CHAPTER 11
Chinese Islam

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Introduction: Muslim Diversity in Contemporary China

The population of China combined with the number of Muslims in the world total approximately 2.5 billion people—over one third of humanity at the outset of the twenty-first century. Given this fact, it is not at all surprising that China and global Islam figure so prominently in international affairs, capturing headlines every day. Today, many observers perceive collaboration between the People’s Republic of China and Muslim countries, particularly the exchange of military technology from the former for oil from the latter, to be a significant force in a shifting global balance of power. In fact, relations between China and the Muslim world have a long history, one nearly as old as Islam itself. Historical contacts between Islam and China have resulted in a Muslim population of considerable size living in China—a minority, or more correctly a number of diverse minority communities, easily overlooked in surveys of the world’s most populous country.

The Muslims of China are often maligned or misunderstood by the enormous majority Han Chinese population that surrounds them. Moreover, most of their co-religionists in the central Islamic world know little about them beyond the fact that they exist. Yet even this exceeds the knowledge of the majority of people in the wider world, who are only now receiving bits of information about some Chinese-born Muslims in side stories to the ongoing epic of the “global war on terror” and the struggle against radical Islam. Nevertheless, the Muslims of China are an incredibly diverse population—or, rather, multiple diverse populations. Though they all reside within the borders of the People’s Republic of China, they live throughout the

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vast country as members of distinct solidarities separated by geography. They are and have also historically been divided along ethnic, linguistic, economic, educational, sectarian, and kinship lines. Besides many other factors, this diversity defies attempts to group them as a single collective; most of these attempts are artificial and ill advised. Indeed, beyond their residence within these contemporary geopolitical borders, there is little more that can be said of Muslims in China as a single group; rather, the story must be told in terms of this “group’s” diversity.

Both China and Islam, sometimes regarded, inappropriately, as monolithic historical entities, encompass a high degree of internal diversity. The tendency to rely either monolithically leads to a host of problems, including an impoverished perspective that looks at civilizations from the top down, focusing upon a facade of homogeneity while overlooking a complicated understructure replete with heterogeneous elements. In a way that is in many respects microcosms of global Islam, Muslims in China include among their numbers devout believers and secularists, even atheist communists. Among the “religious” we also see great diversity: traditional Sufis (of the Hani school of law), Sufi mystics, and even followers of the puritanical Wahhabi ideology. There are political Islamists in China, though many more of China’s Muslims are conspicuously apolitical lest they be branded extremists by the government in Beijing. The present study focuses on some of the problems associated with diversity among China’s Muslims before examining in greater detail some historical and contemporary “solutions” to this problem of diversity put forward both by certain Muslims in China and by the Chinese state.

The problem with Muslim diversity in China today, from the perspective of the People’s Republic of China, is that ethnic groups with widely different cultural and historical backgrounds may not easily fall into lockstep with a single party in its pursuit of a rigidly conceived national destiny. Difference in China, as elsewhere, leads to strife. This is especially so when a group self-identifies in terms of cultural traditions in which religion figures prominently, thereby opposing the ethnic and demographic categories imposed by a radically secular government. The mixing of ethnic and religious elements creates a particularly combustible combination for a population under pressure. Most recently, beginning in July 2009, ethnic tensions between Han Chinese and Turkic Muslim Uyghurs in Ürümqi, the largest city in China’s westernmost Xinjiang province, erupted in deadly riots that led to a military crackdown in the region. The key fact in this event is that the Uyghurs are different from their Han Chinese neighbors in numerous ways, with their Islamic identity playing a significant role in this difference, even though many Uyghurs are only moderately religious, or are even secular.

In 2004, in Henan province, ethnic tensions involving another Muslim community sparked violence when a Han, or ethnic Chinese Muslim, taxi driver struck and killed a six-year-old Han Chinese girl, sparking anti-Muslim riots and Muslim counter-riots that left seven dead and dozens wounded. Hui Muslims from around the country came to the support of their brethren. The protests never took on an overtly religious mien, but were rather perceived on both sides as a national ethnic controversy, and by social commentators as an attempt by a disadvantaged group to seek redress from the authorities gone awry. Yet, even so, we cannot dismiss the role played by Islam. The ancestral religion of the Hui, in the Hui’s communal solidarity and identity negotiation in relation to the Han majority. Indeed, to the uninformed observer, with the exception of cases where Hui individuals deliberately distinguish themselves by outward signs of Islamic religiosity (e.g., skullcap and/or beard for men, head covering for women), average Han and secularized Hui citizens are virtually indistinguishable in appearance from each other. Yet, in terms of each community’s sense of belonging in Chinese society, Hui and Han alike cite mutually irreconcilable differences based on Islamic custom, if not belief and practice.

As the two cases cited above bear witness, Muslim difference and diversity in China are not only matters of a single non-Muslim ethnic group of Muslims confined to one region of the country. The situation is considerably more widespread and complex, with multiple Muslim ethnicities adding to the multicultural tapestry of China, and diversity even among the members of respective Muslim communities. The Uyghurs and Hui are, in fact, but two of ten Muslim minority nationalities officially recognized by the People’s Republic of China, making up an overall Muslim population in China of indeterminate size. According to Chinese census statistics, approximately 91.5 percent of China’s people are members of the Han Chinese majority nationality, leaving all minorities to round out the population at 8.5 percent. Of the officially estimated twenty to twenty-five million Muslims, nearly half are Hui, with an estimated forty-five percent made up of the Uyghur population and roughly five percent belonging to other minority nationalities. While those proportions are credible, the overall number of Muslims in the People’s Republic of China is disputed. Other estimates have the Muslim population of China exceeding fifty million, perhaps reaching as many as one hundred million. The higher numbers are often cited by Muslim groups with the motive of inflating population statistics, and are therefore suspect. However, survey criteria that do not clearly distinguish religious, cultural, and ethnic self-identification from externally imposed identities lead many to suspect that the official count is underestimated. The diversity of China’s Muslims thus contributes to our statistical uncertainty regarding the size of the population.

The Classification of Muslim Identity in the Communist Era

Before examining more closely the “problems” associated with Muslim diversity in China, and some of the “solutions” attempted both by Muslims and the Chinese state in its various incarnations from dynastic empire to People’s Republic, it would be helpful first to attempt to obtain some grasp of how this diversity is manifested, and how it came to be. Efforts to “manage” ethnic/cultural heterogeneity in the mid-twentieth century by the nascent Communist state borrowed heavily from Stalinist-era Soviet social science, leading to a system of classification whereby China’s fifty-six
minorities ("nationalities" or ethnicities) were identified (i.e., the Han majority and fifty-five minority nationalities). According to this system, ten minorities are recognized as having Islam as part of their ethnic-cultural heritage (use of the term "religion" is avoided here as it was not one of the original criteria used to distinguish minority nationalities in the formative period of the minzu system).

