meaning of “civilizing non-Sinitic or non-Han people.” Traditionally, Sinicization is deeper than assimilation, ensuring two-way interactions and creating ample space for

On the contrary, scholars from China and Taiwan embraced the theory. Different historiographical discourses constructed different definitions for Sinicization to serve different purposes. In the 17th and 18th centuries, Europe admired Chinese notions and things which seemed to be intellectual Europe’s aspirations. Thus, Chinese notions, language, things, and material culture have impacted cultures outside China as vast as Europe and Japan. In the 1900s, Sinification was used widely with the same meaning as Sinicization. Specifically, in 1899, Sinification was meant as managed or administered by the Chinese instead of foreigners. It indicated the Chinese taking over foreign settlements, railways, and other organizations inside China. Later, the same terminology meant China’s gradual takeover of Tibet (Noël Williamson. “The Lohit-Brahmaputra between Assam and South-Eastern Tibet, November 1907, to January, 1908,” *The Geographical Journal*, 34, no. 4, (1909): 363-383. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1777190>.) In earlier usages, Sinicization has been used to represent China’s influence on the outside world, like Japan and Europe. However, with the changing geopolitics and China’s domestic political scenario, since the 1920s, Sinicization appeared as a paradigm used with the connotation of annexation and acculturation of its border populations. Eventually, Sinicization’s dominant and continuing connotation has been the assimilation of non-Han domestic cultural groups into the Chinese language, culture, and economic life.

co-existence for diversity.³³ It mainly emphasizes how the Manchus employed Sinicization when they had the dual challenge

³³ Sinicization could trace its origin from the Chinese philosophical construct of harmony. In China, the idea of harmony and harmonious society is rooted in the traditional Chinese culture that proposes the founding of a Utopia, which is known as *Datong*, (Great Unity or Great Harmony), an ideal Chinese world based on universal humanity and harmony. Tong in *datong* means sameness. It has also been called as *Taiping* (太平, the State of Eternal Peace) (Baogang Guo and Sujian Guo. (eds.) *China in Search of a Harmonious Society*. New York: Lexington Books, (2008): 4. *Datong* was also known as “One World Philosophy”. *He* or *hexie* (和, harmony, 和諧, harmonious) represents harmony with diversity, and *datong* means Great Unity. *Harmony* 和 (*he*) makes its presence felt as a socio-political construct since pre-Qin period in the Chinese philosophical tradition. Basically, *he* stands for a happy state of affairs or an ideal way of life. The state of harmony has been compared to both mixing of different sounds to make music and mixing of various flavours to make a soup.

In the process, each flavour or tone of music complements and enriches one another (Chenyang Li. "The Ideal of Harmony in Ancient Chinese and Greek Philosophy," *Dao*, 7, (2008): 86. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-008-9043-3>). Harmony or *he* has been considered the ultimate virtue. There are "five virtues like human excellence, rightness, ritualized propriety, wisdom, and sageliness (*ren* 仁, *yi* 義, *li* 禮, *zhi* 智, *sheng* 聖)" and when "these virtues are performed in harmony; it makes the human way the heavenly way" (Li, "The Ideal of Harmony in Ancient Chinese and Greek Philosophy," 86-7). Confucian Harmony is an ethical means to distinguish between *junzi* (an exemplary person) or a sage and a base person (Dong Feng. "The Great Harmony: An Essay on Man and Confucianism," *The Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture*, 2, no. 1, (2008): 78. [https://doi.org/10.30395/WSR.200812_2\(1\).0003](https://doi.org/10.30395/WSR.200812_2(1).0003)). Harmonization is a dynamic process. It acknowledges strife as a constructive move towards greater Harmony (Chenyang Li. "The Confucian Ideal of Harmony," *Philosophy of East and West*, 56, no. 4, (2006): 583-603. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2006.0055>). While Confucian Harmony does not have a problem accepting the difference, the challenge with Confucian Harmony in contemporary times is that Harmony exhibits a holistic value orientation. Consequently, in Harmonization, collective good prevails over individual good in the family, society, and the state (Chenyang Li. "The Philosophy of Harmony in Classical Confucianism," *Philosophy Compass*, 3, no.3, (2008): 423-35. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1747-9991.2008.00141.x>). The crisis that individual autonomy encounters in Confucian Harmony is that individual good is sacrificed for the collective or shared good, which is considered justifiable.

of legitimizing their own rule and maintaining the Chinese State's multi-ethnic nature. The Qing dynasty did this by upholding the Chinese political and cultural tradition of Confucianism and even preserved their unique Manchu identity by manifesting the banner system.³⁴ Further, it was one of the Manchu adaptation tactics that the Manchus under the leadership of Yongzheng undermined the idea of *yi* as barbarian and used it to legitimize their rule by upholding Confucian virtue as a requirement for non-Han authority. Manchus referred to their empire as both *Da Qing Guo* (Qing Empire) and *Zhongguo* (Central State) by calling all subjects, including the people of conquered territories as Chinese

Adherence to cultural purity has preserved Harmony in the imperial Chinese State in the form of hierarchical moral order and provided space for upward mobility for the non-Han ethnicities. The rise and long rule of the Yuan and the Qing dynasties bore the evidence (Baogang He. "Minority Rights with Chinese Characteristics," in *Multiculturalism in Asia*, W. Kymlicka and Baogang He, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, (2005): 56-79. <https://doi.org/10.1093/0199277621.003.0003>.). The self-cultivation or imparting of *li* in imperial China intends to enable the individual to fine-tune himself to social traditions that contribute to a harmonious society, irrespective of the individual's ethnicity. Here, the value of Harmony is defined as adherence to Confucian values, which was fundamental in social relations in imperial China (A F Wright. "Struggle vs. Harmony: Symbols of Competing Values in Modern China," *World Politics*, 6, no. 1, (1953): 31-44. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009077>.). This template of preserving Harmony has been replicated in successive periods in China.

³⁴ The banner system is a social and military structure created by the Manchus 40 years ahead of the Manchu conquest (1644), and it continued to exist till the end of their fall in 1911. "The banner system included soldiers, officers, servants and slaves; Manchus, Mongols, accultured frontier Chinese and Koreans; men and women, young and old, able and infirm". Mark C Elliot. *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China*. California: Stanford University Press, (2001): 3-39.

irrespective of their ethnic origin.³⁵ This legitimized Qing authority and enabled the craft of a multi-ethnic nature for the Chinese State. However, Sinicization also indicates a hierarchical moral order where the Han value system is superior and aspirational for the rest of the ethnic minorities to receive acknowledgment and acceptance. However, the consequence of it in the contemporary Chinese State has been a gradual and complete assimilation of the Non-Han to the Han value system. Eventually, cultural diversity was limited to the permitted spaces authorized by the State.

