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ABSTRACT

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, China panicked and began to analyse the potential root causes. China, like the Soviet Union, is a multinational country with religious diversity. Chinese Soviet-watchers paid particular attention to the impact of the Islamic resurgence in the newly independent Central Asian republics on China's Muslim populations in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Those writings tended to define the Xinjiang minorities fighting for religious freedom as political dissents opposing socialism. They also perceived that after the Soviet collapse, international forces would move against China. Xinjiang was seen as the most vulnerable to foreign conspiracies, owing to this Islamic resurgence and Western influence. These viewpoints justified the agenda of the CCP after the Cold War, when the Party believed that Western countries had a master plan to undermine China.To summarise, the debates of Chinese Soviet-watchers emphasized the importance of the Chinese government to take a firm hand in combating Xinjiang's Islamic resurgence. The strategies that arose from these debates may inform readers of China's present state policies and actions.

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By
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Introduction

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 had profound repercussions for the People's Republic of China (PRC). In particular, the role played in this by religious factors caused panic throughout the top levels of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). China, like the Soviet Union, is a multinational society with a diversity of religious faiths. Chinese Soviet-watchers (both officials and academics) in the 1990s paid particular attention to the impact of Islamic resurgence in the newly independent Central Asian republics in China's largest province—Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Xinjiang borders three Central Asian states that were members of the former Soviet Union. As a result, Chinese policymakers view these nations through a strongly strategic lens (Mackerras 2003; Zhang 2014). Xinjiang itself is the home of China's largest Muslim populations, including the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and the Uyghurs.

Scholarship on how China learned from the Soviet Union in the management of ethnic and religious affairs falls into two categories. The first category of literature focuses on the pre-1991 period, especially the eras of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping (Schwarz 1971; Dreyer 1976; Heberer 1989; Mackerras 1995; Gladney 2004). The second category of research shifts its attention to the post-collapse decades, but those scholars are generally concerned with how the Chinese debated and analysed the failure of Soviet policies and how China could learn from Moscow's mishandling of those issues (Bernstein & Li 2010; Shambaugh 2008; Liew & Wang 2012; Lambert 2001; Star 2004).

The above-mentioned scholarship mainly discusses how Chinese officials and scholars reflected Moscow's past wrongdoings, tending to overlook how the Chinese debates generated and provided solutions, strategies, and direction for the country to handle its ethnic and religious affairs in the years to come. As this essay will argue, those arguments made in the 1990s may mirror China's present state policies and actions.

To support this argument, this essay examines the thinking of Chinese scholars and officials against the backdrop of political developments in the PRC in the 1990s. It does this primarily

with a literature review of publications in national core journals of the PRC. In addition, to successfully locate this study in the rich fabric of intellectual activities and the changing environment of contemporary China, the author also consulted China's Party newspapers and journals, such as *Renmin Ribao* (人民日报 People's Daily), and the writings and speeches of PRC officials, such as those of contemporary Chinese leaders.

In this essay, the term 'Soviet-watchers' (or 'Sovietologists') refers to those who study and research the state of the USSR. This is based on the definition of Christopher Xenakis, who defines US Sovietologists broadly to include 'political scientists, economists, sociologists, historians, diplomats, and policy makers, working in academia, government, private think tanks, and the media' (Xenakis 2002: 4). He uses the terms 'Sovietologists', 'Soviet experts', 'foreign policy analysts', 'Cold War theorists', and 'political scientists' interchangeably, citing the examples of George Kennan, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Richard Pipes, and Strobe Talbott. These individuals are both Soviet-specialists and policy makers, while Hedrick Smith and Robert Kaiser are also Soviet-watchers and journalists simultaneously (Xenakis 2002: 4). For the sake of conforming to the Chinese context and for convenience of narrative, the author will use the term 'Soviet-watchers' (rather than 'Sovietologists') throughout the essay.

