FIRE: Forum for International Research in Education
Vol. 5, Iss. 1, 2019, pp. 22-43

CONTROLLING RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE AND EDUCATION FOR COUNTERING RELIGIOUS EXTREMISM: CASE STUDY OF THE UYGHUR MUSLIMS IN CHINA

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Abstract

As a secularist state, China has always been highly sensitive about religious traditions, particularly Islam. During the late 1990s and especially after the 9/11 terrorist events, the government rhetoric has been to equate the Islamic knowledge and identity with violent ethnic separatism, and more recently extremism and terrorism (Roberts, 2016, 2018). Thus, the Uyghurs' right to access Islamic knowledge and practice Islam has been increasingly restricted and diminished (Cook, 2017; Millward, 2018). After reviewing the recent history of Chinese rhetoric and policies regarding the religious education in Xinjiang, this article discusses the possible ramifications of such developments, via the lenses of post-colonialism, the Politics of Recognition (Taylor, 1994), the push and pull factors that trigger radicalization, and religious literacy. Meanwhile, through sharing the perspectives of the Uyghur diaspora in Canada, the author also highlights that current Chinese policies and practices could deepen the "us" vs. "them" dichotomy between the Muslim Uyghurs and the majority Han population as well as the Chinese state, therefore creating more tension in society.

Keywords: religious knowledge and education; religious extremism; China; Uyghurs; policies and rhetoric

Introduction

Religion has always been a deeply contested topic in the People's Republic of China. As the contemporary Chinese vision on religion is based on a highly secularist[2] paradigm,

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[2] I use the term "secularist", in the way Robert Jackson (2012) sees, as a paradigm that deems "religious claims are false or meaningless", versus "secular" which refers to equal treatment of various religious traditions while respecting the principle of freedom of religion (p.60).

religion has generally enjoyed a very limited space in society, especially in educational spheres. Although, during the early years of the Republic, religion had been tolerated to some extent due to many other urgent priorities, in the late 1950s, especially during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) all religious traditions were ruthlessly suppressed.[3]

At the end of the Cultural Revolution, most notably during the 1980s, all religious beliefs and faiths began to be treated with more tolerance and acceptance by the government, as a result of the newly-launched reform and opening-up policies (simplified Chinese: *改革开放政策*). Accordingly, a wide range of traditional cultures, values, and faiths was offered the chance to revive and flourish again to a certain extent. Yet, during the late 1990s, the authorities began to perceive the link between religious faiths and security of the state, especially regarding Falun Gong and Islam. In the latter case, the rhetoric of the government has been increasingly parallel with the one of the West, where the "war on terror" campaigns have been exclusively targeting Muslims and their faith (Hilal, 2017; Jamal, 2008).

When it comes to education, China has always tried to exclude religious rhetoric, knowledge or activities from the compulsory education system both at primary and secondary levels. As Article 8 of the Education Law of the People's Republic of China[4] adopted in 1995, one of the fundamental laws of China regulating education states: "Education activities shall be in the benefit of public interests of the state and the society. The state shall separate education from religion. Any organization or individual may not employ religion to obstruct activities of the state education system." Accordingly, since the early 1980s, the only available religious content at the primary and secondary level of education has been strictly limited to the introduction of the world's major religions and some relevant cultures (Nanbu, 2008).

At the tertiary level, academic courses and programs related to religion have been offered, but exclusively through secularist or irreligious perspectives (Nanbu, 2008). Consequently, according to China expert Dru Gladney, intolerance towards Muslim minorities in China has been growing due to a severe lack of religious education in main stream education. Although, religion-related content in the Chinese curricula has increased in the past two decades, it is still largely discussed in superficial, negative or pejorative ways (Zhou, 2017).

If there is considerable space for religion in the Chinese education system, it is in the religious institutions operated by various patriotic religious organizations that aim to train officials and scholars who work in jobs related to religion. The most important obligation of these schools is to cultivate a group of young religious professionals who are patriotic, upholding socialism, and loyal to the Communist Party (Department of Ethnic Religion Theory, Central Institute of the Party, 1998, pp. 448–9). Moreover, "regulations governing education of religious schools shall be formulated separately by the State Council," as stated by the Article 82 of the Education Law of the People's Republic of China.

Objectives

[3] For more information on this era, see Overmyer, D. L. (Ed.). (2003). *Religion in China today.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

[4] For more information about the content of this law, see http://www.china.org.cn/english/education/184669.htm

With such a background, this article aims to analyze the rhetoric, policies and practices of the Chinese government regarding the access to Islamic knowledge or education both within formal and informal settings of Xinjiang where Uyghurs have been struggling to maintain and strengthen their Muslim identity in the last seven decades. More specifically, it first reviews the shifting government rhetoric and policies and how academics and policy analysts have been viewing these developments, then briefly discusses the media reports on some recent violent events that are labeled by the government as religiously motivated, and shares the perspectives the Uyghur diaspora on the effectiveness and possible consequences of those rhetoric and policies, and finally analyzes these realities and perspectives through the theoretical lenses of Post-colonialism (Orientalism), Politics of Recognition (Taylor, 1994), push and pull factors that trigger radicalization[5], and religious literacy.

Who are the Uyghurs?

The Uyghurs are one of the 55 officially recognized minority ethnic groups in China, contrasting to the majority Han Chinese who comprises 91% of the total population. They mostly live in the far north-western border region which is the hub of the Eurasian Crossroads. Manchu Empire annexed the region to China proper in the second half of the 18th century and had ruled the local inhabitants through indirect means till 1884 when Xinjiang (CH. new dominion) province was established (Millward, 2007).