Fangyi Cheng presents Sinicization through three distinct historiographical discourses: the acculturation of both the domestic and border population into the modified and standardized Chinese language and culture, the inherent superiority of Chinese culture that impacted a cultural change across eastern Eurasia, emphasizing both diversity and unity of the people living inside constructing a stabilized polity.³⁶ Among the three demonstrations of Sinicization, the third one emphasizes it as both an ideology and process of ensuring stability in contemporary China, where stability has emerged as an obsession in the post-Tiananmen scenario. The third discourse highlights

³⁵ James Leibold. *Reconfiguring Chinese nationalism: How the Qing frontier and its indigenes became Chinese*. Vol. 1. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, (2007): 10-11.

³⁶ Cheng Fangyi. "The Evolution of "Sinicization," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 31, no. 2, (2021): 321-342. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186320000681>.

China's attempts to construct a political narrative of ethnic unity amidst diversity; however, ethnic unity could not be more than mere political expression.

The Chinese State argued in the past that all the five officially recognized religions of China were melted with the dominant Confucianism and accultured and absorbed into the Chinese social and political system. According to the dominant Chinese narrative, Sinicization never implied coercion and domination.³⁷ Sinicization was receptive toward institutional models and practices that were worth emulating based on the capacity to adopt from both philosophical (Buddhism) and material ideas (technology).³⁸ Besides, the argument is that the religions in China experience “multiple co-existence and harmony.”³⁹

The fundamental similarity between the Sinicization of the past and contemporary China is that the Chinese State often employs a heavy hand on the provinces like Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolia to adhere to the mainstream or dominant Han cultures and belief systems as these provinces and people were

³⁷ Mingsheng Wang, *The History and Logic of Modern Chinese Politics*. Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, (2021).

³⁸ Peter J. Katzenstein. (ed). *Sinicization and the rise of China: Civilizational processes beyond East and West*. London and New York: Routledge, (2013).

³⁹ Jinguang Liu. “The tolerance and harmony of Chinese religion in the age of globalization,” *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 77, (2013): 207. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.03.079>.

distinctly different. However, Sinicization has never been about creating sameness and flowing in one direction. Instead, networking permits traffic flows in multiple directions, offering ample space for heterogeneity in the social and political process.⁴⁰ The Chinese State employs the phrase harmony⁴¹ to exemplify diversity's co-existence within the Chineseness framework more often than before during the Hu Jintao era. However, in the history of the PRC, harmony was often replaced with the quest for "everlasting stability," and "harmonious" remained rhetoric. However, religious tolerance existed within the limits of permitted space.

Xi Jinping's management of religion marked a trajectorial shift. Since his tenure, the State has approached religions such as Tibetan Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam purely from a security perspective. It invoked allegiance and loyalty as the primary factor ignoring their centuries-old presence in Chinese society. China's solid economic foundation in 2012 offered Xi Jinping the optimism and confidence to articulate Xi's version of Chinese politics, "reclaiming China's sense of its own identity and place in the world."⁴² To facilitate this line of politics, Xi engaged in recentralizing Chinese politics, taking a complete departure from

⁴⁰ Katzenstein, (ed). *Sinicization and the rise of China*.

⁴¹ Refer to footnote 33.

⁴² Joshua Eisenman. "BRI in Context: China's Geostrategic Conception of the Developing World," *Global Asia*, 14, no. 2, (2019): 63. https://www.globalasia.org/v14no2/debate/bri-in-context-chinas-geostrategic-conception-of-the-developing-world_joshua-eisenman.

the hitherto leaders; Xi has taken on an unprecedented number of institutional titles. The pattern exemplifies Xi's embrace of Mao-style leadership, a sudden shift from Deng's collective leadership to group politics where an inner circle of advisors under Xi Jinping calls the shot,⁴³ emerging as the coveted core of the party.

Moreover, the officials increasingly call him a great leader. Overall, the recentralizing political scene in Chinese politics buries Deng's style of politics invoking Mao. Thus, the rise of Xi as the core not only demands a pledge of loyalty to that core⁴⁴ but accelerates the fusion of the party and the State, leading to Xi Jinping's inner circle. Xi's vision of complete indigenization of religions and their pledge of loyalty in the name of Sinicization must be explained in Xi's burial of Deng's politics and the decentralization of power in the lead domestic political landscape.

It was a watershed moment for the Chinese State when Xi, for the first time at the National Conference on Religious Works in 2016, called for the Sinicization of religion, which means 'guide that adaptation of religions to China's socialist society.' The objective is to embrace the Chinese orientation to the

⁴³ Wen-Hsuan Tsai and Zhou Wang. "Integrated fragmentation and the role of leading small groups in Chinese politics," *The China Journal*, 82, no. 1, (2019): 19. <https://doi.org/10.1086/700670>.

⁴⁴ Lance L. P. Gore. "Rebuilding the Leninist Party Rule: Chinese Communist Party under Xi Jinping's Stewardship," *East Asian Policy*, 8, no. 01, (2016): 7. <https://doi.org/10.1142/S1793930516000015>.

religions. The National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) not only followed it up but provided bureaucratic, ideological, and legal structures of Sinicization. Xi initiated the Strike Hard Campaign Against Violent Terrorism, targeting Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims in 2014. By 2017, 21% of the arrests made in China were from Xinjiang alone. Almost two-thirds of Mosques were damaged or demolished, citing multiple reasons. Islamic sacred sites were demolished, and, above all, the official surveillance program of "becoming families" was in action that facilitated an intrusive campaign of political indoctrination through the overnight stay of the officers in Uyghur homes.⁴⁵

The bureaucracy closely monitors religious affairs, while the Chinese mission is to maintain the party ideology over religious beliefs and practices. Moreover, the judiciary monitors and controls religions' growth and influence on society.⁴⁶ Corresponding to economic development and globalization, foreign religions like Christianity and Islam have a rising impact on Chinese society and polity. It posed an existential threat to the party regime, and the CPC members were concerned about the

⁴⁵ Nathan Ruser, James Leibold, Kelsey Munroe, and Tilla Hoja. "Cultural Erasure: Tracing the destruction of Uyghur and Islamic spaces in Xinjiang," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, Policy Brief 38/2020. <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/cultural-erasure>.

