

Religion, Identity, and Tolerance:
A historical analysis of the clash between Uyghurs and the CCP

By Camden Koch

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Thesis Advisor:
Professor Brenton Sullivan

Defense Committee:
Professor Megan Abbas
Professor Jenna Reinbold

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Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion.¹

- Article 36 of the Fifth National People's Congress

[D]etainees were forced to memorize a list of what he calls '126 lies' about religion: "Religion is opium, religion is bad, you must believe in no religion, you must believe in the Communist Party," he remembers. "Only [the] Communist Party could lead you to the bright future."²

- Interview of an Ex-Detainee at a Uyghur Re-Education Camp

Introduction

The position of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) — the ruling organization of the current Chinese party-state apparatus — on religion in the modern day appears hypocritical and clearly targeted against the religious customs of the native Muslims inhabiting China's westernmost borderland region, Xinjiang. On the one hand, rights are granted to Chinese citizens protecting their freedom of religious belief along with freedom from discrimination and/or persecution by institutions on the basis of those very beliefs. However, the relatively recent discovery of "re-education camps" all across the Xinjiang province seems to belie these supposed guarantees of religious freedom. Although the CCP claims that these camps serve the purpose of bolstering general education and provide vocational training to the economically downtrodden minority groups, evidence coming out of the camps seems to indicate otherwise.³

¹ The Common Program of The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference § (1949).

² Rob Schmitz, "Ex-Detainee Describes Torture In China's Xinjiang Re-Education Camp," NPR, 2018.

³ Alex Winter, "China has Locked Up 8 Million in Terrifying 'Re-Education' Camps, Docs Reveal," The US Sun, The Sun, 2020.

In these “re-education camps,” or “detention camps” as I will refer to them,⁴ the detainees are actually being threatened, beaten, tortured, and/or ceaselessly indoctrinated in CCP propaganda against religion.⁵ Furthermore, the estimated total number of detainees at these camps in Xinjiang is astounding, with roughly 8 million people — half of Xinjiang’s Muslim population — expected to have been through the camps over the last several years.⁶ Not only does this treatment of detainees in the camps violate the CCP’s own constitution with regard to religious freedom, but one recent article describes these camps as “likely the largest internment of ethnic and religious minorities since the Second World War.”⁷

Because the most numerically dominant non-Han ethnic group in Xinjiang is the Uyghurs, the detention camps appear to be the latest iteration of oppressive policy targeting the Uyghur people. Although other minority group Muslims in Xinjiang — such as the Kazakhs and the Hui along with non-complicit Han people — are believed to have been detained in these camps as well, the region is overwhelmingly associated with the Uyghur people. The Uyghurs make up just under half of the population, and are nearly matched one to one by the Han people who have migrated to the region over the past seven decades.⁸ Even the official name of the province, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), assumes Uyghur association with the area. Thus, the aim of the detention camps, which target the Uyghur people over other

⁴Terminology referring to these camps varies by scholar. I have elected to follow the term concluded by Adrian Zenz in the following quote by Mark Elliot at the lecture “Chinese De-Extremification Campaign in Xinjiang,” stating that the camps “go by a variety of names in Chinese, the most official, I think, being *jizhong jiaoyu zhuanhua peixun zhongxin*, but there are a bunch of other names, very unstandardized if you look around. In English, they’re called re-education camps or re-education centers. Some media voices have given them other names such as internment camps or concentration camps, both names going back to the 19th century, in fact. Our speaker, who has recently published the authoritative study on the creation of these centers, based on Chinese documents primarily, sees them as part of a ‘Large-scale, extrajudicial detention system.’” Mark Elliot and Adrian Zenz, “Chinese De-Extremification Campaign in Xinjiang,” Lecture, August 12, 2020.

⁵ Schmitz, “Ex-Detainee Describes Torture In China’s Xinjiang Re-Education Camp.”

⁶ Winter, “China has Locked Up 8 Million in Terrifying ‘Re-Education’ Camps, Docs Reveal.”

⁷ Ben Mauk, “Inside Xinjiang’s Prison State,” *The New Yorker*, February 2021.

⁸ Ibid.

Muslim minority groups in the region, is implicitly clear: cultural genocide and eradication of Uyghur Islam.

At the core of this ongoing crisis is the conflict between the CCP's attempts at creating a shared national identity for China and the Uyghurs' pre-existing identity distinct from that of the CCP's vision. While generating its stance towards religion, the CCP idealized secular modernity through the adoption of Enlightenment and Marxist understandings of the relationship between religion and human progress, whether through philosophy, science, or material gain.

Additionally, the Soviet precedent of government involvement with the secular aims of Enlightenment and Marxist philosophies seemingly justified the ability of the CCP to take a tough stance towards religion, even going so far as to outright ban religious practice during Mao's Cultural Revolution. Obviously, such policies by the CCP would serve to alienate religious peoples such as the Muslim Uyghurs. Though at the ideological level, these harsh religious philosophies did not intend single out ethnic minorities specifically. Rather, religion was targeted as a whole.

Another point of contestation lay in the identity the CCP put forth to assimilate the Uyghurs and other religious minorities at the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In the early phases of modern Chinese nation-building efforts, officials had to grapple with how to unite the various ethnic groups or nationalities, encompassed in the complex Chinese neologism *minzu*, within the Chinese borders in order to sustain the territorial integrity of the Chinese nation-state. If the territorial integrity of the Chinese nation were to be compromised, imperialist powers would be able to gain a foothold over China as they had done during China's "century of humiliation," the nineteenth century. The CCP embraced the term *Zhonghua minzu* in the years leading up to the founding of the People's Republic of China in order to unite the

non-Han peoples in a shared collective Chinese identity under the authority of the Han-led CCP. In exchange for the unity of the various minority *minzu*, the CCP promised toleration of the various *minzu* customs, culture, and religion. However, as Wendy Brown notes, the concept of toleration is flawed because it merely perpetuates divisions rather than resolving them. Thus, concept of *Zhonghua minzu* was intended, in theory, to transcend the differences of the various *minzu*, therefore serving as a deracialized identity for all of the competing *minzu* identities in China and resolving the issue of toleration; however, this concept of a shared Chinese identity, in practice, came with an implied a sense of Han superiority over the minority *minzu*. Hence, *Zhonghua minzu* was an assimilationist ideology, through which competing *minzu* identities are eliminated as they are assimilated into the CCP's Han-centric identity. In this sense, the CCP rejected alternative policies that would have granted autonomy or self-determination to the various *minzu*. Toleration was to be granted to *minzu* until the CCP naturally assimilated them into the *Zhonghua minzu*, or until the CCP could assimilate them by force. Although this term was generally abandoned after the CCP was victorious in the Chinese Civil War, the concept of *Zhonghua minzu* played a strong role in formulating policy in the early PRC era prior to a revival of the term since 2005 as intellectuals have begun to question the efficacy of the CCP's previous ethnic policies.⁹

This original assimilationist conception of the *Zhonghua minzu* proved too idealistic for successful implementation in Xinjiang, where a strong Uyghur identity separate from the CCP's narrative of a shared Chinese identity already existed prior to Xinjiang's incorporation. This distinct Uyghur identity existed not only prior to CCP governance, but also prior to the existence of the CCP as a political organization; the early Uyghur identity was centered largely around the

⁹ Mark Elliott, "The Case of the Missing Indigene: Debate Over a 'Second-Generation' Ethnic Policy," *The China Journal* 73 (2015): 186.

shared Sufi Islamic traditions and *tazkirah* texts¹⁰ unique to the Uyghurs, which distinguished them from other Turkic and Islamic groups. Religion and ritual, therefore, played a pivotal role in binding Uyghurs together into a distinct identity prior to their placement under CCP control, corroborating the role of religious ritual in forming a collective identity as theorized by Durkheim. Religious policy of the CCP was therefore critically important in determining the outcome of the Uyghur people's reaction to their incorporation into the People's Republic of China.

Following the Cultural Revolution, the CCP shifted from its Marxists-Leninist disdain for and persecution of religion to a more liberalized and Euro-American position, prompting a shift in theoretical framework from Marxist to Durkheimian religious theory. Although current religious policy with regard to the Uyghurs, such as the detention camps, appears to be more in line with the anti-religious past than the supposedly tolerant present, the important element of the current crisis in Xinjiang is not between religion and the CCP, but rather, Uyghur Islam and the CCP. Thus, the conflict between CCP and Uyghur identity is no longer characterized by Marxist ideology. In order to understand the modern oppressive CCP regime, the ideas of Durkheim are utilized to both conceptualize the current state of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang while also hypothesizing on the likely outcome. Durkheim's theories on religion present a comprehensive framework for understanding religion as a social phenomenon which ultimately forms a collective identity. Based on this framework, the modern CCP policies targeting the religious practices of Uyghur can be understood as an attempt to disrupt the religious source of Uyghur identity so the CCP can effectively assimilate the Uyghurs without resistance.

¹⁰ *Tazkirah* are local folk stories of Sufi saints as well as accounts of critical moments in the history of Xinjiang, and such stories have evolved as they have been passed down from generation to generation.

Whereas some religions in many regions in China are tolerated by the CCP, religious policy in Xinjiang is intolerant due to the Uyghur rejection of shared Chinese identity. Due to the critical role of religion in the creation and maintenance of the Uyghur identity, religious toleration has been revoked by the CCP, allowing the direct attack on Uyghur Islamic practices in the pursuit of breaking the competing Uyghur identity. Durkheim's theories on religious ritual and identity posit that collective identity arises from shared ritual practices, therefore, by revoking the Uyghurs' ability to practice religion, the CCP is directly seeking to destroy the distinctiveness of the Uyghurs. Religious toleration is therefore contingent on the relative subjugation of religious and ethnic groups to the CCP's original sense of *Zhonghua minzu*, whereas intolerance is utilized to attempt to subsume resistant identities into the CCP's shared Chinese identity by force. As such, this paper seeks to demonstrate that the ongoing CCP-Uyghur conflict, though reminiscent of hostile Marxist philosophy, actually reflects an attempt to intervene in Uyghur religious rituals to break up the collective Uyghur identity for assimilation; however, the CCP will ultimately fail to gain the acquiescence of the Uyghur people to the concept of a shared Chinese identity because the distinction between identities is maintained in current policies through binary of oppressed and oppressor. In other words, the Uyghurs will retain a sense of identity not necessarily of ritual binding to one another through shared religious means, but through the CCP's conscious "Othering" of the Uyghurs without providing any mechanism for Uyghur-Chinese identity reconciliation.

Evolution of Pre-PRC Religious Philosophy

In order to conceptualize the struggles of identity between the CCP and the Uyghur people, it is first necessary to understand the ideologies which have shaped the policies that led

to this crisis. As will be discussed below, the modern Chinese nation-state emerged from the collapse of the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), or Manchu Qing Empire, with a strong concern over imperialist powers. In order to deter future imperialist ambitions of Western powers and Japan, the post-Qing Chinese nation-building project sought to harness Western concepts and ideologies in order to modernize in self-defense. In line with this adoption of Western philosophies, early Chinese political figures drew heavily upon Western secular philosophies such as the Enlightenment and Marxism, which ultimately placed religion in contention with modernization. However, these policies did not mandate the active persecution of religion to achieve modernity; instead, it was suggested that religion would fade as humanity progressed. Alongside these philosophies, the CCP also utilized the precedent established for religious policy in Soviet Russia, where, under Lenin and Stalin, the secularization of society became a duty of communist government. Based on these ideological foundations of religious and secular philosophy in modern China, the CCP founded the PRC in a position where it could justify oppressive policies aimed at the eradication of religion, while also having the ideological foundation to justify religious toleration.

Much of the early CCP religious policy makes sense when put in the context of China's deep anti-imperialist feelings at the time of the CCP's founding. Though never fully occupied by the Western colonial powers during the 19th and 20th century, China's defeat in the Opium Wars and subsequent economic abuses by Japan and the West led to a condition that has been described as semi-colonized.¹¹ In this sense, although Chinese were able to limit the imperialist occupation to a series of coastal "concessions," the Chinese people were forced to give in to the demands of the West unless they wanted to risk a full-scale usurpation of Chinese sovereignty.

¹¹ Mayfair Mei-hui Yang, "Postcoloniality and Religiosity in Modern China: The Disenchantments of Sovereignty," *Theory, Culture & Society* 28, no. 2 (2011): 17.

This “century of humiliation,” taking up much of the 19th century, drove the post-Qing Chinese leaders to search for ways to protect their sovereignty against imperialist forces in the future. In response to this state of “semi-colonialism,” Mayfair Yang writes the following analysis:

Although Chinese territory and the ‘Chinese race’ were perceived to be at risk of being carved up, or rendered extinct in the competition between nation-states and ‘survival of the fittest,’ China’s semi-colonial condition meant that there was no direct Western or Japanese colonial administration that tried to alter or destroy native Chinese culture. Thus, in China, the integrity and very survival of Chinese culture was not felt to be threatened by imperialist forces, and therefore modernity and the cultural transformation that it entailed were not seen in China as a foreign imposition to be repelled, but an urgent self-imposed Chinese undertaking.¹²

Colonialism in China did not spark a sharp, nativist rebuke of Western modernity because the essence of Chinese culture and identity was never threatened by Western rule. Instead, the repeated humiliation of China by the West and Japan drove the Chinese to seemingly paradoxical embrace of modern Western values. However, the adoption of Western modernity was not necessarily an act of admiration of the West, but rather the acknowledgement of Western superiority in particular domains such as military, economic, and political power, all of were considered highly important in the ever increasingly connected global society; Western-style modernization was a defensive action by China against further humiliation and sovereign distress at the hands of the Western world.

The adoption of Western notions of modernity by China also meant bringing along many products of the Enlightenment, a philosophical movement which was seen by Chinese modernizers as the foundational components of Western modernity. The Enlightenment occurred largely in Europe throughout the 17th and 18th centuries and brought about new ways conceptualizing the relationship between religion and politics while also furthering the

¹² Ibid, 18.

development of secularism. During this period, science and religion were increasingly viewed as oppositional realms, with human reason and philosophy being embraced by Enlightenment philosophy over religion and faith to better serve the future of humankind. Reason and rational thought were viewed as the future, while religion was increasingly seen by public intellectuals as an institution of the past. Religion was therefore viewed as inevitably doomed to obsolescence through the lens of the Enlightenment.

Søren Kierkegaard, a 19th century Danish theologian and founder of existentialism, wrote extensively on the Enlightenment distinction between faith and reason, though Kierkegaard ultimately sided with religion over human philosophy. Demonstrating this Enlightenment position of the dichotomy of reason and faith, Kierkegaard stated that “[i]nstead of the objective uncertainty, there is here a certainty, namely, that objectively it is absurd; and this absurdity held fast in the passion of inwardness, is faith.”¹³ To Kierkegaard, part of the point of religion is that faith is irrational, or absurd. This irrationality is precisely where Kierkegaard believed that religion draws its power from, because adherents must have faith in the face of improbability and the inexplicable. Thus, to Kierkegaard, religion and reason are dichotomous, though religion must be embraced not in spite of its absurdity but because of its absurdity. However, to Enlightenment thinkers who favored reason and rational thought, this was precisely the problem with religion. Because it is absurd, it is untrue, improbable, or at least unsupported by rational thought, and therefore must be discarded in the long run as society advances. Thus, Enlightenment ideology results in an understanding of secularization which “consists in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church.”¹⁴ Western modernity is therefore traditionally understood in conjunction with the

¹³ Søren Kierkegaard, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments,” In *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946), 220.

¹⁴ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 2.

decline of religion and the rise of science and reason, during which people will turn away from religion by choice as it is increasingly viewed as irrational and absurd.

In the pursuit of modernization in China, the adoption of Enlightenment ideology meant the elevation of Western ideals and the neglect of religion and Chinese traditions. Writing on the origins of Enlightenment philosophy in China, Mayfair Yang states:

The tenor of Chinese anti-colonial nationalism has always been in arduous pursuit of modernization, science, and national strengthening through economic and military development, while Chinese traditional knowledge and cultures were generally positioned as obstacles to these national imperatives. Although highly critical of capitalism and Western imperialism, Chinese Marxists and Maoists were no exceptions to this rule, for they accepted the Hegelian teleology of linear history, Western narratives of progress and science as liberation, and their historical materialism meant that they regarded religious culture as merely ‘opiates’ (yapian) of the people that would recede with their liberation.¹⁵

Thus, according to Yang, the sovereign anxiety experienced by China over the 19th and 20th centuries almost ironically led to a self-imposed colonial attitude with regard to religion and traditional culture. The ruling Chinese, rather than an outside colonizer, elevated some of the key Western ideals in Chinese society and placed them in contrast to the “old” and “backwards” elements of Chinese culture, which needed to be left behind in pursuit of modernization. Yang writes that in the emerging modern Chinese nation, “[s]cience was glorified, but freedom of religion, even in the Republican era, was not taken seriously. Nationalism seemed at the time the natural and only answer to China’s urgent problems, but individual rights, the rights of kin groups and religious communities, and local community self-government and autonomy were neglected as correctives to the excesses of nationalism and state centralization.”¹⁶ Territorial concerns and colonial anxieties about the Western imperialist powers therefore led to the

¹⁵ M. Yang, "Postcoloniality and Religiosity in Modern China," 18.

¹⁶ Ibid, 12.

influence of Enlightenment understandings of religion and secularism, as well as a strong nationalist discourse, in post-colonial China.

Talal Asad, a contemporary theorist on religion and secularism, offers some important ideas that are applicable to the development of religious policy in modern China. First, Asad shows that the academic and societal concepts of religion and secularism are actually Eurocentric ideas, which were far from globally encompassing prior to their colonial propagation.¹⁷ As Europe proceeded to expand its imperial control over foreign lands throughout the latter half of the last millennium, these European conceptions were either forced onto the colonized, or co-opted in the manner described above with the Chinese adoption of Enlightenment values. Thus, European conceptions of the relationship between religion and secularism were conveyed globally through the European imperialist systems. Asad also appears to directly push back against this idea of contention between the secular and the religious in which religion is viewed as anti-modern, instead arguing that secularism “should not be thought of as the space in which *real* human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of ‘religion’... It is this assumption that allows us to think of religion as ‘infecting’ the secular domain.”¹⁸ Despite this absorption of certain components of Western Enlightenment thought, the Chinese still remained critical of some aspects of Western Enlightenment conceptions of modernity.

