
Islamic Veiling in Xinjiang: The Political and Societal Struggle to Define Uyghur Female Adornment

James Leibold and Timothy Grose

ABSTRACT

The Islamic veil is arguably the most politicized piece of fabric in the world, eliciting heated debate over its significance and complex meanings. The over 10 million Muslim women in China have their own histories and cultures of veiling. This article explores the ongoing struggle between the Chinese Communist Party and Xinjiang's Uyghur Muslim minority over the right to define what is "appropriate" and "normal" female adornment. New styles of veiling have entered China from abroad, intensifying the controversy over the scope of Uyghur ethnic attire. We contrast the party-state's antiveiling campaign to eliminate popular styles in Xinjiang, with the diverse reasons and meanings Uyghur women and men attach to them. While the party-state strives to control and standardize Uyghur dress, the community itself responds, sometimes defiantly, with a complex registry of veiling practices that reflect everything from ethnonational resistance, increased religious faith, and global Islamic haute couture.

For over a century, Muslim and non-Muslim communities have been debating the significance of the "veil,"¹ with robust exchanges over whether Muslim women must conceal their bodies; how they should cover; and who has the right to decide, define, and speak about the complex meanings of head, face, and body coverings. While the Qur'an alludes to modest female dress, there is little agreement on how this should be embodied.² This debate has only recently emerged in

1. We adopt the terms "veil" and "veiling" as generic descriptors for a wide range of head, face, and body coverings among Muslim women. We follow Gökariksel and Secor in defining veiling as "an Islamic system of modesty in dress," which "in general may range from just covering the hair with a headscarf to fully covering the body." Banu Gökariksel and Anna Secor, "The Veil, Desire, and the Gaze," *Signs* 40, no. 1 (2014): 178 n. 1.

2. The literature on this is extensive. Good starting points are Elizabeth Bucar, *The Islamic Veil* (Oxford: Oneword, 2012); Christian Joppke, *Veil* (London: Polity, 2009); Lila Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013); Marnia Lazreg, *Questioning the Veil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 2nd ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Sahar Amer, *What Is Veiling?* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

China,³ where the Chinese Communist Party exhibits an almost compulsive concern with the thoughts, behavior, and norms of its citizens, especially the non-Han minorities who inhabit strategically important frontier regions. From its inception, the Party has sought not only to classify and regulate ethnic diversity in China but also to define its very content: with museums, textbooks, and even playing cards prescribing representative customs, habits, and costumes for each of China's 56 officially recognized ethnic groups (*minzu* 民族).⁴ In this context, some now question whether veiling is an intrinsic part of Uyghur culture, religion, and traditional ethnic attire, while others suggest that China should follow states like France and Belgium in placing restrictions on religious and Islamic dress.

Veiling in what is today known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR) predates the arrival of both Islam and communism to the region. Prior to the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, veiling was a local matter, with different communities adopting their own standards of modesty, piety, and morality.⁵ Yet with the arrival of first Russian and then Chinese state builders, the veil was politicized in Xinjiang and became an object of intense government concern, with concealment of Muslim women's hair or face antithetical to the optics of the modern state.⁶ Over the last six decades, the Chinese Communist Party has sought to make once remote and isolated oasis communities legible: rolling back blind spots and ordering cultures and peoples in the (arguably) elusive hope of constructing a modern, stable, and loyal frontier. Xinjiang—one-sixth of PRC territory, rich in natural resources, and bordering eight countries—has long been a key battleground in the Party's state-building project.⁷ Yet tensions between the Muslim Uyghur minority and the secular state and its majority Han population have sharpened since the 2009 Ürümqi riots due to the continued marginalization of significant portions of the Uyghur commu-

3. In contrast to an extensive literature on Islamic veiling practices elsewhere in the world, veiling has thus far attracted little attention among China scholars. Notable exceptions include Joanne Smith Finley, *The Art of Symbolic Resistance* (Leiden: Brill, 2013): 235–93; Ayxem Eli, "Gender, Social Hierarchy and Ethnicity" (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2006); and Rachel Harris, "Internet Rumours and the Changing Uyghur Religious Soundscape," *Sounding Islam in China*, March 3, 2014, at <http://www.soundislamchina.org/?p=394OTHERS?>

4. Thomas Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Dru Gladney, *Dislocating China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

5. Ildikó Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters in Xinjiang 1880–1949* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); Richard Antoun, "On the Modesty of Women in Arab Muslim Villages: A Study in the Accommodation of Traditions," *American Anthropologist* 70, no. 4 (1968): 671–97.

6. Aishanjiang Abulizi, *Weiweu'erzu chuantong fushi wenhua yanjiu* [A study of traditional Uyghur clothing culture] (Ürümqi: Xinjiang People's Publishing House, 2009).

7. S. Frederick Starr, ed., *Xinjiang* (New York: Sharpe, 2004); Ildikó Bellér-Hann et al., eds., *Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007); Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Trine Brox and Ildikó Bellér-Hann, eds., *On the Fringes of the Harmonious Society* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2014).

nity and the spread of radical interpretations of Islam. Islam has become an important succor for many Uyghurs, with increased religiosity and public displays of faith across Xinjiang and neighboring countries.⁸ This has set off alarm bells among Party officials. Many in the Party now associate a range of Islamic practices with the “three inimical forces” (terrorism, separatism, and extremism), which they insist are destabilizing the region and challenging Communist Party rule.⁹

In particular, Party officials have been shocked by the dramatic revival of veiling practices over the last decade and the adoption of imported styles in parts of the Uyghur community. In a recent article on combating “religious extremism” in Xinjiang, one of the Party’s top ethnic policy advisors, Zhu Weiqun, blamed overseas Islamic extremists for the proliferation of women wearing “deeply religious clothing.” He asserted that *jilbāb*-style black robes that completely cover the body have never been a part of “Chinese Islamic tradition.”¹⁰ To curb this pernicious trend, he called on the party-state to “persist with the trend of secularizing all aspects of social life” in Xinjiang.

In this article, we explore the ongoing tussle between the Chinese party-state and Uyghurs over head, face, and body coverings, highlighting how deveiling has become a symbolic yet ultimately hollow marker of “progress” in the Party’s efforts to secure political control and social stability in Xinjiang. We will first provide a brief sketch of the history of veiling in Xinjiang before discussing government policies and the diverse veiling practices of Uyghur women today. Our aim is to contrast the state’s sartorial engineering campaign with the variety of meanings Uyghurs attach to the veil. While the Party views the veil as an emblem of religious fanaticism, Uyghur women use it to embody a range of Muslim and Uyghur subjectivities in different discursive and performative contexts. Rather than passive victims of the state’s antiveiling crusade, Uyghurs continue to inscribe the veil with their own idioms and ethics, finding creative ways to navigate between conflicting demands while parrying the state’s intrusion into their daily lives.¹¹

8. On the growing religiosity in portions of Uyghur society, see Smith Finley, *Art of Symbolic Resistance*, 235–93; Edmund Waite, “The Emergence of Muslim Reformism in Contemporary Xinjiang,” in *Situating the Uyghurs between China and Central Asia*, ed. Ildikó Bellér-Hann et al. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007): 56–78; Timothy Grose, “The Uyghurs of the Xinjiang Class” (PhD dissertation, Indiana University, 2014): 129–44.

9. See, e.g., Li Xiaoxia, “Xinjiang e’zhi feifa zongjiao huodong zhengce fenxi” [Analysis of government policies to restrain illegal religious activities in Xinjiang], *Minzu shehuixue yanjiu tongxun* 140 (2013): 1–10.

10. Zhu Weiqun, “Chuli baokong shijian yao cong minzu zongjiao wenti zhong tuomin” [We need to deal with violent terror incidents by desensitizing ethnic and religious issues], *Fenghuang* [The phoenix], April 2, 2014, http://news.ifeng.com/exclusive/official/detail_2014_04/02/35384995_0.shtml; Zhu Weiqun, “Fandui zongjiao jiduan zhuyi yao zonghe shice” [Comprehensive measures are needed to oppose religious extremism], *Haiwai wang*, May 27, 2014, <http://news.163.com/14/0527/15/9T8UBGBB00014AEE.html>.

11. Here we add to the rich literature of ethnic minority agency and hybridity within the Chinese context while placing equal weight on the state’s civilizing, state-building project as it relates to veiling practices, drawing on the scholarship of Steven Harrell, Dru Gladney, Colin Mackerras, Louisa Schein, Ralph Litzinger, Susan Blum, and many others.