According to the 2010 Chinese national census, the Uyghur population in China is slightly more than 10 million, which still constitutes less than one percent of the entire Chinese population. Yet, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region occupies one sixth of the total Chinese landmass and possesses China's most abundant resource of oil and gas. Uyghurs are ethnically Turkic and since as early as 10th century they have been following the moderate form of Sunni Islam which is organically mingled with their local traditions and ancient worldviews (Millward, 2007; Waite, 2007). They regard being Muslim as one of the most crucial aspects of Uyghur collective identity (Dwyer, 2005; Kuşçu, 2014). The Uyghurs had been able to gain their independence twice during the 1930s and 1940s. One of those states was East Turkestan Islamic Republic (1933-1934), while the other being East Turkestan Republic (1944-1949).[6] As those state names indicate, Islam is a core marker of Uyghur nationhood.

Till the early 20th century, the education among Uyghurs had mostly been regulated through madrasas – the religious schools. The advent of Russian imperialism in Central Asia triggered the modern educational reformism among the local intellectuals who tried to establish *Jadid* (new-method) schools that, to some extent, offered secular education in Russian Central Asia as well in Xinjiang (Khalid, 1998). Up to the founding of the People's

[5] Radicalization can be caused by various push and pull factors in society. For more information see: Ghosh, R., Manuel, A., Chan, W. Y. A., Dilimulati, M. & Babaei, M. (2016) *Education & Security: A Global Literature Report on Countering Violent Religious Extremism (CVE)*, Tony Blair Faith Foundation.

[6] These two independent states were established in the North-west of Xinjiang by the local Turkic peoples lead by the Uyghur elites. The advent of the communist China to the region ended the short independence of the Uyghurs. There exists a small separatist group named the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) that has been fighting for the independence of the Uyghurs since the last few decades. The U.S. Government declared it to be a terrorist organization affiliated with Al-Qaida in August 2002. For more information see Bovingdon, G. (2010). *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Republic of China in 1949, these schools had flourished all over Xinjiang. The formation of modern Uyghur identity has indebted tremendously to such *Jadid* schools that blended Islamic and secular education systems in an organic manner (Brophy, 2016; Waite, 2007).

Perspectives and Theoretical Framework

In the West, since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, religion has increasingly become a focal point in both public and academic discourses. In this process, especially the Muslim identity has been homogenized and essentialized, as a result of the backlash of the global surge of Islamophobia (Sen, 2006). Meanwhile, this has created an 'us versus Muslims' dichotomy that is reminiscent of the post-colonial/Orientalist paradigm and consequently, the Muslims have become further marginalized in the Western societies (Volpp, 2002). The same process also has produced a racialized Muslim identity that can be effectively scrutinized through the lens of traditional critical race theory (Gotanda, 2011).

Accordingly, this article suggests that after 9/11, the Chinese government has created an "us vs. Muslim Uyghurs" dichotomy through its recent rhetoric, policies and practices pertaining to the Islamic knowledge and education in Xinjiang. While "Internal Orientalism" (Schein, 1997, P. 70) - the discourse that validates the unequal power relations between the majority Han and ethnic minorities in China in terms of their cultures, faiths and education - has always existed among the majority Chinese, and such a discourse has only fortified itself and gained more overt and harsher tones since the turn of the new millennium. As a result, the Islamic identity and education among the Uyghurs have become the focus of attention and questioning in dealing with "terrorism" within the Chinese state (Bovingdon, 2010, 2014; Roberts, 2016, 2018).

While being deeply critical towards such a post-colonial and essentialist position, Sen (2006) strongly warns us against the danger of overemphasizing the singular identity of religious groups. In our contemporary world, overstressing and interrogating Muslim identity in dealing with violent extremism (as it is often happening in the West now), which is a sort of 'misrecognition' (Taylor, 1994, p.25), could further alienate the Muslims from mainstream societies and/or make them more attached to and zealous about their religious faith (Mahmut, 2018). Along with such a process, the global Muslims have been generalized or homogenized and their faith has been essentialized under the assumption that all Muslims follow one static ideology which has a unified, unchanging and innate violent nature (Said, 2001). This process can also fortify the voice of Islamist extremists who attempt to essentialize the Islamic faith and build a wall between the Muslims and the Western world (Mahmut, 2018; Tibi, 2013; Welby, 2015).

Within such theoretical perspectives, this article tries to elucidate and evaluate the push and pull factors that trigger radicalization created by the Chinese government rhetoric, policies, and practices regarding the Islamic identity and religious knowledge of Uyghurs, while sharing the perspectives of the Uyghur diaspora on the same issues. Equally importantly, it emphasizes that the lack of religious literacy[7] among the Uyghurs - one of

[7] "Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/culture life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religiously literate person will possess 1) a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts; and 2) the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place" (Moore, 2006).

the key and possible consequences of such a development - could become a powerful factor that could lead some Uyghurs to be easily disillusioned by the extreme religious ideologies.

Methods and Modes of Inquiry

This study is primarily based on a review of the recent government rhetoric, policies, and practices associated with the religious education in Xinjiang, the debates among various scholars and experts on these evolutions, and a brief discussion on the current news reports, as well as a short qualitative analysis of the Canadian diaspora Uyghurs' perspectives on the related issues. Triangulating these approaches is very helpful in better understanding the nature and possible ramifications of such developments.

Reviewing the recent government rhetoric, policies, and practices is essential as this provides the background information on how these all have unfolded responding to the differing national and international discourses on Islam and Muslims. More specifically, this reveals to what extent and in what ways China has been part of the global "war on terror" rhetoric and campaigns and elucidates the Chinese special features in such a process. In other words, this review helps us better identify how the global Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) discourse has been realized or implemented through educational and public policies in the context of China.