One such post-Enlightenment ideology adopted by China was Marxism, which built upon the religious and secular framework established in the Enlightenment. Since the Communist Party of China was victorious in the Chinese Civil War and has led the PRC since its foundation, the case for the influence of Marxist thought should be apparent. As for why the CCP and the

¹⁷ Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27.

¹⁸ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 191.

Chinese public would be drawn towards Marxist philosophy in the first place, Mayfair Yang writes:

After ‘Mr. Science’ (Sai Xiansheng) emerged during the May Fourth Movement as a modern object of national desire and liberation, ‘religion’ (zongjiao), the Western categorical opposite of science, had to be excised from the ailing national body, along with ‘superstitions’ (mixin). It may be no accident that Marxism, with its doctrine of historical materialism, won out over Western liberalism, since its stance against the philosophical position of idealism, its elevation of material economic needs, and its equation of religion with ideologies of former ruling classes were more unwavering and uncompromising.¹⁹

Thus, according to Yang, the Chinese *intelligentsia* were driven towards Marxism for its materialist nature, its elevation of economic advancement in a society downtrodden by the West, and its simplification of society through the rejection of Western post-Enlightenment liberalism with regard to tradition and religious doctrine. Thus, Marxism gradually gained in popularity and power in China over the first half of the 20th century, culminating in the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) establishment of the People’s Republic of China as a one-party state.

Marxism puts forth an understanding of religion that indicts it as both a symptom of economic disparity and as a tool for the continuity of class-based oppression. Arguably one of the most widely quoted lines of Marx on religion from his *Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law* is his assertion that “[religion] is the *opium* of the people.”²⁰ To explain this metaphor of religion as a narcotic drug, religion in the eyes of Marx serves to “numb” society against the injustices perpetrated by itself and appears as an ironic example in light of China’s own semi-colonial history involving the Opium Wars. Marx then goes on to state that “[t]o abolish religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is to demand their *real* happiness.”²¹

¹⁹ M. Yang, "Postcoloniality and Religiosity in Modern China," 16.

²⁰ Karl Marx, “Toward a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction,” In *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 146.

²¹ *Ibid*, 146.

Religion in Marx's view has two components, the first of which is an expression of oppression. Religion is what people turn to when they lack the means to attain their real fulfillment on Earth, leading Marx to conclude that religion is a reflection of this lack of true happiness. In other words, religion fills the void left by a lack of earthly fulfillment. The second facet of religion is as a delusory, drug-like institution that perpetuates the very systemic injustices causing oppression in the first place. By placing emphasis on the afterlife, as many religions do, Marx argues that religion “numbs” individuals against the imperfections of this world, reducing their impulse to action against worldly injustices. Therefore, religion is “opium” in the sense that its presence indicates fundamental flaws in the society of its users, and simultaneously prevents its users from taking action to change those very conditions leading to its use.

Marx also clearly appears to subscribe to a form of Enlightenment juxtaposition of the religious and the secular. In his writing, Marx clearly denotes philosophy and human reason as the tools for solving the problems of humanity post-religion, an idea seemingly adopted by the CCP in its requirement of atheism to be considered for party membership. Expressing this idea, Marx states the following about philosophy and reason:

The *task of history*, therefore, once *the world beyond the truth* has disappeared, is to establish the *truth of this world*. The immediate *task of philosophy*, which is at the service of history, once the *holy form* of human self-estrangement has been unmasked, is to unmask self-estrangement in its *unholy forms*.²²

This so-called “self-estrangement” is precisely what has been indicated above in Marx’s understanding of religion, that by electing to pursue the beliefs and practices of religion, humanity self-destructively prevents itself from reaching both its true desires and full potential. The elevation of philosophy is put forth by Marx as the solution that must be adopted to prevent

²² Ibid, 146-147.

the continuation of humanity's self-estrangement. Once humanity no longer pushes its desires and potential into the realm of the divine and otherworldly, reason and philosophy can be utilized to effectively obtain and institute the full potential of humanity in the present and material world.

Although the discussion on Marx's religious theory so far appears wholly hostile and intolerant towards religion, further evaluation of Marx's ideology shows Marxism does not have to involve an explicit eradication campaign against religion. In *The Peasant War in Germany*, Friedrich Engels highlights how, in the case of Thomas Munzer, religion is a tool that can be utilized for the cause of the Proletariat. Despite Munzer's own religious philosophy being on the borderline of atheism, he was able to mobilize the peasantry in a class rebellion against the bourgeoisie under the guise of returning to the "real" Christianity.²³ Additionally, beyond Marx and Engel's speculation on potential appropriation of religion to the communist cause, neither theorist ever specified a timeline for, nor an active program of, the eradication of religion. Marx merely points out that a society that has advanced to the stage of true communism would not contain religion, since "[r]eligion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions."²⁴ Instead, as a society advances toward socialism, and eventually communism, religion would theoretically disappear on its own. As Marx states, "[t]o abolish religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is to demand their *real* happiness. The demand to give up illusions about the existing state of affairs is the *demand to give up a state of affairs which needs illusions*."²⁵ To utilize Marx's metaphor, if religious adherence is the equivalent of an opium addiction, a harsh system of removal is likely to result in negative effects due to withdrawal. Instead, a slower, drawn-out approach designed to ease

²³ Karl Marx, "The Peasant War in Germany," In *Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 158-160.

²⁴ Karl Marx, "Toward a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law," 146.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 146.

society out of the addiction is easier on the addict, and likely more effective. Thus, although Marxism at the surface appears to prescribe an intolerant position towards religions in general, there is room for a tolerant political position towards religion; however, the end goal still involves the dissolution of religion in society.

Although both Marxism and Enlightenment ideology share a similar belief in the eventual disappearance of religion from society, the key distinction between the tolerant iteration of Marxism and Enlightenment ideology lies in the method through which religious doctrine will be eased out of society. Marxism identifies this falling away of religion as a byproduct of the advancement of society's economic status. As society progresses from capitalism to socialism, and by extension closer to communism, religion is expected to fade away.²⁶ Under the Enlightenment, it is the progression of human reason and rational thought that leads to this disappearance of religion. Marx builds upon the Enlightenment idea that religion is the opposite of human reason and science by shifting which "ideal" is dichotomous to religion and spells out additional negative characteristics of religion. Marx shifted from Enlightenment science and reason to the economic and material advancement of society as contributing to the downfall of religion while also emphasizing that religion has historically promoted complacency rather than action in pursuit of class equality.

Based on this detailing of Marxism's treatment of religion, it should be clear that Marxism is not only compatible with Enlightenment ideology in its treatment of religion, but that Marxism builds on Enlightenment thinking. Under both philosophies, religion is viewed as implicitly backwards and doomed to disappear with the advancement of the human condition, but neither necessitates an active campaign against religion, much less its forced removal, in order to reach a better society. An important precedent is therefore established in Marxism which

²⁶ Ibid, 146.

is critical to understanding its later iterations in the Soviet Union. Marx's philosophy stipulated that socialist and communist secular society is necessarily atheist and devoid of religion because religion is indicative of an oppressive, and therefore non-Marxist, society. Thus, for any Marxist society religious coexistence in the long-term was impossible, because it would indicate that the Marxists were making no progress towards communism. The eventual disappearance of religion became a necessary policy aim of any government proclaiming itself to be Marxist. Tolerance would be permissible in the short-term for any Marxist society; however, the long-term outlook of any communist party, such as the CCP, would be oriented towards intolerance for religion as a whole.

Similar to how Marxism reshaped the Enlightenment notions of religion and secularism, the early leaders of the Soviet Union built upon Marxism to create their own concept of modernity along with the roles that religion and secularism fill. This led to the development of Marxist-Leninism, which went on to influence the CCP in the People's Republic of China. Akin to the intolerant form of Marxism, Marxist-Leninism takes a much more direct stance against religion and prescribes a proactive approach to secularizing society. This alternative reading of Marx and Engels places heavy emphasis on the delusory nature of religion, which is understood as needing to be removed as a prerequisite for advancing towards communism. Therefore, under this form of Marxism the government must be active in the removal of religion, since passive treatment of religion in the hope that it fades on its own will inevitably lead society to failure in the communist's goals of implementing communism. Vladimir Lenin, the first leader of the Soviet Union, during a discussion specifically on the relationship between socialism and religion, wrote the following on the role of the Bolsheviks in combating religion:

So far as the party of the socialist proletariat is concerned, religion is not a private affair. Our Party is an association of class-conscious, advanced fighters for the emancipation of the

working class. Such an association cannot and must not be indifferent to lack of class-consciousness, ignorance or obscurantism in the shape of religious beliefs. We demand complete disestablishment of the Church so as to be able to combat the religious fog with purely ideological and solely ideological weapons, by means of our press and by word of mouth. But we founded our association, the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party, precisely for such a struggle against every religious bamboozling of the workers. And to us the ideological struggle is not a private affair, but the affair of the whole Party, of the whole proletariat.²⁷

Here Lenin seems to be mainly discussing the need for disestablishing religious institutions, such as the Eastern Orthodox Church in Russia, because they mislead and “bamboozle” the proletariat. However, the ideology behind the political opposition to the Christian Church in Soviet Russia runs deeper than just a concern of the power of religious institutions in opposing the cause of the proletariat. Lenin posits that at the level of the communist party, religion must not be tolerated, but paradoxically protects the rights of individuals unaffiliated with the party. An earlier passage in Lenin’s writing appears to offer clarification of this point:

Religion must be declared a private affair. In these words socialists usually express their attitude towards religion. But the meaning of these words should be accurately defined to prevent any misunderstanding. We demand that religion be held a private affair so far as the state is concerned. *But by no means can we consider religion a private affair so far as our Party is concerned* [emphasis added]. Religion must be of no concern to the state, and religious societies must have no connection with governmental authority. Everyone must be absolutely free to profess any religion he pleases, or no religion whatever, i.e., to be an atheist, which every socialist is, as a rule.²⁸

Thus, Lenin’s view on religion protected an individual's right to choice of religion, but did not extend such toleration to full-blown religious institutions. Smith, in writing on the comparison between Soviet and CCP religious policy, notes that, following the Bolshevik Revolution, “the

²⁷ Vladimir Lenin, “Socialism and Religion,” Marxists Internet Archive, 1905.

²⁸ Ibid.

party programme of 1918 called for ‘systematic anti-religious propaganda to free the masses from their prejudices but without irritating the feelings of others.’”²⁹ Lenin was being cautious in his approach to religious policy, attacking and isolating the church via propaganda while attempting to avoid aggravation of the masses. Under this method, Lenin’s regime was able to destabilize the Eastern Orthodox Church in Russia, arguably the largest threat to communist power in post-Bolshevik Revolution Soviet Russia.³⁰ Lenin’s philosophy therefore viewed religion as an opponent to be actively grappled with, but not destroyed at all costs. Soviet policy focused on isolating the powerful native of religious institutions, such as the Eastern Orthodox Church, and conducted aggressive, large-scale propaganda campaigns, though the Soviet government was cautious not to overly aggravate the religious masses until they had secured their rule.

Following Lenin’s death in 1924, Joseph Stalin eventually rose to power and intensified many of the policies put in place by Lenin with the intention of reducing religious permeation throughout Soviet society. In 1929, Stalin enacted the Law on Religious Association, which seems to contravene the protections afforded the “private” citizen spelled out by Lenin. Stalin’s policies regarding religion later would be echoed by the CCP in their own religious policymaking. Stalin’s Law on Religious Association banned public worship, shut down the majority of places of worship, and imposed the mass incarceration of clergy members, indicating a strengthened position of the Soviet government against religious institutions as well as a direct limitation of the agency of religious believers in the USSR.³¹ This aggressive eradication campaign was still justified through the use of Marxist ideology, as Smith points out that “the

²⁹ S. A. Smith, "On Not Learning from the Soviet Union: Religious Policy in China, 1949-65," *Modern China Studies* 22, no. 1 (2015): 80.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 74-75.

³¹ *Ibid*, 78-79.

leitmotif of Stalinist discourse at this time became the ‘class enemy is carrying out its work under the cover of religion.’”³² To counter this “class enemy” that was supposedly operating under a religious guise, Stalin’s response was to ratchet up the pressure placed on religion as a whole, no longer simply religious institutions. This aggressive, anti-religious, Marxist state policy of the USSR thus grew over the early years of its nationhood to become a combined philosophy, first Marxist-Leninism and then Marxist-Leninist-Stalinism. In both cases of Lenin and Stalin, a charismatic authority figure took the existing framework of modernity and radicalized the role of secularism and religion in conjunction with their own philosophy and circumstances.

Chinese adoption of Western conceptions of the role of religion and secularism in modernity were spurred on by the fear of imperialist ambitions of the Western colonizers and Japan. As can be seen through the analysis of these Western ideological influences, secularism was elevated as the key to modernization while religion and old customs either were to be allowed to fade away, were to be eased out, or were to be actively removed from the populace. Evidence of each of these three positions can be seen at points in the history of the People’s Republic of China through the CCP’s policy directives, with the first two demanding some form of toleration of religion, while the latter, active eradication of religion, revoking any toleration for religious practice. Based on the influences on CCP policy, it is clear that the CCP policy directives would be in some form of contestation with Uyghur Islamic religious practices, a fundamental component of the Uyghur identity. However, before addressing the modern crisis, it is important to analyze the background of another key political component of the clash between the two beyond religious policy: the CCP’s national identity it crafted for all *minzu* minority groups in the aftermath of the fall of the Qing dynasty.

³² Ibid, 79.

Origins of *Minzu* Policy and CCP Toleration

As indicated above, the Chinese adoption of Western values of religion and secularism to modernize Chinese society was driven by fears over imperialist interference in the sovereignty of the post-Qing Chinese nation. Likewise, since the collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1912, China has focused on anti-imperialist objectives for its policy on the vast variety of nationality/ethnic groups, or *minzu*, contained within China's borders. Although the CCP drew upon Marxist and Soviet precedents in the formulation of its stance on the role of religion and secularism in modern society, the CCP actually rejected traditional Marxist and Soviet policies of self-determinism for *minzu* (i.e. the USSR system of allied soviet republics) to embrace the post-Qing assimilationist rhetoric of *Zhonghua minzu*. This rejection was wrought by both the aforementioned fears of imperialist powers alongside the important notion of the "united front," leading to the belief that *minzu* policy in China had to be different from established ideological precedents due to the unique nature of the Chinese nation.

Before discussing the origins and implications of the CCP's policy towards the *minzu* they rule over, further clarification is needed on what exactly is expressed within the term *minzu* (lit. "people lineage"), borrowed from the Japanese *minzoku* in the late 19th century.³³ As Mark Elliot points out, the term is rife with misunderstanding and confusion even prior to translation.³⁴ In an English context, linguists struggle to effectively translate the term, questioning if *minzu* is best characterized as "a 'nation', or is it a 'nationality', a 'race', an 'ethnic group' or a 'minority group'?"³⁵ In Elliot's discussion on the contemporary issue of defining *minzu*, he is ultimately drawn to a definition involving indigenous peoples as a more analytically sound concept,

³³ Elliot, "The Case of the Missing Indigene," 202.

³⁴ Ibid, 204.

³⁵ Ibid, 204.

though Elliot acknowledges the high improbability of China adopting such an understanding of the term due to the international protections specified for indigenous peoples.³⁶

Despite Elliot's solution to the modern conundrum involving the term *minzu*, I have chosen to utilize the term within this paper in the form of "nationality." First and foremost, *minzu* appears to be used synonymously with nationality by Chinese elites in the years between the fall of the Qing dynasty and the modern People's Republic of China and is also highly compatible with similar Marxist and Soviet discourses. Second, adopting an alternative definition would unnecessarily complicate the CCP rhetoric of *Zhonghua minzu*, the concept of a single unified Chinese people crafted out of the multitude of *minzu* occupying the territory of the PRC.³⁷ Lastly, as Elliot notes "just as within the English word "nationality" is the root word "nation", so within the Chinese expression *shaoshu minzu* [national minority; *shaoshu* is the adjective, "small in number"] there is the word *minzu*. Both terms are prone to be applied in political contexts, and may be thought to embody an inchoate nationalism or national consciousness that could one day be called into existence."³⁸ As I contend within this paper, the Uyghur *minzu* has developed into a coherent Uyghur identity partially as a reaction against the CCP's own policy implementations with regards to religion and *minzu*. Using the term *minzu* in conjunction with the English translation of nationality therefore assists in providing clarity to the arguments I make with regards to the Uyghurs, and in fact, the Uyghurs themselves have demonstrated their own nationalism through calls for independence from the CCP regime. However, although I utilize *minzu* in conjunction with nationality for the purposes of this paper, the reader should certainly

³⁶ Ibid, 212.

³⁷ James Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism: How the Qing Frontier and Its Indigenous Became Chinese* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 98.

³⁸ Elliot, "The Case of the Missing Indigene," 204.

keep in mind that the term is much more complex, especially in contemporary discussions, than simply meaning ‘nationality.’

Following the collapse of the Qing dynasty, Chinese intellectuals were forced to adopt new conceptions of state structure, transitioning from an empire to a nation-state, in order to remain relevant as a society. Whereas the Qing dynasty, as with all dynasties prior, was an empire, in order to keep up with the imperial West, post-Qing Chinese elites had to reject the empire as a viable state project and instead adapt into the Western formulation of the nation-state. James Leibold, writing on the formation of the modern Chinese nation, writes the following summary of this transition of state formulation:

[Western] Modernity authenticates the nation-state system as the only legitimate expression of sovereignty, with nations replacing gods and empires as the subject of history and linear progression superseding cyclical transcendence. At the same time, modernity and its political form, nationalism, were the driving forces behind imperialism in Asia, with the rhetoric of nationalism employed to legitimate the territorial imperative driving the modern state’s pursuit of global capital and perceived racial survival.³⁹

To become modern, it was therefore required that the post-Qing sovereign power be consolidated into a Chinese nation-state system. Control of the state in the post-Qing Republican era of Chinese history fell to the numerically dominant Han *minzu*, who during this period attempted, with surprising success, to hold together the territory of the Qing empire without falling victim to imperialist powers. However, the country still lacked a cohesive Chinese national identity to bind together the territory and its various *minzu* into a unified nation-state, a conundrum which lacked a coherent solution until the CCP, led by Mao, elected to diverge from traditional Marxist ideology and Soviet precedent on the question of nationalities and ethnic groups.