With the exception of the Hui, the various Muslim nationalities—Uyghur, Kazakh, Kirghiz, Ubeek, Tatar, Sahar, Bonan, Dongzhang, and Tujik—are neither ethnically nor linguistically Chinese: they all speak Turkic or other Altaic languages (except for the Tujiks, who speak a form of Persian, an Indo-European language). Today, most of these various Muslim minorities live in Xinjiang and neighboring western provinces (again with the exception of the Hui, who are dispersed throughout the country). Apart from their common religious identity as Muslims, the Muslims of Xinjiang and western China are distinct from one another in several ways. They speak different, albeit in many cases related, languages. In terms of lifestyle, some of these communities maintain the nomadic-pastoralist traditions of the steppe, while others, most notably the Uyghurs, have been sedentary for centuries. These lifestyle differences also led to differences in the sociopolitical organisation of communities, different means of livelihood, and (often in the context of the urban-rural divide) varying degrees of religiosity versus secularisation and cultural traditionalism versus the assimilation of mainstream Han-centric Chinese customs and values. With the exception of language and other ethnic markers, these same differences may be found not only between the various Muslim minorities in China but within them as well.

The History of Islam in China

The makeup of the Muslim population of China challenges those who attempt to study it, as well as the governments that have sought to bring it under hegemonic control, with its layer upon layer of perplexing diversity. But how did this situation arise? That is, whence came the Muslims of China, and how and when was Islam introduced to China? Not surprisingly, these questions also have diverse answers. There was no single entry point of Muslims, no single moment, nor, despite Chinese Muslim perpetuation of origin myths to the contrary, a single, definable event whereby Islam was brought to the Middle Kingdom. The diverse Muslim population of China today, which we have already determined that it is best to regard as a number of distinct populations, traces its roots to two main historical phenomena: immigration and the subsequent naturalization of immigrant Muslims in China, and the absorption of Central Asian Muslim populations due to imperial expansion and the annexation of Muslim regions. The rest of these phenomena (immigration and naturalization) produced the ethnic Chinese Hui population, whereas the second (territorial expansion and annexation) accounts for the inclusion of the nine non-Chinese Muslim nationalities, chief among them the Uyghurs.

Under numerous dynasties during most of the past two millennia, China was a multicultural empire, incorporating large minority populations of indigenous peoples, some of whom have become almost entirely assimilated into the mainstream Han Chinese culture while others have remained more culturally distinct. Various Chinese regimes welcomed foreigners to come and trade their commodities and ideas within the Empire, making certain Chinese cities magnets for international commerce and immigration. These historical factors, including both imperial expansion and the allure of cosmopolitan centers, explain not only the existence of Muslims in China but also their tremendous diversity—a diversity that persists even today and has variously been seen both as an asset and as a liability to China's national interests, and sometimes, paradoxically, both. When foreign influences and foreign trade benefited the Empire, the presence of non-Chinese foreigners within China's borders was tolerated and foreign fashions and products, even foreign ideas and religious beliefs, united the indigenous population. However, because foreign trade was perceived by some Chinese as a threat to local commerce, foreigners and immigrants in imperial China were often the targets of popular prejudice and persecution. Moreover, because China was often the victim of foreign invasion from Inner Asia, at times xenophobic government attitudes and policies regarded foreigners and even residents descended from immigrants with suspicion.

Various groups of Muslims entered China in different historical epochs, as the Muslims of annexed territories were incorporated gradually under different regimes in a process of consolidation that continues in China's far west even today. The history of China's Muslims must, therefore, not be viewed synchronically. A diachronic approach not only leads to more accurate historiography but also better accounts for the degree of diversity described above. Nor can we overlook the geographic complexity behind this story: all histories (like all politics), no matter how global their consequences are, are, after all, local. As Jonathan Lipman has correctly cautioned, "the wide distribution of Muslims... took place in a bewildering variety of contexts," calling for "careful research, which must be local rather than generalised" (Lipman 1997). The Muslim population of China is the product of waves of immigration in various periods (which deposited Muslim sojourners and settlers in various parts of the country) as well as the vicissitudes of Chinese and Central Asian political, economic, and military history. And, depending on where these Muslims lived and when they arrived, different degrees and combinations of both "Muslimness" and "Chineseness," including varying expressions of Islamic religiosity, have emerged and developed among various populations.

While we must be cautious to avoid sweeping statements about all Muslims in China, an overview of the history of this diverse population does allow us to observe certain patterns concerning the distribution and development of Muslim communities in China. On the global level, we see Muslims in China straddling two worlds, acting as mediators between the Chinese and Islamic civilisations along sometimes literal, sometimes metaphorical, frontiers. A closer look reveals a predictable pattern based on the historical geographic distribution of China's Muslims. Muslims in the
western provinces of China, owing to greater proximity and stronger lines of communication and transportation to the heartlands of Islam in Central Asia and beyond, commonly demonstrate a deeper connection to Muslims living outside China than do co-religionists elsewhere in China. Likewise, these Muslims tend to display fewer marks of acculturation, or assimilation of Han Chinese culture. Consequently, Muslims originating in western China have often drawn their religious and cultural inspiration more directly from the Islamic world, making them markedly different in significant ways from the vast majority of China’s population. This generalization applies mainly to the Uyghurs and other non-Chinese Muslims of Xinjiang and neighboring provinces who, though influenced by centuries of contact with Chinese culture and efforts by central Chinese governments to promote their assimilation, have largely retained their distinct cultural characteristics.

By contrast, other Muslims have, over the course of history, come to live lives more remote from their Islamic brethren outside China, and have seen their existence and their future as being intimately and intrinsically linked to the fortunes of the Chinese state and society. Muslims living in the central and eastern parts of the country, mainly of the Hui minority, have responded to the centrifugal pull of the hearth of Chinese tradition and culture by becoming assimilated, to varying degrees, and blending to some extent into the mainstream of Chinese society. Observation of these differences among various Muslim communities within the borders of China, in both late imperial and modern times, uncovers fissures, which have at times put some Muslims at odds and in open conflict with other Muslims in China, not only on ethnic grounds but also based on regional, political, economic, and even intra-sectarian religious differences. In the complicated story of Muslims in China, differing communal interests have not only divided Han Chinese Muslims but have at times set Uyghur against Hui, and sometimes some Hui against other Hui who have found themselves allied with Han Chinese in specific instances.

In order to grasp the unwieldy subject of Muslim diversity in China, we begin here by narrowing our focus to the two largest Muslim populations in China, the Uyghur and Hui minorities, not only because of their numbers but also because they make for interesting comparisons, and also demonstrate the highest degree of internal diversity among themselves. In order to trace the evolution of these diverse populations, a brief narrative of the arrival and early development of Islam in China is in order. Chinese Muslim tradition (with several versions and variations) attributes the arrival of the first Muslims in China to a supernatural event. As the story goes, the Emperor Taizong (r.626–649) of the Tang Dynasty had a dream in which a monster (in some versions a demon or dragon) threatened to destroy his realm. In the dream, the Emperor saw a bearded man wearing a turban who had the power to quell the monster. Upon waking, the emperor asked his advisors to interpret the dream’s meaning, and they told him it depicted a great “sage” who had recently appeared in the West. The emperor dispatched emissaries to go and fetch this western sage and bring him back to China. The sage was none other than the Prophet Muhammad, who, upon receiving the Chinese delegation, declined to go to China himself but sent a contingent led by one of his close companions (and maternal uncle), Sa’d ibn Ali Waqas. According to the Chinese Muslim tradition, the Prophet’s companions remained in China, where they served the emperor and helped to restore peace and harmony to the Tang Empire. They settled in China and married Chinese women, thus making them the progenitors of the Hui people.

