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The impact of the state on Islam amongst the Uyghurs: religious knowledge and authority in the Kashgar Oasis

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The broadening of access to religious knowledge beyond elites who base their cultural capital on years of study in religious colleges is a key social development affecting contemporary Muslim societies on a global scale. Traditionally, the primary avenue for gaining religious knowledge, and thereby religious authority, was through such institutions as the maktab (religious school) and madrasa (religious college) where education was based on ‘mnemonic possession’ (i.e. the memorisation of key texts).¹ Printed and electronic media and modern education systems lay the potential for more diverse, direct and egalitarian access to knowledge. In the words of Dale Eickelman, ‘Those who can interpret what Islam “really” is can now be of more variable social status than was the case when mnemotopy was an essential feature of the legitimacy of knowledge’.²

It is noticeable that the growth of reformist ideologies in Muslim societies from the late nineteenth century onwards coincided with, and depended heavily on, the availability of new printing technology which facilitated the dissemination of these new ideologies and provided more egalitarian means of accessing religious knowledge.³ The growth of the Jadid (reformist) movement in Central Asia was no exception in this respect. Printing technology challenged the ascendancy of religious transmission through ritualised, face-to-face interaction and allowed reformers to redefine the nature of cultural production in their society.⁴ In the words of the historian Adeeb Khalid, ‘Jadidism would have been inconceivable without print’.⁵

The expansion of modern education systems has not only allowed for more direct access to the printed word but also facilitated the dissemination of a range of Muslim ideologies that seek to challenge existing patterns of religious knowledge and authority.⁶ Equally, increasing trans-national linkages through travel and trade as well as faster and more global flows of information in the contemporary era facilitate the transmission of Muslim ideologies that subject local patterns of religious belief and conduct to critical scrutiny.

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What are the implications, then, for those groups that live under secular political systems where printed and electronic media, and the modern education system, are not readily available for the dissemination of religious ideology and where there are constraints on contacts with foreign Muslim communities? The eight million Turkic-speaking Uyghurs of Xinjiang (officially known as the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region), China, face the predicament of living under a state system that continues to subscribe to an entirely secular ideology in the form of Marxism-Leninism. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, the Uyghurs were affected by global currents of reform as reflected in the establishment of schools that followed the *usul-i jadid* (new method) approach to education. These provided an important channel for the broadening of access to religious knowledge beyond religious institutions. As early as 1885, the brothers Hüsäyn Musabayov (1844–1926) and Bawudun Musabayov (1855–1928), wealthy merchants who had travelled widely in Germany, Turkey and Russia, had established a school in Artush that was influenced by the *jadid* education movement as well as Pan-Turkic trends emanating from Turkey.⁷

The 1910s and 1920s saw the growth of these reformist schools in the Artush and Kashgar area, one of which was led by Ahmad Kamal a citizen of the Ottoman empire, who employed methods ‘imported from the Muslim west’ and encouraged his pupils to regard the Turkish Caliph as their spiritual father.⁸ The Turpan area was another important focal point for Jadid-style activities by members of the emerging mercantile elite, such as Mäkhsut Muhiti who had travelled to Russian Central Asia in 1910–1913 and opened a modern Turkic-language school in Astana (near Turpan) in 1913. The 1930s saw the expansion of ‘scientific’ (*pänni*) schools in Kashgar together with various efforts to reform madrasa education.⁹

Yet reformist Muslims at that time faced a twofold challenge from conservative clergy opposed to the teaching of secular subjects and an extremely adverse political environment. Yang Tseng-hsin, who was the Republican Governor of Xinjiang from 1912 to 1928, and his successor Chin Shu-Jen (who ruled from 1928 to 1934) sought to isolate the region from external influences, imposed censorship and were wary of educational innovations that might challenge the political status quo. Although the rise to power of Sheng Shi-ts’ai as governor of Xinjiang in 1934 initially led to a more liberal period, allowing for the flourishing of reformist newspapers, journals and schools,¹⁰ the consolidation of Sheng’s political control from 1937 onwards ushered in a period of brutal repression in emulation of the Stalinist purges. Muslim reformist intellectuals faced particular persecution during Sheng’s ten years of absolute power in Xinjiang, in which an estimated 100,000 people were arrested.¹¹

The imposition of socialist rule in 1949 and the consequent secular appropriation of the modern education system and print media together with political restrictions on travel to other Muslim societies ultimately had the most serious consequences for stifling reformist developments in Xinjiang. The purpose of this article is to analyse how this broader political context has impacted on a specific community context, the rural neighbourhoods of Kashgar. Drawing on

fieldwork conducted in Kashgar over a ten-year period,¹² I argue that the political machinations of socialist rule have served to bolster reliance on the traditional, orally transmitted knowledge of religious elders. Moreover, they have undermined the social basis for the dissemination of Muslim ideologies that challenge existing patterns of religious knowledge and authority. Finally I consider the key implications of increasing trans-national ties for challenging religious traditionality in Kashgar.

An overview of state policy towards Islam in Xinjiang

From 1949 onwards, state policy towards Islam and religion in general in China has oscillated between radical intolerance, based on the imposition of the atheist principle underpinning Marxism-Leninism, such as during the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), and controlled tolerance of religious institutions that are co-opted under the auspices of the state.

The establishment of socialist rule in 1949 was initially followed by a relatively cautious and tolerant approach towards Islam, due largely to the need to defuse possible rebellion and allow for political consolidation. Although Shari‘a (religious law) courts and the office of *qadi* (religious judge) were abolished in 1950, the Agrarian Reform Law of 30 June 1950 specifically protected the rights of Muslims to mosque land.¹³ Under the so-called United Front Strategy, which aimed to co-opt and win over all sectors of society to the socialist cause, the China Islamic Association was formed in 1953, along with other ‘patriotic religious associations’, in order to manage the training and oversee officially sanctioned religious clerics. These institutions also became important vehicles for the dissemination of party doctrine to officially recognised religious clergy.