³⁹ Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism*, 4.

One area viewed as a potential source for identity creation in the nation-state construction of Republican era China was the concept of a “national religion.” In the aftermath of the collapse of the Qing empire, the “religion of the overwhelming majority of Han Chinese was neither Buddhist, Daoist nor Confucian, but drew selectively on all three traditions and combined these with elements of local ritual and belief. Popular religion was par excellence local, rooted in networks of cults, festivals and ancestor worship based on the household, territorial communities, guilds and other associations.”⁴⁰ Chinese popular religion was by far the most widely practiced religion in China during the fall of the Qing dynasty as a result of the numerical dominance of the Han across Qing territory and converting it to a national religion would have accommodated the majority of Chinese citizenry. However, the adoption of Western values and the desire to modernize led to two major ideological roadblocks. The first obstacle was the previously-mentioned internal Orientalist attitude towards China’s homegrown popular religious sects as “backwards” and anti-modern. The second obstacle was the Western Enlightenment value of the separation of religious power from the government. Thus, attempts at a unified Chinese “national religion” failed due to the inability to nationalize the only religious category widely believed by the majority of Republican Era Chinese citizens.

The question of “national religion” also overlooked the variety of religions practiced by minority groups, often racially and geographically linked. Thus, “[t]he struggles over what China’s ‘national religion’ (if any) should be and whether traditional forms of worship should be retained or discarded took place in the context of the modern imagination of China as a member of the family of nations, each of which should share a common language, culture, territory, economic life, and religion”⁴¹ Questions of post-Qing Chinese identity therefore aimed at

⁴⁰ Smith, "On Not Learning from the Soviet Union," 75.

⁴¹ Vincent Goossaert and David Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 60.

shaping identities out of the variety of underlying minority groups, often linked by some combination of religion, race, culture, or geographic region. Sun Yat-sen, the ideological leader of China in the early Republic Era, attempted to capture the diversity of China by “formulation of the Chinese Republic [as] being made up of five constituent nationalities, the term *minzu*... was used to designate the Han, the Man (Manchus), the Meng (Mongols), the Zang (Tibetans), and Hui (Muslims). Under this schema, the religious identity of the dominant Han remained open to debate, whereas for the four other *minzu*, it was naturalized as a function of their ethnic identity.”⁴² However, at this stage *minzu* was only associated with the broad religious category of each group, and did not take into account the minutiae of religious belief and practices. The simple association of all Muslims as a single category demonstrated a neglect of Han authority to truly understand the distinctions of the various Muslim peoples, such as the Uyghurs, early on in the modern Chinese nation-state. Thus, from an early stage *minzu* was closely associated with the religious identity of grouped peoples, though the Han supposedly transcended these boundaries.

Minzu also was broadened by Sun Yat-sen to represent his ambitions for the Chinese nation and demonstrated a concrete attempt at establishing a unified “nation of nations.” Liebold, writing on Sun Yat-sen’s attempts at nation-building in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Qing dynasty, states:

Following the 1911 Revolution, Sun Yat-sen claimed that all the peoples of China, namely the so-called five races of the republic, formed a single national entity, which he termed the Zhonghua *minzu*. China’s ongoing struggle against outside invaders and shared destiny of national independence bound the Han majority and its ethnic minorities together into a single, organic, and indivisible race-state (*guozu*).⁴³

⁴² Ibid, 60.

⁴³ Liebold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism*, 149.

Thus, although all *minzu* constitute distinctly unique people, including the Han and other Chinese minority *minzu*, all of the *minzu* of China are to be bound together in a singular Chinese identity dubbed *Zhonghua minzu*. In this phrase, “Zhonghua” refers to both “China Proper,” the Central Plains of China where China’s ancestral civilization is understood to have originated, and to supra-ethnic, assimilating identity of the Chinese state. Although never fully embraced by the minority *minzu* of Sun Yat-sen’s early Republican Era China or necessarily even the other ruling Han elite, this concept represented a strong bid for a unified national identity, even if it was an identity constituted of sub-identities. Additionally, *Zhonghua minzu* established an expectation for the territorial continuity of the fallen Qing dynasty into the official Republic of China. Because all *minzu* are together one big *Zhonghua minzu*, no singular *minzu* can possess any legitimate claims to independence based on their distinct differences from the other *minzu* of the Chinese state. Though initially opposed by the Communist Party of China in the 1920s and early 1930s, over time Sun Yat-sen’s beliefs on *minzu* were adopted by the CCP as they rejected Soviet policies of self-determination and further developed the concept of the united front.

In the early years of the Republican era, the CCP was highly dependent on Soviet Russia both for material support and ideological development. The position of Soviet ideology in those early years appears to have offered clear support in favor of the concept of self-determination for various sub-nationalities, and compelled Marxists to support proletarian nationalist movements on the global scale, regardless of one’s own nationality:

At a time when bourgeois-democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe and Asia have begun, in this period of the awakening and intensification of national movements and of the formation of independent proletarian parties, the task of these parties with regard to national policy must be twofold: recognition of the right of all nations to self-determination, since bourgeois-democratic reform is-not yet completed and since working-class democracy consistently, seriously and sincerely (and not in a liberal, Kokoshkin fashion) fights for equal

rights for nations; then, a close, unbreakable alliance in the class struggle of the proletarians of all nations in a given state, throughout all the changes in its history, irrespective of any reshaping of the frontiers of the individual states by the bourgeoisie.⁴⁴

Thus, Vladimir Lenin called for support of self-conscious national movements in two respects. First, Marxists must recognize the right of all nations, hence nationalities or *minzu*, to self-determination if so chosen by the nation. Second, Marxists must also support these movements in line with the class struggle of the proletariat of a given state, regardless of any territorial compromise necessary.

Stalin also weighed in on the concept of self-determination for nationalist movements against oppressor nations in 1923, just a year before Lenin passed away and control of Soviet Russia shifted. In writing on the merits of upholding and advocating in favor of self-determination, Stalin states that Marxist support for self-determination of all nationalities “removes all grounds for suspicion that the toilers of one nation entertain predatory designs against the toilers of another nation, and therefore creates a basis for mutual confidence and voluntary union.”⁴⁵ Thus, Marxism demands cooperation between the oppressed of the world, regardless of nationality, which is supposed to inadvertently lead to trust and the joining together of the oppressed groups in socialist society. However, Stalin goes the extra length of adding apparent stipulations to the rights afforded to *minzu*, foreshadowing less accommodative and tolerant policies to come: “It is beyond doubt that the labouring masses of the backward peoples are not in a position to exercise the rights that are accorded them under ‘national equality of rights’ to the same degree to which they can be exercised by the labouring masses of advanced nations.”⁴⁶ To remedy the situation of the “backwards” nationalities, Stalin suggests that “the

⁴⁴ Vladimir Lenin, “The Right of Nations to Self-Determination,” Translated by Bernard Isaacs and Joe Fineberg, Marxists Internet Archive, 1914.

⁴⁵ Joseph Stalin, “Concerning the Presentation of the National Question,” Marxists Internet Archive, 1923.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

victorious proletariat of the advanced nations must assist, must render assistance, real and prolonged assistance, to the labouring masses of the backward nations in their cultural and economic development, so as to help them to rise to a higher stage of development and to catch up with the more advanced nations.”⁴⁷ Stalin, therefore, establishes a hierarchy of nations in a vaguely unspoken imperialist context. Though Stalin does not call for economic extortion of backwards nations, as is shown in the actions of imperialist powers, Stalin does recommend that these advanced nations intervene to facilitate “1) the study of the economic conditions, manner of life and culture of the backward nations and nationalities; 2) the development of their culture; 3) their political education; 4) their gradual and painless introduction to the higher forms of economy; 5) the organisation of economic co-operation between the toilers of the backward and of the advanced nations.”⁴⁸ Taken at face value, Stalin statement almost appears to imply the condonement of imperialism, so long as it is stripped of its anti-Marxist traits. In this “communist imperialism,” although self-determination is respected and economic exploitation is abhorred, the communist state is allowed to engage in other imperialist activities such as interference in the cultural, political, and economic structure of a nation to ensure its progression towards communism.

In its earliest years, the Communist Party of China was highly dependent on Soviet Russia; however, discord over the Soviets stance on nationalities eventually sowed the seeds for the differentiation of Sino and Soviet *minzu* policymaking. In the early 1920s, the Soviets recognized the nationalist movements of Outer Mongolia, a Chinese borderland province at the time between the rest of the Chinese territory and Soviet Russia. The USSR supported Outer Mongolia as a new nation, in line with Soviet ideology of self-determination, deeming that Outer

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Mongolia was sufficiently prepared for independence. However, the response of the Han Chinese, by far the most powerful *minzu* both numerically and politically in post-Qing China, was in strong opposition to the secession of Outer Mongolia, as it undermined the territorial sovereignty of the Chinese nation. Leibold offers insight on the importance of territory under the nation-state, stating the following:

The transition from premodern empires to modern nation-states reconfigured the world's political geography into finite and bounded entities. A system in which authority radiated outward from the center, with borders elastic and imprecise, was replaced by one in which 'state sovereignty was fully, flatly, and evenly operative over each square centimeter of a legally demarcated territory.' This shift had important implications along the margins of empires, transforming them from peripheral borderlands—where sovereignties overlapped because sovereigns were remote—into valuable and vulnerable bordered lands where territory needed to be patrolled and guarded day and night.⁴⁹

Thus, borderlands, such as Xinjiang or Outer Mongolia, were of special importance to the Chinese elites, heightened by the anti-imperialist imperatives of the Han people. However, the early CCP reliance upon the Soviets severely dampened their ability to react against the Soviet desire for Outer Mongolian sovereignty. The net result was that although “the CCP’s alliance with the Soviet Union placed clear limitations on its policy statements toward Outer Mongolia and other large, territorially defined ethnic groups, no one within the party was willing to acknowledge that the numerous but small and widely scattered minority tribes of the South had a right to political independence.”⁵⁰ While the CCP was forced to comply with the Soviet policy making out of necessity of survival, the CCP did not fully support the universal application of the Soviet *minzu* ideology.

⁴⁹ Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism*, 10-11.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 89.

The early Republican era of modern Chinese history also saw the import of another critical idea into the CCP from Soviet Russia, the concept of the “united front.” In response to the growing animosity between the Soviet-sponsored Communist Party of China and the ruling Nationalist Party, the Kuomintang, the Soviets introduced Lenin’s tactic of the united front, which was effectively the acceptance of a short-term ceasefire or alliance for the greater good of the communist party’s later goals.⁵¹ Summarized most succinctly, the concept of the united front originated as a survival tactic in which “[i]ts fundamental principle is to ‘unite the secondary enemy to combat the primary enemy.’”⁵² As will be later discussed, the united front became key to many different aspects of CCP policy and decision making; however, the first instantiation of the united front in China ultimately collapsed after three years of uneasy alliance between the CCP and the Kuomintang, lasting from 1924 to 1927. Yet, the collapse of the first united front did not signal to the CCP that the tactic was ineffective; instead, the tactic was revived and ultimately altered in its scope by Mao over the following decade and elevated in the face of Japanese invasion. In fact, following the collapse of the first united front, the Soviet Union gradually withdrew from direct influence over the CCP, allowing the policy to be “transformed into a far more powerful and dynamic tool—one that placed temporary alliances at the very heart of revolutionary strategy... Mao and his party experimented with the united front strategy, realizing that there were times when loyalty was more important than class.”⁵³

In the aftermath of the collapse of the cooperative relationship between the CCP and the Kuomintang government, both sides fell into civil war against one another. During this period,

⁵¹ Ibid, 94.

⁵² Beatrice Leung, "China's Religious Freedom Policy: The Art of Managing Religious Activity," *The China Quarterly* 184 (2005): 897.

⁵³ Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism*, 94.

Mao Zedong's influence over the CCP was gradually growing. Writing on Mao's transition from Soviet ideological influence, Leibold writes the following:

Arguing that ideology and not social composition made the CCP proletarian and revolutionary, Mao—in language reminiscent of Sun Yat-sen— called for the transformation of the party into a “smelting furnace of communism” (*gongchanzhuyi de ronglu*), arguing that the inclusion of minority elites and other feudal elements would result in their ‘tempering into Bolshevik fighters with the highest class consciousness.’ Mao, in other words, viewed the united front tactic as a revolutionary strategy for enlarging both the appeal and authority of the CCP.⁵⁴

Thus, Mao recognized the need to enlist the aid of the minority *minzu* in the CCP's struggle for survival, and claimed to other party elites that this temporary alliance would further serve the purpose of awakening the proletarian consciousness. As Palmer and Goossaert state:

At an ideological level, the policy aimed to unite the five constituent nationalities (particularly the four non-Manchu groups) as equals in the struggle for national dignity and independence, first from the foreign Qing dynasty, then against Japanese and Western imperialists; but on a practical level, in many ways it reformulated late-Qing approaches to managing the non-Chinese peoples living in the strategically important border territories — attempting to secure their loyalty by giving special regard to their own culture and customs, including religious practices.⁵⁵

Thus, in exchange for aid throughout the Chinese Civil War, minority *minzu* were promised cultural and religious respect under the rule of the CCP.

However, this policy of promised respect of *minzu* distinctions did not come with the Soviet assurance of self-determination. Even under the direct influence of Soviet leadership, CCP elites chafed against the imposition of Soviet self-determination on Outer Mongolia in the early 1920s:

⁵⁴ Ibid, 96.

⁵⁵ Goossaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question in Modern China*, 60.

[T]he moment they [Soviet leadership] included Lenin's principle of national self-determination in the party's political program, CCP leaders attempted to circumscribe it. The Comintern's insistence that the CPP support Outer Mongolian independence in the name of socialist brotherhood sharply contradicted the social Darwinian logic [the linear view of history and geo-politics in which the strong are justified in preying on the weak for survival] that had come to reinforce the presumed superiority of the age-old Sinic cultural core, and it threatened to undermine the party's patriotic and revolutionary credentials.⁵⁶

CCP leaders were willing to circumvent problematic aspects of Marxist and Soviet ideology in order to pursue their own sovereign interests, in the process creating their own strain of ideology unique to China: "they [Bolsheviks] ignored China's unique cultural traditions in their application of Marxist theory, and [Mao] called instead for the creation of a new strain of Marxism unique to China and its national form."⁵⁷

In the face of continued foreign imperialism through the invasion of Japan during World War II, the CCP came to fully embrace Sun Yat-sen's conception of *Zhonghua minzu* in conjunction with the full implementation of the united front to cooperate with the Kuomintang government against the Japanese invaders. During this tumultuous period in China, Marxist idealism had to be abandoned by the CCP as "[u]nity was now more important than class struggle, and the party urged the settling of all disputes among the nationalities according to the principle that 'brothers that quarrel at home should join forces against an attacker from without.'"⁵⁸ Thus, the CCP and the Kuomintang not only called a ceasefire in their civil war, but also called for all the various *minzu* to join together to repel the foreign imperialists. Seeing as the Japanese sought to sow discord amongst the various *minzu* in order to weaken the Chinese resistance to invasion, a new emphasis on "[f]orming a new, overarching national identity

⁵⁶ Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism*, 106-107.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 98.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 103.

[*Zhonghua minzu*] was central to the revolutionary strategies of both the Guomindang [Kuomintang] and the Chinese Communists.”⁵⁹

As a net result of the success of the united front and *Zhonghua minzu* in repelling the invading Japanese imperialists, this policy remained pivotal to Mao’s ideology and policymaking not only post-Japanese invasion, but even after the CCP victory in the Chinese Civil War, also known as the Chinese Communist Revolution. This new, uniquely Chinese policy was independent of previous ideological influences and is best summarized in the following passage by Leibold:

Mao’s new nationality policy represented a clear departure from the earlier Comintern-inspired program. The Leninist principle of national self-determination, with its explicit right of political secession, was replaced by the vaguer promise of the right to manage one’s own affairs. Gone too was the previous aim of minority national liberation, now supplanted by the goal of uniting all *minzu* into a single body to jointly resist the Japanese invaders. Finally, the party now spoke not of eventually creating a *Zhonghua Federated Republic* after all frontier nationalities were individually liberated, but rather of immediately establishing a unified state to combat Japanese imperialism.⁶⁰

Mao therefore was effectively able to take the CCP *minzu* ideology from reluctant obedience to the Soviet-led liberation ideology to full embracement of Sun Yet-sen’s concept of a “nation of nations,” in which all *minzu* form the collective *Zhonghua minzu*. Following the founding of the People’s Republic of China, explicit reference to the concept of *Zhonghua minzu* would fade away; however, ideas beheld in the term continued to play a role in the CCP’s *minzu* policy under Mao.

It is important to note that the embraced conception of *Zhonghua minzu* as a family of nationalities in shared collective identity did not imply the equality of the nationalities under this

⁵⁹ Ibid, 153.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 99.

umbrella term. In the creation of China's national myth, the concept of *Zhonghua minzu* was shown to be Han-centric. In connecting the modern iteration of the People's Republic of China with the various different historical dynasties and empires of China, CCP nationalist historians also placed the Han *minzu* in a position of superiority over the *minzu*, leading the more backwards *minzu* of the *Zhonghua minzu* forward into modernity:

[O]ver the course of five thousand years, a single Hanzu gradually grew from the Yellow Emperor's clan to the center of the multiethnic *Zhonghua minzu*. Through the process of this racial and cultural envelopment, the Han absorbed countless different clans, tribes, races, and cultural groups. The Han nationality thereby transformed itself into a microcosm of the *Zhonghua minzu*'s collective diversity: its geographic spread became the unified territory of the Chinese nationalities; its national culture embodied all local and ethnic cultures; and its mongrel blood flowed through the veins of each and every member of the mighty *Zhonghua minzu*. In other words, its inherent superiority led the Han nationality to assume the Han man's burden of absorbing the blood and traditions of the inferior ethnic minorities so that they might, in the words of Liang Qichao and then Sun Yat-sen, be "smelted together in a single furnace," creating a single and indivisible *Zhonghua minzu*.⁶¹

A primary justification for the CCP's denial of the Soviet right to self-determination to its own *minzu* is the Han superiority in determining the relative "completeness" or "advancement" of the minority *minzu*. Thus the CCP established that "the *Zhonghua minzu* [as a whole] (and its Hanzu core) constituted a modern nation, and its various 'backward' or 'incomplete' *minzus* were still in the process of evolving toward full nationhood."⁶² Since the various non-Han *minzu* were not yet at the point of constituting a full nation, as determined by the Han, these *minzu* were unsuited for independence. Thus, although the CCP *minzu* policy is phrased in terms of unity and defense against imperialism, the reality of the policy is that although the *Zhonghua minzu* and united front were utilized in defense of the Chinese nation, they also served the role of subjugating the

⁶¹ Ibid, 173.

