



Exploring Cultural, Religious, and Ideological Influences in Tibet and Xinjiang: Shaping Collective and Individual Identities in East Asia

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Abstract: *This research seeks to identify and analyze critical questions of cultural difference by attending to the intersections of culture, religion, and political ideology in Tibet and Xinjiang, two focal regions of East Asian cultural politics. Concentrating on Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet and Islam in Xinjiang, the dissertation explores how the two religions define people's personal and group identities, particularly in conditions of expanded state control. Based on literature sources and religious and ethnographic materials, the study focuses on how people of different localities keep their faith and cultural identity alive despite political constraints such as the Sinicization policy and state control. The project is also concerned with the historical contexts that inform the people's religious experiences and how governance strategies shape culture and religion. Analyzing the investigation results, which were conducted with the help of cultural anthropology, religious studies, and political history, the study provides a complex understanding of how religion is paramount to identity work in these areas and considers the general significance of East Asian culture. Therefore, this study adds to the growing literature on accommodating and contesting cultural and religious minorities in politically sensitive contexts. It also advances a hermeneutical understanding of the complex relations between governance, religion, and minority cultures in contemporary East Asia.*

Keywords: Cultural, Religious, and Ideological Influences; Tibet and Xinjiang; East Asia.

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1. Introduction

Tibet and Xinjiang are two potentially sensitive areas owing to their cultural characteristics and political status: the Tibetan Buddhist area in Tibet and the Islamic area in Xinjiang. Although geographically marginal, these remain strategically located in cultural, religious, political, and even national narratives of China and the East Asian region. It is worth reminding that Tibetan Buddhism, as well as the Dalai Lama himself, is embedded in the ideology of Tibet. Similarly, Islam is the basis of Uyghur's sociocultural livelihood in Xinjiang. But both areas have also been arenas of political repression, where religious and cultural traditions are under ever more tremendous pressure of state regulation in the framework of policies of Sinicization and the unity of the nation. This research mainly focuses on understanding how Tibetan Buddhism and Islam define people and communities and how the same processes became the primary reaction to the political interventions. The result of a sociological trifecta of religious studies, anthropological, and political history investigation, the project will explore how these practices continue and evolve under the state's interference. In this way, the study examines the meaning of religious and cultural identity formation in these regions while considering both local approaches and political contexts. On this basis, the study reflects upon the importance of religious and cultural identity in East Asia as a part of overgeneralized East Asian cultural territories.

2. Methodology

This research is informed by cultural anthropology, religious studies, and political history to provide a better understanding of identity in both Tibet and Xinjiang. Information for analyzing spiritual and cultural practices is



derived from primary ethnographic sources that give a grassroots understanding of how Tibetan Buddhism and Islam contribute to identity construction. Scholarships that appeared in print and sociopolitical contexts of religion and culture in these areas are discussed with the help of theoretical concepts provided by peer-reviewed academic texts. The case of Tibetan Buddhism and Islamic religious texts are used to explain how religion affects everyday lives and the formation of identity. Apart from the textual analysis, this project also takes a historical and political approach, using sources that consist of relevant governmental Chinese publications and reports. This study focuses on state policies, regulations, Sinicization, and counter-terrorism. This combination of first-hand and secondary materials provides a realistic view of preserving or modifying religious and cultural characteristics under political influence and gives valuable insights into these areas.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Tibetan Buddhism: Cultural and Religious Identity in Tibet

Tibetan Buddhism plays a significant role as a cultural and religious framework of Tibetan society as it involves more or less all spheres of life, ranging from community to personal life. An analysis of published materials on the subject shows the richness and scope of the field of Tibetan Buddhism, as well as the dynamism that characterizes the religion with its implications for the socio-political context of Tibet. Samuel's (1993) *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* looks at how Buddhism has adopted and adapted cultural beliefs and practices of Tibetan society to maintain social order, stability, and continuity of culture among the Tibetans. According to the author Samuel, it is not just a religion since the stated subject here refers to a comprehensive means of social life encompassing ethical, aesthetic, and communal aspects. This work reveals how essential ritual practices, monastic institutions, and pilgrimage remained in fashioning the Tibetan self.

Kapstein (2002), *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism*, analyzes the development of Tibetan Buddhism, the history of its accommodations, and the sustenance of its fundamental characteristics notwithstanding the influence from outside. Hear Kapstein discuss their worldview about nature, society, and cultural identity based on interconnectedness and compassion. In *The Dragon in the Land of Snows*, Jagou (2000) gives a historical background of Tibet from 1947 to the present time, giving a framework in which modern Tibetan Buddhism can be best understood. In this context, Shakya looks at the effects of Chinese state policies in shaping the Tibetan tradition, namely "patriotic education campaigns and control over the religious organizations and institutions." This paper, therefore, defines how political regulation weighs on and defines religious experience to show how Tibetan subjectivity is crafted in the face of state domination.