This said, the coercive powers of the party-state should not be underestimated, as illustrated by the evident decrease in the number of full-face veils in public places since 2013. Yet in seeking to eliminate some popular styles of veiling in Xinjiang, the Party has inadvertently widened the rift of mistrust and misunderstanding between the Uyghurs and mainstream Han society.

A brief note on methodology is warranted. The “Xinjiang problem” is one of the most politically sensitive topics in modern China. Researchers and journalists alike have been hindered from freely moving about the region and interviewing local inhabitants. Both authors have experienced firsthand the monitoring and intimidation of local and national security officials. As others have noted, creative and flexible approaches are required when conducting research among the Uyghurs, with formal interviews and robust survey data virtually impossible to obtain and subjective biases unavoidable.¹² There is no simple solution to these methodological challenges. Yet in confronting them, this article combines the different skill sets and experiences of the two authors, hoping that our divergent tactics will help mitigate some of the obvious shortcomings.

UYGHUR VEILING: AN ETHNOCULTURAL PRACTICE IN FLUX

Historical texts paint a rich and complex picture of veiling practices throughout the oasis towns of the Tarim Basin (known as *Altishahr* in the local vernacular) prior to the Communist Revolution in 1949.¹³ In fact, *Altishahr* women covered their heads even prior to the region’s gradual conversion to Islam from the tenth to the sixteenth century.¹⁴ But specifically Islamicized veiling was unlikely widespread until *Yaqub Beg* violently seized political power from the Qing in 1867. Shortly after the “fatherly holy warrior” (*ataliq ghazi*) established his Islamic emirate,¹⁵ he funded the construction and repair of important mosques, tombs of Muslim saints, and institutions of Islamic learning (*madrasah*, or *mādris* in Uyghur).¹⁶ He also imposed sharia law, which he narrowly interpreted and strictly enforced.¹⁷ Under his regime, women were required to cover their heads and faces. Some reports from this period even claimed that morality police (*rā’is*)

12. Joanne Smith, “Maintaining Margins: The Politics of Ethnographic Fieldwork in Chinese Central Asia,” *China Journal* 56 (2006): 135–36; Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*, 17–21.

13. We have adopted the term *Altishahr* in light of Thum’s convincing demonstration of its utility in discussions about the region prior to the widespread use of Xinjiang or Eastern Turkestan. See Rian Thum, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014): 4–7.

14. Aishanjiang Abulizi, *Weiweu’erzu chuantong fushi wenhua yanjiu*, 36–37.

15. For an interesting discussion on the origins of this title, see Hodong Kim, *Holy War in China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004): 99.

16. *Ibid.*, 129–31.

17. Demetrius Charles de Kavanagh Boulger, *The Life of Yakoob Beg* (London: Allen, 1878): 145–47; Ella Sykes and Percy Sykes, *Through Deserts and Oases of Central Asia* (London: Macmillan, 1920): 282.

whipped women who set foot in public unveiled.¹⁸ For the Altishahr women themselves, however, veils embodied a myriad of meanings (humility, chastity, shame, virtue, etc.) and often marked membership within a particular community.¹⁹

By the turn of the nineteenth century, there was no universal standard for veiling in Altishahr;²⁰ rather veiling practices changed according to intellectual and cultural trends in the Islamic world and local communities. The introduction of “scientific” (*pänniy*) or “new-style” (*yengichä*) schools by modern Muslim reformers is a notable example of this fluidity.²¹ These schools, many of which welcomed young girls, combined secular subjects with a religious curriculum. In addition to providing female students with a basic education and trade skills, the schools played a key role in eradicating child marriage, polygyny, and veiling.²² In Kashgar, for example, girls marched off to schools each day singing about their “hair tied back in pigtails.”²³

Styles of veiling prior to 1949 remained diverse, varying according to local preferences and socioeconomic status.²⁴ Strict veiling was often the reserve of well-to-do urban women who were not expected to engage in manual labor. City-dwelling girls would begin to cover their heads around age 12 and would adopt more modest dress after marriage.²⁵ Like the Central Asian *paranji* (*päränjä*), an ensemble that combines a long cloak and heavy horsehair veil, Islamic dress in Altishahr often covered women from head to toe,²⁶ while women in Kashgar and Yarkand sometimes left their faces exposed.²⁷ Travelers who arrived in the region from more conservative Muslim communities were surprised to find unveiled women freely mingling with men in the bazaars and engaging in commerce.²⁸ Women in

18. Boulger, *Life of Yakooob Beg*, 146; J. W. Kaye, “Copy or Extracts of Correspondence Relating to the Mission of Mr. Douglas Forsyth to Yarkand” (Government of India Foreign Department, 1871), 22; Sykes and Sykes, *Through Deserts and Oases*, 61.

19. Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters*; Eli, “Gender, Social Hierarchy and Ethnicity.”

20. Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters*, 193.

21. Eric Schluessel, “History, Identity, and Mother Tongue Education in Xinjiang,” *Central Asian Survey* 28, no. 4 (2009): 385–86.

22. Adeeb Khalid, “Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization,” *Slavic Review* 65, no. 2 (2006): 241; Edward Lazzerini, “Beyond Renewal,” in *Muslims of Central Asia*, ed. Jo-Ann Grose (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992): 162–63.

23. Adil Muhämmät, *Qäshqär ma’aripi* [Education in Kashgar] (Kashgar: Kashgar Uyghur Language Press, 2012): 98.

24. Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters*, 192–93.

25. John Hultvall, *Mission and Revolution in Central Asia: The MCCS Mission Work in Eastern Turkestan, 1892–1938*, trans. Birgitta Åhman (Stockholm: Gummessons, 1981), 12–18.

26. Douglas Northrop, “The Limits of Liberation,” in *Everyday Life in Central Asia*, ed. Jeff Sahadeo and Russell Zanca (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007): 94; see also Rakhmat Rakhimov, “Veil of Mystery,” *Anthropology & Archeology of Eurasia* 45, no. 4 (2007): 67–92.

27. Gunnar Jarring, “Gustav Raquette and Qasim Akhun’s Letters to Kamul Efendi,” in *Ethological and Folkloristic Materials from Southern Sinkiang* (Lund: Gleerup, 1975): 25; P. S. Nazaroff, *Moved On!* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1935), 134; Ella Sykes, “Notes on the Folklore of Chinese Turkestan,” *Folklore* 35 (1924): 251.

28. Sykes and Sykes, *Through Deserts and Oases*, 61 and 212.

remote villages, as well as urban-dwelling women from low-class neighborhoods, also rarely covered their faces with veils,²⁹ though they frequently covered their heads and faces when visiting holy sites,³⁰ as well as when they encountered a man of high status.³¹

The paucity of detailed information about veiling during the initial decades of the PRC obliges us to turn to official accounts and occasional mentions of these practices in Western sources. Party sources insist that Islamic law infringed on the basic rights of Uyghur women, confining them to their homes and forcing them to cover their heads prior to the founding of New China;³² while the Party ushered in a new era of unprecedented social equality that finally “liberated [Uyghur women] from the veil.”³³ Despite the certainty of the language, it is extremely doubtful that Uyghur women suddenly discarded their veils en masse. Like elsewhere in the Islamic world, antiveiling campaigns (like the *hujum*, or “assault,” movement carried out in Uzbekistan in 1927) often fail in the long run as women simply recovered themselves (sometimes in different ways) after the campaign runs out of steam.³⁴ In fact, Party leaders initially adopted a cautious approach to Islam in Xinjiang, and Han cadres dispatched to the region were ordered to respect ethnic minority customs.³⁵

Whether forced or voluntary (it is difficult to ascertain), adornment styles continued to evolve during the early decades of the PRC, reflecting wider social and cultural trends in Central Asia and the spread of communist ideology and fashion from Moscow to Beijing. Many young Uyghur women followed their Russian peers in donning baggy, single-piece Bragi dresses usually paired with a *doppa* hat (*huamao* 花帽) rather than a headscarf; others adopted military-style uniforms and hats that emerged as popular symbols of the revolution in China.³⁶ But there is also evidence that some Uyghur women (particularly older, rural women) retained thin scarves throughout the 1950s and 1960s.³⁷

29. Nazaroff, *Moved On*, 134; Sykes and Sykes, *Through Deserts and Oases*, 189.

30. Jarring, “Gustav Raquette,” 19.

31. Clarmont Percival Skrine, *Chinese Central Asia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1926): 201; Sykes and Sykes, *Through Deserts and Oases*, 58.