⁶² Ibid, 154.

non-Han *minzu* to Han-oriented governance and historical narratives. The various *minzu* were therefore to be tolerated by the Han, as per the united front policy, until these groups could be subsumed by the superior Han nationality.

The application of Wendy Brown's theories on toleration and identity help to further understand the implications of the Han-centric *Zhonghua minzu* principles. As has already been mentioned, the united front effectively served as a contingent form of toleration extended to minority *minzu* in the face of imperialist threats. Brown's theories help to explain that, at the very least, toleration would serve to perpetuate the opposition of *minzu* identities already formed distinct from the CCP prior to the foundation of the People's Republic of China. At the core of Brown's theories are contradictions surrounding the true meaning of the term "toleration." Whereas the Euro-American tradition of political theory has romanticized the term in conjunction with progress and universal human rights, the reality is that toleration is merely a state of conditional coexistence with the difference of the "Other" rather than the acceptance and acknowledgement of the value of the "Other." Furthermore, the result of Brown's theory is an understanding of toleration that ultimately runs counter to the more tolerant iterations of Marxist and Enlightenment religious philosophy.

Brown focuses on the problematic components of toleration in her work, highlighting the fact that toleration does not resolve the animosity borne between differing groups, instead it merely places the conflict wrought by difference on hold. At its core, "tolerance is necessitated by something one would prefer did not exist."⁶³ Under a regime of tolerance, feelings of animosity and hatred are allowed to fester on the condition that these feelings do not leak out into the public sphere in the form of violence and conflict because "tolerance is, among other

⁶³ Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 24.

things, a breeding ground for such resentments, it does not simply respond to but produces a troubling and unstable psychic landscape for liberal multiculturalism.”⁶⁴ Toleration also requires and enforces a reduction of a spectrum of variation into discrete categories in which “subjects are identified with and reduced to certain attributes or practices, which in turn are held to be generative of certain beliefs and consciousness.”⁶⁵ As such, groups are categorized and their intricacies reduced by the tolerator into a singular identity, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy in which said group coalesces around this identity as opposed to the tolerator. This component of toleration stems from the fact that modern principles of toleration were “built on the nineteenth-century zeal, both scholarly and popular, for typology, classification, and measurement and drew for evidence on everything from brain size and survival capacity to the origins of languages and language groups.”⁶⁶

In addition to the role of toleration in reifying distinctions and identities, toleration also serves to legitimize certain hierarchies of competing groups. Tolerance in the West is a value that arose out of the Protestant Reformation and the Enlightenment era, serving the role of ending violent inter-Christian conflict, and in today's society tolerance is viewed synonymously with liberal democracy and modernity. However, it is important to remember that liberal democracy and modernity are largely Western constructs, and serve Western political purposes. Writing further on the political nature of toleration, Brown states the following:

They [Western democracies] require surrendering an understanding of tolerance as a transcendent or universal concept, principle, doctrine, or virtue so that it can be considered instead as a political discourse and practice of *governmentality* that is historically and geographically variable in purpose, content, agents, and objects.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ Ibid, 29.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 43.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 55.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 4.

Thus, the artificial elevation of tolerance as a critical component of human life leads to Western tolerance discourse which “while posing as both universal value and an impartial practice, designates certain beliefs and practices as civilized and others as barbaric.”⁶⁸ For those barbaric and backwards beliefs and practices, tolerance must be revoked to then allow the liberation — the violent institution of Western ideals — of such backwards people. Thus, tolerance can be seen as a political tool used by Western powers to enforce their own beliefs as universal, with toleration revoked for groups that do not comply with these Western ideals.

Based on the political nature of toleration, its role in establishing Western modernity, and its close association with Enlightenment ideology, the concept of toleration most definitely was adopted alongside other aspects of Western modernity by the CCP in its Chinese nation-building project in spirit through policies such as the united front, even if not in the explicit phrasing. Toleration became a reward granted by the CCP to the various minority *minzu* for complying with its policy directives, which in the years prior to the foundation of the PRC were primarily anti-imperialist. Because toleration perpetuates division, *Zhonghua minzu*, the CCP’s collective identity of all Chinese *minzu*, could be interpreted then as an attempt to get beyond the conundrum of toleration by advancing to a state of acceptance and acknowledgement of the “Other,” the minority as equal.

However, due to the Han-centric goals of the CCP’s *Zhonghua minzu*, the “Other,” here understood as the Uyghurs, is granted toleration only until they can be effectively subsumed into the *Zhonghua minzu*. As has been previously mentioned, the concept of *Zhonghua minzu* actually constitutes a veiled representation of Han norms, customs, and identity as the foundational structure of Chinese society, while various *minzu* are expected to eventually abandon their previous identities to conform with this new, Han-focused Chinese identity. If *minzu* were to

⁶⁸ Ibid, 7.

reject *Zhonghua minzu* as their overarching identity, the CCP will only grant toleration until the party has consolidated enough power to explicitly revoke toleration of *minzu* such as the Uyghurs without risking its sovereignty. *Zhonghua minzu* therefore performs the role of justifying an almost imperialist domination of the minority *minzu* by the Han and the CCP. In this sense, toleration under the CCP “is offered on the condition that the individual shifts *public* attachments and fealty from the old object to the new, and potentially from one nationalism to another... the old attachment may be retained but privatized (and often renamed culture).”⁶⁹ Thus, when Uyghurs refuse to abandon their pre-existing religion and overall identity as historical culture, this represents a rejection of the CCP’s magnanimous gestures, triggering the CCP to revoke the previously allotted toleration to violently enforce its will on the Uyghurs.

After the fracture and collapse of the Qing dynasty, Chinese intellectuals were faced with the dilemma on how to hold together the geographic territory of the Qing while shifting political structure from empire to a nation-state. Part of this struggle involved retaining sovereignty over the various nationalities, *minzu*, contained within the borders of the Qing dynasty, as these groups were clearly distinct in terms of culture, social structure, religion, and even geographic region from the numerically dominant Han. Over the course of the first half of the 20th century, Chinese intellectuals came to be consumed with the assimilationist concept of the *Zhonghua minzu* as a solution to the national identity crisis facing the new Han-led Chinese nation-state. The Chinese Communist Party, although initially ideologically subservient to the self-determination policy of Soviet Russia, eventually came to embrace the *Zhonghua minzu* program due to the efficacy of the united front in both the Chinese Civil War against the Kuomintang and the Japanese invasion during World War II. Accompanying this new ideological stance was the shift that “the goal was not to implement an unspecific international proletarian

⁶⁹ Ibid, 95.

culture, but rather to build a new “national culture” (*minzu wenhua*) that “belongs to our own *minzu* and bears its national characteristics.”⁷⁰ However, due to the Han dominance in both political structures and identity construction in the creation of post-Qing China, reality was the CCP’s conception of *Zhonghua minzu* veiled assimilation into the Han *minzu*. Based on Brown’s theory on toleration and identity, the toleration extended by the united front policy would maintain any division between *minzu* and the CCP. Thus, the implications of the toleration of the united front meant that the distinctive characteristics of various non-Han *minzu*, including their religious beliefs, rituals, and traditions, should be tolerated until they could be effectively assimilated into the Han-dominated *Zhonghua minzu* identity. Based on current policy decisions, it would seem that CCP leaders have decided that time has now come.

Uyghur Islamic Identity and Competing National Origins

Turning now to the Uyghurs and their position with regard to the CCP, it is important to understand that the Uyghurs did possess a form of collective identity prior to the incorporation of Xinjiang into the People’s Republic of China. Religion was a core component of the pre-PRC Uyghur identity, alongside shared language and geographic region. Uyghur religion, in addition to beliefs and rituals, also encompassed elements of history, customs, and the oral transmission of texts. Furthermore, the Uyghurs had developed their own sense of collective historical narrative for the region which pushed back against the Chinese narrative of the *Zhonghua minzu*. Thus, the Uyghur people possessed a distinct identity prior to their subjugation to the CCP which was primed to reject the CCP’s Han-centric “shared” identity.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 98.

Located on the fringe of Middle Eastern influence in Central Asia, the region of Altishahr — Xinjiang prior to its official incorporation and subsequent renaming in the People's Republic of China — has historically been viewed as a region of disparate settlements and oases bearing little in connection with one another due to the regions geographical characteristics. More recent scholars, such as Rian Thum, have shown that although this region was various groups with supposedly little claim to commonality, there actually existed a fundamental sense of 'Altashahri identity' produced through religious ritual prior to incorporation within the People's Republic of China.⁷¹

Prior to subjugation to Chinese rule, and even under the supervision of the Qing dynasty, the religious landscape of Altishahr was paradoxically both uniform and diverse, descending largely from the Hannafi school of Islam and Sufism.⁷² Although the inhabitants of this region broadly identified with the Islamic *ummah*, a vital component of the Altishahri religious and cultural identity rested upon an overarching collection of stories - *tazkirah* - specific to Altashahri religious practice rather than all of Islam, many of which describe heroic Sufi saints and their martyrdom. Tales of the martyrdom of the saints in defense of Altashahri's reinforced a collective religious identity which simultaneously varied by town and oasis.⁷³ The grave sites of these Sufi saints over time developed into shrines and became places of worship for Altashahri people. Eventually worship at these shrines developed into ritual practice in which the local *tazkirah* would be publicly read and performed at the shrine, lasting from the 18th century until the PRC officially incorporated the region of Altashahr and renamed it as Xinjiang in 1949.⁷⁴ Additionally, more mainstream Middle Eastern Islamic thought patterns increased in the

⁷¹ Rian Thum, "Modular History: Identity Maintenance before Uyghur Nationalism," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 71, no. 3 (2012).

⁷² Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs: China's Internal Campaign against a Muslim Minority*, 7.

⁷³ Thum, "Modular History: Identity Maintenance before Uyghur Nationalism," 634-635.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 636-638.

Alatshahri region in the decades prior to attempted incorporation of this region into the PRC due to the increased cross-border travel and trade coming from the Middle East to Asia.⁷⁵

Travelers from oasis to oasis helped to transmit different written copies of *tazkirah* around the region, resulting in many similarities between differing stories and even the adoption of certain common stories between different communities, slowly bringing together their religious communities. *Tazkirah* were malleable and were shaped as others ‘corrected’ and added to an original author’s work, eventually leading to a convergence of stories into something akin to basic cultural system augmented by Islam.⁷⁶ Combined with an increased utilization of the local written vernacular of Turki, these ritual performances led to the more widespread access to *tazkirah*.⁷⁷ Thus, these common stories publicly performed in a ritualistic manner lead to the development of a form of Altashahri identity prior to what scholars and the CCP have historically understood or even acknowledged. A common Altishahri — proto-Uyghur — identity existed under the Qing dynasty and the Republican era of China through shared religious traditions and narratives, augmented by the increasing connectivity of the region throughout the 19th and 20th centuries.

Out of this common religious identity naturally arose the concept of a shared national origins for the entire Uyghur people, which inevitably butted against the CCP’s own myth of national origins for the Uyghurs contained in the *Zhonghua minzu*. In the years leading to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, the CCP attempted to bolster the strength of this assimilationist ideology by historically projecting it onto the various *minzu* across the several millennia of the history of China. By acknowledging the distinctiveness of of the various *minzu* prior to their status as being bonded to the *Zhonghua minzu* through historical struggle against

⁷⁵ Mukherjee, “Comparing China’s Contested Borderlands,” 66.

⁷⁶ Thum, “Modular History,” 639-640.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 638.

imperialists, the CCP left open the fact that *minzu* inevitably did exist on their own, unbound from the other *minzu* at some point in the history of their respective peoples. To combat this flaw, in the years following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the PRC engaged with state historians and scientists to craft an "official" history of the *Zhonghua minzu* with all *minzu* connected to the Han people as a point of collective origin. Clearly, such a narrative would come into conflict with the Uyghur identity, as well as the "official" Uyghur historical narrative offered by Uyghur nationalists.

In addition to the concrete proto-Uyghur identity observed under the Qing dynasty and the Kuomintang government, the Uyghur people constructed their own mythos of national origin in their efforts to create the narrative of a continuous, historically connected Uyghur people throughout the majority of history within the region of Altishahr. Writing on the politicized history of Xinjiang and the origins of the Uyghur *minzu*, Gardner Bovingdon states the following:

Uyghur nationalists have written histories claiming that Uyghurs have lived in what is now Xinjiang for six thousand years and that they founded many powerful independent states in or near that territory. They constructed these histories... with two audiences in mind: the Uyghurs and the international community. In the face of challenges from official Chinese history, they have tried to restore the Uyghurs' collective belief in a proud and independent past and so impart new vigor to their resistance to Chinese rule.⁷⁸

Thus, the Uyghur identity was supposedly verified through historical precedent, with the concept of the Uyghur drawing upon generations after generations of distinct identity. An alternative to this eternal notion of the Uyghur people is the "Uyghur nationalist claim [of] more recent descent from the Xiongnu, a confederation of peoples who engaged in a 'tug of war' with the Han dynasty for control of Xinjiang. They place a special emphasis on this lineage because the

⁷⁸ Gardner Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs: Strangers in Their Own Land*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), 25.

Xiongnu appear in Chinese language histories as the mortal enemies of the Han dynasty.”⁷⁹

Regardless of which history a Uyghur subscribed to, both historical claims of Uyghur identity and peoplehood posit Uyghurs as in control of their own identity and justified in their claims to nationhood distinct from the Han-ruled People’s Republic of China.

This concept of a historical, unified Uyghur people was concocted specifically against the aims of the united front and concepts of *Zhonghua minzu*, and to fight back, the CCP developed its own politicized history for the region of Xinjiang. Bovingdon argues that the the CCP had two strategies in creating its own counter to the Uyghur historical claims, the first being that “they applied the frame of class analysis in interpreting the past, insisting that in all periods the affinities of all exploited peoples, regardless of language and culture, were stronger than those of any one group for its corresponding exploiting class — within the boundaries of the ‘Chinese nation.’”⁸⁰ Thus, due to its role in the liberation of the proletariat within the modern Chinese nation, the CCP’s claims to sovereignty transcended those of independent *minzu* identity and culture. The second aspect of CCP strategy focused heavily on the *Zhonghua minzu* as the natural progression of linear Chinese history:

[T]hey [Chinese nationalist historians] developed the notion of ‘main currents’ and ‘countercurrents’ in history. The ‘unification’ of many peoples under the rule of powerful dynasties and harmonious relations among the laboring ranks of those peoples were the main currents of Chinese history. Internecine battles among peoples they labelled *countercurrents*. Official Chinese histories of the Uyghurs used these narrative strategies to prove that Uyghurs had been part of China’s ‘great family of *minzu*’ [*Zhonghua minzu*] from the moment of their emergence and never ceased to be so. In asserting that Uyghurs *had* never separated from the ‘Chinese nation’ in the past, they sought to demonstrate that they *could* never do so in the future.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Ibid, 27.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 28.

⁸¹ Ibid, 28.

As part of this emphasis of Uyghur's as part of the *Zhonghua minzu*, CCP historians had to grapple with the independence of the Xinjiang region prior to the Qing dynasty's conquest and colonization of Xinjiang. In order to accomplish this task, Chinese nationalist historians "tried to obscure the Qing's having been an empire by emphasizing that it was the victim of other imperialist powers... by reframing the Qing as 'China,' they could depict its conquest of Xinjiang as the 'reunion' of the nation with a long-alienated part."⁸² Thus, the CCP's counter to the Uyghur nationalist narrative returned to the core of CCP ideology, an emphasis of collective class struggle and the preeminent *Zhonghua minzu*.

Furthermore, in the era following the imperialist crisis of the Japanese invasion and the civil war, the *Zhonghua minzu* was elevated to a 'scientific' propaganda scheme. The Chinese state could not risk the potential for any of the *minzu* to contend against national unity, as this would risk shattering the territorial integrity of China due to the numerical dominance of minority *minzu* in nearly all borderland regions of the PRC. As such, James Leibold offers the following insight:

Communist leaders could no longer simply claim that China's various minzuses were bound together in a common destiny of national liberation and independence from the global forces of imperialism; they now felt compelled to trace this unity backwards in time to the very origin of the Chinese people. In other words, to make the unity of the *Zhonghua minzu* seem organic and innate, Communist intellectuals needed to engage in what Benedict Anderson termed "the process of reading nationalism genealogically—as the expression of an historical tradition of serial continuity."⁸³

Additionally, in defining the origin of the people making up the collective *Zhonghua minzu*, Chinese historians and genealogists attributed the origins of the modern Chinese people to the Han people from a clan and/or dynasty described as that of the Yellow Emperor. In this sense, the

⁸² Ibid, 39.

⁸³ Leibold, *Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism*, 148.