In recent years, increasingly more experts have been involved in the study of the Uyghurs, particularly focusing on the Islamic knowledge and education and related government rhetoric and policies in Xinjiang. Reviewing the perspectives of those experts can be very valuable, as this will show the general positions among the academics and the existing gaps in the scholarship. This is followed by a brief overview of the recent reports on violent events and the standpoints of the government and various scholars on those incidents.

This being said, gaining the perspectives of the Uyghur diaspora on the relevant issues is equally important. Most of the Uyghur immigrants in the West, including Canada, are first generation immigrants who left the Uyghur region of China not very long ago, and have been living in the West in the past one-two decades, therefore they still retain strong ties with their cultural roots and home society. While it is virtually impossible to obtain the perspectives of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang due to the strict censorship and security measures, it would prove to be very viable and useful to understand the perspectives of these diaspora Uyghurs. Furthermore, the Uyghurs selected for the interviews were skilled immigrants who had at least finished their tertiary education and worked in Xinjiang for several years before coming to Canada. This means, they are highly-educated individuals who are deeply aware of and closely following the policy issues in Xinjiang.

They came to Canada through the Federal (and Quebec) Skilled Worker Programs; they all were skilled immigrants who had lived in Canada in the past 5-15 years at the time of the interviews. Thus, they could represent the economic class Uyghur immigrants rather than other diaspora Uyghur groups such as asylum seekers and students. Their ages ranged from 35 to 46 during the time of my interviews. All of the interviews were conducted in Uyghur language and translated into English after being transcribed. All the participants were in Canada when they were participating in this study. Pseudonyms were used for all them. The main interview questions were: (1) What do you know about the recent rhetoric and policies of the Chinese government regarding the religious knowledge and identity of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang? (2) What do you think will be consequences of such rhetoric and policies? And (3) Do you know that some Uyghurs have been radicalized and joined ISIS? If so, why do you think they have been attracted to jihadi ideologies or radicalized? All the

interviews were conducted in the late 2017 and early 2018, and the privacy and safety of all the research participants were fully respected.

A Review of Rhetoric, Policies and Practices

The Islamic Association of China was founded in 1953 shortly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Under its administration, the first Chinese Islamic Institute was built in Beijing in 1955. The operating guidelines of the institute state that its objective is to cultivate "specialists in Islam who love the socialist motherland, uphold socialism and have thorough knowledge of Islam and Arabic as well as Chinese' (Yang & Yang, 1999, p. 318). However, during the Cultural Revolution, the institute was closed along with many other religious organizations. It was reopened after the Revolution, and since the early 1980s nine other Islamic institutions have been established throughout China, including the one in Urumqi, Xinjiang. One of the most important aims of these schools is to train young imams who will work in various mosques in China, replacing former imams who were mostly trained in traditional madrasas (Armijo, 2007).

Since 1949 the Chinese government policies towards the Islamic faith and practices in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region have alternated between "radical intolerance" especially during the 1960s and 1970s to "controlled tolerance" (Waite, 2007, p. 167) with "the relative openness" starting from the early 1980s (Millward & Perdue, 2004, p. viii). The "openness" culminated in the establishment of the Law on National Regional Autonomy of 1984 that granted national minorities the most pluralistic rights in comparison to any of the previous legislation (Wu, Xiaohui, 2014). Thousands of mosques were built during the 1980s in Xinjiang (Bovingdon, 2010; Smith Finley, 2013), and private religious education had been tolerated to a limited degree until the end of the 1990s (Roberts, 2004).

Yet, all but in Xinjiang, the tolerance towards religious education has allowed all mosques throughout China to organize classes in Arabic and Islamic studies for all members of society regardless of their age. The graduates from those institutes are even able to establish smaller independent religious schools. Only in Xinjiang, the perceived link between Islamic knowledge or identity and Uyghur separatism or resistance has stopped the government from regulating such policies (Armijo, 2007, 2017).

This being the case, right after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001, there occurred a "rhetorical shift" in dealing with Uyghur resistance, as the PRC for the first time officially asserted the existence of the Uyghur terrorist threat in China. In other words, Uyghur "separatism" has become "terrorism", as a result of a convenient conflation of Islam with violence and terrorism (Roberts, 2018, p. 234; Harris, 2013, 2014; Kuo, 2012). The sole state media as well has intentionally reinforced the imagined connection between Islam and terrorism in the context of Xinjiang (Harris, 2013, 2014; Lams, 2016). In other words, the government has started to conveniently use the global "war on terror" rhetoric to suppress the Uyghur rights to access Islamic knowledge and education (Bovingdon, 2010, Roberts, 2016, 2018). This has further accentuated the reality that religion and education have already been two highly sensitive areas within Xinjiang in the recent history (Clothey & Koku, 2016).

Since then, the Islamic knowledge, ideology and practices have been increasingly obstructed and subject to questioning in all social spheres, most notably in educational institutions in Xinjiang (Bovingdon, 2010, 2014; Kanat, 2015; Roberts, 2016, 2018). Young people under 18 have been banned from attending mosque prayers, and forbidden to have

any religious education in underground madrasas ("China restricts Ramadan," 2016; Morelos, 2014). Wearing religious symbols and engaging in religious activities, including praying, fasting during Ramadan, etc. have been outlawed in all educational institutions in Xinjiang (Dearden, 2017; Grieboski, 2014). Thus, the Uyghurs' right to access Islamic knowledge and practice Islam has been increasingly restricted and diminished (Bovingdon, 2010, 2014; Cook, 2017). This trend has become more drastic and exaggerated since 2009 under Xi's rule; 'a wide range of routine and peaceful aspects of religious observance that were once permissible have been arbitrarily labelled as "illegal activities" or "religious extremism"' (Cook, 2017, p. 70; Ibrahim, 2018a).