An important feature of socialist reform in the 1950s was therefore the dismantling of the wider institutional framework of religion (in the form of the abolition of the Shari‘a courts together with the state appropriation of education): the ‘total social pattern’ that Marshall Hodgson has famously described as being ‘called forth’ by Islam was replaced by a more limited and state-monitored religious space.¹⁴

The onset of the Great Leap Forward (1958–1962) led to a far more radical imposition of the atheist principle implicit in socialist ideology and entailed the large-scale closure of mosques and confiscation of mosque lands. The drive to establish communes from August 1958 onwards made no real allowances for ritual ablutions, purification (*taharāt*) and acceptable food preparation. The climate of increased intolerance towards the observance of religious practices was reflected in the formal abolition of the China Islamic Association in October 1958.

The deterioration of China’s relations with the Soviet Union, leading to the Sino-Soviet split of 1962, resulted ultimately in the closure of cross-border ties between the inhabitants of Xinjiang and their Central Asian neighbours until the mid-1980s. An inevitable consequence of this development was that the territory

of Xinjiang became further isolated from the potential flow of religious ideas from other Muslim societies. The end of the Great Leap Forward ushered in slightly more favourable conditions for religion in China and Muslim religious festivals were reported in the Chinese media. For example in 1964 a three-day religious holiday was announced and heavy attendance at many mosques was reported.¹⁵ The China Islamic Association was temporarily resurrected. However there is no evidence that confiscated property was returned to the mosques or that those mosques which had been closed during the Great Leap Forward were allowed to reopen.¹⁶

The slightly more liberal interlude in Communist policy was ended with the onset of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) which entailed an onslaught on the cultural traditions of minority peoples. The ideology of the Cultural Revolution included the principle that, even in socialism, the national issue was ultimately a ‘class issue’.¹⁷ The religious policy of the Communist Party at this time sought to eradicate religion and replace it with Mao Zedong thought, centring on the cult of Mao himself. Religious institutions were closed throughout China with the exception of a few mosques, churches and temples which were kept open for visiting dignitaries.¹⁸ Zealous Red Guard factions saw Islam as a hold-over from feudal society and condemned it as one of the ‘four olds’ (*si jiu*) (old ideas, culture, customs, and habits). During the course of my fieldwork interviews, several informants reported that the Red Guards would search households for religious literature in this period and would then arrange for the ritual burning of the Qur’an and other religious texts in front of the Id Kah mosque (the central mosque in Kashgar).¹⁹ The ritual humiliation of those who had been caught participating in religious worship is also vividly remembered in the contemporary context. One individual from a rural neighbourhood in Kashgar, who was found to have recited the Qur’an at the birth of a friend’s baby, was punished by having his face blackened and being paraded around Kashgar on a donkey, carrying a placard saying ‘I must not believe in old ways’. Such punishments were apparently commonplace during this period. Tamara Dragadze has suggested that religion under the Soviet Union underwent a process of ‘domestication’, in the twofold sense that religious conduct shifted to the household (in response to political constraints on public worship) and individuals learnt to appropriate certain religious tasks that were previously the domain of specialists.²⁰ A similar process appeared to have occurred in Kashgar in the era from the late 1950s to the late 1970s in so far as the household became the primary locus of religious activity carried out in secret. One individual, for example, related a childhood recollection of his family gathering each day for morning prayer with the father undertaking the role of imam (prayer leader).

The death of Mao and the overthrow of the Gang of Four in 1976 paved the way for a renewed tolerance of minority ‘special characteristics’ in the so-called ‘reform era’, a process that was first ushered in by the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Party Congress in December 1978. Mosques throughout Xinjiang began to be repaired and redecorated from 1979 onwards. By 1984, 14,000 mosques were reported to be open in Xinjiang.²¹ The China Islamic Association

was resurrected in April 1980, having been defunct for the previous 17 years. The pilgrimage to Mecca was once again tolerated.²²

However, this increased religious freedom has been combined with state measures to co-opt religious institutions for political purposes. According to Document 19 (published in 1982) which has shaped the Communist Party's approach to religion in the contemporary era, the aim of organisations such as the China Islamic Association is not only to 'assist the Party and the government to implement the policy of freedom of religious belief' but also 'to help the broad mass of religious believers and persons in religious circles to raise their patriotic and socialist consciousness'.²³

Government restrictions on religion in Xinjiang have increased markedly during the course of the 1990s, partly in response to major uprisings in Baren (Akto County) in April 1990 and Ili in February 1997. According to legislation introduced by the Xinjiang Regional Government in September 1990, all religious leaders must be 'licensed' by the China Islamic Association and they must 'support the leadership of the CCP . . . and oppose national separatism'.²⁴ The religious leaders based at the large Friday mosques are also summoned to meetings organised by the local branch of the China Islamic Association where they are instructed periodically to insert political messages in support of government policy. State authorities have also sought to restrict and manage those undertaking the pilgrimage to Mecca under the auspices of the China Islamic Association.