32. State Ethnic Affairs Commission, *Weiwu'erzu jianshi* [A concise history of the Uyghurs] (Beijing: Ethnic Publishing House, 2009): 415.

33. “Yaghliq” [Veils], *Tianshan Net*, June 30, 2009, http://uy.ts.cn/Miras/content/2009-06/30/content_209864.htm.

34. Khalid, “Backwardness and the Quest for Civilization”; Northrop, “Limits of Liberation.”

35. Donald McMillen, *Chinese Communist Power and Policy in Xinjiang, 1949–1977* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1979): 114–15.

36. Wang Si'en, “Jiefang hou Xinjiang Weizu'erzu fushi bianqian yanjiu” [Analysis of Xinjiang Uyghur costumes change after Chinese liberation] (MA thesis, East China University, 2009), 17–35.

37. Cindy Huang, “Faith and Ethics in the Time of Postcommunism,” *Soundings* 92 (Spring/Summer 2009): 85.

Traditional Uyghur head coverings came under attack during the Cultural Revolution decade (1966–76),³⁸ when all religious and ethnic practices in China were criticized.³⁹ In his memoir *The Battle of Qara Jul Village (Qara juldiki jäng)*,⁴⁰ the Uyghur writer Abdurräshid Haji Kerimi claims that Uyghur culture, especially clothing, was targeted as a manifestation of the “four olds.”⁴¹ The effects of the Cultural Revolution on veiling appear to have been long lasting. An internal document circulated within Turpan’s city government in the late 1980s reveals that local women customarily wore hats (*bük*) and long blouses (*künäk*) and reserved decorating their hair with a brightly colored scarf (*yaghliq*) for special occasions.⁴² During field research in the mid-1980s and again in the mid-1990s, Rudelson observed that veiling was only found in southern Xinjiang, Kashgar in particular,⁴³ while women in Yining (or Ghulja in Uyghur) had abandoned the practice entirely.⁴⁴

After China’s national political landscape shifted away from assimilationist policies to more accommodating approaches in dealing with ethnic minorities in the 1980s and 1990s, some Uyghurs reembraced Islamic and ethnic practices that were persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. By the 1990s, the large increase in the number of mosque attendees in Ürümqi spurred the construction of new mosques and the expansion of existing mosques.⁴⁵ In sharp contrast to 1970s Xinjiang, most Uyghur men now view communal worship on Friday, performing prayers at least once a day, and fasting during Ramadan as the minimum requirement for a “proper” Muslim, while many members of the Uyghur elite now have access to the cultural and religious trends of the wider Islamic world through the Internet as well as trade and travel opportunities.⁴⁶

38. Haniqiz Nurmämät, “Kashi diqu Weiwu’erzu funü dai toujin xisu de minzuxue diaocha” [An ethnographic survey of headscarf customs among Uyghur women in Kashgar] (MA thesis, Xinjiang Normal University, 2012), 31; Wang, “Jiefang hou Xinjiang,” 29–38.

39. Tom Grunfeld, “In Search of Equality,” *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 17, no. 1 (1985): 64; James Millward, *Eurasian Crossroads* (London: Hurst, 2007), 275; Justin Rudelson, *Oasis Identities* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997): 104.

40. The authors are grateful to Sandrine Catris for pointing out this source.

41. Abdurushid Haji Kerimi, *Qara Juldiki Jäng* (Stockholm: Uyghur PEN, 2012): 113–14, http://www.uyghurpen.org/uy/Qarajuldiki_jeng.pdf.

42. Gheni Mäynäm and Keram Tursun, eds., “Turpan tarih materiyalliri” [Turpan historical materials] (unpublished internal Party document, Turpan, 1988), 184–85.

43. Rudelson, *Oasis Identities*, 153.

44. *Ibid.*, 162.

45. Smith Finley, *Art of Symbolic Resistance*, 238. According to one government official, the number of mosques in Xinjiang increased tenfold since the death of Mao and now totals over 20,000. See Xinhua, “Xinjiang’s Mosques Have Grown Ten-Fold,” *Global Times*, March 3, 2015, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/909861.shtml>.

46. Bellér-Hann, *Community Matters*, 311; Timothy Grose, “(Re)Embracing Islam in Neidi,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 24, no. 91 (2015): 101–18.

Veiling is no exception to the growing trend toward more prescribed Islamic practices in Xinjiang. The revitalization of the practice has been especially pronounced among young women in southern Xinjiang and Ürümqi's predominantly Uyghur Erdaoqiao (or Döngköwrük) district.⁴⁷ During repeated visits to Xinjiang over the last decade, the two authors have noticed a marked increase in the number and types of head-, face-, and body-covering cloths—a phenomenon that includes both urban and rural Uyghur women. In Xinjiang, like elsewhere, the types of headdress are as diverse as the reasons for covering. Veiling practices today differ from region to region and generation to generation and are influenced by both local traditions and global fashion trends. Most Han officials and some Uyghurs conflate these styles, creating confusion over what the party-state seeks to eliminate. There is a growing concern among Uyghurs that officials might extend their antiveiling efforts beyond burqa-style head and body coverings to include more popular styles. The uncertainty here, we argue, is transforming the veil into a hot-button political issue in contemporary Xinjiang society.

Single-piece headscarves (see fig. 1, photograph 1) have long been ubiquitous across the region and closely associated with Uyghur femininity and identity, although many Uyghur women no longer wear them. Styles, fabrics, colors, and degrees of concealment vary greatly. Some scarves are knotted around the back of the head, covering most or all of the hair yet leaving the ears and neck exposed; others tie the scarf under the chin, concealing the neck and ears yet leaving the forehead and some of the hair exposed. In recent years, with the flow of cultural styles and couture trends from the Middle East and Central Asia into Xinjiang via television, movies, print media, and the Internet, some Uyghur women have adopted the hijab (see fig. 1, photograph 2), a tight-fitting one- or two-piece set of scarves that cover the hair, forehead, and ears completely, and often the neck, chest and shoulders as well.⁴⁸ This more religiously conservative headdress is viewed as both alien and infelicitous by some local officials despite its increasing popularity in Xinjiang and across the Islamic world.

Among some women, a headscarf or hijab is accompanied with a *niqab* that covers the nose and lower face (see fig. 1, photograph 3). Colors and styles again vary, with some women even adopting cotton facemasks (often with lace) that are a common defense against the heavy air pollution in many urban centers in China. Some Uyghur women cover not only the head and face but also the body, wearing a long cloak or *jilbāb* (see fig. 1, photograph 4), or some other style of loose-fitting robe and veil that covers almost the entire body and face. Finally, in the Kashgar region, some older women go out in public with a brown coarsely

47. Smith Finley, *Art of Symbolic Resistance*, 241–42; Waite, “Emergence of Muslim Reformism,” 72.

48. One woman from Hotan explained that people in her hometown refer to this style of veil as *hajimchä yaghliq* (the Haji style veil).



1. headscarves [Ch. *toujin* 头巾; Uy. *yaghliq* or *sharpa*]



2. *hijab* [Ch. *liqieke* 里切克; Uy. *hijab* or *lichäk*]



3. *jilbāb* [Ch. *jilibafu* 吉里巴甫 or *zhaopao* 罩袍; Uy. *jilbāb*]



4. *niqab* [Ch. *mengmiansha* 蒙面沙; Uy. *niqab*, *chūmbāl* or *chūmpārdā*]



5. Kashgar-style netted veil [Ch. *wangzhuang toujin* 网状头巾; Uy. *tor roma!*]



6. *ätläs-fabric* [Ch. *aidelaisi* 艾德莱斯] dresses and *doppa hats* [Ch. *huamao* 花帽]

Figure 1. Diversity of Uyghur female adornment in Xinjiang. The authors thank Aziz Isa for providing the photograph of the woman in a *jilbāb*. The remaining photos were taken by the authors.