Such a repression has reached the highest level since CCP secretary Chen Quanguo, who was transferred from Tibet Autonomous Region to Xinjiang in August 2016, began an intensive securitization program targeting the Islamic knowledge sharing and observance among the Uyghurs in early 2017 (Millward, 2018; Zenz & Leibold, 2017). New rules launched in October 2016 to restrict the Uyghur parents from teaching their children religious knowledge and attracting or forcing their children into religious activities. The perpetrators would face serious penalties (Surana, 2016). Giving Uyghur babies Islamic names has been banned, as well (Haas, 2017; Ibrahim, 2018a, b). In March 2017, *Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region Regulation on De-extremification*[8] was adopted, further restricting the religious knowledge or information sharing in all private and public spaces, while explicitly emphasizing "making religion [referring to Islam – author] more Chinese and under law, and actively guide religions to become compatible with socialist society" (Article 4). Accordingly, the Regulations states that religious schools and institutions also 'should adhere to the direction of sinocizing [sic] religion, and earnestly perform the duties of cultivating and training religious professionals, to prevent permeation by extremification' (Article 40). 'Sinocizing' (Sinicizing) here obviously means 'secularizing' or 'modernizing' under the discourse of 'Internal Orientalism', which, in this context, further demeans Islam as a backward and innately violent religion.

Subsequently, those who have been suspected as being too religious or showing signs of radicalization (including participating in very mainstream religious activities like praying, fasting, wearing religious symbols, men wearing hijab and growing beard, abstinence from alcohol, etc.) are sent to newly opened "education and transformation training centers" (*教育转化培训中心*) or "Counter-extremism Training Schools" (*去极端化培训班*), where they must stay for months or indefinitely away from their families to "unlearn" their religious ideologies. Since their inception in early 2017, these schools have been opened in many parts of Xinjiang and have already "re-educated" hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims (Thum, 2018; Smith Finley, 2018b). Currently, it is estimated that as many as one million Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslims could be living in those Nazi style political education centers where conditions are extremely poor (Thum & Wasserstrom, 2018; Zenz, 2018). As Ibrahim (2018b) puts, for the government, it is necessary to "re-educate" the entire Uyghur population to achieve "ethnic harmony" and "social stability". The prominent Human Rights advocate, journalist and editor Sheng Xue regards those re-education centers as eviler and more dangerous than the

[8] For more information, see http://www.iuhrdf.org/content/xinjiang-uyghur-autonomous-region-regulation-de-extremification

Nazi concentrations camps, as the former destroys the identity, dignity, and self-respect of the detainees, while the latter only obliterated the physical bodies.[9]

Furthermore, it seems that the authorities have started to see Islamic education from abroad as problematic too. It is known that recently all Uyghur students who were studying Islam in Egypt have been required to go back to China. Reportedly, under the pressure of Chinese authorities, the Egyptian government arrested and extradited many Uyghur students (Awad, 2017; Batke, 2017). The students who returned either disappeared or have been sentenced to lengthy prison terms (Smith, 2017).

Under such circumstances, accessing religious knowledge among Uyghurs has been increasingly through oral traditions (Waite, 2007). Recent developments in Internet technology and social media had facilitated the sharing of Islamic knowledge among Uyghurs to some limited extent till the late 2016 (Clothey & Koku, 2016). However, since early 2017, this channel has been subject to ever-tightening censorship and control[10] that such a sort of knowledge exchange has become virtually impossible (Vanderklippe, 2017; Smith Finley, 2018b).

Considering such developments, China expert Dru Gladney regards that the recent efforts of Chinese authorities have "intended to make the Uighurs look as if they're a threat, an Islamist terrorist organization," as a group. He warns that this may cause further alienation of the Uyghurs from the state, creating more tensions in the region (Drennan, 2015). In a similar vein, Sean Roberts (2018) utilizes Michel Foucault's (2010) concept of biopolitics to argue that the current counter-extremism and counter-terrorism rhetoric and policies in Xinjiang are targeting the whole Uyghur population as potential terrorists. These polices aim to quarantine all Uyghurs as a "virtual biological threat" or the potential suspects of terrorism, which is a sign that the corresponding security measures and practices have reached unprecedented levels. He also contends that these policies have only played the role of alienating the Uyghurs from the Chinese state and severely disfiguring their image in broader Chinese society (p. 252).

While, one cannot deny that religious extremism has indeed been infiltrating through the Xinjiang borders in recent years, Uyghur expert Michael Clark (2014) attributes some of the key reasons of violence in Xinjiang to Chinese government's repressive policies in the region, including restrictions on Uyghur religious education and expressions. Many other experts (e.g. Botobekov, 2016; Cafiero, 2018; Neriah, 2017; Roberts, 2016, 2018) also see the same oppressive policies as, to a great extent, pushing some Uyghur people to support or adopt religious extremism in various forms to express their resistance to the central or local governments.