From 1996 onwards, illegal religious activities and separatism (*fenlie zhuyi zhe* or 'splittism' as it is most commonly translated) have been much more explicitly linked in official discourse. A key landmark in this respect was the introduction of the so-called 'Strike Hard' campaign throughout China at the end of April 1996 which entailed an onslaught on all forms of criminal and violent activity. In the case of Xinjiang the 'Strike Hard' campaign was clearly linked to the effort to combat separatism which in turn was linked to 'unlawful religious activities'.²⁵ More stringent measures to eradicate 'illegal' mosques and religious schools, to increase political training amongst clergy as well as to combat religious practices amongst party members were subsequently introduced. Following major riots in Ili in February 1997 as well as other cases of ethnic unrest, the principles of the Strike Hard campaign were reaffirmed in April 1997 with a renewed 'intensive special campaign' targeted at 'national separatists and religious extremists' together with the strengthening of management over legal religious practices.²⁶ In this context, Islamic teaching is confined mainly to the Xinjiang Islam Institute in Urumchi which is responsible for training religious professionals in the region and includes political education in its curriculum.

More recently, China has sought explicitly to link its struggle against separatism in Xinjiang with the 'global war on terror' and has stepped up efforts to combat both separatism and unlicensed religious activities.²⁷ This clampdown has entailed 'banning some religious practices during the holy month of Ramadan, closing mosques, increasing official controls over the Islamic clergy in the region, and detaining or arresting religious leaders deemed to be 'unpatriotic' or 'subversive'.²⁸ Increasing government restrictions on religion have major implications

for state employees who are unable to attend the mosque (except in some cases at festivals) or undertake the fast.²⁹

The impact of socialist rule on a specific community setting: the rural neighbourhoods of Kashgar

The following section examines how these developments have affected a specific community setting, the rural neighbourhood of Häzrät in the north of Kashgar where the majority of inhabitants have traditionally undertaken a mixture of farming and handicrafts. As elsewhere in Xinjiang, the onset of the reform era from 1978 onwards saw a relatively rapid rebuilding of mosques. In the case of Häzrät this happened soon after the dawn of the reform era on the basis of a pooling of collective resources, with a respected member of the local community overseeing the project.³⁰ Particularly in poorer neighbourhoods, the goal of re-building the local mosque could be delayed for several years. For example, in the neighbourhood of Qassap, near Häzrät, one of the mosques had only been re-built in 1988 once sufficient resources had been raised. Until then the local community prayed on the open site where the old mosque had previously stood before being destroyed in the late 1950s.

It is noticeable that mosques tend to correspond with the two conceptual levels of the neighbourhood (*mähällä*) and administrative categories employed in the socialist era. In Häzrät, there is one large Friday mosque (*azna mäschit* or *jamaä mäschit*), the associated territory of which corresponds broadly with the local administrative category known as *känt* in Uyghur (or *dadui* in Chinese), which was a production brigade under the era of collective agriculture. There are then four associated smaller mosques, used for everyday prayer, which mark out more local levels of the neighbourhood. This correspondence of religious communion with neighbourhood organisation exists widely throughout Central Asia. As Poliakov puts it, ‘in addition to being a productive and territorial unit, the mahalla has always been a religious and organisational unit, forming a parish or Kaum’.³¹

The large Friday mosque is served by at least one senior religious cleric, known as *damolla* or *chong* imam, who holds an especially revered position.³² The senior clerics are the central figures in shaping local religious knowledge, the most important channel being the delivery of the Friday sermon (*khutbä*), and they receive a salary from the government which reflects their status as full-time religious professionals. Most religious leaders at the mosques in rural areas tend to be relatively senior in age having been educated before 1949 or in the 1950s (before the major clampdown on religious education). The current *damolla* at the Häzrät mosque, Ablimät Qari, was born in 1941 and began studying at the Apağ Khoja religious college in 1947.³³ By 1954 he had learnt how to recite the whole of the Qur’an by heart whereupon he progressed to a more advanced form of religious education which consisted of learning how to translate the Qur’an into Uyghur, the study of religious law (*qanun*) and other forms of religious knowledge (*ilim*). In total, he spent five years studying the Persian language. The literature he recalls reading includes ‘Navoi, Khoja Hapiz Shiraz (i.e. Hafiz, the famous Persian

mystical poet), Sheikh Yasudi, and Atta Beg Shirazi'.³⁴ Ablimät Qari's religious education then came to a halt with the government's closure of the madrasa during the Great Leap Forward. From that time onwards Ablimät Qari was engaged purely in agricultural work and he claims not to have engaged in religious activity because of the strict policy of repression towards religion. Ablimät Qari then spent ten years in the reform period, from 1980 to 1990, intensively re-learning the Qur'an and extending his religious education in what amounted to an effort to revive the education of his youth, using essentially 'self-taught' methods. He could recite the Qur'an by heart and, significantly enough, was the only member of Häzrät who could translate the Qur'an into Uyghur. As mentioned above, religious leaders at the large Friday mosques are expected to support government policy when called upon by the local Islamic Association. In 1993–1994 I was informed by one rural inhabitant that government-influenced statements would be inserted in the mosque sermons in Häzrät approximately once a month. The examples he provided included an expression of support for state-imposed restrictions on family size as well as a declaration of the supposed Muslim ethic of respect for, and loyalty towards, political authorities.

The religious leader at the local-level mosque, known simply as the imam or *molla*, is selected by the local community on the basis of possessing the most religious merit and learning.³⁵ If the senior religious leader at the nearby large Friday mosque lends his approval this appointment will then be confirmed. The religious leaders at the smaller mosques do not receive a salary from the government, although they receive payments for undertaking religious duties on behalf of the local community. The imams at the smaller, everyday mosques were all advanced in age, and had received a rudimentary religious education at the local madrasa (Uyg. *mädris*), which consisted principally of learning the Arabic script and key chapters (*sürä*) from the Qur'an. Damollam, a retired farmer in his seventies, had studied at religious school for two years and was therefore able to read the Arabic script and to recite by heart two of the 32 *parä* (sections) of the Qur'an. He had no knowledge of the Hadith or other scriptural sources. Much of his knowledge of religious practices was based on oral traditions passed on by his parents and other elders in the community. At another of the small mosques, the *molla* had also spent two years at a religious school but he could now recite four *parä* of the Qur'an by heart due largely to self-study during retirement.