Several details of this legend are completely implausible, especially because Sa’d ibn Ali Waqas is known to be buried in Medinah. Nevertheless, encomiums and errors aside, a religious myth that links China’s Muslims to the genetic and spiritual lineage of Muhammad serves to give them a sense of Islamic legitimacy; if the Prophet planted the seeds of Islam in China then the existence of Muslims in China is divinely ordained. Thus, we can understand the importance of perpetuating this narrative even when its historicity is dubious.

Nevertheless, Islam did indeed arrive in China during the Tang Dynasty, carried with the caravans trade along the overland Silk Road from the West; via maritime trade from the Persian Gulf, Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean to southeastern Chinese coastal cities; and on horseback by military mercenaries, who fought in skirmishes along China’s western frontiers. Muslims also came to the Tang Empire on diplomatic missions sent by both the Umayyads (661–650) and Abbasids (751–1223) caliphates. The foundations of the Muslim population of China were laid by some of these early arrivals, who settled in Chinese cities, intermarried with Chinese women, and established permanent Islamic enclaves in various parts of the country, principally in port cities and inland commercial centers. However, Islam, as the religion and culture of the early settlers, remained a distinctly foreign entity in China, kept apart from the mainstream of Han Chinese society by differences of language, custom, and faith. As long as Muslims continued to generate revenue for the empire and did not violate its civil laws, they were permitted to conduct internal affairs within their communities as they saw fit. This included the ability to appoint their own religious authorities, including, as in the case of the community in Qianhau, a shaykh al-‘ism to preside over religious matters and a qadi to rule according to Shari‘a law on intra-communal civil matters. This autonomy helped to preserve Islamic orthodoxy in China over generations, but also contributed to the divide between the Han and Hui communities.

The ideal of the Confucian meritocracy ensured that foreigners who were willing and able to acculturate could find a place, even elite status, in Tang society. Yet, even if they could overcome cultural obstacles, the fact that most Muslim immigrants to China were engaged in commerce automatically placed them at the bottom of a Confucian social hierarchy that disdained merchants. This economic reality, perhaps more than Chinese xenophobia, excluded most Muslims from full integration in society. Thus, even after generations of residence in China whereby the descendants of early Muslim sojourners rose to the status of wuhsi fanke (fifth-generation "famil- iar strangers"), these "naturalized" Muslims in China were still perceived as foreign.

The influx of foreign Muslims continued into the Song period (960–1279), and it was made up particularly of Muslim immigrants seeking economic opportunity, or refuge from political turbulence in the Islamic world. Yet, even with the inroads made by Tang wuhsi fanke communities and the Muslim families successfully naturalized
during the Song period, with their participation in various areas of Chinese society. Islam in China had yet to be institutionalized and thus remained stigmatized as irremediably "different." The Mongol conquests and the establishment of the Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) linked China with the vast Mongol Empire. This multinational and multiethnic empire encompassed all of Central Asia and parts of the Middle East and, therefore, contained a large Muslim population. The Mongol policy of bringing in soldiers and bureaucrats from their distant domains to preside over local conquered peoples meant that Muslims, including Uighurs and other Turkic Muslims, were imported to serve as civil and military administrators in China. Mongol policy placed Muslims in the second highest ethnos (lit. "mixed categories") class of a social hierarchy divided along ethnic lines. This status allowed certain prominent Muslims to rise to positions of considerable power and wealth under Mongol rule. The political climate also drew large numbers of Muslims from the Mongols' western territories to China, where they sought economic opportunity and often settled among the Muslim communities that already existed there, or pioneered the settlement of frontier territories, such as the southwestern province of Yunnan. For the most part, Mongol policies of religious tolerance afforded Muslims in China a significant degree of autonomy in the administration of their own communities. Thus, while the Muslim population of Yuan China grew, both in size and prosperity, it largely continued to function separately from Han Chinese society, and retained its foreign stigma.

When the founder of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) overthrew the Mongols and restored native rule to China, there was no backlash against Muslims, many of whom had supported the Yuan regime. The early Ming emperors were wary of Mongols living in China, but members of other non-Han groups who had served in the Yuan administration were retained. Muslim military officers, architects, astronomers, and engineers, among others, played an important role in helping to build the Ming Empire. Yet popular resentment of Muslims among the Han Chinese majority—which had existed since the Tang Dynasty and only grew in bitterness as the result of Muslim collaboration with the Mongols—reached dangerous heights. Fearing social discord in their realm and any negative foreign influence in China in the wake of the expulsion of the Mongols, the Ming rulers, through much of the period, pursued a foreign policy that was isolationist and protectionist. A companion domestic policy sought to homogenize Ming society, encouraging the rapid acculturation of heterogeneous communities, including Chinese Muslims. These policies, and those of the subsequent Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), will be examined more closely below.

Hui Muslims

As a consequence of this history, the Hui, who are ethnically and linguistically Chinese, are a Muslim population scattered across the country in both rural and urban areas. The Hui exhibit great diversity in terms of religious practice and integration into the cultural mainstream of Han Chinese society. Yet collectively they embody what can be referred to as "simultaneity," being both Chinese and Muslim at the same time. The historical development of various communities that would later be brought under the rubric of Hui nationality in modern times is the history of the naturalization of Islamic culture and religion, the process whereby Islam in China has been transformed into a hybrid Chinese Islam. This notion of a "Chinese Islam" must not be thought of as monolithic, for there is a wide range of Hui acculturation and religiosity. What distinguishes the Hui from other Muslim populations in China is the fact that they embody, to a greater or lesser degree, a mixture of Chinese and foreign Islamic heritage.

Uighur Muslims

The history of Uighur Muslims in China differs significantly from that of the Hui. While the Uighurs have been affected by centuries of close contact with and influence from Chinese civilization, their internally diverse culture remains distinct. The Uighurs are by far the most populous of the non-Chinese Muslims in China, and at the present remain a plurality (approximately forty-five percent) among Xinjiang's population, despite the constant influx of Han Chinese settlers fanned by governmental incentive programs. The recent riots in Ürümchi were the direct consequence of hostilities between the indigenous Uighurs (thirteen percent of the city's population) and the Han immigrants (seventy-six percent), a clash rooted in the problem of ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity in the region. Beijing has met the problem with a two-pronged approach: trying to persuade the Uighurs to assimilate into the Han-centric mainstream culture of "New China" and trying to create a Han majority via immigration, in Xinjiang. Until the population balance shifts dramatically in favor of the Han Chinese settlers, however, clashes like those in Ürümchi will be inevitable. And, although a few Uighurs have embraced the idea of a shared national destiny, the majority cling tenaciously to their ethnic and cultural distinctiveness.