For example, the Uyghurs joining ISIS has been a pressing issue in recent years (Botobekov, 2016; Cafiero, 2018; Clarke & Kan, 2017). Chinese authorities estimated that the number would be around 300 in late 2015 (Cook, 2015, Drennan, 2015). As of May 2017, the Syrian ambassador to China mentioned that there were as many as 5000 Uyghurs

[9] Sheng Xue expressed this view when interviewed by Radio Free Asia Uyghur Service. The Uyghur human rights advocate Nuri Turkel also echoed her perspective highlighting the inhumane treatments of the Uyghurs detained in those re-education camps. For more information, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nEjjr1o-GFY

[10] A typical way of censorship has been to directly check smartphones or mandatorily install some apps for detecting religious content. For more information see https://www.theregister.co.uk/2017/07/24/china_installing_mobile_spyware/

fighting in Syria (Blanchard, 2017; Cafiero, 2018). According to a Washington-based think tank, Xinjiang has supplied the highest number of foreign ISIS fighters from any country of the world outside of Tunisia and Saudi Arabia (Tewari, 2017).

Uyghur ISIS fighters themselves specifically mention, in their propaganda videos, how restrictions over religious rights have pushed them to join ISIS where they can enjoy religious freedom and fight for the cause of Islam[11]. The Xinjiang expert Sean Roberts (2018), based on his personal interviews of some Uyghurs fighters in Syria also confirms that the systemic oppression, especially the ever-increasing restrictions over the Islamic education, identity, and practices among Uyghurs within Xinjiang that have been "the driving force in the recent creation of a viable Uyghur militant movement in Syria" (Roberts, 2018, p.252).

Some scholars also find that the repressive policies have strengthened the collective or Islamic identity of the young Uyghur students in China. For example, Timothy Grose's (2015a, b) studies show that the Islamic faith and collective identity vs. being part of Chinese nation among the Uyghur students studying in inner Chinese schools further solidified, despite the reality that they were isolated from their communities back in Xinjiang and their religious faith and practices were heavily curtailed in those schools. The similar studies on some boarding school Uyghur students in inner Chinese cities conducted by Yangbin Chen (2008, 2009 with Postiglione, 2010) conclude that while the Uyghur students were deliberately isolated from their cultural environments and restricted from using the Uyghur language and accessing the knowledge about Uyghur Islamic culture, they became more conscious of their cultural and religious roots, and developed more in-group social capital among themselves vis a vis the pan- Chinese.

In sum, the rhetoric, policies, and practices of the Chinese government pertaining to the Uyghur rights to access Islamic education and knowledge and practice Islam have not been consistent over the last 7 decades. While the government attitudes towards Islamic faith and identity had alternated from complete intolerance in the 1960s and 1970s to "controlled tolerance" in 1980s (Waite, 2007, p. 167), the drastic transformation of the international discourses around Islamic faith and Muslims at the turn of the new millennium has largely reshaped the rhetoric and policies of the state. The current developments indicate the situation has reached its unprecedented oppressive level that many scholars, both through their theoretical and empirical analyses, have warned against the negative consequences of such developments.

News Reports on Recent Violent Events and Some Speculations

Ethnic clash or politically motivated violence has always existed throughout the history of Xinjiang. However, the past few years have witnessed the most serious incidents in which the highest number of causalities has been produced (Larroca, 2015; Roberts, 2018). Meanwhile, as mentioned earlier, the government rhetoric and policies around these events have been increasingly more emphatic on the Islamic, rather than the ethnic aspect of the Uyghur violent attackers (Bovingdon, 2010, 2014; Roberts, 2016, 2018)

For example, in 2009 July 5 there was a student demonstration in Urumqi, Xinjiang. This was apparently fueled by the unsatisfactory response of the government to the murder

[11] Jihadology Project run by Aaron Y. Zelin has collected some video speeches of some young Uyghur Jihadists. Please check all the related videos from this link: http://jihadology.net/2016/06/07/new-video-message-from-ḥizb-al-islami-al-turkistani-in-bilad-al-sham-a-call-from-the-front-lines-of-jihad-19/

of at least two Uyghur workers by the Han Chinese in a toy factory in Guangdong province. Many argue that the growing dissent among the Uyghurs towards oppressive government policies in Xinjiang was the root cause of this incident (Bovingdon, 2010, 2014; Roberts, 2012, 2016, 2018; Smith Finley, 2013). The demonstration turned into violence because of the government's harsh crackdown, and during which more than 200 civilians were killed, 1800 injured (it has been the most serious event in the recent history of Xinjiang). The government blamed the outside Islamist terrorist groups such as Al-Qaida as instigating the violence (Wu, Chaofan, 2009). In October 2013, three Uyghurs drove a truck into a crowd on Beijing's Tiananmen Square, killing two people along with themselves (Rajagopalan, 2013). On March 1, 2014, Kunming knife attacks caused 31 deaths and more than 140 injuries. Chinese state media agency Xinhua claimed extremist militant Uyghurs carried out the attacks (Beech, 2014; Blanchard, 2014). In May 2014, bomb attacks in an open-air market in Urumqi left 31 people dead and 94 injured. In July same year, 96 people died in an ethnic clash in Yarkant County, including 59 assailants (Zuo, 2014). In November again the "terrorists" in the same place attacked the civilians, during which 15 died, including the assailants (Phillips, 2014). After two years of relative silence, on February 14, 2017, eight people were killed in a knife attack in Pishan county, Xinjiang (Ng, 2017). Most of these violent events were treated by the government exclusively as terrorist events resulted from religious extremism, while these incidents were primarily provoked by the repressions over the basic human rights of the Uyghur, including the religious rights (Roberts, 2016, 2018; Smith Finley, 2018a).

It seems that in most recent years there have not been major violent incidents in Xinjiang. However, some argue that the situation may have been getting worse, as there is a possibility that many attacks are not being reported at all for various reasons (Gracie, 2017). Be it true or not, it is obvious that the government has been excessively highlighting Islamist extremism or terrorism when assessing these violent incidents and formulating and further tightening relevant policies and regulations.