The term *qari* denotes all those with religious learning who take a leading part in religious rituals, such as the collective recital of the Qur'an on Friday and the Qur'anic recitals that take place after death. In practice most older men would be described as *qari* since they had been educated in the old madrasa. The vast majority of old people in Häzrät had attended this institution for two or three years, which was sufficient to learn the Arabic script and recite key verses from the Qur'an by heart. Frequently religious study would be seasonal; older men would describe having studied at religious school for 'two or three winters'. It is noticeable that each *qari* would explain the nature of his religious learning in terms of the amount of the Qur'an they had been able to remember, which reflects the strong 'mnemonic' nature of religious knowledge.

Just as the mosque serves to reinforce neighbourhood-level identifications, those attending the mosque on a regular basis, the *jama'at* or mosque community, provide the most public manifestation of the local community. Attendance at the mosque has traditionally increased with age in a clearly discernible 'religious life cycle', and almost all men over the age of 60 attend the mosque and pray five times a day. Women, on the other hand, pray within the household.³⁶ The vast majority of rural inhabitants undertake the fast (Uyg. *Ramazan*, Ar. *Ramadan*) and during this month which is described as a 'great' (*ulugh*) and 'holy' (*muqaddäs*) time, mosque attendance at least doubles.³⁷ Moral propriety and communal responsibility are intertwined with being a good Muslim and regular attendance at the mosque impacts positively on an individual's standing in the community. As Yusup,³⁸ a college student from Häzrät, explained to me: 'If you go to the mosque everyday, people greet you very warmly. If you don't go to the mosque people are not so friendly and respectful towards you.' Those officials who worked as government cadres for the local neighbourhood administrative authority (*känt*) also subscribed to the prevailing religious and moral norms of the rural neighbourhood and would attend the mosque in retirement. In this respect the rural neighbourhoods are characterised by an overriding observance of Islamic religious norms and by a rejection of the atheism implicit in Communist ideology. In the neighbourhood of Häzrät, I heard about only three individuals who could be described as leading an entirely secular life-style. Two were middle-aged men who did not even go to the mosque at festivals, one of whom would jokingly have the word '*khitai*' (Chinese) added as a suffix to his name by his neighbours. The other individual was a retired school worker (and party member), whose reputation for being a complete maverick was reflected in his keeping a picture of Chairman Mao in his *mehmankhana* (guest room). In this respect, it is easy to forget, and difficult to imagine, that the neighbourhood of Häzrät was once a production brigade organised into teams, where religious rituals were outlawed and where the public greeting during the Cultural Revolution was 'long live Chairman Mao', as opposed to *salamu äläyikum*.

Although full-time Qur'anic schools were forbidden in the vicinity of Häzrät, the practice of children attending the houses of *qaris* after school was tolerated during the course of my initial fieldwork in 1993–1994. Indeed, the vast majority of young children in Häzrät were engaged in this form of education. I was informed that those parents whose own education coincided with the period of extreme repression that lasted from the late 1950s to 1978 were particularly keen to send their children to these schools, often by way of compensation for their own disrupted education. Even those with a reputation for being lax Muslims (manifested, for example, in regularly drinking alcohol) were nonetheless keen that their own children should receive a religious education. Religious education took place from the age of seven onwards. The children would spend two years acquiring a basic religious knowledge which consisted of learning the Arabic script, some simple verses (*ayät*) for prayer and one or more *sürä* (or chapter) of the Qur'an, usually the *sürä yasin*. This type of education was very similar to the model of primary religious education in the pre-1949 context, with its emphasis on memorisation and the recital of Qur'anic verses. As in the

pre-1949 context, the *qari* was provided with contributions by the children's parents.³⁹ However, the model of children attending religious classes at the houses of religious elders has now been discontinued following increasing government restrictions on religious education from 1996 onwards.

It can be seen from this specific ethnographic example that the broader political context has led to an increased reliance on those who have received a religious education in the pre-1949 or 1950s era. The nature of religious knowledge is 'traditional' in so far as it is based on the 'mnemonic possession' of orally transmitted knowledge at a religious college. The lack of printed religious material has exacerbated dependence on religious elders. The Qur'an was only translated into Uyghur in 1986 and until recently there has been an extreme scarcity of religious publications (as will be discussed in more detail below). It is also significant that those who have received a secondary or college-level education (the sector that, as noted above, has been most prone to religious reform in Muslim societies elsewhere) tend to be state sector employees and are therefore barred from participation in religious rituals.

Particularly amongst religious leaders based at local mosques, there is a relatively weak referential scripturalist tradition in so far as the Qur'anic justification for religious practices is assumed rather than cited. During the course of fieldwork in 1993–1994, religious elders would often justify a range of 'local' religious practices on the basis of having a Qur'anic justification. For example, one *qari*, who claimed descent from the seventeenth century Sufi leader ApaQ Khoja, told me in response to my questions about ritual practices surrounding *Barat* (a vigil over three nights) that 'if you want to find out about *Barat*, you should read the Qur'an' and he therefore appeared to be unaware of any critique of this practice on the basis of its lack of scripturalist foundation.⁴⁰

In the absence of alternative channels of religious instruction, dependence on religious elders together with conformity with the inherited practices of the mosque community constitute the essential source of religious guidance. Stephen Feuchtwang, in his work on popular religion in China, uses the notion of 'traditionality' to outline a type of transmission that is characterised by repetition in an eternal sense—'the way we do it'. In addition to being 'set apart' the performance of tradition entails a 'social compulsion'.⁴¹ I would suggest that the nature of religious traditionality in Kashgar can only be understood in terms of the wider political context which has narrowed the available sources of religious information and has reinforced the 'social compulsion' to follow the accepted norms of the mosque community.