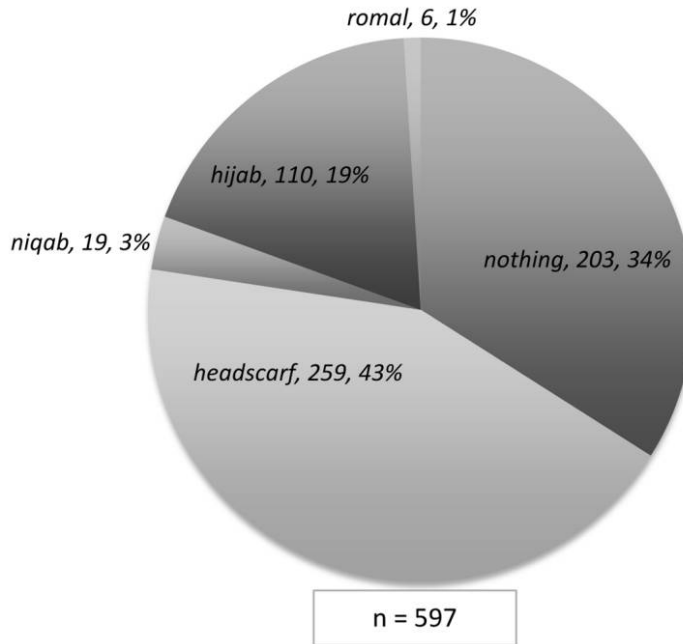


Figure 2. Veiling types, Ürümqi and Kashgar, 2013–14

woven cloth draped over the head, known as a *tor romal* (netted veil; see fig. 1, photograph 5), which can be pulled completely over the head and face when a man or stranger is encountered, while others wear a single, embroidered fabric (often white in color) draped over their head and shoulder without tying it around the chin or neck. Women wearing *niqab/chümbäl* or *tor romal* are commonly described in Uyghur as “*ropach*,” or strictly veiled, and these are the principle targets of the party-state’s antiveiling efforts.

We conducted a crude survey on the popularity of various veiling styles during research trips to Ürümqi and Kasghar in 2013 and 2014. For this direct observation exercise, we noted the types of head coverings and the approximate age of nearly 600 women in different Uyghur neighborhoods (see figs. 2–3). By itself, this method is far from ideal, but restrictions on formal surveys force scholars to adopt ad hoc approaches. We can still draw a few conclusions from our data: first, over 30 percent of women go completely uncovered and thus represent a potential ally in the government’s sartorial campaign; and, second, the popularity of the hijab among women under age 40 suggests the influence of recent religious, fashion, and cultural trends emanating from outside of China. While many of these young women are prohibited from veiling at school or in their places of employment, they join other Uyghur women in wearing hijabs and headscarves when going out in public.

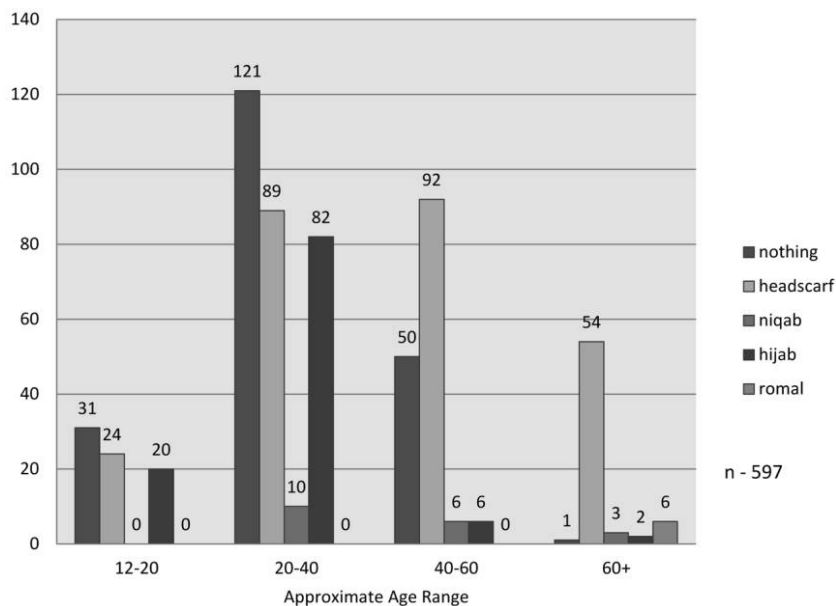


Figure 3. Veiling types by age group

THE STATE'S VEILING POLICIES

At present, the party-state lacks any clear policy on veiling, and there is considerable evidence of widespread disagreement on how best to tackle this sensitive issue at a national, regional, and local levels. At the heart of the problem is whether veiling (in some or all of its manifestations) is part of Uyghur ethnic culture and tradition. The PRC Constitution of 1982 guarantees ethnic minorities like the Uyghurs the right “to preserve or reform their own ways and customs” (article 4) and “enjoy freedom of religious belief” (article 36) and grants Xinjiang, which is officially titled the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, the authority, as an “organ of self-government,” “to sort out and protect the cultural legacy of each ethnic group and work for the development and prosperity of their ethnic cultures” (*minzu wenhua* 民族文化; article 119).⁴⁹

Minority and Han cultures have long been at odds in modern China with the former symbolizing “backwardness” and “tradition,” and the latter “modernity” and “progress” in China’s civilizing project.⁵⁰ Yet, the religiosity and conservatism in some segments of Uyghur society when combined with the spike in ethnic and religious violence has heightened the sense of urgency among government officials, with the veil now targeted as an observable symbol of religious

49. *The Constitution of the PRC* (Beijing: Information Office, State Council, 1982).

50. Stevan Harrell, “Introduction: Civilizing Projects and the Reaction to Them,” in *Cultural Encounters on China’s Ethnic Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 3–36.

extremism and cultural backwardness. In the current environment, issues once deemed purely ethnic, cultural or even personal are being reinterpreted as overtly political and ideological acts that warrant closer Party scrutiny and intervention. The influential Xinjiang-based social scientist Li Xiaoxia recently asserted that veiling is neither a personal fashion statement nor a traditional ethnic custom in Xinjiang but rather a pernicious practice that reflects a complex and dangerous political situation. “As a result,” she writes, “‘de-veiling’ has emerged as one of the most important tasks in managing religious activities in Xinjiang.”⁵¹

After taking over as Party Secretary in 2010, Zhang Chunxian called for the promotion of “modern culture” in Xinjiang, including a “modern lifestyle.” Ethnic minority women (Uyghur women in particular) were targeted for special attention, with Han women and their fashions put forward as an unspoken standard of modernity. Officials in Xinjiang expressed concern about a “rebound” (*fantan* 反弹) in veiling practices, especially among women under age 30 in urban areas, and called for urgent “deveiling efforts” (*jie miansha gongzuo* 揭面纱工作). As the Xinjiang Women’s Federation admitted in a 2011 internal report, even Uyghur government officials, schoolteachers, health care professionals, and university students were now “tightly wrapping themselves in headscarves, *jilbāb*, long sleeves and long skirts.”⁵²

In order to counter this “regressive fad” and promote a “modern lifestyle,” the regional leadership initiated “Project Beauty” (*liangli gongcheng* 靓丽工程) in September 2011. This five-year, US\$8 million “engineering project” (the literal translation of 工程) aims to promote both the fashion and cosmetic industry in Xinjiang and “quality education” (*suzhi jiaoyu* 素质教育) among Xinjiang women,⁵³ “encouraging the women of all ethnic groups to become practitioners, promoters, and disseminators of modern culture.”⁵⁴ The project seeks to engender an unbound and deveiled “new-style women.” As a government editorial put it in 2012: “veils and long robes block a women’s splendor and beauty. Without a doubt this is a backward and regressive trend that deviates from modern development and thus is incompatible with the vast beauty of Xinjiang. Women represent the love and beauty of the world and they should personify beauty and

51. Li Xiaoxia, “Xinjiang e’zhi feifa zongjiao huodong zhengce fenxi,” 6.

52. Xinjiang Women’s Federation, “Zhiziqu fulian duocuo bingju zhuoli jiejie Xinjiang bufen shaoshu minzu funü mengmiansha wenti” [A range of measures put forward by the Xinjiang Women’s Federation to resolve the problem of a small number of women wearing veils], October 20, 2011, <http://www.xjwomen.org.cn/xjfl/ywqx/2011/11728.htm>.

53. On the concept of *suzhi*, see Tamara Jacka, “Cultivating Citizens,” *Positions* 17, no. 3 (2009): 523–35; and on *suzhi* education, see Andrew Kipnis, *Governing Educational Desire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011): 65–67.