Han people were once again placed in the center of the mythos of the modern Chinese state, with all various minority *minzu* ultimately benefiting from the “enriching” qualities of the Han people, who will inevitably absorb all *minzu*: “In constructing a myth of Zhonghua cultural antiquity and racial propinquity, Sinic intellectuals transposed the Orientalist discourse of white racial superiority onto China’s own minority nationals—rationalizing a paternalistic nationality policy and a Darwinian narrative of Chinese historical development with a single, dominant Han majority at its center.”⁸⁴

Such is the historicized nature of the national identity centered on *Zhonghua minzu* that the CCP sought to develop. Writing on the role that this identity was intended to accomplish by the CCP, Leibold states:

So, too, early twentieth-century historians, answering the nationalist appeal to save the nation, attempted to project a desired state of national unity onto China’s historical past. In imagining a unified and homogeneous national community, Chinese historians imposed a linear and unbroken narrative of racial and cultural continuity on the rich ethnic mosaic of Chinese history—creating an arabesque of temporal and spatial connections that tightly bound the diversity of the Chinese minzus, or “nationalities,” together in a shared myth of national unfolding.⁸⁵

Thus, the unified origin of all *minzu* from a single people was officially enshrined within the CCP ideology, and propagated through state propaganda schemes. To challenge such a narrative would be not only to challenge history and science accepted by the CCP as fact, but also to challenge the very legitimacy of the CCP itself due to the fact that the CCP had staked the unity and legitimacy of the modern Chinese state on these claims.

Historical narratives of the respective identities held by both Uyghurs and the CCP appear in clear contest with each other. As indicated above, the Uyghur historical narrative

⁸⁴ Ibid, 174.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 147.

pushes back directly against the Han and actually forms itself against the Han governance. On the other hand, the CCP sought to enfold Uyghur origin and mythos into the Han narrative of *Zhonghua minzu*. It should then come as no surprise that that as the situation in Xinjiang has escalated, the CCP has further increased its efforts to convince both Uyghurs, its own populace, and the international community that the Uyghurs have forever been a part of the Han-led *Zhonghua minzu*, to such an extent that every text on Xinjiang “since 1959 begins with the obligatory statement that ‘Xinjiang has since ancient times been an inseparable part of China.’”⁸⁶ Furthermore, even the CCP’s official naming of Xinjiang during the region’s incorporation into the People’s Republic of China has caused further alienation between the identities of the CCP and the Uyghurs. On this point of contestation, the “Uyghurs point out acerbically that Xinjiang means ‘new boundaries’ or ‘new dominions’ in Chinese, unambiguously acknowledging the territory’s late incorporation into a Chinese-speaking polity. Many Uyghurs revile the name as a Chinese imposition and prefer Eastern Turkestan or Uyghurstan, toponyms whose use the government forbids today.”⁸⁷

The true history of the Uyghurs has been left behind by both the CCP and the Uyghurs themselves in the aims of creating mythos of origin and historical identity claims. The CCP has attempted to fold the Uyghur people into the *Zhonghua minzu* and connect the origins of the Uyghurs to early Chinese peoples in the face of contradictory evidence. On the other hand, the Uyghurs have portrayed themselves as consistent and ever-present people in the region of Xinjiang who have created powerful empires in the past; however, this narrative is also inconsistent with the existing historical evidence. Both sides have clearly politicized their historical origins in the pursuit of their respective aims, and these competing politicizations have

⁸⁶ Bovington, *The Uyghurs*, 24-25.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 24.

inevitably led to the further entrenchment of CCP and Uyghur identities as opposed to one another. Regardless, the mere existence of such a coherent and supported competing mythos of origin to the CCP's concept of the *Zhonghua minzu* demonstrates that, at least with regards to the Uyghur people, the concept of *Zhonghua minzu* failed to assimilate the Uyghurs at the time of the PRC's founding.

Early CCP Policy and the Transition from Toleration to Eradication

The first roughly thirty years of CCP rule over the People's Republic of China were dominated by the decisions of the CCP's charismatic leader, Chairman Mao Zedong. Over the course of this period, the attitude toward religion as a whole swayed from an initial policy of tolerance reminiscent of the relaxed Marxist position, if not slightly Leninist in implementation, to a position in which religion, alongside other "backwards" elements of society, had this toleration revoked in favor of eradication. This policy elevated beyond the levels of religious persecution seen even under Stalin in Soviet Russia. As such, Uyghurs, with their identity centered on shared religion as a binding characteristic, had a core component of their identity attacked by the CCP, albeit indiscriminately as a part of a wider religious eradication plan. Therefore, the active expulsion of religion from the People's Republic of China further distanced the Uyghurs from the CCP by signalling that this central component of Uyghur identity could not exist as part of the *Zhonghua minzu*. Furthermore, though the CCP had signalled respect and autonomy, minus self-determination, to the various *minzu*, the CCP clearly backtracked on these promises in favor of greater control over the assimilation with regard to the people of Xinjiang.

The early years of CCP rule in the People's Republic of China experienced a style of authoritarian dictation of doctrine on the secular and the religious similar to that demonstrated in

Soviet Russia. This took the form of the CCP's own authoritarian leader, Chairman Mao Zedong. While discussing the relationship between sovereign power, colonialism, and religion in modern China, Mayfair Yang posits that the aforementioned concerns of Chinese sovereignty in the face of imperialism drove an increase in the power vested in the Chinese political system, which was held in a monopoly by the CCP, over the course of the 20th century:

Amidst the renewed threats to China's sovereign territory from the Japanese in the 1930s, US nuclear power in the 1950s and 1960s, and the Soviet Union in the 1960s, the state of emergency reproduced a sovereign exception whose ample sacred body was both inside and outside revolutionary history and law. In the post-Mao era, sovereign power continues to be visible in the police state that deals with threats to national sovereignty in Tibet, Xinjiang and other areas.⁸⁸

Thus, the concern and anxieties over imperialism in the Han Chinese populace led to the greater placement of political power into the hands of the government from the Chinese people. And by extension, this power was consolidated into the charismatic leadership figure of Mao Zedong. Summarizing this early period of Mao Zedong thought, Yang states that “[d]uring the unique three decades of the Maoist era (1949-78), Chinese intellectuals adhered carefully to a regimen of Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist-Mao-Zedong thought that, while more anti-imperialist and anti-Western than in the first half of the 20th century, also expanded the critique of ‘feudal’ and religious China to new and destructive heights.”⁸⁹ However, what appears unique in the case of Mao Zedong is that although the critique of religion in China under Chairman Mao certainly did reach “new and destructive heights,” Maoist philosophy with regard to religion and secularism appears to change over the course of his time at the head of the CCP.

Though Mao himself rarely wrote or spoke on religion directly, the positions of Zhou Enlai, Premier of the PRC and widely regarded as second in command in the Chinese

⁸⁸ M. Yang, "Postcoloniality and Religiosity in Modern China," 28.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 13.

government, do offer some insight into the ideological positions of the CCP during the rule of Mao Zedong. Smith, analyzing Zhou Enlai's position on religion in the early years of the CCP, writes that "Zhou Enlai reported to the party cell of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference that there were two types of religion in China: one was connected to ethnic minorities – Islam, Mongolian and Tibetan Buddhism - and should always be treated with respect; the other – Christianity - was linked to imperialism, and should also be handled with care."⁹⁰ This statement clearly reflects lingering concerns within the CCP with the potential influence of foreign nations on the sovereignty of the CCP within the People's Republic of China. Additionally, Zhou Enlai appeared to have distanced the CCP from Soviet policy, stating "the government had to respect the religious beliefs of its people and reject the use of coercion to suppress religious activity: 'Whoever tries to abolish religion artificially will find it impossible. The Soviet Union is a socialist country but it still has religion. We emphatically do not intend to do this. If we imagine that things we don't like will simply cease to exist, then that is not in accordance with objective reality.'"⁹¹ In this case, Zhou seems to indicate that the CCP acknowledged the shortcomings of Soviet policy, and that although the CCP was an officially Marxist government, the CCP would be charting a different path on its religious policy than the precedent established by the Soviet Union.

Mao's own words at first seem to reflect this more relaxed approach to religion and secularism put forth by Zhou Enlai as well. Speaking on the acceptance and rejection of Marxism to the Chinese Communist Party's National Conference on Propaganda Work, Mao stated:

Some actually disagree with Marxism, although they do not openly say so. There will be people like this for a long time to come, and we should allow them to disagree. Take some of the idealists for example. They may support the socialist political and economic system but

⁹⁰ Smith, "On Not Learning from the Soviet Union," 73.

⁹¹ Ibid, 73.

disagree with the Marxist world outlook. The same holds true for the patriotic people in religious circles. They are theists and we are atheists. We cannot force them to accept the Marxist world outlook.⁹²

Furthermore, Mao himself emphasized that “this situation will continue for a very long time. If we fail to recognize this, we shall make too great a demand on others and at the same time set ourselves too small a task. Our comrades in propaganda work have the task of disseminating Marxism. This has to be done gradually and done well, so that people willingly accept it. We cannot force people to accept Marxism, we can only persuade them.”⁹³ Thus, even if Mao does not appear to be directly returning to a tolerant Marxism, he does seem to either be deviating from the harsh Soviet policy or at least returning to a soft Marxist-Leninist in contrast to the intolerant, militant policies under Stalin.

However, other aspects of Mao’s speech appear to indicate that his support for easier religious policy was not as strong as would initially seem. The first warning sign appears in the same speech cited above, where Mao states “we [the CCP and broader Zhonghua minzu] should all realize that the new system of socialism will unquestionably be consolidated. We can assuredly build a socialist state with modern industry, modern agriculture, and modern science and culture.”⁹⁴ Although this statement does not specify action against religion, there is an implicitly negative connotation being ascribed to religion in this statement in the fact that religion is being juxtaposed with the “modern science and culture.” This once again reaffirms a strong commitment to Enlightenment and Marxist thought that religion is negatively related with human progress. Additionally, while speaking on those who actively oppose the CCP and Marxism, Mao states that “they [resistors] are actually ready to capitulate to imperialism,

⁹² Mao Zedong, “Speech at the Chinese Communist Party’s National Conference on Propaganda Work,” Marxists Internet Archive, 1957.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

feudalism and bureaucrat-capitalism. Such persons are found in political circles and in industrial and commercial, cultural and educational, scientific and technological and religious circles, and they are extremely reactionary.”⁹⁵ This statement effectively places a target on religious circles, among the other listed groups, to be watched carefully for anti-communist tendencies.

More evidence that Mao’s personal philosophy was more similar to that of the Soviets is seen in Mao’s earlier writings during the initial phases of the communist revolution in China. To Mao, there are four authority structures that must be overthrown in pursuit of class revolution.

Writing on these authorities, Mao states:

These four authorities--political, clan, religious and masculine--are the embodiment of the whole feudal-patriarchal system and ideology, and are the four thick ropes binding the Chinese people, particularly the peasants. How the peasants have overthrown the political authority of the landlords in the countryside has been described above. The political authority of the landlords is the backbone of all the other systems of authority. With that overturned, the clan authority, the religious authority and the authority of the husband all begin to totter.⁹⁶

Thus, to Mao, religious authority is simply one of four corrupt authorities preventing a peasant uprising, which must be overturned once political authority is disrupted. Furthermore, Mao documented that “[i]n places where the power of the peasants is predominant, only the older peasants and the women still believe in the gods, the younger peasants no longer doing so. Since the latter control the associations, the overthrow of religious authority and the eradication of superstition are going on everywhere.”⁹⁷ Interesting in this piece is Mao’s note that rebellion against religion and religious authority seems not to be solely divided on class lines, but age lines as well. This distinction by age would return with Mao using the youth to propel the Cultural Revolution launched in the mid-1960s. While it is possible that the more revolutionary attitude

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Mao Zedong, “Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan,” Marxists Internet Archive, 1927.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

toward religion present in Mao's earlier writings dissipated by the time he was made Chairman of the CCP, the following examination of policy demonstrates that Mao slowly returned to this "revolutionary attitude" over the course of his rule.

There were significant differences in the circumstances of the communist revolutions in the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China that led to distinctions in their official philosophies on religious policy in the aftermath of their revolutions. Though Smith acknowledges that early CCP policy did consult and draw upon precedents established by the Soviets, he highlights that CCP policy differed from the Soviets due to a much less structured and institutionalized religious landscape within the People's Republic of China versus Soviet Russia:

[T]he struggle against religion in the PRC – in the absence of centralised institutions that characterised Russian Orthodoxy - was never as important a priority for the Chinese Communists as it was for their Russian comrades. The CCP did not have to fight an institution with considerable resources and symbolic capital, as the Bolsheviks did in the civil war (1918-20), and this fact, together with the United Front policy that characterised the Chinese Revolution, oriented the CCP towards neutralising rather than suppressing religious organizations.⁹⁸

Therefore, because the religious scene in China was incredibly diverse and largely non-institutionalized, no religious group appeared as a sizable potential threat to CCP rule as the Eastern Orthodox Church did to the USSR.

The lack of institutionalization of religious groups in China appears to have led the CCP to institutionalize the various religious groups in pursuit of its own control over them. Writing on this exact phenomenon touched upon by Smith above, Mayfair Yang states:

Since it came to power in 1949, the CCP has demonstrated its ability to control religion through relations of cooperation and co-optation, and to use repression only when individuals

⁹⁸ Smith, "On Not Learning from the Soviet Union," 75.

and groups appear to push the envelope too far. Before the onset of the Cultural Revolution, the CCP favoured the institutionalization of religion in ways unseen before in China's history... Through the creation of these associations, the party sought to use the United Front Work Department to enforce compliance with its directives.⁹⁹

Thus, even though the early CCP policy was built on ideology that emphasized the negative role of religion in society, the Chinese government was willing to tolerate religion in order to accomplish other goals that were pressing for the newly formed nation, such as the development of a national identity and establishment of protection against foreign interference. The United Front policy fit into this picture by enabling the CCP to infiltrate religious organizations, leading to surveillance of "problematic" religious organizations, without directly attacking religion in general.¹⁰⁰ Thus, religion clearly still was viewed as an enemy by the Chinese government, but its presence was tolerated, though closely monitored.

Additionally, the state institutionalization and infiltration of religious organizations under united front policy enabled the CCP to co-opt and intervene in the affairs of these religious organizations, indirectly leading to bureaucratic control over religion itself. To carry out this policy, religious officials chosen by the CCP were put in charge of either creating or reshaping religious organizations in an appropriately "patriotic manner."¹⁰¹ The first instantiation of this policy occurred in Protestant Christianity in China, in which Wu Yaozong was "instructed and entrusted to lead a 'patriotic' movement for the Chinese Protestant churches to become self-ruling, self-supporting, and self-propagating."¹⁰² The emphasis on independence of the churches was a critical move for China, reflecting its concerns of imperialism and defending its

⁹⁹ André Laliberté, "Religion and the State in China: The Limits of Institutionalization," *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 40, no. 2 (June 2011): 4.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 897.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 897.

¹⁰² Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival Under Communist Rule* (Cary: Oxford University Press, 2011), 68.

sovereignty. This need for independence was especially pressing for the CCP in both Christianity and Islamic faith organizations, due to the international church community present in both religions. Leung emphasizes that this exact concern over the international nature of certain faiths confronted the CCP in its early years, stating “[t]he Muslim faith, therefore, has always presented a strong and complex challenge that went far beyond simple ideological rivalries. So, in a way, did Christianity... it is the international and institutional features of the churches that present serious problems for the religious policy makers.”¹⁰³ Accordingly, early CCP policy avoided directly attacking religious institutions, but instead sought to “nationalize” these institutions by severing their international connections and instating their own personnel. Early CCP policy therefore sought to harness religion in the pursuit of the Chinese communist cause via nationalism. As is shown through this implementation of the United Front policy, the CCP was not only able to fend off imperialist powers and bolster nationalism by rejecting foreign influence and wealth in its religious organizations, but also increase its own authority by subtly taking control of religion in the People’s Republic of China under the guise of national security.

With regard to *minzu* policy post-Communist Revolution, the CCP was tempered by the promises of respect and autonomy it had promised through the united front; however, the assimilationist nature of *Zhonghua minzu* continued to play a prominent role in policymaking even as the term itself disappeared until recently, and was a critical part of Mao’s political agenda. Though the CCP supposedly operated on a framework of autonomy similar to “self-determination,” the reality is that the operating framework still reflected *Zhonghua minzu*. The following passage by Leibold is especially helpful with this point:

As early as 1940, the party asserted that it was the responsibility of the “modern” Han majority, as China’s “ruling minzu,” to guide the Mongol, Hui, Tibetan, and other “backward

¹⁰³ Leung, “China Religious Freedom Policy,” 896.

minzu” toward their collective liberation and to foster the right environment in which “natural assimilation” (*ziran tonghua*) could forge a new, more evolutionarily robust national people. Again like the Guomindang, the Communist Party offered the frontier minorities political and cultural autonomy in exchange for their incorporation into a multi-ethnic yet unitary *Zhonghua minzu*. The Communists also loudly resisted any attempts to “split the minzu,” while calling with increasing clarity after the 1949 Revolution for the recovery of those “lost territories,” ... Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai shek shared a common political stratagem, one that sought to accommodate (at least temporarily) the desire of the frontier minorities for autonomy, while simultaneously stretching the boundaries of the minzu and its sovereignty firmly over their heads.¹⁰⁴

While the term itself was abandoned, under Mao the policy definitely still reflected the aim of *Zhonghua minzu*. The naming of Xinjiang as the Xinjiang *Uyghur Autonomous* Region would initially seem counter to this thinking; however, Gardner Bovingdon effectively demonstrates that simply calling the region autonomous was actually a facade, as the Uyghurs were severely limited in their ability to exercise autonomy, or even engage with the CCP policy decisions in the region.¹⁰⁵

Though the united front and toleration characterized the first decade of CCP rule in China with regard to religion and secularism, the period of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) brought about increasingly hostile policy towards religion as well as division amongst CCP officials over the proper path of secularization to be undertaken by the CCP. Since the political threats of religious organizations were minimized and sovereign power safely consolidated into the CCP over the course of the first period, overarching policy of the second period emphasized economic production leading to the Great Leap Forward, a move towards both industrialization and socialism which lasted from 1958 to 1962. Summarizing the Great Leap Forward, also known as the Second Five Year Plan, Fenggang Yang writes “central planning was imposed on

¹⁰⁴ Leibold, “Reconfiguring Chinese Nationalism,” 107.