Broadening access to religious knowledge: the impact of transnational influences

The increasing opening up of Xinjiang to transnational travel and trade has major implications for challenging the strength of religious 'traditionality' in Kashgar.⁴² It is no coincidence that the first person to seek explicitly to reform religion in contemporary Kashgar was AbdulHämüd (otherwise known as Ablimät Damolla), who had travelled in the Middle East and undertaken a pilgrimage (*hāj*) to

Mecca in the 1980s. He organised the expansion of a mosque in the north of the town, known as Toqquz Tash mosque, where he propagated a version of Islam that he believed to be more in keeping with 'orthodox' Islam. Various 'local' religious practices, such as *nāzir* (memorial feasts occurring on the third, seventh, fortieth days as well as one year after death), regular attendance at the cemetery to pray on behalf of the deceased, the commemoration of *Barat* and the payment of *mollas* for Qur'anic recitals were criticised as having no foundation in the Qur'an or Hadith.⁴³ The influence of AbdulHämüd's time in Saudi Arabia was clearly evident in the new forms of prayer that he introduced. He encouraged his followers to pray according to the requirements of the Hanbali school (predominant in Saudi Arabia) rather than Hanafi legal school which the Uyghurs, and the vast majority of other Central Asian Muslims, have traditionally subscribed to. The adoption of the Hanbali rite of clasping hands at the centre of the chest whilst standing for prayer (rather than clasped right over left at the waist above the navel in the Hanafi rite) and the declaration of the word *Amin* out loud (rather than silently) at the end of the *fatihah* (a Qur'anic verse) partly accounts for the label 'Wahhabi' being attached to AbdulHämüd and his followers by many Uyghurs including other religious leaders who do not share his reformist zeal.⁴⁴

AbdulHämüd's mosque sermons were marked by a tendency to encourage an egalitarian ethic that emphasised the equality of all believers before God whilst discouraging forms of excessive or unthinking reverence for religious elders. In particular, AbdulHämüd made a point of critiquing the custom prevalent in Kashgar of those attending the mosque to arrange themselves in rows based broadly on age, with the eldest nearest the *mehrap*.⁴⁵ Another important feature of AbdulHämüd's teachings was a tendency to stress the compatibility of Islam with learning and modern developments in general. While AbdulHämüd and other present-day Islamic reformists who advocated a strictly scripturalist interpretation of Islam differ in important ways from the pre-1949 reformists, his setting up of a school in the centre of Kashgar that ran part-time classes in foreign languages is reminiscent of some of their practice. AbdulHämüd's mosque gained huge popularity, particularly amongst younger Uyghurs in the city centre of Kashgar, and during prayer time a vast crowd of believers would over-flow into the street.

However, AbdulHämüd's case also serves as an illustration of the obstacles facing those who undertake a project of religious reform in contemporary Xinjiang. In November 1997, the government dismissed AbdulHämüd from his post as *molla* at Toqquz Tash mosque. This followed the government's closure of his school the previous year. Many in Kashgar explain his dismissal on the basis that AbdulHämüd had simply become too popular and that his stress on religious knowledge and the development of the Uyghur people was seen as subversive. According to the Eastern Turkistan Information Centre (ETIC), the dismissal was prompted by a sermon that AbdulHämüd made in which he announced that 'In the past, the oppressive rulers deprived the Uyghur people of education and science, economic and technical progress, and kept the people in ignorance and superstitions. The only way out for the Uyghurs from the present grim situation is education, and everyone should do his best to promote it'.⁴⁶

Since AbdulHämüd's dismissal there is no religious figure who can be identified as leading the impetus towards increased religious zeal and the striving for religious 'orthodoxy' in Kashgar. Instead, highly informal proselytising (*räblich*) takes place through individuals who have been labelled as 'Wahhabi' by the Uyghur populace.⁴⁷ The emergence of the term 'Wahhabi' in popular usage in the last ten years is itself indicative of greater debate and negotiation over what constitutes religious orthodoxy, following increasing transnational ties. Such developments have important potential implications in posing a potential challenge to the authority of official clergy. During the 1990s, for example, clusters of reformist Uyghurs chose to pray exactly according to the position of the sun in a bid to follow what they regarded as more orthodox religious conduct. This meant that the time of their prayer would change slightly from day to day in contrast to the officially sanctioned time for prayer at the mosque that would be altered on a less frequent basis. In November 1997 one of the senior imams at Kashgar's Id Kah mosque went as far as locking a group of young Uyghurs in the mosque and calling the police because they had undertaken evening prayers (*sham namaz*) at a different time to the rest of the mosque congregation.⁴⁸

When I first conducted fieldwork in Kashgar, the teachings of AbdulHämüd had made little impact on the rural areas. The undertaking of *näzir*, for example, was regarded as an essential part of Muslim conduct. Now there is far more debate around such practices. I have argued elsewhere that shifting attitudes and increasing debate over *näzir* can be attributed to an accidental convergence of critiques against this ritual on the basis of its lack of scripturalist justification (by AbdulHämüd and others) with state efforts to restrict religious activity that takes place outside the domain of the mosque and other officially sanctioned sites.⁴⁹ Yet, the government authorities remain adverse to those who engage in proselytising or strive for an intensification of religious zeal and state repression of so-called 'Wahhabi' Muslims has increased in the post-September 11 context.