In terms of this elastic definition of the field and the diversity of scholars' backgrounds, the situation in China is generally similar to the situation in the US as described by Xenakis. Although some Chinese scholars specialise in either Soviet or world communism, most of those mentioned and quoted in this essay are generalists rather than specialists in Soviet studies. Their articles often express more political zeal than scholarly expertise or analytical insight. Generally speaking, the descriptions by Xenakis of US Sovietologists could also be applied to the Chinese situation. Chinese Soviet-watchers are a diverse group, rather than representatives of a single school of thought or central theory. Their publications never imply a complete homogeneity of views. However, although their academic training is in different disciplines and by no means confined to Soviet studies, their research and publications are relevant to Soviet research in one way or another.

The essay is divided into six sections. After the introduction, the author will move on to review how the PRC tackled religious issues both historically and in the present-day context. In the subsequent third section, the essay will look at how the Chinese state reacted to Xinjiang's Islamic resurgence in the 1990s. In the fourth section, this paper examines the 1990s Chinese

debates on the resurgence of Islam in Xinjiang and the religious repercussions from Central Asia. In the fifth section, the paper discusses how the PRC regime made use of Xinjiang's Islamic resurgence to facilitate its control over ethnic minorities and legitimise its rule after the end of the Cold War. In the conclusion, the essay sums up how these discussions might reflect China's increasingly repressive religious and ethnic policies in the present-day.

The Issue of Religion in the Chinese Communist Regime

Since the founding of the PRC, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has made it clear that religious bodies are to be stripped of their political and economic power. The CCP intended to control religion as far as it could for its own purposes and to support its own rule (Dreyer 1976). In the 1980s, the Chinese government still believed that strengthening economic development – in combination with respecting the rights of minority and granting them a certain degree of autonomy – would strengthen Party-rule. In doing this, they believed that the results would help them to win the sincere support of national minorities and regain the ruling legitimacy that was damaged by the disastrous Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) (Zong 1986).

However, since the collapse of world socialism in the late 1980s, religious revival in China and especially that of Islam in Xinjiang has posed new difficulties for the Chinese government, which discovered that material goods alone could not easily stifle the awakening of national identities separate from the Han-dominated PRC and demands for independence.
In 1992 a state document made the following warning on religious issues:

> All party comrades should be psychologically prepared for the long-term nature of religion existing under socialism. The thought that religion would perish soon under socialism is unrealistic (Cai 1992).

Religious revival and its threat to China's sovereignty were a central topic in the 1990s Chinese Soviet-watchers' writings. First, Marxism-Leninism is avowedly and extremely anti-religious. The religious issue in the Chinese context is often interwoven with problems of ethnic groups and nationalities. Interestingly, the popularity of the topic in China coincided with the faltering of some multinational socialist countries with diverse religious beliefs such as the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Thus, the CCP regime came to see religion as a major political threat to communism.

Second, the discussions of religious revival in 1990s China focused on Xinjiang's Muslim

populations, suggesting that the issue has less to do with filling the faith vacuum because of the death of Marxism. In this case, religious revival is associated with national consciousness and the awakening of ethnic identities in China's minority regions. In the mind of the Chinese leadership, the religious revival was the reason for the Chinese minority's demands for independence, and it was the direct result of the Soviet and Yugoslavian collapses. It might constitute a major threat, not only state unity and social stability, but also to the fate of socialism. As Ismail Amat (Chairman of the PRC State Ethnic Affairs Commission) stated in 1994,

> We can draw a profusion of lessons from the evolution of Eastern Europe and the Soviet collapse, and the present social disturbances in the world owing to ethnic and religious conflicts. China's religious issue has its own characteristics, and correctly handling the religious issue will have great implications for the future of socialism (Amat 1994).

China's official publications have long been aware of the disintegrative impact of religion on socialism. A reporter in the Party-sponsored journal *Liaowang* (瞭望 Outlook) remarked in 1983 that the anti-communist uprising of 'Solidarity in Poland' was inspired by Christianity, which has a long tradition in Polish society (Chu 1983). After the Soviet collapse, both Party Secretary-General Jiang Zemin (江泽民) and Li Ruihuan (李瑞环), member of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee, warned that the Party must remain vigilant against collaboration between dissidents and international malevolent forces using religion to incite political disturbance and divide the country (Jiang 1994; Li 1994).