¹⁰⁵ Bovingdon, *The Uyghurs*.

the whole economy. In the new socialist society, the ideal distribution of consumer materials was established as ‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his labor.’ Everyone in the country was supposed to participate in labor of material production.”¹⁰⁶ The emphasis on material production even in the countryside led to the neglect of adequate farming and agricultural yield, sparking widespread famine and political violence leading to at least 45 million deaths during this period.¹⁰⁷

Surprisingly, recovery from the resulting famine wrought by the Great Leap Forward led to a widespread religious revival across China, including Islam for the Uyghurs in Xinjiang.¹⁰⁸ This revival of religious beliefs and practices disturbed officials of the atheist CCP, especially in light of the economic message of the Great Leap Forward: “[m]oney, they [CCP officials] reported, was being ‘wasted’ on temple reconstruction, on extravagant temple festivals and on lavish marriage and funeral rituals.”¹⁰⁹ Of further concern for these officials was the amount of time that the populace was “wasting” on religious activity that could otherwise have been devoted to production, along with the apparent “wasted” labor of clergy members. As a result, religion was discouraged, clergy membership reduced, and religious sites appropriated by the state into secular uses.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, the religious revival coupled with the failure of the Great Leap Forward led the CCP in the early 1960s to adopt a more hostile rhetoric towards religion, implying that “the religious revival was being stirred up by landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries and ‘bad elements’ in order to sabotage socialist construction.”¹¹¹ In the final years of this period, “[t]he previously salient distinction between ‘religion’ and

¹⁰⁶ F. Yang, *Religion in China*, 70.

¹⁰⁷ Frank Dikötter, *Mao's Great Famine: The History of China's Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958-1962*, London: Bloomsbury, 2017.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

¹¹⁰ F. Yang, *Religion in China*, 70.

¹¹¹ Smith, "On Not Learning from the Soviet Union," 94-95.

‘superstition’ was now increasingly challenged, as the earlier rhetoric of treating religion with respect was jettisoned.”¹¹² This period of religious policy was characterized by increasing hostility and tension on behalf of the CCP with regard to the contradiction between its newfound emphasis on economic production and the glaring resurgence of religiosity across China.

The increasingly aggressive and oppressive religious policy surrounding the Great Leap Forward foreshadowed the impending policy of the era following this period known as the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (or simply the Cultural Revolution). This new period, lasting from 1966 to 1979 and ending with Mao’s death, is best described as a period of radical, militant enforcement of the CCP atheism in the pursuit of a secular, modern society as envisioned in the most aggressive reading of Marxist religious philosophy. During this time of intolerance towards religion as a whole, religious belief was effectively banned and all religious sites were appropriated by the state, while many were destroyed. Beatrice Leung aptly summarizes this period in the following passage:

[R]eligious life in China was dismantled in the 1960s. Religious discipline was ridiculed, church and temple property confiscated, church education and service institutes (orphanages, schools, and medical services) nationalized, places of worship closed, religious houses disbanded, religious personnel sent home, and non-conforming religious adherents jailed... During the Cultural Revolution, Red Guards attacked both conformist and non-conformist religious believers. They crushed all religious objects, burned religious literature, and publicly insulted, tried, and jailed religious personnel. The uprooting of religion and the silence of jailed religious personnel and adherents made outsiders believe that religion in China had been eradicated. Ironically, the iron bars of prison protected religious inmates from the homicidal hooliganism of Red Guards.¹¹³

Single handedly launched by Chairman Mao himself, “[t]he Cultural Revolution began with the campaign to destroy and sweep away the ‘Four Olds’: old customs, old culture, old habits, and

¹¹² Ibid, 95.

¹¹³ Leung, “China Religious Freedom Policy,” 901.

old ideas. All religion [officially recognized and not] fell into the categories of the four olds.”¹¹⁴ The eradication of the ‘Four Olds’ were to be replaced by Chairman Mao Zedong’s cult of personality as represented by the revolutionary cadres of Red Guards. It is clear, therefore, that one of the primary aims of the Cultural Revolution was the absolute eradication of religion in the People’s Republic of China.

Perhaps most ironic is that the CCP elected to maintain its outward portrayal of freedom of religious belief through the language of the operating constitution of the People’s Republic of China throughout this period. Fenggang Yang points out that the religious freedom as outlined in the Common Program in the first several years of CCP governance was not only ratified in official constitution in the 1954 First National People’s Congress, but freedom of religious belief was also retained in the 1975 reformed constitution, albeit with an added protection for the freedom of atheist propaganda.¹¹⁵ Thus, there was an inherent contradiction between the official doctrine of the CCP in the People’s Republic of China and the practical implementation of its policies with regard to religion. As already mentioned, Yang has pointed out that the official constitution of the People’s Republic of China has never adhered to its constitution as a guiding principle for religious policy.¹¹⁶ However, Leung offers a deeper take on this contradictory phenomenon, stating that “[u]nder Mao ‘religious freedom’ had been implemented to give Marxism-Leninism the upper hand in the church-state struggle through the exercise of teaching authority.”¹¹⁷ In this sense, religious policy of toleration was a tool to gain control of religious organizations in the CCP before eventually being used to enforce a mandated secularization of the entirety of the People’s Republic of China in pursuit of an ideal CCP modernity. Once Mao

¹¹⁴ F. Yang, *Religion in China*, 73.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 74.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 74.

¹¹⁷ Leung, “China Religious Freedom Policy,” 901.

and the CCP felt confident in its sovereign power, this toleration was revoked as religion as a whole was viewed as “backwards,” “barbaric,” and contrary to CCP ideals, therefore in need of violent and oppressive techniques to implement the desired compliance.

Durkheimian Theory in Xinjiang

Before continuing on the central argument of this paper, that the oppressive policies in Xinjiang will ultimately fail to gain the integration of the Uyghurs into the CCP’s shared collective identity, it is necessary to establish the theoretical premise of this argument. The work of French sociologist Émile Durkheim is particularly useful in conceptualizing the nature of this conflict of identities in the modern People’s Republic of China. Durkheim’s theories on religion and group identity, contained in his work 1912 *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, are effective at demonstrating how the distinct identity of the Uyghurs came about, and how it has been historically maintained in the face of CCP governance.

Durkheim was among the first to study religion from a sociological perspective, and differs from previous scholars of religion due to his emphasis of religion as an inherently social phenomenon. In his work, Durkheim attempts to tackle the conundrum presented by the circular logic of human communities: society exists through belief and propagation by individuals, yet the very attributes of humanity, which shape individuals, are provided by human society.¹¹⁸ Religion falls into this circular logic as well, with humanity creating religion while religion ultimately shapes human society. This reasoning presented by Durkheim leaves the reader questioning what society, and therefore religious principles, are grounded on in the first place.

¹¹⁸ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 257.

As part of his analysis of primitive religions, Durkheim argues that humanity has an inherently double nature. Under this twofold system, Durkheim posits that there is the individual self, which manages the profane (non-religious) aspects of life. However, there also exists a social self, which transcends the individual and bonds with others, leading to the formation of society. This social self is also what interacts with the sacred, or religious, an area of life understood as wholly distinct from the profane. Describing this system, Durkheim states that “man is twofold. Within him are two beings: an individual being that originates in the organism and whose sphere of action is strictly limited by this fact; and a social being that represents within us the higher reality of the intellectual and moral order that we know through observation — by which I mean society.”¹¹⁹ Thus, Durkheim believed that this two sided nature of human existence is ultimately what enables society to form in the first place.

Though the twofold nature of humanity *enables* societal formation, collective ritual is posited by Durkheim as the *method* through which human societies are formed. As part of the process of describing how rituals bind people together into a common identity, Durkheim develops the notion of collective effervescence, which arises from when people gather and experience shared thoughts and emotions. Ritual serves to invoke collective effervescence. While discussing this point that rituals produce in their performers strong, vivid emotions, Durkheim argues that these emotions “indicate a state of effervescence that suggests a mobilization of all our active forces and even an influx of external energies.”¹²⁰ Furthermore, Durkheim also states that this is actually the sole purpose of ritual, because “if religious ceremonies have any importance, it is because they set the collectivity in motion — groups gather to celebrate them. Their first effect, then, is to bring individuals together, to increase contacts between them, and to

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 18.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 303.

make those contacts more intimate. This in itself causes a change of consciousness.”¹²¹

Durkheim’s last line thus indicates that as people’s consciousness is changed, they are molded together in a sense of shared commonality and identity. Lastly, while attempting to describe exactly how collective effervescence supports a collective society, Durkheim offers the following insight:

[During collective effervescence] what then occupies their thoughts are common beliefs, common traditions, the memories of great ancestors, the collective ideal of which they are the incarnation — in short, social things... Society, then, is foremost in people’s minds; it dominates and directs their conduct; which amounts to saying that at this time society is more alive, more active, and consequently more real than in ordinary times.¹²²

Thus, under Durkheim’s framework, the social self is engaged during religious rituals and pushed into a state of collective effervescence, which in turn binds individuals together into a collective identity.

Under the Durkheimian theory of ritual and society, religion plays a pivotal role, as the individual self is incapable of generating the same collective effervescence as the social self. In addition to rationalizing the purpose of rituals, religion leads an individual to transcend the profane elements of life dealt with by the individual self. In his assessment of the ability of the profane to generate collective effervescence and common identity, Durkheim states the following:

During ordinary days, utilitarian and individual occupations are uppermost in people’s minds. Each one devotes himself to his personal task. For most people this involves satisfying the necessities of physical life, and the chief motive of economic activity has always been private interest. Of course, social feelings would not be entirely absent... But they are constantly

¹²¹ Ibid, 258.

¹²² Ibid, 259.

countered and held in check by antagonistic tendencies, which the demands of the daily struggle awaken and sustain.¹²³

Therefore, the profane, individual self is unable to establish a distinct society. Instead, Durkheim's response to the origin and propagation of human society is ritual action, which transcends the profane individual self and justifies rituals which invoke collective effervescence in participants. Ritual, Durkheim argues, serves to bind individuals together into a shared identity.¹²⁴ In the concluding remarks of his work, Durkheim summarizes this critical idea of ritual-binding:

Society can make its influence felt only if it is in action, and it is in action only if the individuals who compose it are assembled and act in common. It is through common action that it becomes conscious of itself and affirms itself; it is above all an active cooperation... Therefore, action dominates religious life for the very reason that society is its source.¹²⁵

Thus, religion is intertwined with the formation of human societies around these religious practices, leading to the creation of distinct identities between groups.

An important line to be drawn in Durkheim's theory is the limited nature of such societies. Because Durkheim's theory stipulates that ritual produces society, societies and their identities are bound by their ability to make people perform their particular religious rituals. As religions and their accompanying rituals vary drastically, so too do their identities. People of a particular religion therefore inevitably view themselves as distinct from those of other religious beliefs and practices. The social nature of religious ritual, therefore, both draws people together, affirming a form of communal identity, while also distinguishing those who perform such rituals together from those who do not.

¹²³ Ibid, 258.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 258.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 313.

When the religious landscape of the Uyghur region prior to the formation of the People's Republic of China is evaluated in this theoretical religious context, it is clear that there existed a pre-CCP Uyghur identity centered on the existence of a uniquely Uyghur form of Islam. The rituals of the Uyghur people outside of Islam, such as the public performances of *tazkirah*, serve to reinforce the distinction of the Uyghur people from other Islamic turkic peoples, while much more apparent distinctions exist between the Uyghurs and Han China simply on the basis of Islam. As such, the early proto-Uyghur identity clearly demonstrates Durkheim's notion of ritual and collective identity, in which people from common localities are assembled under ritual in collective effervescence.¹²⁶

Mao's launch of the Cultural Revolution provides the first look at attempts to intervene in the ritual mechanisms of Durkheimian theory, as the policies of the Cultural Revolution severely disrupted and outlawed the ritual religious practices of the Uyghurs. As demonstrated above, religion was a central part of the identity of the Uyghur people. By closing the borders, the CCP ended practices such as the *hajj*, reducing connection to the *ummah* and ending a longstanding ritual practice for Uyghurs. During this oppressive decade, Uyghur people were often forced to consume pork,¹²⁷ a feature of Islamic culture that Durkheim would point to as a ritual of the negative cult — a religious prohibition — important for consolidating social identity.¹²⁸ In forcing consumption, the CCP sought to violate this negative cult, and lead Uyghurs away from Islamic religiosity. Furthermore, the destruction of shrines and mosques resulted in a reduction in ritualistic spaces, in which Uyghurs conducted Islamic rites such as daily prayer and *tazkirah* performance. The outright ban of Islamic Sharia law resulted in an inability to fully express and practice all the values of Islam communally in the public sphere. Each of these oppressive

¹²⁶ Ibid, 259.

¹²⁷ Mukherjee, "Comparing China's Contested Borderlands," 69.

¹²⁸ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 224.

measures indicated an attempt by the CCP to directly intervene in the ritual practice of Uyghurs in Xinjiang, therefore intervening in the aspects of Uyghur life identified by Durkheim's notions of religion that serve to support a distinct Uyghur identity.

The restrictions during the era of the Cultural Revolution were largely thwarted due to secret Islamic practice that occurred away from detection by CCP authorities, led by religious elders who verbally transmitted Islamic knowledge.¹²⁹ The access to private life, away from the eyes of the government, enabled Uyghur Islam to survive this era of outlawed religion. Yet, this period was not without a significant reduction in Islamic adherents in Xinjiang, and therefore a perceived severe blow to the Uyghur identity as conceived under Durkheimian theory. Thus, one must wonder at the implications of the current surveillance state and detention camp system in Xinjiang, as these policies effectively eliminate the possibility of a private life for many Uyghurs. According to a surface level assessment of Durkheim's theories of ritual and identity, the Uyghur identity only survived the Cultural Revolution due to private access to the outlawed ritual; removal of the Uyghurs only remaining ritual outlet would then, in theory, be successful in eradicating the Uyghur identity to then enable assimilation. However, as I outline below, such a reading is too reductionist of the ongoing identity conflict, and I believe that such intolerant and extreme policies will fail to assimilate the Uyghurs.

To tie together the ideas of Brown's toleration theory and Durkheim's ritual identity formation, religious toleration perpetuates division because it enables the Durkheimian methods of ritual and identity formation to continue, maintaining a sense of separation between identities but not necessarily increasing the divide between them. On the other hand, if toleration is revoked (leaving the realm of Brown's theory), an oppressor is allowed to intervene in

¹²⁹ Edmund Waite, "The Impact of the State on Islam amongst the Uyghurs: Religious Knowledge and Authority in the Kashgar Oasis," *Central Asian Survey* 25, no. 3 (2006), 262.

Durkheim's processes of ritual and collective effervescence, supposedly disrupting the identity of a people. However, this outlook ignores the fact that a lack of toleration also perpetuates division; the difference for intolerance is that this division is expressed through violence and oppression. If anything, intolerance perhaps elevates the extent to which the oppressed identity is formulated against the oppressor. The collective oppressed people are placed into a pseudo-liminal state, distinct and separate from the oppressor, further entrenching the divide between the identity of the collective-self and the "Other." Though, at the surface level, the outside prevention of a group's ability to perform religious rituals would seem to indicate the breakdown of an identity, I push back against this traditional understanding of Durkheim by suggesting that unwanted prevention religious ritual maintains the divide of the Uyghurs and CCP.

Return to Toleration and Islamic Revival

Following the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, power gradually shifted to a new Chinese political leader, Deng Xiaoping, in the year 1978. From the beginning of Deng Xiaoping's reign at the head of the People's Republic of China, it was clear that China would move forward in a different direction than what was indicated by his predecessor, Mao. Deng Xiaoping placed a large emphasis on transitioning the socialist economy towards a more market based approach, and made a point of opening up the country from its isolation, both with regards to the economy and foreign relations. Accompanying these drastic changes were the lifting of many restrictions on religion throughout China. Due to the CCP's transition away from Marxism towards a more tolerant liberalism, I utilize Durkheim's aforementioned theoretical framework to conceptualize both the developments of the Uyghurs and the policy decisions of the CCP through the end of the

paper. Though some restrictions remained in place, compared to the prior aggressive enforcement of atheism, the CCP policy to a period of relative toleration of religion.

With the transition of power from Mao Zedong to Deng Xiaoping, numerous aspects of Chinese policy changed, including certain religious restrictions that were lifted in the 1980s. First, some of the shrines and mosques in Xinjiang that were confiscated by the government under Mao were returned to religious groups and restored to functionality.¹³⁰ To a certain extent, these restorations were conducted in a bid to reverse the religious hostility generated by Maoist policy while simultaneously improving the foreign perception of the PRC therefore boosting tourism.¹³¹ In conjunction with this restoration of previously damaged shrines and mosques, the Uyghur people went on to construct thousands of new mosques within Xinjiang in this period, during which the CCP took a step back from direct oppression of all religions in China, among which were the Uyghurs. Additionally, “[i]n 1978, Deng Xiaoping launched the Reform and Open-up Policy, which created more opportunities for communication between the local people and foreigners.”¹³² The Reform and Open-up Policy enabled a reconnection to the *ummah*, the global Islamic community. Though connection between Uyghurs and the Middle East remained heavily regulated during this time, the opening of China coupled with increasing globalization enabled Uyghurs to gain access to a variety of Islamic media previously withheld, including the Qur’an, which was not translated into the Uyghur language until 1986.¹³³ Additionally, with the opening of the country, Islamic Uyghurs were able to apply to perform the ritual pilgrimage essential to Islam, the *hajj*, and to study abroad in Arabic countries, both serving the governments interest of improving relations with Central Asia and the Middle East.¹³⁴ This

¹³⁰ Mukherjee, “Comparing China’s Contested Borderlands,” 67.

¹³¹ Finley, “Chinese Oppression in Xinjiang,” 635.

¹³² Mukherjee, “Comparing China’s Contested Borderlands,” 67.

¹³³ Finley, “Chinese Oppression in Xinjiang,” 643.

¹³⁴ *Ibid*, 644-645.

period of eased tension, though still not completely devoid of religious restrictions, lasted until the late 1990s and early 2000s.