⁴⁶ Tom Harvey. "Sinicization: A New Ideological Robe for Religion in China," *Oxford House Research Ltd*, December 21, (2020). <https://www.oxfordhousereseearch.com/sinicization-a-new-ideological-robe-for-religion-in-china/>

ideological purity of Chineseness and loyalty toward the party State. Sinicization appeared as a legally backed remedy for this. Xi's administration has designed specific strategies for the Sinicization of each religion, nevertheless emphasizing the 'foreignness' of Islam and Christianity.

Christianity has been the fastest-growing religion in China in the last few decades, with a seven percent increase yearly.⁴⁷ The growth of Christianity in China has its social significance with its natural inclination towards human dignity and social and political democracy. The Chinese State has attempted to realign it to suit Chinese conditions.⁴⁸ Following the official data, half of China's 60 million Christians attend independent (unregistered) churches,⁴⁹ with six million Catholics in China. Still, numbers could be double if the underground church worshipers are included too. In the case of Protestantism, or independent

⁴⁷ Tom Phillips and Harriet Sherwood. "China accused of trying to 'co-opt and emasculate' Christianity," *The Guardian*, November 17, (2015). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/17/china-accused-emasculate-christianity-secret-conference-communist-party>

⁴⁸ Thomas Alan Harvey. "Sermon, story, and song in the inculturation of Christianity in China," in *Sinicizing Christianity*, Yangwen Zheng, ed. Leiden: Brill, (2017), 138-166. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004330382_007; Fenggang Yang. "From cooperation to resistance: Christian responses to intensified suppression in China today," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, 15, no. 1, (2017): 79-90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2017.1284415>.

⁴⁹ Rob Schmitz. "China's Repression of Ethnic Muslim Minorities Comes into Clearer Relief," interview by Lakshmi Singh, All things considered, NPR, November 17, (2018). Audio, 05:00. <https://www.npr.org/2018/11/17/668953524/china-s-repression-of-ethnic-muslim-minorities-comes-into-clearer-relief>.

churches, the State forces them to join religious organizations supervised by the CPC's United Front Work Department (UFWD). It isolates them from a global community of protestants, detaining those criticizing the party-state and managing the Bible's sale through government-sanctioned bodies.⁵⁰ The effort to eliminate foreign elements intensified recently when the Chinese government launched a five-year plan for the "development" of the Catholic Church with Chinese Characteristics.⁵¹ Though the agreement is still vague, it is the "beginning of the process," as claimed by the Vatican spokesperson. China thus confirms its absolute legitimacy over Catholic establishments and ideological inclination within Chinese territory, reducing the Papal authority to a mere ratifying authority.⁵²

Vatican's decision to engage China, however, comes due to four significant developments: 1) China's increasing global influence; 2) persistent persecution of the Catholic Church under Xi Jinping, 3) the longstanding split between the official and

⁵⁰ William Nee. "In China, 'Xi Jinping Thought' Is the Only Accepted Religion," *The Diplomat*, August 17, (2021). <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/in-china-xi-jinping-thought-is-the-only-accepted-religion/>.

⁵¹ Michael Sainsbury. "A Catholic Church in China with Chinese characteristics," *UCA News*, June 02, (2017). <https://www.ucanews.com/news/a-catholic-church-in-china-with-chinese-characteristics/79409>.

⁵² Harriet Sherwood. "Vatican signs historic deal with China – but critics denounce sellout," *The Guardian*, September 22, (2018). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/22/vatican-pope-francis-agreement-with-china-nominating-bishops>.

underground Church, and 4) Protestantism making deep penetration into Chinese society, especially among the young generation⁵³. Eventually, suppose the Vatican becomes insignificant to the Chinese Catholics, and China succeeds in dictating the terms and conditions of the Chinese Catholic Church. In that case, Vatican's decision will only serve to be inclusive to roughly 13 million Chinese Catholics. This decision, however, has raised several eyebrows on either side.

The Vatican faces criticism over dealing with China when the government actively pursues repressive measures against religions in general and Catholicism in specific.⁵⁴ It includes destroying the Church buildings and even strictly restricting the children from attending Church services. On the Chinese side, the critics assert that this deal could create dangerous precedence as it offers a channel of integration with religious bodies outside China's realm. Islam was the crucial choke point regarding Sinicization as a process of imbibing the Chinese version of secularism. Consequently, Sinicization is the reason behind the mass incarceration of Muslim ethnicities like the Uyghurs, the Hui, and the Kazakhs.

⁵³ Simon Denyer. "Possible deal between Vatican and China alarms many Catholics," *The Washington Post*, February 02, (2018). https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/possible-deal-between-vatican-and-china-alarms-many-catholics/2018/02/02/cacb8976-078c-11e8-aa61-f3391373867e_story.html

⁵⁴ Sherwood, "Vatican signs historic deal with China – but critics denounce sellout."

V. Sinicizing Islam: Social Re-engineering to Islamophobia

The entry of Islam into China can be traced back to the eighth century through merchants traversing the Silk Road. The Han Kitab is a unique body of literature that explains Islamic teachings influenced by Neo-Confucian classical teachings. According to the Han Kitab, Islam in China, despite its Arabian origins, looks beyond geographical distinctions, envisioning a universal and ubiquitous truth accommodating the teachings from both East and West.⁵⁵

Islam arrived in China during the Yuan (Mongol) period (1271-1368), even before the Arab and Persian travelers and merchants migrated to China and settled in secluded communities. The Mongol dynasty brought in highly skilled and professional Central Asian Muslims who were scientists, geographers, astronomers, musicians, artisans, soldiers, and administrators. Inter-marriage with Han women has been an organic process in society. Their children were raised as Muslims. However, acculturation into Chinese society started with the Ming dynasty, as they were the ones who initiated Sino-centric homogenization. Besides, the Ming dynasty's travel bans detached the Muslims from their global network of learning, knowledge, and homeland. Therefore, the Islamic tradition in China also had to depend on

⁵⁵ James D. Frankel. "Apoliticization": One Facet of Chinese Islam," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 28, no. 3, (2008): 421-434. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602000802548078>.

local religious leaders' limited textual resources. Consequently, a (un) conscious blending of Chinese and Islamic literary traditions is one of the features of Han Kitab. The production of a Chinese version of Islamic culture reveals that Islam has always been sensitive to Chinese sensibilities and contributes to the rich legacy of Chinese heritage.