Barnett's (2006) *Lhasa: In Streets with Memories* focuses on the people's cultural and religious practices, particularly in Lhasa, which is the soul of Tibet due to practices of Tibetan Buddhism. To support his argument, Barnett describes how geometrical forms in the streets, lighting of lamps, annual celebrations, and religious practices show how deeply the comparatively young religion of Tibetan Buddhism penetrated the life of the city. His ethnographic account focuses on the daily lives of Tibetans and the fact that despite political situations, the people sustain the Buddhist traditions. Therefore, the literature about Tibetan Buddhism suggests that this aspect of the society has always defined the nature of the culture and the Tibetans' beliefs. It shows how certain local practices, historical writing, and politics combine and demonstrates that Tibetan identity continues to survive despite all.

3.2 Islam in Xinjiang: Faith, Culture, and Political Struggles

An analysis of the position of Islam in Xinjiang is crucial to the perception of the cultural and political background of the Uyghur people – the dominant ethnos of the region. Previous work on Islam in Xinjiang highlights the interrelation between religious identities and cultural performances exacerbated by state policies, especially in the contemporary period. Millward's (2021) *Eurasian Crossroads: A History of Xinjiang*, revised and updated, gives a historical backdrop of Islam in Xinjiang from the times of the ancient Silk Route to the modern day. Millward also exemplarily shows that the connections of trade, migration, and cultural exchange have created the religious setting and highlight the centrality of Islam for the construction of Uyghur ethnicity. His work also shows how Islamic practices have developed through social-political dynamics and other aspects leading to the development of the Uyghur cultural entity. Gladney's (2005) *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects* discusses how the Chinese state discriminates against its Muslim minority, the Uyghur. Gladney analyses how state policies regulating religious freedom have changed the culture of the Uyghurs. He posted that the Chinese government responded to this situation by assimilation and repression, which have

established a situation that constantly problematic Uyghur identity.

Sean R. Roberts' (2020) *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority* unfolds the present-day issues faced by Uyghur Muslims of Xinjiang on the restriction of freedom of religion with the Beijing government's anti-terrorism operation. Roberts gives a chronological narrative of the systematic subjugation, detention of the Xinjiang people, surveillance, and erasure of their culture. This work centers on the Uyghur experience with oppression and showcases the stakes of the Chinese government's actions worldwide. Thum's (2014) ethnographic research, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History*, helps to understand better Islam's role in the lives of the Uyghurs. Thum explains, on the one hand, how historiographical understanding and religious faith constitute the Uyghur identity and moral bond. He stresses the role of cults associated with beliefs and customs, veneration of shrines, and storytelling in maintaining the Uyghur identity, including in the period of political upheavals. Consequently, the literature on Islamic belief in Xinjiang provides a detailed analysis of the interaction of religion, tradition, and politics. A key aspect of their experience lies in asserting the religious and cultural identity of the Uyghur Muslims, who are imbued with a rich heritage and tradition, struggle to do so in the face of a political system that gradually tightens the screws on freedom of speech and expression.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Cultural and Religious Practices in Tibet

Tibetan Buddhism is so integrated into the people's lives and their social, artistic, and organizational contexts that talking about Tibetan culture without reference to the religion would be somewhat off-base. It is incorporated into habits of everyday existence, shared through religious practices during rites of passage, celebrations, and meetings. The second central theme of practicing Tibetan Buddhism is the role of lamaism, the paramount significance of the Dalai Lama, and the religious strata of Tibetan society. This kind of hierarchical organization- all-pervading social order- strengthens the ties in terms of community among the Tibetans. As Samuel (1993) notes in *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*, the functions of puja — prayer ceremonies and skor — are the movement around holy places, cement community, and the means of maintaining traditions. The importance of these practices is further manifested in annual religious and cultural events such as Losar or the Tibetan New Year, which are joined by religious significance with the simultaneous celebration of cultural facets of the festival, from renewals to the coming together of the community.

It is impossible to overemphasize the effects of Chinese state policies on the nature of cultural and religious expression in Tibet. In *The Buddhism of Tibet*, Waddell (2015) describes how, since the mid-1970s, patriotic re-education campaigns within religious institutions aimed to unsettle traditional patterns of religious thought and subjugate loyalty and obedience to the state's patriotism. This policy has created a conflict between the Tibetans' culture and state. Hence, many forced the Tibetans to strike between culture and state, requiring the Tibetans to balance between religion and the state.