Perspectives of the Uyghur Diaspora

As mentioned earlier, my participants were highly-educated immigrants who had had post-secondary educational experiences prior to coming to Canada. Some scholars argue that Uyghur intellectuals tend be relatively more secular than the rest of the Uyghur population (Smith Finley, 2013; Zang, 2012), thus my interviewees' narratives would not necessarily represent the perspectives of religiously more conservative Uyghurs. This being said, they unanimously showed a strong awareness of and deep concerns over the recent developments in the government rhetoric and policies in Xinjiang. Meanwhile, thematic analysis of their narratives demonstrated several key themes. One of the important themes is the existence of a paradox between the policy aims of countering radicalization and the act of suppressing mainstream religious knowledge and practices that could foster resilience against radicalization. Most of my interviewees (16) expressed such a view on these developments. As one of them said:

> *'There might be such a thing as radicalization among the Uyghurs, and I understand why the government is responding so harsh. But it is now targeting all of our religious knowledge and customs as extremism. Praying, fasting, or doing Hajj are not extremism. And those students studying Islam abroad are not becoming extremists; they will actually become good religious leaders in the future'.* ----- Omar (interviewed in December 2017).

Omar's perspectives on the Uyghurs studying Islam in the Middle-East were in response to the recent extradition of Uyghur students from Egypt and some other Islamic countries under the pressure of the Chinese government, with the suspicion that these students were becoming radicalized (Batke, 2017). Along with Omar, most of my respondents rejected the possibility that these students could become extremists, highlighting the government policies being totally unreasonable. *"The government itself was sending students to the Middle-East to study Islam before, but now they see those students as terrorists, which is crazy,"* said Aysha, stressing the drastic difference in the government rhetoric in two recent historical periods (interviewed in October 2017). It is true that many Chinese students including the Uyghurs from Xinjiang Islamic Institute started to be sent to some Muslim countries for further education in the early 1990s with the government sponsorship, and the students who supported themselves privately were not questioned very much (Armijo, 2017). Yet, the most recent government rhetoric and moves seem to have been very much contrary to the earlier ones, especially regarding the Uyghurs, as discussed earlier.

Albeit, almost all (18) of my participants also emphasized in various ways that the government policies could not yield desired results, only leading to further resistance. They believed that the repressive policies on Islamic education and practices would only make the Uyghurs more resentful towards the government. *"The hatred is simmering under the rocks"*, as one of them said. *"One day, another violent resistance may erupt, and they will see how they did many things wrong." - Zohra* (interviewed in February 2018).

Some of them also directly warned that the government policies would exacerbate the ethnic divide and clash between Uyghurs and Han Chinese. They stressed that the distrust and disharmony between these two ethnic groups had always been there and restricting the right of religious education of Uyghurs could only exacerbate the already volatile relationships between the Muslim and non-Muslim populations. For example, Mihray said *"they [the government] do not learn from their lessons. All the clashes in the past happened because they (the government) did not treat the Uyghurs equally as Han people. The oppression can only lead to violence in the end. Simple*" (interviewed in December 2017).

This being highlighted, some of my participants acknowledged that during the 1980s, the ethnic tension between the Uyghurs and Hans in Xinjiang was not serious at all. It was indeed the period during which some relative tolerance and openness were granted to the Uyghur population (Millward & Perdue, 2004; Waite, 2007). As Yashar remembered his childhood in the 1980s:

> *"You know, we used to be able to attend home madrassas in our neighborhood. I learned how to read Quran from a Mullah in our village, privately and secretly. Nobody was afraid of learning about Islam. Nobody was watching you that tightly. And my parents' Han acquaintances would come to visit us during the Eid. Everything was peaceful. Everybody was minding their own business. There was no clash. Now, it is totally a different world"* (interviewed in January 2018).

Such a specific response validates that different government policies indeed yielded different social atmospheres in Xinjiang in two different time periods. *"There was a mosque on our campus. We could go there and pray without any fear…It was a good time. Now Islam is the enemy of the government, and we have become terrorists! All Han people see us that way now,"* said Abdulla (interviewed in October 2017). These drastic comparisons between two historical

periods of Xinjiang could also foretell the unfavorable consequences of current government rhetoric and approaches.

At the same time, some (five) of my interviewees expressed that the Uyghur dissidents could easily be attracted to jihadi ideologies under such circumstances. Meanwhile, they were the ones who were aware of that some Uyghurs were involved in the militant groups in Syria. They thought that as a Muslim group, Uyghurs were not immune to Islamist extremism which has been penetrating various national borders, including the Xinjiang borders. They strongly believed that the disenfranchised or marginalized Uyghur youths might be becoming more vulnerable to be recruited by the violent extremists who would promise to help them revenge their "infidel" enemy – China; they perceived the narratives of those extremists as very powerful. For example, Sadiq said:

> *"I know how those crazy Muslims abuse Islam to wage war against non-Muslims. They make young people believe that only through Jihad can they be true Muslims. Now, the enemy can be the oppressive Chinese government who happens to be infidel (kafir). So, they [the extremists] can easily make those young Uyghurs, who lack normal Islamic knowledge due to the anti-Islamic policies of the government, terrorists"* (interviewed in February 2018).

These perspectives can be seen as very alarming as no one among my interviewees saw the positive aspects of the Chinese government rhetoric and policies. Instead, the negative consequences of suffocating normal or mainstream Islamic education and practices were emphasized. Especially, the point of Sadiq on how current government policies would make the young Uyghurs vulnerable to Islamist ideologies is a very forceful one. He meant the mainstream Islamic knowledge by saying "*normal Islamic knowledge*", which was clarified during the interview. Theoretically speaking, his point reconfirms the possible connection between religious illiteracy and radicalization into religious extremism (Ghosh, Chan, Manuel & Dilimulati, 2016; Moore, 2006).