54. “Xinjiang nüxing ‘liangli gongcheng’ zhengshi qidong” [Formal launch of “Project Beauty” for Xinjiang women], *Tianshan Net*, September 9, 2011, http://www.ts.cn/special/2011_Beautiful/2011-09/08/content_6154274.htm.

serve as emissaries of love. Wrapping oneself up is not only un-pretty, it can also destroy one's body and mind. One's heart and soul can wither due to long periods in the dark."⁵⁵

Over the last four years, the Women's Federation and other parts of the XUAR government have staged fashion shows, exhibitions, performances, and other propaganda exercises, where Uyghur and other ethnic minority women are encouraged to "expose their face and allow their beautiful hair to flow free." Major urban centers have created educational posters and sartorial monitoring stations in Uyghur neighborhoods, while inspection teams have sought out veiled women for reeducation in the countryside. Rewards and incentives are provided for deveiling, including an all-expenses-paid trip to cities like Beijing and Shanghai in one case,⁵⁶ and 5,000 RMB (approximately US\$800) worth of colorful *ätläs* fabric in another.⁵⁷ At the same time, editorials in *Xinjiang Daily* and other newspapers have sought to persuade readers that *niqab*, *jilbāb*, and hijab are not part of traditional Uyghur adornment.⁵⁸

In their place, other styles are actively promoted as more "authentic," "traditional," and paradoxically "modern" forms of Uyghur beauty, chiefly braided hair, *ätläs* fabric dresses and skirts, and velvet or embroidered *doppa* hats (see fig. 4 and fig. 1, photograph 6). One township in Aksu prefecture recently held a "braid contest," with awards doled out for the longest and most beautiful hair plaits. One Uyghur participant reportedly claimed the event "allowed the masses to revert back to their traditional clothing and cast off strange costumes."⁵⁹ With all its hyperbolic boasting about multiethnic equality and harmony in China, the party-state must tread carefully in relation to Uyghur culture, tradition, and identity, seeking to carefully redefine "ethnic costumes" in ways that exclude veils

55. "Xinjiang nüxing 'liangli gongcheng' yu xiandai wenhua" [Modern culture and "Project Beauty" for Xinjiang women], *Tianshan Net*, May 9, 2012, http://www.ts.cn/special/2011_Beautiful/2012-05/09/content_6814977.htm.

56. "Kashi diqu nübuwei, jiediao miansha funü yuanman wancheng aiguo gan'en jiaoyu" [Kashgar women successfully complete patriotic and grateful education by removing their veils and adopting headscarves], *Xinjiang dang jian wang*, December 24, 2012, <http://www.xjkunlun.cn/quntuangongzuo/fulian/2012/2668171.htm>.

57. Li Chunling, "Xinjiang 13 hu cunmin zhudong shangjiao 'hei zhaopao dizhi zongjiao jiduan sixiang" [Villagers from 13 households in Xinjiang resist religious extremist thought by turning over "black burqas" to the authorities], *Xinjiang Ribao*, October 15, 2014, <http://www.xjdaily.com.cn/xinjiang/002/1135828.shtml>.

58. See, e.g., Manbat Turdi, "Dai heisha chuan heiqun bushi yige hao xianxiang?" [Wearing black veils and black robes is not a good look], *Xinjiang Ribao*, July 19, 2013, http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/detail_2013_07/19/27664382_0.shtml; Zumret Ablikim, "Shi shei xiang zhebi weiwuerzu jiemei de meili?" [Who wants to hide the beauty of young Uyghur women], *Xinjiang Ribao*, July 19, 2013, <http://news.sina.com.cn/pl/2013-07-19/150627716447.shtml>.

59. Hao Junfeng, "Xinjiang Yisihala zhen juxing cai bianzi dahui" [Yixihala township in Xinjiang holds a braid contest to resist the influence of illegal religious acts], *Akesu Ribao*, June 23, 2014, http://www.guancha.cn/local/2014_06_23_240213.shtml.



Figure 4. Ürümqi city propaganda poster, November 2014. The top banner reads, “Prohibited ‘abnormal’ clothing.’ Strive to be the most beautiful person in Ürümqi!”

so as not to be seen as favoring or imposing Han fashion and culture on Uyghur women. Ironically, however, many Uyghur women now view headcovering as part of a modern and global Islamic public, rather than anything particularly “traditional” or “backward,” let alone unique to Uyghur culture.

If the full-face veil and body-covering *jilbāb* are deemed “bizarre” (*qizhuang yifu* 奇装异服) and “abnormal” (*fei zhengchang* 非正常) forms of adornment in official propaganda, what about the ubiquitous headscarf that has been worn by Uyghur women throughout the twentieth century? Aren’t headscarves a quintessential part of Uyghur ethnic culture and femininity? A confidential internal document issued by the provincial department of education in 2013 as part of a campaign to eliminate extremist religious thought and promote modern culture and patriotism in regional schools seeks to clarify the meaning of “ethnic customs and habits” as it relates to constitutional rights and protections.⁶⁰ Ethnic traditions, the document begins in classic Marxist fashion, are historically contingent and thus need to keep pace with the times, meaning ethnic groups must continually “adopt the cream and cast off the dregs,” voluntarily abandoning backward, conservative, and silly customs and habits. Otherwise, it is suggested, ethnic groups will become extinct.

The document asserts that extremists with ulterior motives are now duping Muslim women, attempting to convince them the veil and *jilbāb*-style robes are customary forms of clothing, and in some cases even publicly chiding them; yet these fashions are part of Arab culture (not Xinjiang) and “the wearing of the ‘*jilbāb*’ is an outward expression of religious extremism.” Conservative sects like the Taliban, who claim Islam requires women to cover their bodies outside of the home, are “distorting and misinterpreting” the Qur’an and should not be considered Muslims. In contrast, Uyghur ethnic customs are “bright and beautiful with an obvious ethnic character,” like *ātlās* dresses, earrings, rings, necklaces and other manifestation in keeping with the “singing and dancing” culture of all ethnic groups in Xinjiang.

The document declares that neither the headscarf nor the *doppa* are appropriate student apparel, and dismisses arguments that prohibiting students from wearing headscarves and *doppas* is “a form of discrimination against traditional *minzu* adornment.” They are simply not part of the uniform, although in the past local schools in Xinjiang adopted a far more relaxed definition of appropriate school attire. While the document admits the *doppa* is “certainly a distinctive Uyghur ethnic cultural symbol,” there is no similar declaration regarding the headscarf, leaving its place as a part of Uyghur culture ambiguous.

60. Department of Education, XUAR, “Neibu mingdian (2013) 276 hao: Guanyu zai quanqu jiaoyu xitong kaishi ‘chongshang kexue jingshen, jianxing xiandai wenhua, wei hu zuguo tongyi’ zhuti jiaoyu huodong de tong” [Internal cable 2013, number 276: Circular on holding an education campaign on “Upholding the spirit of science, moving toward modern culture, and safeguarding national unity” throughout the entire XUAR education system], September 3, 2013, www.xjedu.gov.cn/FileDownload.do?affixid=13342.

This state of ambiguity is slated to end shortly. The Small Leadership Group for Standardization Work at the XUAR's Bureau of Quality and Technology Supervision has recently been tasked with standardizing traditional ethnic clothing in Xinjiang, while producing representative samples of each groups' traditional clothing.⁶¹ Turgunjan Tursun, a research fellow at the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences, supported this new policy in the Chinese language press, arguing that a clear delineation of ethnic adornment is needed to provide a legal framework for punishing those who violate ethnic customs and attempt to spread extremist ideas.⁶² By redefining and reifying ethnic dress, the party-state is employing a cultural argument—Uyghur culture is veil free—to pursue what is essentially a much larger political aim—Uyghurs as chiefly modern, secular, and undifferentiated Chinese citizens.

POLICING THE VEIL

Project Beauty targets Uyghur women through education and persuasion, aiming for “voluntary” de veiling and gradual transformation. Yet on the ground in many locations, local authorities have adopted a far heavier hand in policing the veil, especially in the wake of recent violence. In their search for the roots of instability, local officials are targeting “outward manifestation” of religious extremism, equating certain types of veiling with extremist thoughts and activities. Attempts to maintain security and stability now entail blatant ethnic profiling and maladrofit policing tactics that are fueling a dangerous cycle of ethnic and religious bloodshed.

The mass media and government reports mention a range of official grassroots measures to root out and then eliminate veiling practices. Take, for example, the “five-step method” pioneered in Shufu county (98 percent Uyghur) in Kashgar prefecture in 2010.⁶³ Step one is “ferreting out the enemy” (*moqing dishu* 摸清底数). Female cadres are mobilized to identify each and every veiled woman. The next step, “combing for causes” (*shuli yuanyin* 梳理原因), seeks to understand the reasons for veiling, including extremist religious thought, the influence of family members, and copying of veiling practices from abroad. In steps three and four, “building the right atmosphere” (*yingzao fenwei* 营造氛围) and “educa-

61. Wang Tao, “Xinjiang jiji tuijin shaoshu minzu chuantong fushi biao zhunhua” [Xinjiang is energetically pushing forward the standardization of traditional ethnic customs], *Tianshan Net*, May 13, 2014, http://news.ts.cn/content/2014-05/12/content_9656051_all.htm.