From the 1990s onward, several scholars and officials commented that the West was using religious institutions to destabilise the communist systems for peaceful evolution. They criticised the Vatican and the Roman Catholic Church for intervening in the internal affairs of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. They assured readers that the next target of the West in it use of religion for subversion would be China, the last major communist power (An 1991; Luo 1991; Lu 1998).

In the CCP's mindset, religion should not interfere in politics or the state institutions, and above all, it should not be used to split the country (Ulanhu 1981). This proscription applies not only to a religion such as Catholicism, with its tradition of political involvement, but to any faith where the leaders try to split a particular part of China off from the rest of the country. This has

become a serious problem among those nationalities that have made religion a strong component of politics, particularly Islamic minorities (Jiang 1998).

The Chinese government is generally prepared to accept the role of religion, but with one major proviso: it becomes unacceptable when it spills over into a demand for secession or independence from China. As mentioned above, in the 1980s the Chinese government was still willing to adopt a relaxed approach towards religion with regard to its minorities. However, as both the international and the domestic contexts changed, the Chinese authorities moved to restrict religious freedom.

For the Chinese party-state, religious diversity and ethnic harmony are window-dressing, while the survival of the regime is fundamental. As we will see in the subsequent sections, this was the context in which the 1990s debates were set and the narrative that dominated those debates.

Chinese Official Reaction to Xinjiang's Islamic Resurgence in the 1990s

In the 1990s, it was not the religion of Christianity but that of Islam that provoked a heated debate in Chinese Soviet-watchers' writings, and the reasons for this are varied. First, to this day, China has not established diplomatic relations with the Vatican. Relations have been tense since 1989, because the CCP, as mentioned above, is aware of the potential role of religion in overthrowing communist regimes in Europe. On the other hand, China has strengthened its relations with the Third World, including many Islamic states, since the end of the Cold War, as the PRC intended to make allies of developing nations to contain the capitalist West after the fall of world communism (Mackerras 1995). Moreover, very few of the countries bordering China are Christian states, but a number are Muslim nations, especially after the demise of the USSR.

In addition, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the impact of the newly independent Central Asian republics on China's own Islamic populations in Xinjiang has caught the attention of the CCP. Sean Roberts (2004) reveals the influx of ideas of Western liberalism and democracy into Xinjiang since 1991, through the region's increased interaction with Central Asia, which also brought renewed hopes to the Uyghurs that they may realise their long-time ambition of establishing their own sovereign state.

Historically, Xinjiang has been the hotbed of national secessionism in China and this tendency was triggered by Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union (Roberts 2004). In the 1990s, the CCP

leadership perceived the issue a result of the influence of Central Asian states. Jiang Zemin, in his two speeches delivered before and after the Soviet collapse, remarked that the Xinjiang unrests were due to 'the changes of international climate' and 'the influence of Pan-Islamism and Pan-Turkism' (Jiang 1990). He condemned the Uyghur anti-government force for attempting to establish the 'Eastern Turkistan Republic' or the 'Great Kazakhstan Republic' for splitting China (Jiang 1998).

Xinjiang's Islamic Resurgence in the 1990s Chinese Debates

This official guidance inevitably passed into academic research and writings. In 1993, Li Tieying, President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in Beijing, hosted a state-wide meeting for the academic staff in international studies. He expressed his great concern about the political, social, and religious repercussions of the newly independent Central Asian states on China's Xinjiang minorities after the collapse of the USSR, owing to the similar historical and cultural backgrounds of the two regions—the so-called 'problems of the cross-border nations' (*kuajing minzu wenti* 跨境民族问题) (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 2010).