The situation regarding printed religious material in Xinjiang also has complex implications. Despite political restrictions on religion, there is now a relatively large corpus of religious literature published in Xinjiang that is readily available in bookshops.⁵⁰ The case of Abdurähim, a farmer in the north of Kashgar, provides one example of how greater availability of such material can have important social ramifications. Previously reliant on the local *molla* for religious guidance, by 2003 he was engaged in a process of self-education, learning the Qur'an and reading a variety of religious books for two hours a day. As he put it:

When you first came here, I didn't know much about religion—I just recited a few verses from the Qur'an. Now I have started to read these books and know much more. You see for a long time we didn't have religious books. *Mollas* and other religious leaders could recite from the Qur'an but they couldn't really understand it. Now there are many more knowledgeable people in Kashgar.⁵¹

In stark contrast to his previously deferential attitude, Abdurähim now described the local, elderly *molla* as being 'ignorant' (*bilimsiz*). In the current political climate, where religious meetings outside the officially sanctioned sites are

repressed, collective gatherings and teaching around these texts are not tolerated. The above case therefore represents an individualised tradition of learning in response to a political environment that does not tolerate collective teaching, discussion and debate outside limited and state-sanctioned channels.

Conclusion

Although the political upheavals and the state's control of Islam in the socialist era are reasonably well documented in the secondary literature on Xinjiang, the long-term impact this has had on everyday 'practical' Islam as enacted in local contexts is much less well known. I have argued in this article that the secularisation of the education system and print media together with controls on contact with other Muslim societies has tended to bolster reliance on the traditional orally-transmitted knowledge of religious elders in Kashgar and has reinforced the 'social compulsion' underpinning the inherited practices of the mosque community.

In doing so, I do not mean to imply that religion in Kashgar has been caught in a 'frozen' or 'passive' state, as is suggested, for example, by Poliakov's concept of 'traditionalism' in Central Asia, which involves the 'the complete rejection of anything new introduced from outside into the familiar, 'traditional' way of life'⁵² and is reminiscent of the more negative features of orientalist discourse.⁵³ Rather than wishing to imply any pejorative or teleological assumptions about cultures being locked in a quagmire of 'traditionalism', my argument is essentially a comparative one, that major social developments occurring in other Muslim societies (entailing the broadening of access to religious knowledge) have been relatively impeded in Xinjiang.

The same restrictions on these channels for the dissemination of religious ideology operated amongst Muslims in the former Soviet Union. Indeed, the frequent claims that 'popular' or 'folk' dimensions of Islam fared better than 'high Islam' in the Soviet era need to be understood in relation to the secular appropriation of the print media and modern education systems, together with the disruption of transnational linkages, and not just to the institutional upheaval of so-called 'high Islam'.⁵⁴

The increasing opening up of Xinjiang to transnational ties has important implications in facilitating the dissemination of a broader range of Muslim ideologies. In the currently harsh political climate, religious ideologies are inevitably restricted and channelled by the political contours of the state. 'Wahhabi' critiques of local practices can occasionally coincide with state interests, as in the case of campaigns against the *nāzir* as well as opposition to Sufi practices.⁵⁵ Yet at the same time state authorities remain extremely suspicious of those who embark on the path of orthodoxy, or who engage in proselytising. The dismissal of AbdulHämüd, whose teachings radically challenged local religious presuppositions, is an example of how the state agenda can serve to buttress existing patterns of religious authority.