62. Turgunjan Tursun, “Zai Xinjiang, chuan shenme bushi xiaoshi” [In Xinjiang what one wears is not a simple matter], *Huanqiu shibao*, August 7, 2014, <http://www.mzb.com.cn/html/report/140831687-1.htm>.

63. “Shufu xian jie miansha ‘wubu gongzuo fa’ chuanxin zongjiao shiwu guanli” [The “five step method” for de veiling in Shufu county pioneers new ways on managing religious affairs], *Xinjiang dangjian wang*, December 31, 2013, <http://www.xjkunlun.cn/zzgz/jczjzs/ncdj/2013/3171595.htm>.

tion and transformation” (*jiaoyu zhuanhua* 教育转化), Party officials confront veiled women and their families, explaining “correct” Islamic practices and persuading them to remove their veils. The final step, “consolidate and raise the bar” (*gonggu tigao* 巩固提高), has cadres take personal responsibility for assigned women in order to prevent any reemergence of veiling.

Due to its supposed success, the method was rolled out across Kashgar prefecture in 2012 and appears to have also been adopted in neighboring Hotan prefecture and other locales.⁶⁴ In Kashgar city, Party officials claimed a 71 percent success rate in 2012, with 1,565 out of 2,205 veiled women “led to abandon these bad habits; removing their veils; no longer wearing bizarre, religious-style clothing; and instead pursuing a healthy, scientific, civilized, and modern lifestyle.”⁶⁵ In other places, these high-pressure tactics have been coupled with fines, the threat of arrest, and forms of extrajudicial punishments, with some women subjected to “custody and education” (*shourong jiaoyu* 收容教育) or “administrative detention” (*xingzheng juliu* 行政拘留) until they agree to remove their veils and pledge not to reveal.⁶⁶ There have even been reports of women being forcefully deveiled (*qiangzhai miansha* 强摘面纱) in public.⁶⁷ These actions explicitly violate provincial rules that “prohibit deveiling on the street” and other “crude methods,” and instead call for a patient attitude and the use of education and persuasion to get women to voluntarily correct their behavior.⁶⁸

In Yutian county (98 percent Uyghur) in Hotan prefecture, Party officials initiated “targeted administrative measures” in 2012 that sought to compel women to remove their veils.⁶⁹ Special “red armband” teams were assigned quotas and zones of responsibility where they were to carry out on-the-spot inspections. On discovering a veiled woman, officials were instructed to verify the individual’s

64. “Kashi shi quanmian tuixing ‘wubu gongzuo fa’ zuohao funü jie miansha gongzuo” [Kashgar city comprehensively pushes forward the “five step method” in order to carry out good deveiling work], *Kashi shi dangjian wang*, November 2, 2012, <http://www.kssdj.cn/Item/2096.aspx>; “Hetian shi ‘si jiaqiang si tuijin’ zhuanbian zuofeng fuwu qunzhong huodong shenru kaizhan” [Hotan city comprehensively carries out the “four strengthening, four propel forward” campaign to transform the work styles of the masses], *Xinjiang Hetian zhengfu wang*, May 10, 2013, <http://www.hts.gov.cn/Article/ShowArticle.aspx?ArticleID=182838>.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Ding Xiao, “Jiya mengmiansha nüzi chongji jiating xuejing” [The detention of veiled women leads to a clash between families and the school], *RFA*, July 23, 2010, <http://www.rfa.org/mandarin/yataibaodao/xj-07232010160405.html>; an example of an August 2012 antiveiling pledge document can be found at <http://tieba.baidu.com/p/3098605677>.

67. Li Xiaoxia, “Xinjiang e’zhi feifa zongjiao huodong zhengce fenxi.”

68. General Office of the XUAR government, “Zizhi qu 11 hao wenjian baiti wenda” [100 questions and answers on Document No. 11], 2013, <http://wenku.baidu.com/view/d62221b4e53a580216fcfe70.html>.

69. Office of Social Management and Religious Administration, “Yutian xian duocuo bingju jiekai funü mengsha” [Yutian county simultaneously develops different methods to deveil women], Karamay Regional Government website, September 26, 2012, <http://zzw.klmy.gov.cn/ywtdt/Pages/于田县多措并举揭开妇女面纱.aspx>.

identity, open a case file, and then report the matter to the relevant authorities. These teams of officials also pioneered new “control methods” in order to apply added pressure, such as termination of preferential benefits for violators and their families; the removal of fuel subsidies for taxis and buses that transport veiled women; and the removal of credentials or even forced closure of businesses and restaurants that provide services to veiled women. In Yutian and elsewhere, officials have targeted businesses that manufacture or sell veiling apparel, seizing materials and threatening closure. Authorities in Ürümqi launched a special rectification campaign that seized 259 *jilbāb*, 1,265 silk scarves, 293 hats, and 149 pieces of clothing with the Islamic star and crescent printed on them.⁷⁰ This is the first confiscation of silk scarves we are aware of and might signal the future direction of local policing.

In some locales over the past five years, covered women have been prohibited from entering public places.⁷¹ In the northwestern city of Karamay, for example, those wearing veils, *jilbāb*, and hijab (as well as men with long beards and clothing featuring crescents, moons, and stars) were prohibited from boarding public buses in 2014, with violators handed over to the police.⁷² Other areas have provided cash rewards for reporting veiled women to the authorities.⁷³ In August 2014, local authorities in Yining prefecture passed a stringent trial regulation banning “five types of people” (*wulei renyuan* 五类人员)—those with veiled faces, *jilbāb*, hijab (which includes “Malay-style and other bizarre clothing”), crescent, moon, and star clothing, and abnormally long beards—from government buildings, private and public enterprises, train stations, bus stations, airports, hospitals, schools, banks, markets, and all other public spaces.⁷⁴ Public security officials are authorized to forcefully detain violators, while ordinary citizens are asked to re-

70. “Wulumuqi shi: zhuanxiang zhengzhi jizhong gai” [Ürümqi city carries out a targeted strike hard exercise], *Xinjiang Ribao*, August 16, 2014, <http://xjrb.xjdaily.com/jryw/1112089.shtml>.

71. Ma Erhaba, “Gongliu zhen Qiaoleipan shequ zhaokai dangzhibu zhuanti zuzhi shenghuo hui zhengqiu yijian zuotanhui” [The Party branch of the Qiaotiepan community in Gongliu township holds a special meeting to condemn illicit views], *Gongliu dangjian wang*, August 15, 2014, http://www.glccp.gov.cn/news_view.asp?newsid=29843; Xiao Xun, “Huxu, mengsha yu wei-han maodun” [Beards, veils and the Han-Uyghur conflict], VOA, November 6, 2013, <http://www.voachinese.com/content/article/1679675.html>; Luisetta Mudie, “Gas Stations in Xinjiang Bar Veil-Wearing Muslim Women,” *RFA*, June 18, 2013, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/petrol-06182013153821.html>.

72. Michael Martina, “China Bans Beards, Veils from Xinjiang City’s Buses in Security Bid,” *Reuters*, August 6, 2014, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2014/08/06/china-xinjiang-idINKBN0G609U20140806>.

73. Jiang Jie and Fang Yang, “Xinjiang county awards 50,000 yuan for tip-off,” *Global Times*, April 24, 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/856497.shtml>.