According to the official version of the PRC, the Chinese Muslim minorities constitute ten out of 55 recognized *shaoshu minzu* (minority nationalities). The Muslim ethnicities are distinctly unique, complex, and highly diverse from each other. These Muslim minorities represent “distinct solidarities separated by geography. Historically, they have been divided along ethnic, linguistic, economic, educational, sectarian and kinship lines, besides many other factors.”⁵⁶

According to the 2010 Census Data, Muslims constitute 1.7 percent of the total Chinese population, i.e., 23 million Muslims in China. The ten Muslim minorities are the Hui, Uyghur, Kazak, Dongxiang, Kirgiz, Salar, Tajik, Uzbek, Bonan, and Tatar. Except for the Hui and Uyghur, the other eight minorities comprise only 0.1 percent of the population. The Hui people are distributed in the Northwestern region, though some reside in China's inland provinces. The Uyghur are primarily positioned in Southern

⁵⁶ James D. Frankel. “Chinese Islam,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Chinese Religions*, Randall L. Nadeau, ed. West Sussex: The Wiley-Blackwell, (2012), 238. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444361995.ch11>.

Xinjiang. The other Muslim population of Kazak, Kirgiz, Tajik, Uzbek, and Tatar live in Xinjiang's border areas. Though the Dongxiang, Salar, and Bonan follow Islam, they are usually identified as part of the Hui. Even though the Hui and Uyghur follow Islam, they have little in common as points of identification.

Xi focuses on Uyghurs' Sinicization⁵⁷ because Uyghurs denote indigeneity and share a strong bond with the Tarim basin. Also, it never suited the Han narrative of Chineseness. Therefore, cultural, and political resistance must be understood in the context of the Uyghurs' long and proud history⁵⁸ that predates the annexation of Xinjiang by the Qing. The Islamization of the

⁵⁷ Apart from the Hui and Uyghurs Chinese State is inhabited by other Muslim ethnic minorities such as Kazhaks, Krihiz, Dongxiang, Salar, Tajik, Bao'an, Uzbek, and Tatar. Uyghurs constitute the majority in the Xinjiang region, but other Turkic Muslim ethnicities like Kazhaks, Krihiz, Tajik, Uzbek, and Tatar also exist. As multiple reports suggest, along with the Uyghurs, other Muslim ethnicities too go through systematic Sinicization. Moreover, the presence of these Turkic Muslims on the internment campus has surfaced several times. In the article, I have suggested that the Chinese State focuses more on Uyghurs' Sinicization. Sinicization of Uyghurs has been a rigorous and repressive political project, especially under Xi Jinping in the aftermath 2009 Urumqi riot. However, it has eventually evolved into Islamophobia, stretching the Sinicization of Islam as a necessity, and ignoring the heterogeneity and relative integration of ethnic Muslims. The consequence of it has been the de-ethnicization of Islam. This considers Muslim communities in general as a stability security threat. Nevertheless, the Chinese State often tries to appropriate the non-Uyghur Muslim ethnicities in Xinjiang to signal that the Chinese government recognizes the multi-ethnic Xinjiang. Moreover, it is part of an effort to reinvent Xinjiang as a multi-ethnic rather than a Uyghur region. It will enable us to dilute the Uyghurs' case and their concerns.

⁵⁸ Frankel, "Chinese Islam," 245.

Uyghurs from the 10th to the late 17th century did not bridge oases-based loyalties. As Justin Rudelson suggests, regional and cultural diversity (cultural diversity includes the ubiquitous Sufi influence, too), even within the Xinjiang region,⁵⁹ complicated the Chinese State-Uyghur relationship with multiple loyalties. The Qing engaged in the modernization of Xinjiang at a time when Turkish nationalism emerged. Anthony Smith explained this phenomenon as the colonial State's attempt to bring about modernization before the indigenous elites reasserted control.⁶⁰ The late Qing empire contemplated constitutional reforms in Xinjiang, which was embedded in the Eurasian constitutional wave of the 1900s.⁶¹ The Qing authorities assumed loyalty could be created in the indigenous elites of Xinjiang through Parliamentary reforms in the province. Eric Schluessel has found certain factionalism within the Xinjiang government regarding what kind of reforms to adopt.⁶² According to him, one group led by Dutong was positive toward constitutional reforms. Dutong wanted to elevate the local Turkic populations into the new

⁵⁹ Justin Jon Rudelson. *Oasis identities: Uyghur nationalism along China's silk road*. New York: Columbia University Press, (1997).

⁶⁰ Rémi Castets. "The modern Chinese state and strategies of control over Uyghur Islam," *Central Asian Affairs*, 2, no. 3, (2015): 221-245. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22142290-00203001>.

⁶¹ Egas Moniz Bandeira. "Late Qing parliamentarian and the borderlands of the Qing Empire—Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang (1906–1911)," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 11, no.1, (2020): 15-29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1879366520901923>.

⁶² E. T. Schluessel. *The Muslim Emperor of China: Everyday politics in colonial Xinjiang, 1877-1933*. (Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 2016): 80-110.

national community through education⁶³ taught in the local language medium.⁶⁴ While the other faction, under the leadership of Wang Shunan, wanted to consider Xinjiang a “colony” because scholars like him perceived the Uyghur population as uncouth barbarians.⁶⁵ However, such debates showcase how sensitive the late Qing dynasty has been about the status of Xinjiang province and the Uyghurs’ loyalty. The Hui Muslims’ contradictory position of embodying simultaneity as benefactors of the Confucian-Islamic connection, in a way, alienated the Uyghurs in the name of loyalty. The Hui is ethnically, linguistically, and culturally like their Han compatriots and are officially portrayed as having a harmonious engagement with most Han. They represent the immigration and subsequent naturalization of Muslims who entered China for trade under the Tang dynasty.

Attempts to co-opt Islam were made as early as 1956 when the Chinese Communist Party established the Islamic Association of China (IAC) and a local branch in Xinjiang.⁶⁶ Though the 1980s witnessed a revitalization of Islam in general, applying the rule of law, especially the implementation of Document 19, reiterates the State’s supervision of mosques.⁶⁷ The China Islamic

⁶³ Schluessel, *The Muslim Emperor of China*, 102.