Uighur resistance to assimilation, or absorption, into Chinese culture and society must be understood in the context of the Uighurs' long and proud history, which predates the annexation of Xinjiang (lit. "new frontier") by the Qing Dynasty. Descended from tribal pastoralists from around the border of present-day Mongolia and Siberia, the proto-Uighurs were one of many Turkic-Altaic tribes subjugated by the Xiongnu (Huns) around the turn of the fourth century CE. After the collapse of the Xiongnu confederation, several other peoples took up the mantle of nomadic leadership, only to be overthrown by rival tribes. The Göktürks established a new confederation (552–747), under which the Uighurs emerged as a distinct subject people. The Uighurs allied themselves with the Chinese Sui Dynasty (581–618) and struggled against the Göktürks for nearly 150 years. In 742, the Uighur chief Tán Khutuk Khülük Biige Köll after defeating the Göktürks, filled the existing Inner Asian power

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vacuum, declaring himself leader of the nomadic tribes and establishing a Uyghur Khaganate that was eventually overthrown by another Turkic people, the Khirghiz, in 848.

For close to a century, the Uyghur Khaganate held sway over most of Mongolia and Central Asia, dominating the eastern Silk Road. In China the Tang Dynasty (618–906) had succeeded the Sui, but by the middle of the eighth century had been weakened by a number of internal crises, including a rebellion. The wealthy and powerful Uyghur state came to the assistance of the Tang Dynasty, defeating the rebel forces of An Lushan (c. 703–757) and liberating the Tang capital. In 725, in a reversal of customary roles, the Emperor of China paid tribute to the Uyghur Khagan: Tengri Bögić. In 779, during the period of Tang restoration, the Uyghur state held the upper hand in this alliance and was poised to invade China. The Khagan planned to do just that, but was overthrown by his uncle: Tun Bagha Tarkhan, who thought that keeping the Tang Dynasty intact as a buffer against common enemies and a steady source of tribute (i.e., trade) best served Uyghur interests. Moreover, the new Khaghan Tun Bagha Tarkhan implemented laws intended to maintain Uyghur unity, and opposed the invasion of China for fear that, if successful, the Uyghurs would quickly be assimilated into Chinese culture. During their century of domination, the Uyghurs built a sophisticated civilization—borrowing from other cultures, especially in the arts and sciences—but always tenaciously asserted their distinct identity and independence.

The cosmopolitan Uyghur Khaghanate absorbed influences from a variety of sources. This is readily apparent in the religious flexibility demonstrated by ruler and subject alike. Traditionally, the Uyghurs, like most other Turkic tribes, adhered to Tengriist shamanism, named after the Altiya sky deity, Tengri. Religious influences from Persia entered the Uyghur sphere via the influx of Sogdians. Tengri Bögić converted to Manichaeism and made it the official state religion, while among the Uyghur population there were also followers of Buddhism and Nestorian Christianity. When the Khaganate was defeated by the Khirghiz, the Uyghur population was forced into diaspora, the majority settling in various areas of what is now the People's Republic of China, with others scattered throughout Central and Inner Asia. A group of Uyghurs who settled in present-day Gansu province and established the Guishu Kingdom (870–1036) in western China abandoned Manichaeism and eventually adopted Tibetan Buddhism. Today, their descendants are distinguished from the Uyghurs of Xinjiang and are called the Yagur; they are considered by the government of the People's Republic of China to be a separate minority nationality.

The majority of the Uyghurs who fled into China settled in parts of what is now Xinjiang, and, like the other Turkic peoples of Central Asia, ultimately converted to Islam, though the fragmented Uyghur population did not embrace the new religion en masse. The Uyghur diaspora made any kind of significant reunification extremely difficult, as some of the population settled in various scattered throughout the vast Taklimakan desert: Hami, Kashgar, Khotan, Kucha, Marvd, Niyu, Turfan, and

Yarkand. There they pursued agriculture as a livelihood, and provided hospitality to Silk Road travelers. Yet each of these towns fell under separate rule. The Karakhajo state, for example, was based in Turfan and Ürümqi, which remained a center of Uyghur culture and survived as an independent Buddhist Manichaean society until the Mongol invasion of 1209. The Karakhajo regime finally fell in 1335. Another population of Uyghurs, who settled in the Chu river valley, converted to Islam in 934. These, they established the Karakhan state, which was built upon Islamic institutions. The Karakhan state allied itself with other Islamic states, such as the Samanid Emirate of Samarkand, and lasted from 940 to 1212, when it too was overrun by the Mongols. The Karakhans built their capital at Kashi, which, along with Samarqand and Bukhara, became an important center of Turkic Islamic culture and learning. It was thus that Islam first penetrated Uyghur society. While the Uyghurs were never able to regain the unity of their imperial past, they were resettled de facto by Mongol rule in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. This unity helped to facilitate the spread of Islam among Uyghurs from one oasis to another. By the fifteenth century, the expanding influence of the Uyghurs of Yarkand led to the Islamization of the residents of Turfan and Ürümqi—among the last Uyghurs to become Muslims. After the decline of the Chinggisid Mongol empire, the Uyghurs and other peoples of the region came once more under the rule of Mongols coming from the East. This time, a confederation of nomadic Otrat Mongols from Dunhuang in the seventeenth century established the Dunhuag empire, which absorbed most of northern Xinjiang. The rise of the Darungs preceded by a few decades the rise of the Manchu tribes to the East of Mongolia, who would conquer China and establish the Qing Dynasty in 1644. Within decades, the Qing rulers embarked on a westward expansion of their empire that would lead them into a protracted conflict with the Darungs, whom they defeated and utterly eradicated from Xinjiang by the mid eighteenth century, opening the door to a process of Han Chinese migration and settlement in the region that continues to this day.

The scattered distribution of the Uyghurs across present-day Xinjiang and their historically staggered conversion to Islam have resulted in a tremendous amount of diversity among the population. We may generalize and postulate that the Uyghur communities that were Islamicized last have the least-entrenched Islamic traditions and Muslim identities. Thus, many Uyghurs from Turfan to Ürümqi to Hami in modern times are more secularized than their brethren further to the east; whereas the western Uyghurs of Kashgar and its environs tend to look westward for their cultural and religious influences (to Samarkand, Bukhara, and even Istanbul), eastern Uyghurs have been more heavily influenced by contact with Chinese culture (especially material culture). But that is not to say that among them there are not devout Muslims, or that their Turkic cultural identity is weak. On the contrary, mosques in Ürümqi are often full for Friday congregational prayers, as Islam is integrated into Uyghur nationalism, which is strongly represented in western Xinjiang, a fact that is often cited in response to increasing Chinese hegemony.
The Qing incursions into and subsequent annexation of Xinjiang brought the vast majority of the Uyghur population, scattered as it was among the various oases, under Chinese imperial rule. Other Turkic Muslims were similarly absorbed into the Qing empire, and this existing population was added to by an influx of Han Chinese and Hui Muslim settlers seeking opportunities. The Qing annexation of Xinjiang therefore created the conditions for ethnoreligiously based social, economic, and political conflict among the various communities and between the regime and its subjects.