4.2 Islam in Xinjiang: Faith Under Siege

Therefore, Islam is crucial to constructing the Uyghur identity seen in Xinjiang. However, anti-terrorism measures put in place by the current Chinese government have continued to escalate repression. Religion as a practicing entity to the Uyghurs is not only a spiritual undertaking but an ethnic one. Gladney's (2005) *Dislocating China: Reflections on Muslims, Minorities, and Other Subaltern Subjects* contends that the Uyghur's prohibition and conservative Islamic practices can be partly understood as a way to resist pressures to assimilate into Han Chinese norms. Prayer, fasting, and Islamic festivals mean embedding aspects of religion into people's daily lives and creating social and cultural bonds with Uyghur people. However, these practices have become somewhat impaired due to the current political environment. Robert's (2020), *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign Against a Muslim Minority*, describes how the state's repression through mass detention and, most importantly, the assimilation attempts aimed at eradicating the Islamic culture and the Uyghur identity. It is recognized that psychological effects are significant in modern society, with the campaigns of "re-education" camps depriving people of an opportunity to practice on the grounds of religion freely. Further, *The Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* by Thum (2014) traces how the Islamic past and historical storytelling are actively erased or forgotten. The eradication of cultural centers such as mosques and bans on religious schooling showed that the assault on Islamic belief is in Xinjiang in an attempt to control the inherited culture.

5. Political and Ideological Dynamics

Tibet and Xinjiang's political and ideological processes are also essential for the cultural and religious construction of identities in the regions. These two areas have received close state surveillance and regulation due to the Chinese government's top-most agenda of state unity and order. The pedagogy used to justify these policies lies in a combination of nationalism, history, and security lenses.

5.1 Tibet

In Tibet, the Chinese government has always justified its actions as 'rescuing' Tibetans and 'developing' them, thus presenting itself as a 'friend' of the Tibetans. However, this narrative is refuted by the Tibetans, who frequently see such interventions as attempts to erase their culture or, in this case, their religion. As Jagou (2020) argues in Shakyas Tsering's *The Dragon in the Land of Snows*, one could observe that the goal of the Chinese political control caused the cultural degeneration of Tibet by policies of the Han Chinese immigration and assimilation of Tibetan Buddhism. The government wants to uphold "patriotic education" in monasteries to promote loyalty to the Communist Party, which Tibetan people view as a direct threat to their religious and ethnic rights. This complicates the situation in view of the fact that the Dalai Lama is simultaneously a religious leader and representative, albeit an honorary one, of the Tibetan government. His nonviolent messages of self-governance have been suppressed through force, hence driving the Chinese state to paint him as a secessionist figure. In *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*, Samuel (1993) explores how, despite State repression, Tibetan Buddhist culture remains vital; the actions are not only defiant political statements.

5.2 Xinjiang

On the other hand, the politics of Xinjiang now centralizes on security and anti-terrorism due to some violent events orchestrated by the Uyghur separatists. The Chinese government has a set of measures regarding religious activities, repression, and forcing people to be integrated into modern society. As Sean R. Roberts highlights in *The War on the Uyghurs*, These policies involve detaining a large number of people, forced employment, and unprecedented surveillance, all justified as ways of dealing with extremism. These actions are justified in the light of the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party for the interest of the nation's security and social order. This has further extended into pro-PRC propaganda that sees anything associated with Uyghur and Islam as a menace to the state. Gladney (2005) posited and elaborated how the Chinese state has always perceived minority functions as likely to destabilize or incite rebellion, thus propelling a systematic and organized process of Furthermore, what happens in Xinjiang is part of a broader discourse of nationalism in China as advocates the Han chauvinism and a cultural Ernest Mandarinization. This story erases Uyghur ethnic and religious particularity as a problem for the unity of the Chinese nation-state. Thum (2014) recounts that when the current state narratives undermine the legitimacy of Uyghur histories, this reasoning accelerates ideological polarization.

6. Conclusion

This research demonstrates how culture, religion, and the political system in Tibet and Xinjiang are pretty complex, with the prevalence of Tibetan Buddhism and Islam in defining the peoples' identity in the region. Despite the criticism that can be pointed to state intervention and political repression, the people of Tibet and Xinjiang manage to maintain religious customs and traditions. The study also shows that the developmental process of identity in these regions is not only reactive to social and political pressures but is also contextual and constructed based on historical and religious discourses and lived experiences. Thus, this work is relevant to larger discourses on the role of religion and cultural heritage in the overall East Asian picture. It is essential to grasp these dynamics because of the recognition of the country's internal heterogeneity and the acknowledgment of the value of cultural self-governance in a world where everything is becoming standardized. Lastly, this study raises awareness of the need to think beyond the rigid cultural and political constructs of identities that dominate politically charged environments.

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