When restrictions on religious groups were lifted under the rule of Deng Xiaoping, the most recognizable rebound in Uyghur Islam lay in the rapid restoration of destroyed Islamic ritual spaces and construction of new religious spaces across Xinjiang, whether they be mosques or shrines. As Finley points out, the number of mosques within Xinjiang grew by a factor of five from 1979 to 1989, showing a massive resurgence in religious property.¹³⁵ Mosques play an important role within the Durkheimian framework of religion, as religious property constitutes a religious ritual space. Mosques are a place of prayer, a critical ritual in Islam. The expansion of the quantity of mosques therefore does indicate an increase in Islamic ritual conduct, but only if attendance of these mosques rises as well. Interestingly, Finley notes not only an increase in attendance and religiosity of Uyghurs in Xinjiang over this time but also documents a sort of “peer-pressure” effect on other Uyghurs as they begin practicing Islam after the relaxation of CCP regulations.¹³⁶ Whereas this peer-pressure effect might initially draw into question the true religiosity of mosque attendees in the 1980s and 1990s, ultimately this question is irrelevant to the Durkheimian understanding of religion as well as the resurgence of Uyghur identity. Because religion and identity arise from ritual, the initial intention behind those attending the mosque is not pertinent because by merely attending, even through peer pressure, Uyghur mosque attendees reinforce Islam as associated with the Uyghur identity. As long as these new attendees of mosques continue to participate in Islamic ritual with the Uyghur community, religious sensibilities will follow according to the following quote by Durkheim: “Every time we are in the presence of a *type* of thought or action that uniformly imposes itself on particular wills or

¹³⁵ Ibid, 634.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 638.

intellects, that pressure exerted on the individual discloses the intervention of the collectivity.”¹³⁷ Thus, even if the impulse to attend a mosque stems from peer pressure, the result is both a reflection and reinforcement of the Uyghur societal identity. Additionally, Durkheim’s notion of identity fits into this picture of surging mosque attendance numbers through the understanding that “[s]ociety can revive its sense of itself only by assembling.”¹³⁸ Thus, in the Durkheimian understanding of religion and identity, the resurgence of mosques as a place for Uyghur people to assemble and conduct Islamic rituals inevitably contributed to the reinforcement of a distinct and religious Uyghur community as opposed to the secular CCP imposition of Han *Zhonghua minzu*.

Another ritual component of Islamic and Uyghur life that helped to reinforce Uyghur identity in the Islamic revival are the dietary restrictions of Islam. Prior to the annexation of Xinjiang, these rituals were a part of Altashahri identity as well. The series of Islamic laws and guidelines, known as the *halal*, is perhaps best known for its prohibition against pork due to its spiritual impurity.¹³⁹ John Elverskog’s contention that pork has historically been used to draw physical boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim lands is quite reminiscent of Durkheimian theory, as this religious dietary prohibition — Durkheim’s “negative cult” — helps to bind the Uyghur together and to the broader Islamic community against the non-Islamic “Other.”¹⁴⁰ Such was the case with Chinese relations prior to Altashahri conflicts with Qing dynasty, Muslims could identify their proximity to the East, China, through the amount of pork traded in marketplaces.¹⁴¹ Quranic dietary laws on what foods were considered *halal* (permissible) and *haram* (prohibited), therefore, were a clear component of Altashahri identity. Shifting back to

¹³⁷ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 329.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 259.

¹³⁹ Johan Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 227.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 241.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 242.

modern times, the periods of social unrest in the People's Republic of China had dire implications on the Uyghur people's observance of Islamic dietary law. During the Cultural Revolution, it was common for Uyghurs to be forced to consume pork to reinforce that they were not under the thrall of religious ideologies.¹⁴² This ritual abstention had to be broken in order to stay in the good graces of the CCP, resulting in a violation of Uyghur identity and principles — Chinese values and traditions literally being forced down the throat of Islamic Uyghurs. Yet, after over a decade of religious persecution during the later years of Mao's rule, dietary following of *halan* and *haram* foods also resurged along with mosque numbers; many Uyghurs grew to once again view the ritual restrictions of *halal* and *haram* as fundamental to their identity as Uyghurs, and as Muslims.¹⁴³ This system of prohibition, Durkheim's "negative cult," is an important factor in the reconstruction of the Uyghur identity in the Islamic Revival.

The Uyghur traditions of song-and-dance present another instance of ritual performance during the Islamic Revival, which served to further reify the Uyghur identity. Whereas some forms of Islam have specific restrictions on types and styles of music that can be performed, Uyghurs and other Sufi groups are much more relaxed in their stance on music, allowing the development of a distinct Uyghur song-and-dance tradition. Many of the recent folk songs in Uyghur culture developed in the early 20th century, coinciding with the period in which *tazkirah* was rapidly developing in the region of Altashahr.¹⁴⁴ Like the previously mentioned aspects of religious revival, the song-and-dance tradition of the Uyghur is considered to be a crucial component of their identity; however, the response of the CCP to song-and-dance was distinct from other Uyghur Islamic rituals. With musical rituals, the PRC instead decided to utilize these

¹⁴² Mukherjee, "Comparing China's Contested Borderlands," 69.

¹⁴³ Wang Jianping, "Unity in Diversity: The Islamic Revival Movement in China Today." In *Religion in China: Major Concepts and Minority Positions*, (Wien: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press, 2015), 154.

¹⁴⁴ Rachel Harris, "The New Battleground: Song-and-dance in China's Muslim Borderlands," *The World of Music*, New Series, 6, no. 2 (2017), 36.

traditions to their own advantage by instilling patriotic components into the folk songs and mixing them with revolutionary era songs.¹⁴⁵ The public performances of these song-and-dance events by official Chinese state troops both appropriated the Uyghur culture to appear as though the People's Republic of China did fully encapsulate the *Zhonghua minzu* despite active protest by the Uyghurs while simultaneously reinforcing the perceived backwards nature of these groups prior to the intervention of the Chinese Communist Party.¹⁴⁶

Despite the ulterior motives of the Chinese government's involvement in Uyghur rituals song-and-dance, many Uyghurs still strongly identified with these rituals and customs during the Islamic Revival. Ultimately, the continued support of these appropriated rituals stems from both the connection to Uyghur religious patterns prior to the incorporation of Xinjiang,¹⁴⁷ and the desire to appear patriotic to the Chinese government while one's true feelings are hidden from the view of authority.¹⁴⁸ This second understanding is illustrated through a recent study by Harris & Isa on the Islamic revival over social media before the CCP began monitoring those channels. In this study, social media was found to be an outlet of unique both Uyghur and broader Islamic culture, with the media that was shared often involving Islamic music, poetry, and sermons.¹⁴⁹ The takeaway from song-and-dance as ritual is that this tradition of the Uyghur people has been used as a tool by the CCP for subjugating the Uyghurs; however, the Uyghurs have responded by continuing commitment to the original values of the tradition and by developing counter-culture measures through means less easily regulated by the state.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 37.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 37-38.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 36.

¹⁴⁸ Rachel Harris and Aziz Isa, "Islam by Smartphone: Reading the Uyghur Islamic Revival on WeChat." *Central Asian Survey* 38, no. 1 (2019), 61.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 67-76.

A component of the solidarity developed with the Uyghur Islamic revival lies not only in the increase in Uyghur identity but also an increase in solidarity with the broader Islamic community, the *ummah*. With the incorporation into the PRC, Xinjiang was largely isolated from the global community. Yet, Deng Xiaoping's relaxation of restrictions combined with an increase in globalization led to an immediate reconnection to the *ummah*, largely in central Asia and the Middle East.¹⁵⁰ An increase in the import of Islamic materials further encouraged Uyghur Muslims to renew their faith. The Qur'an was not even available in the Uyghur language until 1986, and its translation inevitably increased the access to broader Islamic thought and practices in Xinjiang.¹⁵¹ Studying abroad in Middle Eastern countries also was a prominent factor in the connection to the global Islamic community.¹⁵²

Undoubtedly, one of the largest rituals factor of Islam is the *hajj*; however, due to the geographic distance of Xinjiang, the *hajj* has only ever been an Islamic ritual undertaken by a minority of Uyghurs, though it does remain a part of the Uyghur Islamic identity. This annual ritual journey to Mecca is regarded as a necessity of any devout Muslim and was interrupted when the CCP closed Xinjiang's borders. However, with Deng Xiaoping's reopening of China's borders, Uyghur Muslims were once again allowed to perform the *hajj*. Writing in the midst of the Uyghur Islamic revival, Joanne Finley notes that, "the hajj experience is at the very least serving to increase the sense of religiosity among pilgrims and their neighbourhoods back home, and to enhance their sense of being part of a broader Islamic community."¹⁵³ In this sense, the Islamic ritual pilgrimage of the *hajj* serves not only to strengthen the Uyghur identity, but to bind it with other Islamic nationalities that performed the same ritual journey (and so distinguish them

¹⁵⁰ Mukherjee, "Comparing China's Contested Borderlands," 69.

¹⁵¹ Finley, "Chinese Oppression in Xinjiang," 643.

¹⁵² Ibid, 645.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 644.

further from non-Muslims back home). As a result of these journeys, Uyghur Muslims returning from the *hajj* also brought back with them new Islamic thought patterns from abroad, adding new Islamic thought patterns into the Islamic ideology of the Uyghurs.¹⁵⁴

In light of this period of relief from oppressive restrictions, many Uyghurs look back on this era favorably. Sean Roberts, in his analysis of CCP justification of present day oppressive policies, writes the following of the post-Mao lifting of religious restrictions:

Many Uyghurs who lived through the 1980s to this day call this time the ‘Golden Period’ in recent Uyghur life, remembering it for the hope it provided for a different future and a different China. In retrospect, if these accommodating policies had been sustained, it is likely that Uyghur would have been more readily integrated with Chinese society during the 1990s, especially if the PRC had recognized the XUAR as the Uyghurs’ homeland and had instituted substantive ethnic autonomy there.¹⁵⁵

The post-Mao Islamic Revival in Xinjiang is arguably the most freedom Uyghurs have experienced since Xinjiang’s incorporation into the People’s Republic of China and the subjugation of the Uyghur people to the CCP. However, I sharply disagree with Roberts’ assessment that the continuation of the policies and further accommodation, or *tolerance*, would have led to a deescalation and integration of the Uyghur people. As has been amply demonstrated in the discussions of *Zhonghua minzu* and the Chinese anti-imperialist position, the CCP have been, and continue to be, entirely unwilling to offer further autonomy to the Uyghur people as it would undermine the foundation of the entire CCP nation building project and its current claims to authority.

Additionally, the thought that the Uyghur people would be more willing to integrate by being given greater ability to publicly practice their religious differences from the CCP flies in the face of Durkheimian logic. In the long-run these practiced differences, such as Islam, would

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 642.

¹⁵⁵ Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, 52.

serve to further divide and entrench separate CCP and Uyghur identities. In this sense, I do agree with the CCP's assessment that a policy of toleration will not resolve the struggles of ethnic policies to assimilate Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The periods of toleration in Xinjiang, relative to the periods of oppression and religious persecution under the CCP, demonstrate that the allowing Uyghurs to practice Islam freely ultimately leads to a resurgence in Uyghur identity, distinct from the CCP. However, this is not to say that I condone, or even reach the conclusion of, the CCP with regard to its detention camps and current policy regime; instead, I merely agree that the solution cannot be toleration. As I explain below, I find that the current policies undertaken by the CCP will ultimately fail to produce their desired result as well.

CCP Attacks on the Uyghur Identity

The return of religious tolerance prompted a revival of Islam all across Xinjiang, which in turn bolstered the collective Uyghur identity and led to a resurgence in calls for independence. This resurgence of the anti-CCP Uyghur identity inevitably prompted a crackdown by the CCP to silence this oppositional identity, a change in policy that began in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Furthermore, the events of 9/11 provided the perfect opportunity to categorize Islamic Uyghur separatists in the same sphere as the terrorist threat targeted by the Western world.¹⁵⁶ In doing so, toleration was revoked for Muslims within the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region as Islam was equated as a separatist and extremist threat to the safety of China. Intolerance remains the status quo towards the Uyghur people in Xinjiang even to the present day, and the intensity of this intolerance has steadily increased over the last two decades, with the latest in oppressive policy correlating with the declaration of the People's War on Terror and the arrival of

¹⁵⁶ Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*.

Chen Quanguo as Party Secretary in Xinjiang in 2016. The detention camps of the CCP in Xinjiang constitute the latest attempts to break the Uyghur identity and assimilate the Uyghur people into the *Zhonghua minzu*, this time by force.

Several recorded incidents in Xinjiang appear to show this very issue of toleration allowing the perpetuation of a divide, as the toleration under Deng Xiaoping eventually led the Uyghur people in the midst of the Islamic Revival to be emboldened in airing their grievances with the CCP along with their desire for independent statehood. The first crisis, dubbed the “Baren Incident,” occurred in 1990. Though the details surrounding this event are unclear, with competing reports from differing sources, the event ended in a three day occupation of local government buildings by Uyghurs who were eventually pushed out of the buildings and either killed or arrested by the Chinese military forces. Among the reports are theories of the incident being a premeditated and religiously motivated attempt to overthrow state control in a small rural area. Others state that the event simply began as student protests against policies against Muslims.¹⁵⁷ The second incident, referred to the “Ghulja Incident,” again suffers from contradictory accounts, but Roberts argues that this event “appears to have begun with a protest by Uyghurs against limits on religious observations, and it spiraled out of control after security forces clashed with protestors, leading to multiple casualties.”¹⁵⁸ Thus, even though the CCP policies post-Mao reflect toleration relative to the policies under Mao, the reality was that some severe restrictions remained in place. Though Brown is useful in conceptualizing this effect of going from intolerance to toleration, there are limitations in the application of her theories in this period. Additionally, although the CCP has portrayed these events as coordinated attacks and rejection of the PRC, Uyghurs and modern scholars assert that these disturbances were actually

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 54.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 55-56.

uncoordinated responses to instances of state oppression. However, reports on both incidents invoke some form of religious involvement, indicating that, despite the increased religious freedom of the Uyghurs, these alleviations allowed the reconnection of Uyghurs to their core identity as a people and emboldened their ability to organize and protest CCP decisions they viewed as unjust.

To the CCP, these events, among many others following the Islamic Revival, required a harsh crackdown on the Uyghurs in order to quell the unrest and bring about some stability to the XUAR. Government officials throughout all of the People's Republic of China were already on high alert in the early 1990s due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, which "sparked fear throughout the CCP that the PRC could face a similar fate to the now defunct USSR, but it sparked particular fear amongst those CCP officials responsible for governing the Uyghur homeland."¹⁵⁹ Due to the Uyghurs' historical connection and proximity to Russia, Roberts states that "[m]any Uyghurs from China had witnessed the twilight of Soviet power, the fall of communism, and the emergence of Central Asian nation-states... For many Uyghurs, these events renewed hope of attaining independent statehood."¹⁶⁰ The Uyghur resistance to CCP governance once again threatened the CCP's *Zhonghua minzu* and prompted a harsh reaction to attempt to destabilize the Uyghur identity and destroy any claims to a distinct nationhood. Furthermore, the Islamic components of these Uyghur disturbances worried the CCP, as "[t]he combination of an ideology of self-determination with Islamic religiosity apparent in the Baren incident raised fears in the government that Uyghurs may be organizing a religiously inspired resistance movement to Chinese rule."¹⁶¹ CCP crackdowns therefore not only targeted the general components of Uyghur identity, but Uyghur Islamic attributes specifically; what limited

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 54.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 54.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 53.

toleration existed post-Mao was once again revoked, and Uyghur Muslims, rather than all of religious believers, were equated with “barbarians” and “backwards” society.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Deng Xiaoping’s economic liberalization to integrate the various *minzu* also began to be viewed as a failure, justifying a crackdown on Uyghur religiosity independent of the events occurring in Xinjiang. This form of “modernization theory” can be traced to Marxist origins, though it was implemented in China in the 1980s with a more capitalist mindset than Deng’s predecessor, Mao Zedong. Under this scheme of development and modernization, the CCP was essentially “believing that more economic growth would inevitably lead to improved ethnic relations, if not the disappearance of ethnic difference entirely.”¹⁶²

Roberts posits that the current scheme of detention camps among other oppressive policies of surveillance and control arises from the explicit return to assimilationist *Zhonghua minzu* after the failure of modernization and accommodation, stating the following:

The present campaign of cultural genocide has its roots in the 1990s when the PRC first began developing this region as part of its economic reforms, recognizing that its geographic location on the borders of the former Soviet Union could be an asset... However, after almost three decades of increased development and incentivized assimilation measures, the PRC found that the region’s people remained resistant to its attempts to integrate and assimilate this territory into the state’s vision for the future of its polity and society.¹⁶³

The reasons behind the failure of economic development to facilitate Uyghur integration into the PRC’s *Zhonghua minzu* go deeper than the CCP was willing to recognize. Because the Uyghur identity was already viewed in contention with that of the CCP’s Han China, “for many Uyghurs... this [development] would appear to be an intensification of the state colonization of the region, only provoking more resistance.” Thus, Uyghurs were able to see through the apparent peace offering of economic elevation by the CCP to understand that development was

¹⁶² Ibid, 149.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 5.

essentially being used to pay for the silence of the Uyghurs while simultaneously destroying Uyghur cultural remnants in pursuit of modernization and development. This aspect of the Uyghur identity conflict furthered the divide and reinforced the perceived need of the CCP to revoke toleration and therefore treat the Uyghurs as outside of the laws applicable to the CCP's governance of the *Zhonghua minzu*.