In sum, the Uyghur respondents in Canada unanimously expressed rather negative perspectives over the rhetoric and policies of the Chinese government regarding the religious education and practices in Xinjiang. All revealed their disappointment and very pessimistic predictions towards the possible negative outcomes of such developments. As insiders, as well as intellectuals who had relatively long educational and work experiences in Xinjiang, which means they had richer social and public life experiences than the rest of the population, their opinions and outlooks over these issues should be taken very seriously.

Discussion

It seems that the recent developments in terms of the rhetoric and policies revolving around the Islamic knowledge and practices in Xinjiang can be partly explained by the widespread systemic discourse – "Internal Orientalism" (Schein, 1997, p. 70). Schein (1997) uses the term to describe how minority cultures, since the early 1980s, have been commercialized in an essentialized fashion, and categorized as 'female, rural, and backward', while the majority modern 'Han urbanite' lead them to 'progress' (p.89). More specifically speaking, for the majority Han Chinese, "'culture' is inextricably linked to education, where 'education' is understood as: a) mastery of the Chinese language; and b) knowledge of Confucian codes of behaviour (*li*)"'. Behind this notion, there is a deep assumption that the education in minority languages, or Islamic education equal to 'lack of culture', therefore Uyghurs are 'uncultured (*meiyou wenhua*)' or uncivilized (Smith Finley, 2013, pp. 125-126).

Recent global rise of "war on terror" rhetoric and Islamophobia have only reinforced such a systemic discourse in the Chinese society. While the international Muslim communities have become 'the most visible enemy' of the West, following 9/11 terrorist attacks (Jamal, 2008; Saito, 2001, p.15), the Uyghurs have been increasingly seen as "an almost biological threat" to the state by the Chinese government (Roberts, 2018, p. 246), while other Muslims (such as Hui ethnic group[12]) in other regions of China have been enjoying much more free access to Islamic knowledge and education (Armijo, 2007, 2017; Dillon, 2016). Of relevance is Taylor's (1994) concept of *misrecognition* that could effectively explain how the 'false, distorted, and reduced mode of being' (p.25) of the Muslim Uyghurs has been created and reinforced.

More specifically, before 9/11, Muslims around the world more often had been addressed by their ethnic or geographical backgrounds rather than their Muslim identity (Kymlicka, 2015). Likewise, in China, the primary identifier of Uyghurs has become "Muslim"; most of the attention has shifted from the ethnic to the Islamic aspect of Uyghurness. In other words, the global "war on terror" rhetoric has transformed the Uyghurs from a "backward ethnicity" to "uncivilized and violent Muslims". Furthermore, the current 'confining or demeaning or contemptible picture' (Taylor, 1994, p.25) of Muslims created by the international media and right-wing politics has made the Chinese government more prone to be anti-Islamic in its own educational and public policies and practices.

Therefore, when violent attacks are committed by a few Uyghur extremists, these acts always are easily attributed to whole Uyghur Muslim community, like Afsaruddin (2015) argues, as if there is an underlying problem with the Islamic faith itself. This sort of 'misrecognition' (Taylor, 1994, p. 25) of Islamic faith of the Uyghurs would not only sabotage the general Uyghur identity, but also could create hostility among those Uyghur against the Chinese state, as suggested by many China experts (e.g. Botobekov, 2016; Cafiero, 2018; Clark, 2014; Clarke & Kan, 2017; Neriah, 2017; Roberts, 2016, 2018; Smith Finley, 2018a).

Moreover, as Sen (2006) strongly warns, overemphasizing a singular faith could strengthen the authority of orthodox religious groups. In the same vain, overstressing and interrogating Muslim identity could further alienate the Muslim Uyghurs from mainstream society or make them more attached to and zealous about their religious faith (Botobekov, 2016; Clarke, 2014; Clarke & Kan, 2017; Neriah, 2017; Roberts, 2016, 2018). The reality that many Uyghurs have been attracted to some radical groups like ISIS is a typical example for this (Botobekov, 2016; Cafiero, 2018; Clarke & Kan, 2017).

It seems that current Chinese policies and practices have been successful in eliminating some pull factors that could lead to radicalization, such as peer group (Tharoor, 2015), criminals in prisons (Samuel, 2012; Saunders, 2012), self-radicalization through exposure to online material (Behr, Reding, Edwards & Gribb, 2013) at the personal level.

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[12] Hui Muslims are mostly concentrated in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, but they also live throughout China. Their population is also more than 10 million, according to 2011 National Census. Unlike Uyghurs, their mother tongue is Chinese, and embrace Han Chinese culture, and do not pose threat to national integrity. Therefore, they don't face harsh oppressions like the Uyghurs do. For more information, please see Gladney, D. C. *(1996). Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic (2 ed.).* Harvard University Asia Center. Gladney, D. C. (2004). *Dislocating China: reflections on Muslims, minorities and other subaltern subjects.* C. Hurst Co. Publishers.

At the societal level, the factors like enticing media stories and messages evoking sympathy and affiliation via social media and the Internet (Behr, et. Al., 2013; Tucker, 2009), recruiters on or offline and social media (Braniff, 2015), and radicalized religious or community leaders (Bergen, 2015; Duffy & Harley 2015) have been curtailed to a great extent as well.