⁶⁴ Schluessel, *The Muslim Emperor of China*, 88.

⁶⁵ Egas Moniz Bandeira, “Late Qing parliamentarian,” 22.

⁶⁶ Castets, “The modern Chinese state and strategies of control.”

⁶⁷ Maja Veselič. “Managing Religion in Contemporary China: The Case of Islam,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies*, No 65, September, (2011): 114-137; Castets, “The modern Chinese state and strategies of control.”

Institute in Xinjiang was established in 1987 and served as a vital teaching facility for the Islamic religion in China with 280 students.⁶⁸ Since 2017, the institute has been expanding too. This institute is one of 10 Islamic faculties of theology in the country and the only one that offers courses in the Uyghur language.⁶⁹ The institute presents itself as an example of Deng's liberal approach toward religions in China. However, a relatively stringent Xi Jinping regime after the Urumqi riot and a few other violent incidents employs the institute as an essential instrument to co-opt the religion. The Islamic institute currently facilitates the government authorities to proactively manage Islamic education in the country through which the State not only guides the Islamic religious infrastructure to adapt to the socialist society but has control over choosing curriculum and designing the training program for the imams. Moreover, the State's proactive role inculcates the significance of patriotism in the curriculum to cultivate Islam with a Chinese orientation.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Liu Xin. "Chinese govt actively supports Islamic education in Xinjiang: scholar," *Global Times*, February 8, (2021). <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1215316.shtml>.

⁶⁹ Ali Unal. "Xinjiang Islamic Institute seeks expanded number of students," *Daily Sabah*, September 27, (2016). <https://www.dailysabah.com/asia/2016/09/27/xinjiang-islamic-institute-seeks-expanded-number-of-students>.

⁷⁰ KJM Varma. "Islam in China must be Chinese in orientation: President Xi Jinping," *The Indian Express*, July 17, (2022). <https://indianexpress.com/article/world/islam-china-chinese-orientation-president-xi-jinping-8033799/>.

The State's attitude toward Hui and Uyghur represents a contradiction because the State views them through the separatist/loyalist or feudal/modernist binary dimension. The loyalty debate further elaborates on how China defines Islam by differentiating ethnicity and extremism. The Chinese State's official finding has been that Uyghur extremists who were part of anti-Soviet Jihad turned to Wahhabism and returned to Xinjiang after the fall of the Soviet Union. Despite Xinjiang's autonomous power and religious freedom since the late 1980s, the Wahhabi elements nourished radical Islam by combining it with the Uyghur cultural claims. Moreover, the Chinese State alleges that foreign organizations and governments offer material and moral support to these religious fundamentalist elements to cater to their anti-China propaganda.⁷¹ As an immediate political response to the September 11 attacks, China categorized Xinjiang as a terrorist threat. Henceforth, re-education (*laojiao*) camps cropped up as an "effective" government apparatus to detain religion/ethnicity-based dissidents in Xinjiang post-2001. The general pattern of the political offense committed by the detainees of Xinjiang *laojiao* includes their involvement in,

"Unlawful organizations and religions," "unlawful printing publications and unlawful propaganda, "concealing criminals and weapons," or otherwise "aiding unlawful organizations,"

⁷¹ Lionel Vairon. *China Threat? The Challenges, Myths, and Realities of China's Rise*. New York: CN Times Books, (2013).

“unlawful manufacturing of explosives,” or “unlawful border crossing.”⁷²

The categorization of “involvement in ‘unlawful’ religion” in the context accentuates the Chinese State’s right to determine the definitions of ethnicity and extremism by dictating the spatial boundaries of the Islamic faith. The Urumqi riot and Kunming terror attack assisted the Chinese State in establishing the presence of radical Islam as a political and security challenge. The decades-old “strike hard campaign” was replaced with the people’s war on terror, creating the narrative that the Kunming knife attack as China’s September 11 created fear in the Muslim community as a social evil that requires attention.

For Xi, the solution lies in re-engineering Uyghurs to remove any trace of Islamic influence in Uyghur society.⁷³ Re-engineering indicates a modernist, secular project to secularize Xinjiang’s public sphere. This human engineering is defined as “projects to create new kinds of subjects for political and

⁷² Fu Hualing. “Re-education through labour in historical perspective,” *The China Quarterly*, 184, (2005): 828-829. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741005000512>.

⁷³ Laurent Fievet. “China punishes official for not daring to smoke near Muslims,” *Asia-Pacific News*, April 11, (2017). <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/04/11/china-punishes-official-for-not-daring-to-smoke-near-muslims.html>

economic transformation.”⁷⁴ These state-sponsored engineering projects are pitched as State’s responsibility to emancipate the backward (primitive) ethnicities like the Uyghur and lead them to progress.

Progress is defined as the State’s discretion, and currently, in Xinjiang’s context, it envisages the elimination of Uyghur Islamic knowledge, history, and religious institutions alleging extremist influence. The Chinese State has always treated religion as an addiction (Falun Gong could be an example) but often used medical analogies like mental illness, tumors, etc., to represent Islam in Xinjiang, creating dangerous precedence. The authorities also portray the Uyghur population as a biological threat to Chinese society; hence, the physical separation, surveillance, detention, etc., are justified.⁷⁵ Xi’s re-education camps redefined their purpose as de-extremification camps while expanding its strength to an unprecedented level by dividing the focus groups based on radicalism’s severity. The State’s solution is redefining Islam by inculcating Chinese characteristics.

Islam with Chinese characteristics is an outcome of Xi Jinping’s political project of Sinicizing religions introduced in

⁷⁴ Ann Anagnost, Andrea Arai, and Hai Ren. eds. *Global futures in East Asia: Youth, nation, and the new economy in uncertain times*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, (2013): 8.

⁷⁵ Sean R. Roberts. “The biopolitics of China’s ‘war on terror’ and the exclusion of the Uyghurs,” *Critical Asian Studies*, 50, no. 2, (2018): 232-258. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.2018.1454111>.