74. “Guanyu jinzhi mengmiansha, zhe ‘jilibafu’, liqieke, xingyue biao zhi fushi he feizhengchang liuda huxu yuan, jinru gonggong changsuo de guiding ‘zanxing’” [Notice of the provisional regulation forbidding those who wear veils, *jilbab*, hijab, star and crescent clothing and inappropriate beards from entering public places], website of the Yining Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture Government, September 25, 2014, <http://fztk.ylpf.gov.cn/info/1025/1078.htm>.

port violators through the 110 police hotline. Vehicles that transport the five types are subject to fines and the cancelation of their licenses. The regulation also stipulates fines on enforcement personnel of up to 2,000 RMB (approximately US \$325) for turning a blind eye to violators, possible demotion, and Party disciplinary actions. Finally, in February 2015, the city of Ürümqi outlawed burqa-style head and body coverings (*mengmian zhaopao* 蒙面罩袍) from all public spaces, empowering the police to punish violators and imposing fines of up to 5,000 RMB (approximately US\$80) for those who fail to enforce the prohibition.⁷⁵

Unsurprisingly, these heavy-handed tactics often precipitate violent reactions, especially when popular forms of head covering like the hijab and headscarves are targeted. An academic at the Party School in Beijing has expressed concern that these coercive methods will spawn even more resistance to the Party and its policies while actually increasing the popularity of Islamic-style veils.⁷⁶ Indeed over the last couple of years, dozens (if not more) have been killed as a direct result of antiveiling efforts in Xinjiang. In many cases the violence is between Uyghur Party officials and Uyghur citizens and has not involved Han officials. For instance, in April 2013, eyewitnesses told Radio Free Asia that a violent clash which resulted in the death of twenty-one people in Selibuya (Seriqbuya) township, Kashgar prefecture was triggered by a public act of deveiling.⁷⁷ In May 2014, nearly 1,000 Uyghurs demonstrated in front of a government building in Alahege (Alaqagha) township, Aksu prefecture, after local officials detained up to 25 women and girls who violated a ban on headscarves at a local school.⁷⁸ Police reportedly fired into the crowd, wounding five and killing two, according to a village leader. Unconfirmed reports suggest the incident was touched off by a text message sent to parents of the local middle school: “On orders from higher-ups, when sending children to school, boys cannot wear the *doppa* and girls headscarves or silk scarves. When parents drop off and pick up their children, they cannot wear the *jilbāb*. As soon as [any of these prohibited styles of clothes are] discovered, children will immediately be asked to leave the school.”

75. Timothy Grose and James Leibold, “Why China Is Banning Islamic Veils and Why It Won’t Work,” *ChinaFile*, February 4, 2015, <http://www.chinafile.com/reporting-opinion/viewpoint/why-china-banning-islamic-veils>.

76. Jin Wei, “Burqas, Hijabs and Beards in the Governance of Xinjiang,” *China Policy Institute Blog*, April 29, 2015, <http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/chinapolicyinstitute/2015/04/29/regulating-burqas-hijabs-and-beards-to-push-or-pull/>.

77. Shohret Hoshur, “Xinjiang Violence Leaves 21 Dead,” *RFA*, April 24, 2013, <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/maralbeshi-04242013190839.html>.

78. Shohret Hoshur, “Over 100 Detained after Xinjiang Police Open Fire on Protesters,” *RFA*, May 23, 2014, <http://english.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/detained-05232014165418.html>; Boxun, “Zhouer Xinjiang kuche xian, jingcha xiang shubai juxing kangyi de weizu funü kaiqiang” [Tuesday in Kuche county: PAP fire on a crowd of 100 demonstrating Uyghur women], *Boxun Net*, May 21, 2014, http://www.boxun.com/news/gb/china/2014/05/201405211629.shtml#_U_1DXLySy3k.

BEHIND THE VEIL

Given that these antiveiling policies provoke resistance from the Uyghurs, why, then, is the party-state pouring even more resources into the campaign? There is little evidence suggesting that veiled Muslim women espouse a particular radical, let alone jihadist, interpretation of Islam. On the contrary, women (as well as men) attach myriad meanings to head and body coverings. For some young Uyghur women, the veil is a sign of membership in a modern, transnational Muslim community, while others see it also as a fashion statement. For many others, the decision to veil is a personal matter that often follows marriage and conforms to Islamic as well as community injunctions for female modesty. However, other Uyghur women refuse to cover their heads and consider “imported” styles perversions of Uyghur culture and tradition. In short, although a significant number of Uyghurs have embraced more formulaic Islamic practices, the communities themselves continue to debate the boundaries of Uyghur identity, culture, and dress just like other Muslim communities across the globe.

In what follows, we explore the attitudes of a range of Uyghur women and men on veiling. Our sample is both small and unrepresentative; yet we believe it helps demonstrate the diversity of views within the community. Our information is based mainly on two sources. The second author’s informants tend to be young, college-educated Uyghurs who have graduated from national boarding schools in eastern China (the so-called Xinjiang Classes) and have exposure to the wider Islamic world.⁷⁹ The second source comprises interviews conducted by the Uyghur scholar Nurmämät in Kashgar in 2011.⁸⁰ Based on these and other sources, we argue the growing popularity of headscarves and hijab-style veils is driven chiefly by the global veiling-as-fashion industry and the rediscovery of religion among educated urban women, as other recent studies have also pointed out.⁸¹ In contrast, full-face veils and dark robes are more likely to be encountered in rural or isolated parts of Southern Xinjiang, where there is a long history of cultural borrowing from Afghanistan and Pakistan. But generalizations are difficult, especially as Uyghur patriarchy and party-state pressures also shape veiling practices and patterns.

Rana, a university student in Beijing, completely covers her hair with a hijab, a style virtually unseen among other Uyghur university students in the capital. Following a visit to Egypt one summer, Rana told the second author she “accepted” her veil (*qobul qildim*) as a gift from God after returning to China: “I’ve come to realize that veiling is a very important part of my religion. When I cover my head, others will know my religious beliefs. . . . I think by dressing in this manner, we

79. Grose, “(Re)Embracing Islam in Neidi.”

80. Nurmämät, “Kashi diqu Weiwu’erzu funü.”

81. Bucar, *The Islamic Veil*; Banu Gökarıksel and Anna Secor, “Between Fashion and Testür,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 6, no. 3 (2010): 118–48.

can prevent other men from gazing at or harming us. I feel very happy every time I put on my veil, and when I wear it I'm reminded of my religion, my faith, and God. . . . My hijab is fashionable and matches my clothes. Sure, at first I was influenced by Arabic styles in Egypt, but then I combined them with my own culture and fashion." In conversations she embraces both Chinese and Uyghur identities, as well as a type of transnational Muslim cosmopolitanism. A similar story was told by a young Uyghur woman who had lived a middle-class lifestyle for several years with her husband in Dubai. While there, she had worn the style of head covering typical of Dubai women of her age, a loose-fitting and flowing hijab-like veil. Continuing to do so in China is a complex act that allows her to navigate between sometimes contradictory notions of fellowship, piety, beauty, political loyalty, and ethnonational identity. Her fashionable veil marks a spurning of Han culture and norms, which she believes the older generations have, to an extent embraced: "Even my mother has been influenced by Han Chinese and does not cover her head."

Unlike these two young women, some women "accept" head and sometimes face coverings only after being enjoined to do so. In fact, 28 percent of the 93 women interviewed by Haniqiz Nurmämät in Kashgar adopted veiling in order to appease their new husbands and in-laws or due to peer pressure.⁸² One 40-year-old respondent with a primary school education explained that as a child she had been taught that women who did not wear even a headscarf are promiscuous. Later, "when I was 30 years old and married for a third time to a man in Kashgar, I started to veil my face. Because so many of the married women in the city covered their faces, I would have felt embarrassed if I didn't veil and only wore a headscarf."⁸³

A 26-year-old women with a primary school education noted: "In general, Muslim women should wear headscarves because Islam teaches women to cover their head, but there is disagreement over whether women should veil their faces. Some religious leaders think they should and others not. I believe women should veil as the face is the most beautiful part of a women and veiled women can avoid a lot of danger, and thus I also veil."⁸⁴ She started wearing a headscarf at age 10 and decided to veil her face in public after getting married at age 17. Interestingly, she decided to stop veiling her face when she moved to Ürümqi with her husband, because "in Ürümqi no one covers their face, and if you wear a veil while walking down the street, people will look at you strangely."⁸⁵

In Kashgar and Ürümqi, the second author encountered recently married women who began to cover their heads, some begrudgingly. At a teahouse in

82. Nurmämät, "Kashi diqu Weiwu'erzu funü," 37–38.

83. *Ibid.*, 33.

84. *Ibid.*, 34.

85. *Ibid.*

Kashgar, a local teacher who was not wearing a headscarf said she was expected to wear one in the company of her husband. She protested in a mix of Chinese and Uyghur: “I never wore a scarf as a child. My parents were part of the first class of Uyghurs who received a college education after the Cultural Revolution. So my parents weren’t conservative. My mother didn’t wear a scarf while she was growing up either. So I don’t think it feels natural to wear one now. I usually only wear it when I am with my husband or am at his family’s home.”