As part of the CCP's crackdowns on the Uyghur people, and all Muslims of Xinjiang post-Islamic Revival, the CCP sought to lump Uyghur separatists together with other unsavory elements of modern society to furthering the 'Othering' of the Uyghur people and justify even harsher policy measures. To accomplish this feat, the CCP classified separatism as being part of the "three evils," which constituted terrorists, extremists, in addition to separatists. The first instantiation of this grouping occurred in the 1998 meeting the "Shanghai Five," a meeting of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to resolve border issues and advance diplomatic relations. During this meeting, the CCP added fighting the "three evils" to the agenda of the group, and had Uyghur nationalists branded as being amongst "terrorists,' 'extremists,' or 'separatists,' categories of population which the PRC has framed collectively as the 'three evils' and one of the most existential internal security threats to state and society."¹⁶⁴ By associating Uyghur separatism with terrorism and extremism, the CCP was able to deal a blow to credibility of the Uyghur people and their calls to autonomy, isolating them from other *minzu* within China along with the international community due to the inherently negative feelings of people towards these phenomena, all while further entrenching the Han and the CCP against the Uyghurs. Thus, "[t]he power of the 'three evils' was that it blurred the lines between three different perceived threats, equating them as a unitary threat in the policies of the states concerned. For the PRC, it

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 3.

was critical that ‘separatism’ was included in this trinity of security threats to allow coordination on combating Uyghur calls for self-determination.”¹⁶⁵

This strategic rhetorical move on behalf of the CCP represents yet another adoption of Western societal tools to be co-opted by the CCP to serve its own purposes in China, not that terrorism was utilized for apolitical reasons by the West either. Originating in the US in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the international War on Terror launched by US President Bush came to involve more than the simple demand for justice, serving to justify US pursuit of national interests in the Middle East. Furthermore, Islamophobia was stoked in the West as Islam was reduced to a violent religion in the framing of the so-called ‘Clash of Civilizations.’ Similarly, the War on Terror was utilized by the CCP for political purposes as was the case for Western nations, while also leading to the same feelings of Islamophobia for the Xinjiang region. As further policies were implemented by the CCP, the policies became more and more reductionist in scope. While Uyghur separatism initially was the target of this association of separatism, extremism, and terrorism, more aspects of the Uyghur identity were roped into this association. Uyghur Islam was pulled into this association as well, with any religious actions beyond state sanctioned or recommended protocols warranting scrutiny and possible internment. While toleration was revoked in the West for Islam in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, China similarly revoked toleration of Islam within Xinjiang due to the fears of its ability to unite the Uyghurs in a struggle for independence, utilizing the same rhetoric of ‘terrorism’ and ‘extremism’ in the West to justify the crackdown on the Uyghur *minzu*.

By classifying Uyghur Muslims as terrorists when no organized Uyghur terrorist network existed, the CCP effectively limited the agency of the Uyghur people and delegitimized all Uyghur-led critique of oppressive policies. Sean Roberts’ *The War on the Uyghurs* demonstrates

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 68.

that, in spite of the CCP's classification of separatism into the "three evils," there has never existed any significant Uyghur terrorist organization which poses a sizable threat to CCP authority in Xinjiang.¹⁶⁶ This classification was purely opportunist in nature given by the United States newfound position against the "wrong" forms of Islam in launching the the United States' War on Terror in the aftermath of 9/11. However, Roberts does qualify his systematic assessment of the situation in Xinjiang by stating the following:

[W]hen the PRC began characterizing all signs of Uyghur dissent and aspirations of self-determination as 'terrorism' in 2001... the nature of this structural racism [against the Uyghurs] intensified. These actions set in motion a process that effectively stripped Uyghurs of any legitimate grievances and gradually dehumanized them as an existential threat to state and society. As the state increasingly profiled Uyghurs as a threat, kept them under constant surveillance, and marginalized them in their own homeland, it was almost inevitable that the Uyghur response to these pressures would be violent rage. In turn, the PRC could point to the evidence of this rage to justify that it had been correct from the very beginning regarding the 'terrorist threat' posed by this population.¹⁶⁷

Thus, although there existed no clear Uyghur terrorist threat at the time of the CCP's conscious association of the Uyghur people and Islam in Xinjiang with terrorism, the consistent disregard of Uyghur concerns and protests in favor of the CCP's own political inevitably led some Uyghurs to violence in hopes of being heard. Though the small quantity of violent attacks by Uyghurs were not connected to any terrorist network, these attacks in the early 2010s most definitely served to seemingly affirm to the public the CCP's previously baseless claims of Uyghur extremism, while simultaneously justifying even harsher measures. It should come as no surprise then that the aftermath of these outbursts of violence by Uyghurs led the CCP into the latest strand of oppressive and violent repression, which now encompasses the detention camps and human rights abuses being reported in the United States and Europe.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 164-165.

After a particularly concerning outburst of violence in Urumqi, the CCP officially stepped up its pressure on the Uyghurs through a new set of policies beginning in 2014. After bombs were set off in a train station in Urumqi, “President Xi Jinping launched a so-called “People’s War on Terror”, transforming Xinjiang into a digital police state.”¹⁶⁸ Surveillance and government tracking of any Uyghurs determined to be a potential threat became commonplace under these new policies. Any number of traits could trigger inclusion on the surveillance listings, including something as simple as attending mosque, avoiding alcohol, or refusing to eat pork. With the arrival of Chen Quanguo as the CCP secretary for Xinjiang in 2017, the CCP officially began the development and use of the detention camps in order to further control and intervene in Durkheim’s collective identity as demonstrated by the Uyghurs.

The very existence of the CCP’s harsh and oppressive policies over 70 years after the formation of the People’s Republic of China suggests an implicit recognition by the CCP that the unified Chinese identity has failed to fully encompass all of the CCP’s minority subjects. The violent, oppressive, and coercive integration policies of the CCP in the present day reflect the CCP’s attempts to maintain the integrity of this unified narrative through the dissolution of Uyghur *minzu* altogether via eradication of identity as developed through Durkheim’s theories on religious ritual and collective effervescence.

The CCP’s current oppressive policies no longer reflect a hostile Marxist philosophy, as the policies and detention camps specifically target the Uyghurs’ traditional methods of performing Durkheim’s ritual-binding processes, rather than targeting all of religious belief and practices in the People’s Republic of China. Darren Byler, a surveillance researcher at the University of Colorado studying current policy in Xinjiang, implies the applicability of

¹⁶⁸ Dake Kang, “China ‘War on Terror’ Uproots Uighur Families, Leaked Data Shows,” Al Jazeera, Associated Press, 2020.

Durkheim to the CCP's policies, stating that "It's very clear that religious practice is being targeted... They [the CCP] want to fragment [Uyghur] society, to pull the families apart and make them much more vulnerable to retraining and re-education."¹⁶⁹ Further summarizing these characteristics of the current policy regime, Roberts offers to the following statement:

In effect, this network of surveillance, indoctrination, and internment is serving to destroy Uyghur identity by breaking the linkages of social capital, discouraging Uyghur language use, and dismantling any aspects of Uyghur cultural practices the state deems threatening. At the same time, it serves as a potent force to coerce compliance with other policies promoting Uyghur assimilation and the transformation of the landscape of the XUAR in an attempt to strip it of signs of indigenous culture, except when packaged in a sanitized form for tourists.¹⁷⁰

Under these circumstances the CCP is able to nearly completely eradicate the possibility of a private life away from the government's eye for the Uyghur people. One of the reasons the Uyghurs' Islamic faith was able to weather the harsh policies of Mao was the ability of Uyghur elders to pass along religious knowledge in private life, along with the general practices of Uyghur Islamic rituals. Thus, even though Islam was forbidden in the public sphere, the Chinese government was limited in its ability to regulate what people believed and performed in private. However, the current system in place by the CCP seemingly overcomes this obstacle. By detaining Uyghurs and placing them in these detention camps, the CCP is able to completely eradicate the previously safe private realm of Uyghur religious practice and bring to a halt Islamic ritual for those detained. While we likely will not know the effects of these policies on the identity of the Uyghur people, if it will even remain, until after the current oppressive regime is lifted, I believe that although the Uyghur identity may be damaged by these policies, the attitude against the CCP will not be changed.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Roberts, *The War on the Uyghurs*, 4.

As was discussed in the theoretical framework put forth in the previous section, intolerance does not lead to assimilation. Although intolerance does enable an oppressor to violently intervene in the collective ritual process, supposedly disrupting the identity of a people, such a method with the intent of *assimilation* will ultimately fail. This failure is due to the fact that intolerance also perpetuates and strengthens division rather than fostering unity between competing identities because the oppressed identity is reinforced against the oppressor through conflict and struggle. The oppressed people under an intolerant regime enter into a pseudo-liminal state, reinforcing the difference between the self and the “Other.” In this case, the CCP is able to disrupt the traditional religious components of the Uyghur identity through the detention camps and other oppressive policies. However, by nature of these oppressive policies, the CCP will fail to assimilate the Uyghurs because these policies maintain the distinction between Uyghur identity and *Zhonghua minzu* rather than fostering a sense of compromise and unity between them. Most effectively demonstrating this point is that a recent interview with a man who was detained the camps states “[i]nstead of re-educating him, he says his experience at the camp ‘made me hate the government even more.’”¹⁷¹

Conclusion

In the CCP’s pursuit of constructing a cohesive Chinese national identity during and after the Chinese Civil War, Chinese officials selectively drew from Western ideologies to pursue their own version of Western modernity. These ideologies helped to shape the CCP’s policies with regard to its various *minzu* and religion, as managed through the Western concept of toleration. Tolerance appears to be contingent on the acceptance of the CCP’s shared Chinese identity, while

¹⁷¹ Schmitz, “Ex-Detainee Describes Torture In China's Xinjiang Re-Education Camp.”

intolerance is utilized to attempt to destroy competing identities if a *minzu* or religion pushes back on the “shared” narrative. The CCP retains its position of superiority and forces assimilation of the Uyghurs through the original conception of *Zhonghua minzu*, a shared Chinese nationality, on which the Chinese government has staked its claims to modern statehood. To acknowledge the legitimacy of the Uyghur claims to independence would jeopardize both the territorial claims of the CCP to *minzu* land as well as potentially fracture the People’s Republic of China through the departure of other borderland *minzu*, such as Tibet. On the other hand, the CCP’s unwillingness to budge from its insistence on an all-encompassing Chinese identity for its minority *minzu* has further alienated the Uyghurs from the CCP. Prior to the modern iteration of the Chinese nation-state, the Uyghurs have been bound together through a Durkheimian dynamic of shared religion and traditions, and the brief periods of toleration of Islam in Xinjiang have also demonstrated this point. The oppressive policies of the CCP, along with the elevation of the Han people to the center of the narrative of the Chinese national narrative has further served to bond the Uyghurs together against Chinese nationalism, leading the Uyghurs to embrace their differences from the ruling Han. Thus, religious policy towards Islam has been a major flashpoint in the conflict between the competing identities of the Uyghurs and the CCP’s *Zhonghua minzu*.

Ultimately, these points in the Uyghur-CCP clash demonstrate that the CCP has been willing to abandon ideological tenets, but retain its historical position on religion due to its expedience with regard to other areas of policy making. Laliberté’s assessment of China’s development points out the strange decision of the CCP to move beyond Marxist economic aims while retaining the same end goals Marx had for religion, stating that “even after the CCP relinquished control over important parts of the economy – that is, the fundamental infrastructure

of society according to the ideology it claims to subscribe to – it remains reluctant to loosen its control over the superstructure of religion and beliefs, which is supposed to be “only” the reflection of relations of production.”¹⁷² Furthermore, the CCP demonstrated early on that it was willing to move beyond Soviet self-determination policy and modify Marxist ethnic nationality policy in order to accommodate the “uniqueness” of the modern China nation. In doing so, China also apparently left behind its Western ideological precedents in its *minzu* policy. However, the CCP seemingly clung to the harsh Marxist and Soviet stances towards religion and, despite periodic relief from oppressive policies, CCP remains hostile towards certain religions and religious groups to the present day. The difference between the ideological components the CCP has left behind versus religion is that the hostile position of previous Western ideologies remains expedient to the CCP’s dealings with the various *minzu*. By retaining a Marxist narrative in its overall government, the CCP can justify the imposition of tougher or looser religious policy as needed, despite the fact that China’s economy has long since departed pure Marxist ideology. Thus, although religious policy is shaped by the ideological influences discussed in this paper, the aim of these policies are no longer necessarily the removal of religion and the dominance of secularism as envisioned by the Enlightenment and Marxism as the peak of modernity. Rather, religious policy aims to ensure the dominance of the shared Chinese identity; tolerance is granted contingent on the trust of the CCP in a given *minzu* or religious system whereas intolerance is imposed to attack the competing identity if a *minzu* or religion rejects the CCP narrative.

Additionally, the identity conflict between the Uyghurs and the CCP has, since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, further demonstrated Brown’s concept of toleration in practice. The CCP’s selective use of toleration further demonstrates the hierarchical nature of the term, with the Han dominated CCP leading the various “backwards” minority

¹⁷² Laliberté, “Religion and the State in China: The Limits of Institutionalization,” 13.

minzu towards the Han-defined Chinese modernity. Furthermore, the situation in Xinjiang demonstrates that toleration is not a short-term solution to a preexisting conflict, it merely allows the perpetuation of both sides' grievances. The return to toleration following the intolerant period of Mao Zedong brought about neither the status quo nor a reduction in religious belief in Xinjiang, but a resurgence of Islam in the region. To attempt to solve the current issue between the Uyghurs and the CCP through the re-imposition of religious tolerance for the Uyghurs is a naive Western proposal that would most certainly end once again in a burgeoning Uyghur identity followed by hostile CCP policy. It is possible that had the CCP crafted their unified Chinese identity without the centrality of the Han *minzu* and placed more emphasis on equality and mutual respect, the CCP may have been able to successfully generate the originally envisioned *Zhonghua minzu*. However, the reality is that the CCP's emphasis on the Han people's burden of lifting the "backwards" minority *minzu* established a hierarchy from the very beginning of the CCP's reign. Thus, the case of the modern Chinese nation-state demonstrates that even a tolerant secular regime cannot successfully integrate multiple peoples without force if that regime does not guarantee each *minzu* true equality along with an equal share in the national identity.

Based on this analysis of the Uyghur-CCP identity conflict, several conclusions can be made concerning the interaction of religion and nationalism. While religion has served as the basis of nationalism in many instances around the globe, the CCP went the opposite direction during the formation of the People's Republic of China, rooting itself not even in liberal secular attitudes, but in strictly atheist ideology. As such, it would seem that any religion in the People's Republic of China is inherently opposed to Chinese nationalism and therefore separatist to a degree. However, as China shifted its position post-Mao, it became clear that religion under CCP

religion is not inherently separatist, with religion only being viewed as such if a religious group rejects CCP nationalism.

In this sense, the CCP demonstrates that religion is only viewed as separatist dependent on how the government of a nation chooses to define itself. The modern conflict between the Uyghurs and the CCP therefore demonstrates that, by choosing to define itself in terms of secularism and atheism, all religion was inherently alienated and separatist when confronted with atheist Chinese nationalism. Post-Mao, this opposition of religion and nationalism shifted from being inevitable, to enabling religion to be subservient to Chinese nationalism. However, if religion was not subservient to Chinese nationalism, it was to once again be viewed as separatist. In this sense, a government framing of its nationalism determines what religions are allowed to exist as part of its governed society, dictating which other religions are therefore separatist. In the case of the United States, religion's role in society is traditionally understood as being up to the individual, and protected through the Establishment Clause and the Free Exercise Clause of the U.S. Constitution; however, certain court cases have demonstrated that religions in the United States must still adhere to a certain sense of public order. In the 1879 *Reynolds v. United States* case, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected a claim by the Mormons to be exempted from a law prohibiting polygamy, blocking their ability to practice an aspect of their religion. Closer to the present day, the 1990 *Employment Division v. Smith* case upheld the prohibition of peyote by Native Americans even when stipulated by religious ritual. In this sense, even a society supposedly embodying the notion of toleration and freedom has a prescribed understanding of the role of religion that religious groups may not cross. Thus, although the extent to which religion may be in line with nationalism is determined by the government of a nation, a certain subsection of religious beliefs and practices are nearly always opposed by nationalism. These

ideas can be seen even in tolerant societies such as the United States, and the actions of the CCP post-Mao further demonstrates this line of thinking.

Furthermore, the conflict in Xinjiang demonstrates the peril of treating traits of Western modernity as universal “truths.” By seeking to impose Western modernization ideologies on the entirety of China, the CCP almost ironically became the very imperialist power towards its own minority *minzu* that they had all originally feared from the West or Japan. The crisis in Xinjiang further shows that Western ideals believed to be “universal human truths” are not in fact universal, and may actually seem “barbaric” when these ideals are imposed on populations by force, disregarding the desires of these peoples. As such, though Western ideals are often associated with increasing agency of the individual and furthering freedom, we in the Western world must take care in our own policymaking to ensure adequate agency to those affected by our policies. If the imposition of Western modernity in China has provoked backlash and been actively rejected by certain groups within China’s borders, it should go without saying the imposition of Western values by Western nations on foreign soil will inevitably lead to conflict. While Western modernity has certainly brought about positive changes to human society, it also has brought about negative consequences. Simply because Western modernity benefits some, and is expedient to existing power structures, does not mean that it is the end goal of all human society. To view Western modernity as a “universal truth” is dangerously close to religious rhetoric in its own right, and to treat Western values as universal is hopelessly narcissistic if we are to find solutions to the problems still facing humanity.

Throughout this paper, I have critiqued both the oppressive religious measures of the CCP and the relaxed periods of limited toleration for failing to provide a route to the resolution of the ongoing crisis, but so far have refrained from offering a viable solution. As things stand

currently, I believe that the conflict of identity could be resolved in one of two manners, though neither actually fulfills the CCP's desired assimilation of the Uyghurs. First, the removal of justification of Han superiority and the treatment of Uyghurs as true equals rather than as the "Other" which must be subjugated. In this process, greater autonomy, and even self-determination would be afforded to the Uyghurs, likely resulting in a degree of separation from the People's Republic of China. This separation and autonomy would allow time to heal the wounds of CCP rule in the minds of the Uyghur people, eventually de-escalating the opposition through which both identities conceptualize the other. However, the likelihood of the CCP backtracking to its established hostile and oppressive policy appears highly improbable given the current attitude of the CCP on the Uyghurs. The first solution offered is perhaps viewed as too idealist by the CCP, and negates its assimilation mission of *Zhonghua minzu*. Instead, a significantly less humane approach could be adopted by the CCP as well. Should the Uyghurs continue to refuse the CCP's assimilationist mentality, one could see the CCP revoking not only the toleration of Uyghur practices and beliefs, but potentially even the existence of the Uyghur *minzu*. Such a move would effectively mark a transition from cultural genocide to a traditional genocide of the Uyghur people. Though a transition to outright genocide of the Uyghur people would be met with criticism in Western nations, the world is already split in opinion on the CCP's current detention camps; unless the international community is able to organize, the CCP may decide that the current international climate would enable the full scale genocide of the Uyghurs with little repercussions. Such a decision by the CCP would be the worst possible scenario for the Uyghur *minzu*, as all religious theory would be irrelevant as the Uyghur people would struggle for survival.

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