2015 to align religions with Chinese culture and the party's absolute authority. In the context of Islam, Sinicization aims to redesign Islam in China with Chinese characteristics. Islam with Chinese characteristics does not restrict itself to the meaning of enabling Islam to adapt to China's socialist society. Instead, it intends to indigenize the religions with strong foreign influence, such as Islam. This invokes the historical association that Islam shares with China and how much it is necessary to decouple Muslims from the Arabized versions of it.⁷⁶ It indicates reorienting Muslims to practice their faith in a more Chinese way.⁷⁷ The Chinese State and Xi regime would impart Chineseness by inculcating patriotism to the State and loyalty to the Communist Party of China. Therefore, Islam with Chinese characteristics means Islam under state control where the state authorities choose Quranic verses that shall be delivered during the Friday sermons and prayers, design the curriculum to train the imams, etc. By these measures, the Chinese State defines the permitted space for Islam.

The de-extremification camps force the Uyghur inmates to memorize patriotic texts, confess their 'faults,' criticize their

⁷⁶ Emily Feng. "China is removing domes from mosques as part of a push to make them more 'Chinese,'" *NPR*, October 24, (2021). <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/24/1047054983/china-muslims-sinicization>.

⁷⁷ Kelly Hammond. "The 'Terrible' Sinicization' of Islam in China," *New Lines Magazine*, January 15, (2021). <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/the-terrible-sinicization-of-islam-in-china/>.

religious traditions and denounce fellow internees.⁷⁸ The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulation on De-extremification (2017)⁷⁹ suggests, “de-extremification shall persist in the basic directives of the party’s work on religion, persist in an orientation of making religion more Chinese and under the law, and actively guide religions to become compatible with socialist society” (Article 4). Since the Chinese government conflates extremism and Islam in the context of Xinjiang, the de-extremification project’s objective seems to erase the Islamic identity of the Uyghurs, citing doubts regarding their political loyalty. It feeds into the political conception that the Uyghurs are incorrect in their spiritual and political spheres. Anti-Uyghur sentiments slowly evolved into anti-Muslim paranoia, apparently resulting in the overflow of religious restrictions to the Hui regions such as Ningxia and Gansu.

Restrictions on the Hui region indicate the extension of securitization from Xinjiang to other provinces, too, employing a direct clampdown on the religiosity of Muslims. That includes replacing the Arab -style Islamic architecture of mosques with traditional Chinese-style designs, removing loudspeakers from mosques, and prohibiting Muslim school students in both Linxia

⁷⁸ Gerry Shih. “China’s Mass Indoctrination Camps Evoke Cultural Revolution,” *Associated Press*, May 18, (2018). <https://apnews.com/6e151296fb194f85ba69a8babd972e4b>.

⁷⁹ “Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulation on De-Radicalization.” (新疆維吾爾自治區去極端化條例) China Law Translate, last modified March 29, 2017. <http://www.xjdr.gov.cn/info/104>.

and Guanghe County in Gansu province from attending religious education during the Lunar New Year break.⁸⁰

The othering of Muslims paved the way for the rapid spread of Islamophobia, chiefly in online media.⁸¹ Moreover, pro-China scholars are found involved in pestering Islamophobia online. For example, on Weibo, scholars like Xi Wuyi and Mei Xinyu suggest religious extremism is rampant among the Hui,⁸² mobilizing public opinion against them and throwing the onus on the Hui to prove otherwise. The death threats to the Imam of the Nangang mosque exemplify how China is gradually treading the path of hatred toward Islam, irrespective of the ethnicity of its proponents belong to.⁸³

VI. Sinicization as Cultural Genocide

The Chinese State's construction of binary as backward, savagery Uyghur and civilized, modern Han have a colonial

⁸⁰ Christin Shepherd. "Muslim county in China bans children from religious events over break," *Reuters*, January 17, (2018). <https://www.reuters.com/article/china-religion/muslim-county-in-china-bans-children-from-religious-events-over-break-idINKBN1F60PG>.

⁸¹ Gerry Shih. "China's Uyghur Muslims under pressure at home and abroad," interview by Kaiser Kuo, *A Sinica Podcast*, February 6, (2018) Audio, 54:59. <https://www.chinafile.com/library/sinica-podcast/chinas-uyghur-muslims-under-pressure-home-and-abroad>.

⁸² James Leibold. "China's Minority Report: When Racial Harmony Means Homogenization," *Foreign Affairs*, March 23, (2016). <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2016-03-23/chinas-minority-report?cid=soc-tw-rdr>

⁸³ Gerry Shih, "China's Uyghur Muslims."

pretext in its essence. China's ethnic identity scholars demarcated the ethnic boundaries as Western nationalism and Chinese civilization,⁸⁴ arguing that the only possible solution to the ethnic problem would be the Sinicization of ethnic theory. Moreover, the Sinicization of religion is an official policy, too.⁸⁵

Cultural identity is the soul of any ethnic group. Still, China devised a strong nation-state paradigm in Xinjiang, where attempts were made to overshadow the cultural uniqueness of Uyghurs by making ethnic fusion or assimilation aspirational. Also, the elements of monocultural arrangement would ensure the security challenges to the Chinese nation-state framework. Any ethnic fusion in Xinjiang secures China's Great Revival by resolving the Uyghur problem.

Genocide results from a perpetual state of emergency employing the same as the State trying to transform the barbarians into civilized ones. Therefore, ethnic fusion is presented as a solution to ethnic problems. At the same time, it creates a narrative that interweaves and justifies extra-legal internment

⁸⁴ Ma Rong. "A New Perspective in Guiding Ethnic Relations in the 21st Century: 'De Politicization' of Ethnicity in China," *Asian Ethnicity*, 8(3), (2007): 199–217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631360701594950>.

⁸⁵ Xi Jinping. "Xi's speech at 3rd Xinjiang Working Group meeting," *Xinhua News Agency*, September 26, (2020). http://www.bingtuannet.com/btrb_rmbd/jpzt/zyxjgz/tt/top/202009/t20200926_88694.html.

camps, intergeneration separation of Uyghurs, forced labor, and forced sterilization to invoke an orientation of Chineseness.⁸⁶

Critical genocide studies argue that the dominant understanding of genocide is socially inadequate as it creates the impression of genocide as mass killing alone.⁸⁷ There is an overemphasis on the physical determinants of genocide. However, recirculating the biological frameworks of groups overlooks the state-led project of deprivation and social vitality. It is the context in which the United Nations acknowledged the gradual language eradication and economic exclusion of minorities and indigenous people as contributing factors of genocide. It is because of its complexity with long-term processes of cultural annihilation. Genocide is not necessarily murderous acts initiated with individual culpability.⁸⁸

The Chinese State attempts to eradicate religiosity among the Uyghurs by institutionalizing re-education camps. Xi's conviction resonates with transforming religions as merely an extension of

⁸⁶ Magnus Fiskesjö. "Forced Confessions as Identity Conversion in China's Concentration Camps," *Monde chinois*, 62, no. 2, (2020): 28-43. <https://doi.org/10.3917/mochi.062.0028>; David Tobin. "Genocidal processes: social death in Xinjiang," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 45, no. 16, (2022): 93-121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.2001556>.