The Qing Dynasty first attempted to control Xinjiang by installing friendly local rulers: the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662-1722) installed a Uyghur chief in Xinjiang’s westernmost oasis city of Hami in the early eighteenth century. After the Qing defeat of the Dzungars, the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-1796) tried to follow his grandfather’s example with disastrous results: dividing the entirety of Xinjiang into four sub-vassalates under Qing rule led to unrest and rebellion throughout the territory. As a consequence, the Qing government was compelled to deploy troops to control Xinjiang, resulting in an ongoing military occupation. This commitment of forces left the government ill-prepared to deal with a rash of rebellions across the country, some of them led by Muslims, that plagued the dynasty through much of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Islam and the State

The various Muslim rebellions are often spoken of as though they were a single unified campaign against the central government, but they were anything but that. In fact, they reflected the very "problem" of Muslim diversity in China in the challenges they posed to Qing authority on a local level. After the Uyghur uprisings in the wake of the annexation of Xinjiang, Hui Muslims rebelled in Gansu province in the 1780s. But, rather than a unified movement against the Qing government, this rebellion was actually sparked by a conflict within the local Hui community. For generations, Hui Muslims from western China had been traveling westward into the central Islamic lands for trade, to perform the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca, or Hajj, and also in search of Islamic teachings that they could not find in their native land. In the early part of the eighteenth century, a number of religious teachers from Gansu made their way to Arabia, traveling through most of the Muslim world. In their travels they were exposed to, among other things, teachings of Sufism, or Islamic mysticism.

In particular, several prominent Hui religious leaders were initiated into the Naqshbandi Sufi order, one of numerous Sufi brotherhoods that had proliferated in Islamic countries, had itself divided into two rival sub-orders: the Khaddiya and the Jafariya. These two groups were divided by a difference in the way they performed one of the central practices of Sufism: dhikr, or the ritual remembrance and invocation of the Quranic names of God. In many Sufi orders, the practice of dhikr takes the form of rhythmic chanting, accompanied by breathing techniques that often lead to ecstatic experiences of union with the divine, which are often compared to the feeling of drunkenness. Other Sufi orders have advocated a more “sober” practice; in fact, their practice of meditation and dhikr emphasizes the interiorization of religious experience, and so their dhikr is performed in silence, the repetition of the divine names being done internally by the devotee. Traditionally, the Naqshbandi branch had been considered one of the more sober Sufi orders. As the order expanded and developed, however, a group within the brotherhood that preferred the vocalized dhikr emerged and came to be known as the Jafariya. To distinguish them from the others, the practitioners of the original silent dhikr were then called the Khaddiya.

These Naqshbandi sub-orders, with their divergent practices, were introduced into China by different Hui teachers. Ma Laichi (1673-1753) brought the Khaddiya teachings and practices to China. In Gansu, and the neighboring Qinghai and Shaanxi provinces, he attracted followers among the local Hui who found the Khaddiya practices consonant with the prevailing Sunni traditions that had already been in China for nearly a millennium. Thus, the Khaddiya menehun (“brotherhood”) was established. The Jafariya menehun, on the other hand, was founded in China by a charismatic teacher by the name of Ma Mingxin (1719-1781), who had studied under a Sufi master in Yemen before bringing the vocalized dhikr back to his native land. Ma Mingxin’s order began in Gansu, but gained a following that eventually would penetrate Hui communities from the southwestern province of Yunnan all the way to Manchuria in the northeast of China.

As popular as the Jafariya became, the more traditional Hui, both non-Sufi and Khaddiya, objected to its orthodox practices, which they accused of being disruptive of social harmony. The Khaddiya labeled their own doctrine the “old teaching” (laqta), thereby conferring upon it the air of established, orthodox tradition, though it had been established in China only a few years before Ma Mingxin’s “new teaching” (jinjue), which was considered an upstart heterodoxy. By invoking the notion of heterodoxy, the critics of the “new teaching” got the attention of the Qing authorities, who, like any imperial government, were ever vigilant against potentially seditious religious movements. As the rivalry between these two Naqshbandi sub-orders in western and central China grew increasingly hostile, local Han Chinese officials were thus drawn into the conflict. The Qing government tolerated non-Sufi Hui Muslims, as well as the Khaddiya practitioners, but their constant scrutiny of the Jafariya community eventually caused followers of that community to rise up in violence against both Khaddiya Hui Muslims and the Qing authorities, whom they accused of corruption and anti-Muslim bias, which led to two full-blown rebellions in 1781 and 1783. These rebellions were summarily put down by Qing forces, but in many ways showed a fundamental weakness of the ability of the regime to deal with the complicated diversity that characterized much of its realm.
Underscoring this problem, the Muslim rebellions of the 1780s were based on a localized conflict between two groups of Han Muslims, but also drew in Han Chinese officials and civilians, under the rule of a Manchu Dynasty. Muslim diversity proved to be a thorn in the side of the central government in a way that echoes today's ethnic conflicts in the People's Republic of China.

Given this history of rebellions alternating with periods of peaceful coexistence, scholars have generalized about the interactions with Chinese culture and society in terms of either retaliation or assimilation. This "conflict or concord" interpretation of the encounters of China's Muslims with the dominant Chinese civilization around them is a generalization that seeks to reduce complex and dynamic historical circumstances and events to a simple binary choice. It is flawed not because it is altogether untrue but because it is incomplete. It is unable to depict, let alone explain, the individual and communal motivations that produced the diverse responses of Muslims in China to the social and cultural contexts in which they lived. We have already seen how internally diverse China's Muslim population is. The "problem" of Muslim diversity in China has been exacerbated by a failure on the part of the Chinese state to recognize this diversity, and, worse yet, has led the government to attempt to impose homogeneity upon this diverse population by heavy-handed policies. China's diverse Muslims have offered diverse "solutions" to the problem of finding their proper place in Chinese society, and different Chinese governments have also taken a variety of approaches to the problem.

In the early centuries of Muslim immigration to China, going back to the Tang period, Muslims were afforded a measure of autonomy provided that they obeyed the law of the land and contributed to the empire's prosperity; and essentially lived separately from the mainstream Han Chinese population. In this regard, Muslims were not treated especially differently from other foreign ethnic communities that had also established a presence in China, such as Jews, Zoroastrians, or Nestorian Christians, among others. This "inner-fate" attitude toward foreign settlers on the part of the government, however, could not shield these immigrant communities from the resentment and animosity of Chinese contemporaries, as witnessed during the Tang period by the Huang Chao rebellion (874-884), during which, by some accounts, tens of thousands of foreign residents of the port city of Guangzhou were massacred.