According to the analyses of many Chinese Soviet-watchers throughout the 1990s, due to the Islamic revival and the Soviet collapse in the late 20th century, waves of Pan-Islamism and Pan-Turkism spread across Central Asia. The principle of these religious ideologies was to unify the Muslims across the world or establish a grand republic consisting of all the Turkish-speaking peoples, including those in Xinjiang. In their opinion, such a call might trigger Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism in Xinjiang, which would threaten China's sovereignty and security (Wu 1993; Pan 1994; Yu 1996; Xu 1999). In addition, several Chinese scholars concluded it was the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* (openness) and political pluralism that had encouraged both atheism and the Islamic revival and which finally pulled down the 70-year pillar of Marxist ideology in the Soviet Union (Zhang 1992; Zheng 1994; Deng 1997).

The Chinese State, Xinjiang, and Islamic Revival

Control of religious affairs in China is not a recent innovation by the CCP. As demonstrated by Tony Lambert (2001), in imperial China, different dynasties used a variety of methods to regulate and subjugate the religions and make them serve the interests of the central state. According to Thomas Heberer (1989), the Confucian orthodoxy also criticised other religions as being 'heterodox' and practised by 'barbarians'. He points out that Confucianism, the traditional

ideology of the Chinese state, was especially good at helping the state to assimilate other religions, through the imposition of Han-Chinese values rather than a policy of extermination. The acceptance of other religions signified their subjugation to the Chinese state. The aim was not to conquer them, but rather let them govern themselves (Heberer 1989: 18).

After 1949, when Confucianism had been replaced by communism, any minority figures who wanted to safeguard their traditional way of life and religious faith by opposing the Party's many disastrous political campaigns were dubbed as 'reactionary' and were harshly prosecuted (Heberer 1989:15). As such, there is a strong link between the past and the 1990s Chinese debates on how to overcome Islamic resurgence and maintain national unity. Many Chinese scholars wrote that Xinjiang ethnic minorities might collaborate with foreign or Western hostile forces to use religion to facilitate national separation movements and threaten China's security. This was able to generate support amongst the Han Chinese for the CCP regime in the wake of the collapse of world socialism.

First, the Chinese government has consistently adhered to their long-time tradition of 'grand unification' (*dayitong* 大一统), which is a key concept in China's civilisation and mentality that articulates the unification of the country as the norm and the division of it as an aberration (Fairbank 1968). Under this mindset, the Chinese government takes state sovereignty and unity as its foremost priority. It will tolerate no attempt by foreign forces to divide the country. As Xinjiang ethnic minorities were not considered Han Chinese, they were suspected to be conspiring with foreign forces to secede from the PRC. It was thought that this might stir the Han Chinese to demand the government take tougher measures against Xinjiang ethnic minorities.

Second, the discourse of Islamic revival and its potential threat to split China went hand-in-hand with the prevalent peaceful revolution doctrine in early 1990s China. This theory was created by the CCP regime in the late 1980s to use the imagined fear of foreign subversion to safeguard and justify its rule, after the international collapse of communism (Shambaugh 2008). As a result, the discussions of Islamic religion and its subversive potential in the 1990s Chinese Soviet-watchers' writings also played a role in reinforcing the weakened legitimacy of the CCP (Wu 1993; Pan 1994).

Lastly, the Chinese concern about Islamic religious affairs in Xinjiang could also explain China's

increasingly repressive religious policy from the 1990s onward, owing to the impact of the Soviet collapse (Bachman 2005). While being firmly under the control of the Party, religion in 1980s China was treated by the CCP leadership with appreciation and interest. It was a target of cooperation but not repression, since the Chinese government did not want to repeat the oppressive religious policy seen during the Cultural Revolution (Gladney 2004).