⁸⁷ Damien Short. "Australia: a continuing genocide?" *Journal of genocide research* 12, no. 1-2, (2010): 45-68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2010.508647>.

⁸⁸ Sheri P. Rosenberg. "Genocide is a process, not an event." *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 7, no. 1, (2012): 16-23. <https://doi.org/10.3138/gsp.7.1.16>.

the CPC. To do that, Xi Jinping envisages the penetration of party cadres into Islam so that they carry out the supervision of Islam in China under the aegis of the party to rally them around the party and the government.⁸⁹ Xi's Sinicization of Islam through 2017-2022 initiated re-education camps. During Xi's era, the re-education camps and the securitization of Xinjiang have accelerated since the middle of 2017 as a securitization plan of Xinjiang. The appointment of Chen Quanguo as Party Secretary of the XUAR has been one of the main drivers of this acceleration.⁹⁰ Besides, securitization emerges as "a sophisticated, multi-layered network of mass surveillance in Xinjiang, part of Xi Jinping's grand strategy for achieving 'social stability and enduring peace.'⁹¹

Chinese State's policies in XUAR exemplify the elements of cultural genocide that include the gradual eradication of language, traditions, and general ways of life. Nevertheless, a few reports suggest demographic genocide, as the Chinese State has been taking draconian measures to suppress the Uyghur birth rates

⁸⁹ "Chinese President Xi's Power is now unchecked: Report." ANI. Last modified November 02, 2022. <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/chinese-president-xis-power-is-now-unchecked-report20221102072442/>

⁹⁰ Adrian Zenz and James Leibold. "Securitizing Xinjiang: police recruitment, informal policing, and ethnic minority co-optation," *The China Quarterly*, 242, (2020): 324-348. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0305741019000778>.

⁹¹ James Leibold. "Surveillance in China's Xinjiang region: Ethnic sorting, coercion, and inducement," *Journal of Contemporary China*, 29, no. 121, (2020): 46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2019.1621529>.

since 2016. Multiple strategies have been adopted to implement Uyghur birth control, including IUDs, sterilization, and even forced abortion, followed by punishing birth control violations with internment camps.⁹² These repressive birth control measures were implemented for Uyghurs when the State abandoned the one-child policy for the Han Chinese. Until the Xi era, ethnic minorities, especially in rural areas, were allowed to have three children. Even now, in papers, Uyghurs in rural Xinjiang can have three children, but they are punished for the same.⁹³ The official response from the Chinese State denounces these reports as fake and regards them as a conspiracy by the Western media and scholars.

The Chinese State may or may not be seeking a demographic genocide. However, there is a gradual decline in the Uyghur population in Xinjiang, and Uyghurs have no option except to choose an ethnic fusion of submerging themselves with the Han identity.

⁹² “China cuts Uighur births with IUDs, abortion, sterilization.” *Associated Press*. Last modified June 29, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/ap-top-news-international-news-weekend-reads-china-health-269b3de1af34e17c1941a514f78d764c>; Adrian Zenz. *Sterilizations, IUDs, and Mandatory Birth Control: The CCP’s Campaign to Suppress Uyghur Birthrates in Xinjiang*. Washington: Jamestown Foundation, (2020).

⁹³ *Associated Press*, “China cuts Uighur births with IUDs, abortion, sterilization.”

The authorities differentiate between the Hui and the Uyghur, but the Han perception of both ethnicities is not free from prejudices. As a result, the Han perceive both ethnic groups as potential threats, and internet users often address Islam as a dangerous religion, integrating the Hui and the Uyghur under the umbrella of Islam, representing local and global concerns for the Chinese. The lack of transparency in mainstream media reports on Muslims in China conspires, in part, to add to the online hatred of Muslims. This is mainly because of the government propaganda that plays up pieces purporting to show how much Chinese Muslims have benefited from the government's preferential policies. Also, the reportage on preferential policies damages the relationship between the Han and the Muslim ethnicities. The Han views these policies as unfair, especially the one-child policy, where China has offered Muslims exemption. There is also increased media reportage of domestic and international terrorism. A gradual de-ethnicization of Muslims has accompanied these concerted efforts to have Muslims categorized as a dangerous community to bring them under the monolithic umbrella of Islam.

Sinicization of Islam emerges as a political strategy, diluting all other identities. The creation of a loyal minority population on the frontiers has continued as the primary objective of the Chinese State in Xinjiang as well as in other ethnic minority regions. However, the allegiance of ethnic minorities has attained its transition from loyalty to socialist values in the pre-reform era to

loyalty toward a solid and stable Chinese State in the post-reform scenario.

In the post-Urumqi and Kunming experiences, though the Chinese State acknowledges the need to redefine the ethnic policy, there is no official endorsement for a change in ethnic policy. Nevertheless, China's official ethnic policy position portrays its preference for gradual ethnic policy reform. Given the spectrum of scholarly debate, it demands the depoliticization of ethnic minorities. Nevertheless, depoliticization resulted in the de-ethnicization of Uyghurs and the Hui, neglecting heterogeneity. Moreover, the Xinjiang issue and the security discourse chiefly preoccupy China's engagement with Islam.

VII. Depoliticizing Uyghurs to De-ethnicizing Muslims

After the Urumqi riots, China organized two high-profile Work Conferences to debate its ethnic management in Xinjiang. The 2010 Ethnic Work Forum proposed everlasting stability in Xinjiang to achieve ethnic unity. Nevertheless, during the second Xinjiang Work Conference in 2014, under the Xi regime, the focus was turned toward "ethnic fusion" and "ethnic mingling"

between the Han and Uyghurs.⁹⁴ Debates were active for ethnic policy reforms or formulation of second-generation ethnic policy.