Even in these early centuries of Muslim residence in China, the fact that Muslims were perceived as a foreign presence fueled xenophobic popular prejudices. As we saw above, the fact that more Muslims entered China with the Mongol conquest only worsened this situation. Therefore, along with the restoration of native Chinese institutions, the rulers of the Ming Dynasty had to contend with the potential for ethnic strife, and therefore enacted policies intended to accelerate the "civilization" of "barbarian" minorities, including laws to help accelerate the natural process of acculturation of ethnic and cultural communities. The daily force and inevitability of acculturative processes had certainly shaped the history of the Muslim community in China even before the Ming period, but never before had a regime taken such concrete steps to oversee Muslim assimilation into mainstream Chinese culture and society. While the widespread adoption of Chinese language and material culture by the ancestors of today's Hui Muslims living in eastern and central China would have occurred anyway, the Ming policies certainly catalyzed a more rapid naturalization. The Ming government even enacted a law requiring "foreigners" to intermarry with Han Chinese; however, in a move that highlighted their "difference," Muslim subjects were exempt from this law because the government acknowledged that Muslims might be spurned and have difficulty finding prospective Chinese spouses; they were therefore allowed to marry within their own community.

From the Ming imperial perspective, this domestic ethnic policy was based primarily on foreign policy concerns. After a century of foreign rule, the Ming government sought to define and secure Chinese identity and patrimony via methods that, at least under the reign of several Ming emperors, verged on protectionism and isolationism. That is not to say that the three-hundred-year Ming Dynasty was altogether consistent in its worldview. The dynasty's founder, Ming Taizu (r. 1368-1398), was somewhat exotic in his policies concerning Muslims; while tolerant, and even solicitous at times, the emperor nevertheless also limited his empire's contacts abroad. By contrast, his son, the Yongle emperor (r. 1402-1424), was incredibly outward-looking in his perspective, and actually reversed most of his father's policies toward Muslims. However, through much of the period, a more inward-looking foreign policy greatly reduced Chinese contact with the outside world, including Islamic Central Asia. One of the effects of this policy was to cut off Chinese-speaking Muslims from the central lands of Islam, leaving them to negotiate their way amid a vast non-Muslim majority with very little support or influence from outside China.

By the sixteenth century, many among the highly sinicized Muslim communities of central and eastern China pursued a classical Confucian education in order to take the official examination—a means to social advancement. Chinese had become the mother tongue of assimilated Muslims, and a significant portion of this population were also literate in classical Chinese. By contrast, Arabic and Persian had dwindled in use among these Muslims, except for the liturgical Arabic used in daily religious observances. For these purposes, rudimentary instruction in the Islamic languages, for the purposes of fulfilling basic ritual obligations, was often given to Muslim children at informal schools in local community mosques. There were, however, some Muslims in central and eastern China who were concerned about the possible erosion, or even disappearance, of Islamic knowledge and identity that accompanied assimilation.

One such individual, Hu Dengzhou (1522-1597), had been educated in his youth in the Confucian curriculum, but also craved a deeper understanding of Islam than was available from the mosque school he attended as a child in Shandong. Realizing that such learning was impossible to find in China, Hu Dengzhou did what few others in his time dared. He traveled for years through Central Asia, and eventually to Mecca, seeking instruction and Islamic texts he could bring back with him to China. Upon returning to China, he undertook the reform of existing mosque-based
education, and instituted a new system known as Jingjiang fangyu (lit. "scripture hall education").

Hu Dengzhous innovations included the expansion of the curriculum to include newly introduced Arabic and Persian texts, which required more intensive language instruction than had previously been standard in Chinese Muslim schools. He also implemented the practice of training teachers who could then go out to communities in different locales to train others in the new curriculum and pedagogy. In so doing, Hu Dengzhou laid the foundations of the scholarly network that would blossom at the end of the Ming period into the early Qing period. Perhaps the greatest innovation introduced by Hu Dengzhou was the use of Chinese texts in the curriculum. In the early days of the educational system, Islamic texts were scarce, so Hu Dengzhou and his followers translated those they had into classical Chinese. Eventually, this practice led to the production of a storable Chinese Islamic literary canon, and the gradual blending of Confucian and Islamic ideas that would gain its fullest expression in works collectively referred to as the Han Kitab ("Chinese-language Islamic books")—a term composed of the word han, meaning "Chinese," and the Arabic word (also used in Persian and Turkish) kitab meaning "book." As the educational system, curriculum, and burgeoning scholarly network grew in sophistication, so too did the teachers and students take on the appearance of a true sub-class of Chinese literati, which eventually gave rise to individuals who would write the Han Kitab, the production of which began with literal translations of Islamic texts into Chinese. The scope and breadth of the Han Kitab evolved eventually to encompass commentaries and comprehensive treatises, including the original works of prominent Chinese Muslim scholars such as Wang Dayu (c. 1570-1658), Ma Zhu (b. 1640), and Liu Zhi (c. 1660-c. 1730).

The Han Kitab scholars went from translating Arabic and Persian books, in order to serve the needs of monolingual Chinese-speaking Muslims, to producing an impressive array of original works in Chinese on a range of topics including Islamic history, practice, and theology. These Chinese Muslim scholars were erudite and cosmopolitan, and synthesized diverse religious and philosophical influences. Their work was both steeped in tradition and, yet, exceedingly innovative, shaping the way future generations of Chinese Muslims would be perceived and would come to understand their own ancestral tradition. In effect, they were translating Islam, in its many facets, into Chinese, employing the highly syncretic language of Neo-Confucian philosophy and metaphysics, transplanting an entire religious worldview from one cultural, linguistic context to another. The challenge of expressing Islamic religious concepts in a cultural context devoid of any clear monotheistic principle tested the limits of their scholarship and linguistic finesse.

The Han Kitab authors addressed a dual audience made up on the one hand of sinicized Muslims and on the other of non-Muslim readers among the Chinese elite who may have wished to learn something of Islam. For the former group, the texts were intended to help them cultivate an appreciation for their native religion and to stem the tide of assimilation that had led many Muslims in China to all but abandon their Muslim identity. For non-Muslim readers, the Chinese expression of Islamic beliefs and values was intended to dispel anti-Islamic preconceptions and to demonstrate not only that Muslims were not threatening to Chinese social harmony but also that Islam was consistent with the Neo-Confucian ideals. Thus, with respect to the "problem" of Muslim diversity in China, the Han Kitab affirmed the distinctiveness of Islam and Muslims while also presenting them as seamlessly fitting within the fabric of Chinese society, in essence reflecting the cultural simultaneity of the forebears of Hui Muslims in the People's Republic of China. The urbane, acculturated Han Kitab scholars thus assisted in the promotion and maintenance of a positive image for their community at large. Liu Zhi (c. 1660-c. 1730), regarded as the pinnacle of Chinese Islamic scholarship, was even able to get members of the Confucian elite to write laudatory prefaces to one of his works, the Yaming dianli (Ritual Law of Islam). Other prefaces were written by fellow Muslims, who also enjoyed high social rank. One of these, Yang Pei, used his preface, composed in 1710, to laud the imperial throne as he praised the Kangxi emperor's handling of the annexation of the Xinjiang oasis city of Hami:

The sage Son of Heaven has presided over the empire for forty-eight years. Virtue covers the realm; benefiting areas both inside and outside China. The emperor first instated a ruler in Hami, thereby giving that country a new lease on life... our emperor's way of showing kindness to people from far-off lands... Thus, it may be said that Muslim people heard about and admired the Emperor's reputation for righteousness.