However, the same rhetoric, policies and practices may have been creating and reinforcing some push factors such as deemed threat to individual and collective identity (Seul, 1999; Taylor, 1994), tendency for looking for revenge against perceived wrong or believing that revenge through murder is just (Samuel, 2012) at the individual level. While at the societal level these developments may have been causing, among the disenfranchised Uyghur youth, marginalization from mainstream society (Euer, van Vossole, Groenen, Van Bouchaute & Hogeschool, 2014; Taylor, 1994), or creating the perception of ideological necessity or sacred duty to take revenge against those seen as enemies (Zalman, 2015). or the recognition of religion as a socio-political guide to reach similar goals (Roy, 2004). Although the negative effects of globalization with information and communications technology (Ṣtibli, 2010) have been largely countered through strict censorship policies and measures, it is not enough, and it is highly oppressive and unethical.

At the same time, the lack of mainstream Islamic knowledge resulted from the limited access to religious education can be seen as another key factor that would push the naïve individuals to internalize radical forms of Islam (Batrawy, Dodds & Hinnant, 2016; Ghosh & Chan, 2017; Kelley & Morgenstern, 2006). In other words, lack of religious literacy can be one of the root causes of religious intolerance and extremism both among the insiders and outsiders of a particular religion (Ghosh, et al, 2016; Moore, 2006). Considering the reality that Islam is an integral part of Uyghur collective identity (Dwyer, 2005; Kuşçu, 2014), the Uyghur youths who do not have access to even the basic or mainstream Islamic knowledge may easily be misguided by the extremist ideologies in searching for their Muslim identity.

These points have also been confirmed by the diaspora Uyghur immigrants who had lived most of their lives in Xinjiang prior to arriving in Canada. They almost unanimously perceived the contradiction between the government rhetoric of eliminating religious extremism and at the same time restricting access to mainstream and peaceful religious education in both formal and informal settings, as well as a wide range of traditional Islamic expressions that can be conducive to countering extremism. This process, in turn, could lead to more ethnic divide and disharmony, exacerbating the distrust and friction between the mostly religious Uyghurs and mostly non-religious majority Hans in the region. Equally important, more Uyghurs may become alienated from and hostile towards the Chinese state and be easily attracted by the Jihadi ideologies seeping through the national borders, as suggested by the policy analyst Cafiero (2018). In turn, such a consequence can prove to be very much detrimental to the collective image of the Uyghur Muslims, as well as the wellbeing of the Chinese society as a whole.

Significance and Conclusion

Access to religious knowledge and education has always been strictly controlled in the history of the People's Republic of China. This has been particularly evident in the case of the Uyghurs who have been subject to waves of differing political rhetoric and increasingly tight policy measurements around Islamic knowledge and education. Most recently, the supposed link between Islamic knowledge or religiosity and violent extremism or terrorism reinforced by the global "war on terror" discourse has resulted in an

unprecedented degree of repressions over the basic Uyghur human rights, since the end of the Great Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).

Theoretically speaking, the recent evolution of Chinese rhetoric and policies regarding Islamic knowledge and education among Uyghurs can also be understood through the lens of "Internal Orientalism" (Schein, 1997, p. 70) that puts the religious knowledge and culture of the Uyghurs in a subordinate status vis a vis the "modern" and "advanced" Han Chinese ways of education and life (Smith Finley, 2013). The racialized and subaltern image of global Muslims after 9/11 has further reinforced such unequal power relations in the context of Xinjiang. In other words, this has been a direct reflection of the global "misrecognition" (Taylor, 1994, p. 25) of the Muslims who have been the victims of discrimination in the last few decades. This being reality, as Sen (2006) warns us, overemphasizing singular faith of a religious group (in this case, the Uyghurs) would further strengthen the authority of orthodox religious groups.

While, through its specific policies and measures, Chinese government seems to have been offsetting some factors that could create the conditions for religious radicalization, it has been largely overlooking some very dynamic factors that could trigger violent extremism. The aftermath of the latter scenario appears to be greatly outweighing the benefits of the former in the long run, and the current reality is already showing clear signs of such a prospect. At the same time, religious illiteracy among the young Uyghurs – a possible consequence of such repressive rhetoric and policies, could create a perfect atmosphere for the extremist group to propagate their ideologies. This is not only harmful to the Uyghur Muslims, but also the wider Chinese society.

Various scholars and experts have analyzed such developments and universally expressed their concerns over the possible ramifications. However, no specific study has yet focused on the nature and possible consequences of the government rhetoric and policies on the Uyghur rights to access religious knowledge and practice religion through the theoretical lenses of post-colonialism, Orientalism, essentialism, Politics of Recognition (Taylor, 1994), push and pull factors that trigger radicalization, as well as religious literacy. Exploring the perspectives of the Uyghur diaspora is also a fresh endeavor in this respect. Through sharing the voices of those Uyghur immigrants, this study highlights once again the risks and possible repercussions of recent and current government's oppressive rhetoric, policies and practices.

That being said, the most recent developments do not indicate a positive move, instead, many scholars[13] studying Uyghur culture, especially the religious culture, have been detained or even disappeared during and after this study. Considerably more Uyghurs have been put to re-education camps and prisons due to their religious identities and expressions (Raydoun, 2018; Turdush, 2018). Thus, the international community, including the academic world, should give more attention to the current plights of the Uyghurs.

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[13] Some of the very prominent scholars are Mohammed Salih Hajim who translated Quran into modern Uyghur for the first time in the 1980s (he died at the age of 82 during his custody) and professor Rahile Dawut who studies Uyghur Islamic shrines. Many other intellectuals or celebrities suspected of being nationalist or separatist have been detained too. For more information see https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/china-erase-uighurs-culture-181012155613937.html

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