However, since the 1990s, owing to the alleged role of religion in toppling communism in Europe, China's perception of religion has become more hostile. Gleaned from the Chinese writings above, since the 1990s, religious affairs in China have become a highly politicalised issue. The maintenance of stability and national unity always came at the expense of religious freedom (Perdue 2013). Ethnic minorities from Tibet, Xinjiang, and Inner Mongolian regions who were pleading for religious freedom and national autonomy or independence were defined as political dissents opposing socialism (Zhou 2010). This shows that China has increasingly viewed religious activities through the prism of not only national unity and state sovereignty, but also the survival of the socialist regime, as they may have the ability to threaten the Party dictatorship.

An illuminating example is the *Falungong* (法轮功 Buddhist Law Society) religious movement, whose members once staged a sit-in outside the CCP-leadership compound in Beijing, in protest against China's repressive religious treatment (Tong 2009). Although the CCP leadership is aware of *Falungong*'s organizational power, financial success, and ideological authority that might constitute a challenge to its rule, many of *Falungong*'s demands were for no more than the freedom of religious practice and the right to form associations, guaranteed by the Chinese Constitution (Tong 2009).

The subsequent state-wide crackdown on *Falungong* and the mounting Chinese scholarly denunciation of the movement as '*xiejiao*' (邪教 heathendom), reflected that China has learned from the collapse of European communism that the rampancy of any organised religion might pose a risk to its communist power base. Such understanding is consistent with the above-mentioned Chinese criticism of what they interpreted as Gorbachev's excessive tolerance of religious freedom. The Chinese perceived Gorbachev's liberalisation and hands-off approach to religious policy as having cultivated many anti-government forces and led to the ultimate demise of the USSR.

On the religious issue, the most important aspect of the 1990s Chinese debates was what they

saw as the role of foreign forces in using religious elements to subvert Eastern European regimes and the former Soviet Union. Chinese Soviet-watchers perceived that, after the Soviet collapse, the international forces might gang up against China, and the Xinjiang Uyghur region was the most vulnerable to such contagion, due to Islamic resurgence in Central Asia across the border (Guo 1996; Yu 1996; Xu 1999).

Their opinions highlighted or exaggerated the role of the foreign forces in bringing down the Soviet Union and their potential to overthrow the Chinese communist regime through what they saw as religious subversive activities. Such arguments appear to serve and legitimise the CCP agenda after the Cold War, when the regime thought that the country might become the next target of the West for 'peaceful evolution' (Shambaugh 2008).

Since the 1990s, China has launched many projects to impose assimilation and Sinicisation of minority populations and to suppress the formation of an ethnic identity among minorities, such as official-sanctioning of a large influx of Han populations, compulsory Mandarin-language education in schools in minority areas, and the recent establishment of re-education camps located in Xinjiang (Cappelletti 2019).

All of these efforts aim to integrate Xinjiang and other minority regions with the rest of China and leave them dependent on the central government. Their ethnic and cultural identities, as well as their national existence, have been under direct threat, and those ethnic groups may functionally disappear as a distinct ethnic group within a few generations. No one can deny that China has never been as dominant in its minority regions as it is presently. Such a situation will not see a fundamental change until the political conditions in China themselves undergo massive changes.

Conclusion

As this essay indicates, the fundamental shift in central attitudes towards religion originated in the early 1990s, immediately after the Tiananmen Incident and the demise of the USSR, when the CCP realised the threat that religion posed to its survival and decided to discard its liberal religious policies implemented in the 1980s.

Since then, the Chinese state have determined that respect for minorities and their religions should not go against the fundamental interests of the Party. It believes that any demands for

ethnic autonomy, a revival of national identities, or religious resurgence could threaten the unity of the country and undermine the rule of the CCP.

Any foreign influences on those matters are deemed a conspiracy aimed at China's disintegration, inspired by the Soviet breakup. In the eyes of the CCP, to avoid the fate of the Soviet Union, harsh measures such as 'cultural genocide' (Peerenboom 2008) and 'ethnic drowning' (Cheek 2006) are necessary and unavoidable when dealing with what they see as 'reactionary' elements. Since then, the overall practices of the Chinese state have become more repressive, not only in religious policy but in other aspects as well.

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