As an astute politician, the Kangxi emperor was well aware of the value of maintaining good political relations with friendly Chinese and non-Chinese Muslims on the western frontier of the expanding Qing Empire. It was from among the Muslim population in the vicinity of Hami that the early Qing rulers conscripted soldiers to conquer and control Central Asia, particularly to wrest it from the grasp of Galdan, the Dzungar Mongol khans. The Kangxi emperor did not underestimate the value of Muslim cooperation, nor the potential for Muslim unrest; anti-Qing hostility had plagued the dynasty soon after its establishment, and would again be a source of trouble in Xinjiang. Thus, the attitude of the Kangxi court toward Muslims in the realm alternated between paternalistic solicitude and cautious circumspection.

Concern over the outbreak of Han-Hui quarrels that could destabilize frontier territories helped to shape early Qing ethnic and religious policies, as summarized by Donald Leslie: "Autocratic rule was to be tempered by imperial benevolence; and religious freedom was allowed so long as it did not interfere with good order and obedience to the state" (Leslie 1986).

The Kangxi emperor demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of ethnic politics and minority affairs, and did not make the mistake of painting all Muslims with the same brush. The law-abiding, sinicized Hui of eastern China were to be distinguished from the Turkic Muslims, most notably the Uyghurs, of the frontier. Indeed, even today, the Hui commonly distinguish themselves from these Uyghurs, whom
they regard as un-Chinese, unruly and even uncivilized, despite their common bond of Islam. But even among Hui Muslims there were distinctions: the Chinese Muslims in Gansu and other western provinces were far less息息相关 than those living in the central and eastern provinces—the cultural heart of China. The Emperor was able to discern a difference between his “good” and “bad” Muslim subjects.

In 1694, in response to an unsubstantiated accusation by a Chinese official of sedition activities on the part of the Hui community in Beijing, the Kangxi emperor issued an edict ordering the fair treatment and protection of the lives and property of Muslims. Yet one should not infer from this that he felt a strong personal affinity to Islamic doctrine or Muslim culture. The edict was surely motivated in part by the need to “juggle constituencies,” pitting rival groups against one another as part of early Qing ethnic politics. We may glean from the edict strong political motivations, probably more concerned with checking the power of Han Chinese officials than elevating the status of Muslims.

The Kangxi emperor’s policy of distinguishing between constituencies and offering benevolence in exchange for obedience became the model for his immediate successors. His son, the Yongzheng emperor (r. 1722–1735), issued four edicts concerning Muslims between 1724 and 1730. His 1729 edict asserted that the “Hui people . . . are all children of our country” and cannot be regarded as separate. As long as they peacefully keep their customs, they are not to be compared with traitors, lawbreakers, or those seeking to subvert and lead people astray. “A 1730 edict recognized the merits of good Muslim subjects—‘There is no lack among them of loyal servants of the country’—but also warned that if the Hui people indeed transgress, laws and statutes exist under which they will certainly be punished” (trans. Leslie 1986).

The limits of imperial tolerance were tested under the Qianlong emperor (1736–1796), who, as we saw above, implemented a military occupation of Xinjiang and put down significant Hui Muslim-led rebellions in the 1780s in Gansu. In the midst of the rebellions, the emperor issued a sweeping generalization about Muslims in an edict, declaring that “these sorts of people put violence before everything and have no loyalty to the state.” Obviously, the emperor and his advisors felt as though all Muslims were a threat, having recently witnessed both Uighur and Hui uprisings in the western provinces. Under these circumstances, the subtleties of Muslim diversity were lost on the regime. However, in a 1781 edict, taking a more nuanced stance and returning to the Kangxi-era distinction between lawless and law-abiding subjects, the emperor described the Muslims of the Chinese interior (as distinguished from those in Xinjiang) as “being really no different from the native [Han] inhabitants. There are good and bad among them.” In 1782, another edict warned of overly constraining Chinese Muslims in their practice of their religion, and expressing sensitivity to the condition of “good” Hui subjects: “If there is excessive inquisition and interference, then law-abiding Hui people will be deprived of peace of mind,” potentially leading to “immense trouble” (trans. Leslie 1986).

The Qianlong court, obviously aware of the need for a nuanced policy, recognized the differences between various Muslim groups. We should note again that the Muslim rebellions against the Qing Dynasty of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in northwestern China were largely based on local disputes, sometimes between Muslims (both Hui and Uighur) and sometimes between Muslims and non-Muslims. When Muslims rose up against imperial authority, it was often because they felt bullied by local officials, who abused their authority to side with local non-Muslims in acts of anti-Islamic bias. In these conflicts, Muslims could sometimes be found siding with the authorities against other Muslims. So, we must not imagine a unified Islamic front against the regime, nor should we forget that most of the disputes at the heart of the rebellions were based on local economic and civil issues.

In the extremely sanctioned communities of eastern China, as opposed to the less sanctioned communities of the northwest, both in imperial times and under the Communist regime, Hui Muslims have never organized themselves with the intent of toppling the central government to set up an Islamic state. Such ideas are beyond the purview of a minority that knows, even without the overt threat of suppression, that their survival depends on maintaining good relations and a peaceful, positive image in the eyes of the authorities and their non-Muslim neighbors. We should note the absence of a pan-Islamic notion of jihad in the Qing context. Among the ethnically distinct Muslim communities of the frontier, however, a sense of distinct identity, and a yearning for independence, has occasionally appeared. As Jonathan Unger explains concerning this hot-button term, and its usage in Chinese Muslim history, the idea of a war to convert Qing territory into an Islamic territory could almost never be entertained by a Sino-Muslim leader, as compared to the Turkic-speaking Muslims in Xinjiang, who often did declare jihad against the Qing. Indeed, virtually all of the . . . Sino-Muslims . . . shared a strong sense of belonging in China and of the Qing state’s legitimacy (Unger 1997).