Similarly, at a KFC in Ürümqi’s International Grand Bazaar, another teacher said about her recent decision to cover her hair: “My husband asked me . . . [pause] suggested that I cover my head, so now I wear a headscarf for most of the day [pulls the scarf out of her purse]. [Laughing] Umm, I take it off sometimes. I am required [by my work] to remove my headscarf when I teach.⁸⁶ If I go to a bank or have to do some ‘official’ [relating to the government] business I don’t wear it either. My husband has become very religious since graduating from the Xinjiang Class boarding school and college. He used to drink and smoke, but now he doesn’t. He is fasting, and I prepare *iptar* [meal eaten after sunset] for him. He prays regularly, and works for Arman [a Muslim foodstuffs company]. And he wants me to cover my head. I support his religious practice because now I don’t worry about him finding another girl, smoking, or getting drunk. I think he is even kinder since becoming more religious.”

For these two young teachers, covering their heads is not principally an assertion of Islamic identity; nor does it reflect attempts to follow current styles popular in Central Asia and other parts of the Islamic world.⁸⁷ These two interviewees, like some of the women in Nurmämät’s study, suggest that veiling (in its various manifestations) is indicative of the resilience of patriarchy in Uyghur society.⁸⁸ Still, young women find creative ways in their daily routines to subvert their husbands’ presumptions that, as married women, they must veil. Although they ultimately acquiesce to their husband’s demands in his presence, they also choose when and where to don headscarves once they are beyond their spouse’s gaze. As one 20-year-old university student who decided to unveil after attending high school outside of Xinjiang observed: “I don’t like people making a big deal about what other people wear. Whether or not someone decides to wear a headscarf is a personal matter and does not concern others.”⁸⁹

86. The second author’s informants frequently complained about rules banning government officials, school teachers, and most other public workers in Xinjiang from covering their heads in the work place. Similar rules require men to be clean shaven.

87. Mehrangiz Najafizadeh, “Gender and ideology,” *Journal of Third World Studies* 29, no. 1 (2012): 87.

88. Zang Xiaowei, *Islam, Family Life, and Gender Inequality in Urban China* (London: Routledge, 2011); Elena Caproni, “A Look Inside the Heterogeneous world of Women in Northwestern China,” *International Journal of Interdisciplinary Social Sciences* 3, no. 3 (2008): 149–60.

89. Nurmämät, “Kashi diqu Weiwu’erzu funü,” 35.

In short, Uyghurs often disagree among themselves over veiling. Yet this internal discord is overlooked by the party-state and the Western media alike. The most vocal objectors to the practice are often young Uyghur women and men who believe “Arab-style” veils are either religiously superfluous or undermine Uyghur ethno-national identity. When the second author was on his way to meet Rāna, the cosmopolitan Uyghur woman described above, he was surprised by her classmates’ disparaging remarks: “Rāna?” one woman asked, which prompted her friend to gesture an outline of a hijab. Another young woman looked at her friends and giggled: “Rāna once asked me why I didn’t cover my head. She insisted that Muslim women are required to wear veils. I told her that Allah also created our hair to be beautiful, so He wouldn’t want us [Muslim women] to cover our heads. We got into an argument. Now we won’t discuss veiling anymore.”

Some young men also voice objections to veiling. Strolling down a snaking alley in Kashgar’s old town, one of them shook his head in disapproval on seeing a young woman donning a tightly fitted hijab: “There has been an Arabization of Kashgar, you know. These types of headscarves are becoming more popular. We are Muslim, but we aren’t Arabs. We have our own customs.” He was employed as a bureaucrat in one of Kashgar’s government offices, but his piety had moved him to turn down a lucrative job offer in eastern China because the state-owned company would not provide its employees with halal meals. Since returning to Kashgar, he sneaked into mosques before and after work to perform daily prayers. His deep religious convictions notwithstanding, he viewed “Arabic” veils as an abomination to Uyghur culture.

Upon returning to Beijing after spending his summer recess at his home in Ürümqi, another young man expressed similar displeasure with the growing popularity of face veils: “I saw so many girls my age completely covered. You could only see their eyes. They say that they are following the teachings of Islam, but they don’t know anything about Islam. Muslims are taught to be very clean, but these women smelled bad, as if they hadn’t bathed in weeks. They dress like Arabs, but we have our own customs. Young Uyghur girls put on *osma* and *henna* (both types of make-up) and wear *ätläs*.” As a practicing Muslim, he holds expectations of Uyghur-Muslim femininity similar to those of Party officials, yet for a different set of reasons. Conversations with other respondents make clear that calls for deveiling are not only coming from the Han-dominated party-state. The community itself is divided.

CONCLUSION: WHOSE VEIL?

In China today, one can browse through travel books featuring veiled beauties of the Tarim Basin, buy a burqa on the e-commerce portal Taobao, or even watch belly dancers with lace veils at a Xinjiang-style restaurant in Beijing. Yet if you are a Uyghur woman in Xinjiang who seeks to cover your hair, face, or body for re-

ligious, ethnic, cultural, or even fashion reasons you are deemed potentially “subversive” by the Chinese Communist Party. In its search for stability and conformity in Xinjiang, the Party is plunging deeper into the lives of ordinary Uyghurs, hollowing out the remaining spaces for a distinct, self-defined Uyghur identity. What one wears is no longer a matter of personal or community standards but an overt political act: “deviant” behavior marked for urgent transformation. In Xinjiang, like elsewhere in the world, the “veil” has become overburdened with competing symbolisms.

In the wake of recent political and ethnic violence in Xinjiang, the party-state has drawn a facile and counterproductive link between veiling and jihadism. To curb the threat of terrorism and political instability, Xinjiang officials have banned certain Islamic veils while promoting alternative forms of Uyghur dress—namely, *ätläs*, *doppa*, and braided hair—which it claims are appropriate expressions of Uyghur ethnic beauty. Yet the logic here is both paradoxical and ultimately flawed. First, the styles it deems as “modern” and “normal” are considered by many young Uyghur women “traditional” or even “old fashioned,” and out of touch with current fashion. Second, styles and habits of dress are poor indicators of religious extremism or even political loyalty. As observed, the reasons for veiling and the styles adopted vary tremendously. To be sure, veiling may sometimes be a political or a religious act, but the decision to cover is mediated in complex ways by shifting community standards, global fashion trends and consumption practices. Veiling, as numerous studies have demonstrated, is part of the recent movement to construct alternative, sometimes specifically Islamic and transnational, versions of modernity;⁹⁰ but it is also an expression of personal faith, fashion and familial obligation—and even a form of resistance—in different discursive and performative contexts.

Uyghurs have their own standards of modernity, consumption, and faith like other Muslim communities in China and abroad.⁹¹ Certainly, many of the voices included in this study indicate that the decision to veil is not a regression to the times of Yaqub Beg but rather a leap forward into a transnational Islamic *ummah* or a tacit rejection of Han culture and its hegemonic, colonizing norms. While some Uyghurs believe the hijab and *niqab* are imported and alien styles that are out of step with their own ethnonational identity, many others view veiling as the embodiment of a modern, cosmopolitan Uyghur and Muslim identity. The

90. John Bowen, *A New Anthropology of Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012): 66–74; also Suzanne Brenner, *The Domestication of Desire: Women, Wealth and Modernity in Java* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

91. Maris Gillette, *Between Mecca and Beijing* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); Banu Gökariksel and Anna Secor, “New Transnational Geographies of Islamism, Capitalism and Subjectivity,” *Area* 41, no. 1 (2009): 6–18; Emma Tarlo, *Visibly Muslim* (Oxford: Berg, 2010); Bucar, *The Islamic Veil*; Julie McBrien, “Mukadas’s Struggle: Veils and Modernity in Kyrgyzstan,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15 (2009): 127–44.

variance here unnerves the party-state, which expects (demands) that individual and group behavior (as well as thoughts) conform to a rigid set of Party-defined norms.

The lack of consensus in the Uyghur community on veiling is unsurprising: one's faith and identity—like one's beliefs—are deeply situational and idiosyncratic. Yet in Xinjiang today, these differences of opinion cannot be openly discussed, as the party-state is the final arbiter of what is acceptable ethnic culture and attire. China's 10 million Uyghurs have joined the global discussion over the significance and appropriateness of Muslim women's garb. Yet the Party speaks with the loudest and most forceful voice, meaning divergent opinions from within the community struggle to compete for attention. The danger here is that the veil will join the Uyghur language, religion, and culture as yet another overt site of political resistance—spurring the polarization and mistrust that already divides the Uyghur and Han communities and widening the social chasm that contributes to resentments, alienation, and violence.