Notes and references

1. D.F. Eickelman, 'The art of memory: Islamic education and its social reproduction', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol 20, No 4, 1978, pp 485–516.
2. Ibid, pp 511–512.
3. See, for example, F. Robinson, 'Technology and religious change: Islam and the impact of print', *Modern Asian Studies* Vol 27, No 1, 1993, pp 229–251.
4. A. Khalid, *The Politics of Muslim Cultural Reform: Jadidism in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp 9–12.
5. Ibid, p 9.
6. For example, Horvatich shows how the modern education system has fostered Islamist discourses amongst the Sama of Simunul island in the Philippines. P. Horvatich, 'Ways of knowing Islam', *American Ethnologist* Vol 21, No 4, 1994, pp 811–826. Similarly, Eickelman argues that 'religious activism . . . appeals mainly to those who have benefited from modern education'. D. F. Eickelman, 'Mass higher education and the religious imagination in contemporary Arab societies', *American Ethnologist* Vol 19, No 4, 1992, p 646. Eickelman also cites J. Piscatori in noting that 'In 1953, for example, only 22 per cent of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers were not of the educated urban middle classes'. J. Piscatori, *Islam in a World of Nation-States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p 29. Masud analyses the way 'new intellectuals' (educated in western-style schools and universities) re-evaluate 'traditional' doctrine. K. M. Masud 'The obligation to migrate: the doctrine of Hijra in Islamic law' in D. Eickelman and J. Piscatori (eds) *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration and Religious Imagination* (London, Routledge, 1990). Nagata describes how the foreign-educated intelligentsia has challenged the traditional legitimacy of the rural ulama (Islamic leaders) in Malaysia. J. Nagata, 'Islamic revival and the problem of legitimacy among rural religious elites in Malaysia', *Man* Vol 17, No 1, 1982, 42–57.
7. J. M. Milward and N. Tursun, 'Political history and strategies of control, 1884–1978', in S. F. Starr (ed) *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland* (Armonk/New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), p 72. On the Jadid in Central Asia, see Khalid, op cit, Ref 4.
8. A. D. W Forbes, *Warlords and Muslims in Chinese Central Asia: A Political History of Republican Xinjiang 1911–1949* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986), p 18. I. Bellér-Hann, *The Written and the Spoken: Literacy and Oral Transmission Among the Uyghur* (ANOR 8) (Berlin, Das Arabische Buch, 2000).
9. Bellér-Hann, op cit, pp 61–66.
10. The newly formed Kashgar Uyghur Progress Union established a reformist newspaper, *Yengi Hayat*, in 1934. The newspaper's articles included features on Uyghur politics, culture and poetry, as well as international events, with a particular emphasis on Turkey and the Middle East. Circulation of the newspaper was substantial; 2,500 copies were circulated weekly over the next two years before publication was halted by the government. The Kashgar Uyghur Progress Union also engaged in an intensive construction of reformist schools which resembled the Jadid schools. By 1936, there were no fewer than 17 schools serving over 500 students. See J. Rudelson, *Oasis Identities: Uyghur Nationalism Along China's Silk Road* (New York, Columbia University Press 1997), p 56.
11. Forbes, op cit, Ref 8, p 161.
12. This article is based on fieldwork conducted in Uyghur in Kashgar in 1993–1994 together with two shorter visits in the summers of 2003 and 2004. I am grateful to the Universities' China Committee in London (UCCL) and The Committee for Central and Inner Asia (CCIA) for financing the 2003 research and to the British Academy (Small Research Grant) for funding my 2004 research.
13. Forbes op cit, Ref 8, p 79. Nevertheless, there are also documented cases of mosques having their property confiscated and of Muslims being tortured and imprisoned because of their alleged links or sympathy with the republican era. J. T. Dreyer, 'The Islamic Community of China', *Central Asian Survey* Vol 1, No 2, 1982, p 41.
14. M. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* Volume One (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974), p 89.
15. L. Benson, and I. Svanberg. 'The Kazaks in Xinjiang', in L. Benson and I. Svanberg (eds) *The Kazaks of China: Essays on an Ethnic Minority* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell International, 1988), p 66.
16. Dreyer, op cit, Ref 13, p 46.
17. T. Heberer, 1989. *China and its National Minorities: Autonomy or Assimilation?* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1989), p 24.
18. M. K. Whyte and W. L. Parish, *Urban Life in Contemporary China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p 308.
19. According to local informants, the burial of religious texts was a common strategy for their preservation during this period.

20. T. Dragadze, 'The domestication of religion under Soviet communism', in C. Hann (ed) *Socialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Local Practice* (London: Routledge, 1993).
21. D. E. MacInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy and Practice* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), p 234.
22. The Chinese press reported that 6,500 Uyghurs undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca between 1980 and 1987. D. G. Gladney 'The ethnogenesis of the Uighur', *Central Asian Survey* Vol 9, No 1, 1990, pp 12–13.
23. MacInnis (1989: 19).
24. Amnesty International 1992 'Peoples Republic of China. Secret Violence: Human Rights Violations in Xinjiang' p 5.
25. M. Dillon, *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Far Northwest* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2004), p 85.
26. *Ibid.*, p 103.
27. Amnesty International 2002 (March 22). 'People's Republic of China, China's anti terrorism legislation and repression in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region' <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa170102002>.
28. *Ibid.* Although the US State Department has sought to distinguish China's struggle against separatism with its own 'war on terror', it nonetheless designated a small and previously obscure Uyghur organisation the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a 'terrorist organisation' in August 2002.
29. G. Fuller and J. N. Lipman 'Islam in Xinjiang' in S. Frederick Starr (ed) *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland* (Armonk/New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2004), p 324. State employees are also forbidden from wearing any headgear deemed to have Islamic overtones, such as a headscarf in the case of women and skull-cap in the case of men.
30. In other neighbourhoods, the rebuilding of the mosque might be financed by one or two very rich businessmen; for example in a village I visited near Artush the local mosque had been paid for exclusively by one wealthy local trader at a cost of 100,000 yuan.
31. S. P. Poliakov, *Everyday Islam: Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia* (London: M. E. Sharpe, 1992), p 77.
32. During my fieldwork in Häzrät in 1993–1994, the first imam at that time, who was in his seventies, would be transported around the neighbourhood in a specially assigned donkey cart and would elicit particularly respectful greetings from those he encountered. The customary greeting, leaning forward with hand placed on heart together with the declaration of '*salamu äläykum*', would be marked by a particularly pronounced bowing motion.
33. The *mädris* (religious college) attached to the Apaq Khoja tomb was a major centre for religious education. On the basis of oral testimony by older men I was informed that approximately 400 students attended. Of this number, some 150–200 gained a rudimentary education which consisted principally of learning the Arabic script and memorising key verses from the *Qur'an*. The remainder of students went on to receive a more extensive education. According to older Uyghur informants, most of these latter students came from other areas of Southern Xinjiang (rather than the local neighbourhood of Häzrät).
34. See also G. Jarring, *Materials to the Knowledge of Eastern Turki*, Parts 3–4 (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1951), pp 118–119, and Bellér-Hann, *op cit*, Ref 8, p 46, who reveal that the work of Central Asian poet Nawai, the Persian author Khoja Hafiz and the mystical poetry of Sufi Allahyar provided an important component of religious education in Southern Xinjiang.
35. The terms imam or *molla* are used interchangeably and do not signify any difference in religious rank. As will be seen below, the terms *akhun* and *qari* are also used to describe those of religious learning who occupy a position such as imam or who play an active role in religious duties.
36. Although women undertake prayer at the level of the household, there have traditionally been weekly religious gatherings under the leadership of a *büvüm* (female religious leader). See E. Waite, '*The impact of socialist rule on a Muslim minority in China: Islam amongst the Uyghurs of Kashgar*', unpublished Ph.D dissertation (Cambridge University, 2003), pp 111–112 for details. However there has been a major clamp-down on these religious meetings, particularly since 1996, in keeping with the government's intolerance of religious gatherings that take place outside officially sanctioned sites.
37. *Ibid.*, pp 112–115.
38. All individual names quoted in this paper are pseudonyms apart from those referring to public religious figures.
39. A. Tokhti, *Qäshqärming Yeäinqi Vä Hazirqi Vaman Maarip Tarikhi* (A History of Kashgar's Past and Present Education) (Kashgar: Qäshqär Uyghur Näshriyati, 1986), p 6 reveals that this was the standard practice prior to 1949. The donated money would be called *päyshämbilik*. See also Khalid, *op cit*, Ref 4, p 26 who refers to the same practice of weekly donations to the teacher, which was known as *päyshanbalik* in pre-Soviet Central Asia.