In the twentieth century, after the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the restoration of Han Chinese rule, the government of the Republic of China followed the policy of recognizing the importance of the Muslim contribution to China by including the Hui (along with the Han, Manchurians, Mongolians, and Tibetans) among the core peoples of the new republic. The People’s Republic of China’s ethnic policies are far more complex, and at their inception were largely based on categories and ideas borrowed from Stalin’s Soviet Union. Just as in imperial times, most Hui today understand that their fortunes are inextricably bound to those of mainstream Han society. The same cannot be said unequivocally of the Uighurs of Xinjiang, who are still a thorn in Beijing’s side, as they include a number of separatist factions, some purely nationalist and secular but others more explicitly religious. These groups do invoke jihad and religious unity with Muslims abroad in their struggle for independence. When we have heard of foreign fighters in Afghanistan or Pakistan coming from
China, or being detained at Guantánamo Bay, they have invariably been of Uyghur ethnicity. After more than a millennium of fragmentation and subjugation under various conquest regimes—Mongol, Manchu, and Chinese—Uyghur nationalism emerged just as other peoples around the world sought self-determination between the world wars. These stirrings were supported by Stalin’s Soviet Union, who helped Uyghur nationalists to establish a short-lived independent East Turkestan Republic, from 1933 to 1934. A second East Turkestan Republic was established in 1944, but fell when the People’s Liberation Army entered Xinjiang in 1949, the People’s Republic of China declaring that it had successfully brought to fruition on behalf of the Uyghur people the revolution that their independence movement had initiated. Post-1949, some Uyghurs have argued for greater political, cultural, and religious autonomy with continued ties to the "New China." Others have even advocated outright secession from China and since as early as 1933 there has been an organized movement aiming to create an independent Uyghur state. Activists of this movement generally operate within the Uyghur diaspora community outside China because, since the 1950s, the People’s Republic of China has increasingly cracked down on Uyghur separatism within China, imprisoning dissidents and executing "traitors." A small number of Uyghurs have framed their struggle for self-determination in explicitly religious terms, some invoking the language of jihadi movements.

In the face of Muslim diversity in China, the People’s Republic of China has not articulated a consistent policy regarding Islam and Muslims. Its constitution, modeled after the 1936 Soviet Constitution, proclaims the equality of all of China’s nationalities, with one important exception: the Soviet constitution (on paper, at least) gave republics the right of secession, whereas the constitution of the People’s Republic of China strictly forbids it. As Article 4 explicitly states:

The state protects the lawful rights and interests of the minority nationalities and upholds and develops the relationship of equality, unity and mutual assistance among all of China’s nationalities. Discrimination against and oppression of any nationality are prohibited; any acts that undermine the unity of the nationalities or instigate their secessions are prohibited.

The constitution of the People’s Republic of China similarly guarantees religious freedom to its citizens, though religious persecution and the curtailing of religious rights have occurred frequently over the fifty-five years since it was ratified. The constitution was updated in 1982, with little change in the language outlining the official policy on religion. Yet, with specific regard to Islam and Muslims, the Communist government has proudly publicized gestures of tolerance and benevolence in a series of white papers during the 1990s and 2000s, including statistics on how many mosques are maintained in the country; how many government-trained imams are serving; and, especially, how many Chinese Muslims have been permitted to make the pilgrimage to Mecca each year. Such statistics are intended to promote goodwill among China’s Muslim population but also have value beyond China’s borders. Celebration of Beijing’s generosity to its Muslim citizens is also used to impress on foreign Islamic nations, including regimes that supply the oil necessary for China’s economic growth, that the People’s Republic of China treats its Muslims well and respects Islam. In a similar effort to curry favor with Muslim countries, the People’s Republic of China has encouraged the influx of petrodollars from the Persian Gulf for the construction of mosques and madrasas where elements of the Wahhabi doctrine are promulgated.

Both the constitution and the white papers dealing with matters of religion and minority rights affirm religious tolerance within a context of tight government control. Even when specific language intended to show the government’s appreciation of each religious community’s distinctiveness is invoked, it is overshadowed by platitudes asserting the duty of each community to subjugate their beliefs and practices to the interests of the state.

It is traditional for Chinese religious believers to love their country and religions. The Chinese government supports and encourages the religious circles to unite the religious believers to actively participate in the construction of the country. The various religious believers also advocate serving the society and promoting the people’s well-being, such as . . . Islam’s “praying to Allah to give great reward in this world and hereafter.” ("Freedom of religious belief in China” 1997)

Such general statements about Islam appear to reflect an official perspective in the People’s Republic of China that is not at all concerned with Muslim diversity. Muslim diversity, like ethnic and cultural diversity in general, is celebrated both officially and publically, and suppressed in practice. In reality, apart from its official positions, the People’s Republic of China pursues a variety of responses to the "problem" of Muslim diversity in China, some of them at odds with one another, as dictated by the exigencies of the "situation on the ground."

Diversity poses a challenge to empire builders and imperial administrators; homogeneity is far more conducive to hegemony. To political historians and contemporary political theorists—who study empires and other hegemonic states—diversity often proves inconvenient in terms of constructing comprehensive theories. However, diversity can be a boon to sociologists and anthropologists, for whom it provides evidence to fuel theories about human adaptability to changeable social and cultural circumstances. For historians of religion, diversity is an inevitable reality of the field, as religious beliefs and practices tend to morph according to the norms of a given cultural context as easily as human beings adapt to different physical environments. Whether one welcomes or dislikes political, social, cultural, and/or religious diversity, it is a phenomenon that cannot be swept under the proverbial rug, regardless of the size of that rug. Attempts to whitewash, overlook, or cover up diversity, whether in policy initiatives or scholarly theories, generally fail. This has certainly been the case in certain policies aiming to deal with the Muslim population that have
been implemented by various Chinese governments over the course of Chinese history, as well as in studies of Islam and China.

Toward the end of an eventful and war-scarred twentieth century, scholars theorized and laypeople speculated about the much-heralded "new world order" of the coming millennium. Samuel Huntington, a political theorist, referred to a "Confucian-Islamic connection" in his ominous forecast for the geopolitical future. The Clash of Civilizations (Huntington 1996). Huntington hypothesized that, in the twenty-first century, civilizations will replace ideologies as the principal force behind global conflict. The Christian West, led by the United States, will find itself at odds with various other civilizations around the world. Most notably, the so-called Islamic and Confucian civilizations will be pushed into a unilateral alliance, cooperating—technologically, economically, and militarily—to create a foil to American hegemony.

There is no denying the reality of collaboration between China and Muslim countries, including a nuclear-armed Pakistan and a nuclear-aspirant Iran, nor the fact that relations between China and global Islam will have an important role to play on the international stage in the coming decades. But the idea that there exists in the world a Confucian and Islamic "civilization" is highly questionable. Huntington seems to wish for the convenience of monolithic blocs, separated by borders drawn with bold lines. Such an approach mirrors the attempts by empires to impose unity from above by whitewashing complexities and diversity. Even more neglected by this theory of civilizations is the micro level, on the ground, where individuals within a society hold hybrid identities and multiple allegiances. Even Huntington must admit that there are cracks in his blocs and fissures in his lines. Thus, he refers to "fractured states" whose multicultural, multilingual, and/or multireligious populations include representatives of different "civilizations." The wish to reduce humanity to a collection of monolithic blocs may be appealing, but the reality of diversity and complexity is intractable. Indeed, if we look closely enough, it becomes obvious that all states are "fractured" by internal diversity, just as most individuals assume different identities depending on the situation at hand. Diversity cannot simply be homogenized or hegemonized, as the tenuous diversity of Muslims after nearly twelve centuries in China bears witness.

Further Reading