The second-generation ethnic policy aims to strengthen the national identity at the expense of the ethnic identity by focusing on four identities fatherland (祖國), the Chinese nation (中華民族), Chinese culture (中華文化), and the path of socialism (社會主義道路). Ma Rong⁹⁵ suggested that territorial or ethnic dismemberment of China is required. Ma argued that the Soviet model adopted by the Chinese State in the initial years of the CCP to deal with ethnic minorities had politicized ethnicities. He argued for the depoliticization of ethnic issues so that it helps strengthen the consciousness about national identity among minorities.⁹⁶ As a lead to the depoliticization of ethnic identity, Ma favored *zuqun* (ethnicity) over *minzu* (nationality) to overcome the anxiety of territorial implications of ethnic

⁹⁴ James Leibold. "A family divided: The CCP's central ethnic work conference," *China Brief*, 14, no. 21, (2014). http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43054&no_cache=1#.V-OkW8nSnuk.

⁹⁵ Ma Rong is a specialist in ethnic relations in China. Ma belonging to the Hui minority specializes in Tibet but has published dozens of books and articles on various topics dealing with ethnic issues in many parts of China. Moreover, Ma has influenced the Chinese State's attempts to depoliticize ethnicities in the aftermath of constant ethnic conflicts and discontentment in the minority regions like Xinjiang and Tibet.

⁹⁶ Ma Rong. "Reflections on the debate on China's ethnic policy: My reform proposals and their critics," *Asian Ethnicity*, 15(2), (2014): 237–246. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14631369.2013.868205>.

discontent.⁹⁷ The decisive formulation is integrating Han and non-Han into *Zhonghua minzu*, or Chinese people.

While much of the second-generation ethnic policy was influenced by Ma Rong's idea of depoliticizing ethnicities, Hu Angang and Hu Lianhe⁹⁸ called for the amalgamation of ethnicities in China through meaningful integration of ethnic minorities. These scholars advocated embracing ethnic intermingling instead of ethnic interaction and interchange.⁹⁹

Xi Jinping favored a second-generation ethnic policy because the economic integration did not derive the solution for ethnic discontent and led to unrest in Lhasa (2008) and Urumqi (2009).¹⁰⁰ In 2011, Inner Mongolia and the Chinese State reconsidered the previous attempts to resolve ethnic issues from an economic approach by offering ethnic unity framework to ascertain XUAR with everlasting stability. Through the second-generation ethnic policy, the CCP has blown ethnic separatism out of proportion and is trying to eliminate it. It is

⁹⁷ Mark Elliot. "The case of the missing indigene: Debate over a "second-generation" ethnic policy," *The China Journal*, 73, (January 2015): 187. <https://doi.org/10.1086/679274>.

⁹⁸ Hu Angang, a policy expert, is the founding director of Tsinghua University's Center for China Studies, one of China's most influential think tanks. Hu Lianhe is also a researcher at Tsinghua University but is better known as the "senior Communist Party official" who has become the public face of China's defense of its Uighur policy in venues such as the United Nations.

⁹⁹ Mark Elliot, "The case of the missing indigene," 192.

¹⁰⁰ James Leibold, "A family divided."

done by constituting a social control system with the introduction of the Integrated Joint Operations Platform, which uses algorithms to determine whether a suspect should be re-educated as a precaution based on the evidence received through multiple surveillance mechanisms initiated in Xinjiang.

Though depoliticization was promoted as an effective ethnic reform choice by the Xi regime and the ethnic policy experts of the party, Islam is identified as the sole agency that creates conflict. As a result, the social control mechanism flows beyond Uyghurs to other Muslim ethnicities, declaring Islam the common threat. Thus, despite the State's intention to depoliticize Uyghurs, the Muslims in China are de-ethnicized, wiping out the heterogeneity within them, resulting in the Hui and the Kazakh presence in re-education camps apart from Uyghurs. The outcome would be the Islamization of ethnicities creating a brotherhood among Chinese Muslims that would alienate them from mainstream Chinese society but facilitate further radicalization.

VIII. Conclusion

Secularism and secularization in China are ongoing processes of defining and redefining the relationship between the State and religion. Being an atheist State following a Marxist and Maoist line of action with multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition has had a strenuous engagement with religions since the inception of the PRC. The evolution could be categorized as a

hostile period under Mao, a liberal phase since Deng's era, and Xi's recouping of a new era designing a rigorous Sinicization of religions. Xi's Sinicization strictly envisages the imposition of Chinese orientation into religious affairs. Among these religions, Islam finds relatively problematic encounters with the State due to geopolitical, ethnoreligious, and strategic apprehensions. The concerted efforts to have Muslims categorized as a threat have not only invoked Islamophobia but resulted in the gradual de-ethnicization of Muslims portraying Islam in China as a monolith.

Muslims in China are overwhelmingly Sunni; a few sub-sects exist, like the Gedimu or old school, Sufism, Ikhwan, and Yihewani. The several harmonizing strategies and the corresponding Islamophobia have led to two possibilities. One, it blurs the boundaries of these subsects, erasing the multiplicities in Islam. Secondly, the social re-engineering of the Uyghurs could involve a de-ethnicization process of Muslim ethnicities. It reconfigures the vector of integration away from a particularistic *minzu* identity toward a universal identity of global Islam.

Sinicization of Islam thus is a political strategy leading to the social death of Muslims in China. Unilateral attacks on the Chinese Muslims, portraying them as cancerous to the Chinese society, not only normalizes cultural genocide but alienates the Muslim communities who were part of China's civilizational legacy. Moreover, China's political and economic clout sabotage

global public opinion against the cultural genocide and massive human rights violations employed in Xinjiang.

The Chinese State engages in the Sinicization of Uyghurs with the long-term objective of gradually eradicating language, traditions, and ways of life, shaping up no less than a cultural genocide. However, in the short-term, the Chinese State employs strategies to reorient Islam in accordance with the CPC line. The regime openly embraces and justifies the re-education program and the internment camps arguing that Uyghurs are being trained there for employable skills. Moreover, such training programs are designed to inculcate Chineseness and loyalty among the Uyghurs to the Party-State. The re-education camps have adopted the ways and means to depoliticize the Uyghurs. The Uyghurs are Turkic in their cultural identity, while Islamic in their religious identity. Uyghurs have been following an indigenized version of Islam for a long time.

Nevertheless, recent exposure to the Arab culture has impacted an increasing Arabization of Uyghurs. It created nervousness in China as political Islam has been a dominant outcome, which threatened the stability and security concerns of the Chinese State. Moreover, it enabled the Chinese State to target the genuine Uyghur ethnic discontent as Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism in the aftermath of the 2001 US terror attacks.

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