40. *Barat* takes place on the nights preceding the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth days of the Shaaban month of the Arabic calendar which is more commonly known as the month of *Barat* (from Persian) in Uyghur. It is believed, according to religious tradition, that God will take account of all the sins that each individual has committed in the previous year and will plan the events of the forthcoming year. *Barat* entails the staying awake for these three nights (the vigil being known as *tünäk*) in order to engage in prayer and other rituals. In popular usage, the terms *barat* and *tünäk* tend to be used interchangeably to describe the rituals that take place during this period.
41. S. Feuchtwang, S, *The Imperial Metaphor: Popular Religion in China* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp 16–17.
42. On the increasing significance of Xinjiang as a crossroads of trade, see Y. Zhao, 'Pivot or Periphery? Xinjiang's Regional Development', *Asian Ethnicity*, Vol 2, No 2, 2001, pp 197–224.
43. Another radical innovation was AbdulHämüd's declaration that the wearing of headgear to the mosque was not an essential scripturalist requirement. Prior to this time, the wearing of headgear, whether a cap (*shäpkä*) or skull-cap (*doppa*) was regarded as an essential aspect of Muslim practice and a key indicator of belief.
44. The adoption of Hanbali rites has often been interpreted elsewhere (e.g. in Uzbekistan) as indicative of sympathy for the so-called 'Wahhabi' movement. See, for example, B. Babadzhanov, 'Islam in Uzbekistan: from the struggle for religious purity to political activism' in B. Rumer (ed) *Central Asia: A Gathering Storm?* (New York and London: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), p 312.
45. This is a niche in the wall of a mosque indicating the direction of Mecca, towards which Muslim worshippers must face in prayer. During my fieldwork in 1993–1994, the mosque communities in Häzrät would tend to arrange themselves in rows according to age. Waite, op cit, Ref 36, p 107.
46. Eastern Turkistan Information Centre, 11/10/97: 'Teacher in Kashgar is Deprived of his Political Rights'.
47. See also D.G. Gladney, *Dislocating China: reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and other Subaltern Subjects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, London: C. Hurst and Co, 2004) p 257, who refers to the term 'Wahhabi' as being 'a euphemism in the region for strict Muslims not an organized Islamic school'.
48. This incident was also referred to on the internet by the Eastern Turkestan Information Centre (see ETIC 11/13/97), although this particular source attributes the conflict to an unwillingness on the part of the Uyghurs involved to pray behind a 'red *molla*' (i.e. who was supportive of the government) and no reference is made to the underlying doctrinal dispute.
49. E. Waite, The emergence of Muslim reformism in contemporary Xinjiang Province: implications for the Uyghurs' positioning between a Central Asian and Chinese context in I. Bellér-Hann, C. M. Cesàro, R. A. Harris and J. N. Smith (eds.) *Situating The Uyghurs between Ching and Central Asia* (Aldershot: Ashgate, forthcoming).
50. Examples of texts on Islam that are available in state bookshops throughout Xinjiang include Q. Ėkbär and A. Damollam (eds) *Kishlik Munasivät Vă ädäp-ähkllaqqa Dair Sähih Hädisläär* (hadiths concerning social relations and moral conduct) (Urumchi: Shinjang Khälq Neshriyati, 2002), A. Imin, *Islam Dinigha Dair Soal-Javablar* (Answers and Questions about the Muslim religion) (Urumchi: Shinjang Khälq Neshriyati, 2001), A. Sabit, (ed). *Islam Shäriiti* (Islamic Law) (Urumchi: Millätläär năshriyati, 1999) and Yang Chichen (ed) '*Qur'an kärim*' *diki pälsäpivi idiyilär* (Philosophical Thought from the Qur'an) (translated into Uyghur by Obul Islam and Zahit Rähim) (Urumchi: Shinjang Khälq Neshriyati, 2000).
51. Interview on 10 July 2003.
52. Poliakov, op cit, ref 31, p 4.
53. E. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).
54. See for example P. Steinberger, "'Fundamentalism" in Central Asia: reasons, reality and prospects', in Tom Everett-Heath (ed) *Central Asia: Aspects of Tradition* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), p 221 who outlines the common argument that Muslims in Soviet Central Asia faced the 'near total destruction of "high" Islam' and were 'left with what may be termed "folk" Islam'.
55. On government efforts to control Sufi ritual activity around *mazars* (shrines) in Xinjiang, see R. Harris and R. Dawuta, 'Mazar Festivals of the Uyghurs: Music, Islam and the Chinese State', *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, Vol II, No 1, 2002, pp 112–115; see also E. Waite, 'From Holy Man to National Villan: Popular Historical Narratives about Apaq Khoja amongst Uyghurs in Contemporary Xinjiang' *Inner Asia*, Vol 8, No 1, 2006, pp 19–21.