



China's Silk Road - Historical Influence and Development in Xinjiang

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Author's contribution

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the Silk Road became revived by the People's Republic of China as the global economic power, including the contacts along its ancient routes. Beijing is aiming to reactivate the Silk Road that once linked China with Central and Southeast Asia, the Gulf States, Africa, and Europe. Many among them are nowadays Islamic states, in particular along the continental path. Taking this into account, the historic and archaeological heritage highlights the influence on nowadays' economic, political, social, and ecological implications and consequences. Different ideologies are the main challenges for this new initiative. The present article focuses as a descriptive narrative on the history, development and position of Islam in Central Asia, mainly in Xinjiang and its inhabitants the Uyghurs. Uyghurs and Han share their history, not only by conflicts but also by trade and cultural exchange. The author's field research (by archaeological surveys, as well as interviews with inhabitants) reflects the contradiction of those regions sometimes forgotten in the world, but on the other hand, becoming the center of global trade.

Keywords: Xinjiang; Uyghur; An Lushan; Central Asia; Silk Road.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Silk Road, shrouded in legend, brought intensified attention in China's northwestern region: In addition to the "nostalgic" routes for those interested in culture and adventure, the Xinjiang Province plays an important role in the expansion of the New Silk Road. In recent years, its revival has become one of China's economically most significant projects. Thus, the routes get at the same time more into today's focus of global politics and globalized economy. Along with innovation and improved infrastructure, sometimes heritage gets lost; tourism partially has to be blamed for loss of authenticity. The author's intention has been to research in this region what had been originally left of this cultural background.

The Silk Road(s) brought the worlds of East and West closer to each other. In addition to goods and inventions, culture and ideas as religions came along. Central Asia was a melting pot of different religions, beside the Zoroastrian [1] and Manichaeian [2] religion (both of Persian origin) and the Jewish [3] and (Nestorian) Christian faith [4], mainly Buddhism played a key role. It became stronger during the Northern and Southern Dynasties (Wei-Jin) in the 4th and 5th century (when the Confucian Han dynasty lost its power), with its peak in the 7th and 8th century during the Tang. From the 7th century on, after the conquest of the Persian Sasanian Empire, the Arabs expanded eastwards, settling Islam after the defeat of the Chinese army at the battle of Talas. The Chinese influence was pushed back, and Islam mainly adapted by Turkic peoples settled in the Central Asian region. Thus, in Turkestan (what covers more or less all Turk-speaking countries), Buddhism diminished by Islam in the 8th and 9th centuries [5].

Although in the 13th century, the Mongolian army devastated large parts of Central Asia [6]– which was a heavy blow to Islam as well– nearly all the population including "Chinese Turkestan" (Xinjiang) had turned to Islam by the 15th century. Until nowadays, Islam is the main religion in most countries from Northwestern China to the Black Sea.

2. GEOGRAPHICAL AND ETHNOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

By tradition, Xi'an (Chang'an) is always seen as the eastern starting point of the silk road (ignoring the Chinese eastern coast and the maritime routes that would involve e.g. Nara in

Japan that had been linked as well): Already the Han dynasty extended the Great Wall far to the west, expanding their empire in that process. The established trading and way stations became the centers, the former stream of traders and missionaries left their mark in the religious and ethnic diversity.

Nowadays a higher percentage of Muslims live further to the west in China's northwestern province – Xinjiang. In this biggest province are the famous oasis cities of Hami and Turfan / Turpan located, the latter one apparently being the most famous cities regarding the Eastern Silk Road, where settlements predate Han and Tang dynasties. Its inhabitants ranged from Indo-Europeans (Tocharians) to Chinese and Uyghurs, whose capital Gaochang (Khocho) stood until 1250 and witnessed Uyghur's transformation from nomads to farmers, and from Manicheans to Buddhists and finally to Muslims. In the 7th century, before their encounter with the Arab-Muslim armies, Emperor Taizong/Dezong of Tang [7], China had sent its armies west to attack the Western Turks and the oasis states after having overcome the Eastern Turks [8]. The first oasis to fall was Turfan, which was captured in 630 and annexed as part of China [9]. It absorbed many migrants, mainly Sogdians, and the pace of migration heightened considerably after the Islamic conquest of Samarkand (nowadays Uzbekistan) in 712 [10]. Two wealthy cities were located close by: Jiaohe (Yarkhoto / Yarghul) and Gaochang (Karakhoja / Qocho), built in the 2nd or 1st century BCE and having played a key role as a transportation hub in the Turfan basin [11].

Following those continental paths (the southern route around the Taklamakan desert), another one among the wealthiest and most powerful lay to its southeast: Khotan. It was – as most municipalities in that region – since around 200 CE a Buddhist kingdom [12]. Generally, the pressure on the western Turks had been greatly weakened in this period, especially as their attention had been diverted to the west, where the advance of Islam and of the Arabs was a new menace for them [13]. In the last year of Kao Tsung's reign (649 to 683 CE), under whose rule the decline of the Tang dynasty began, the first of the liberation wars by the northern Turks (known until then as the western Turks) started against the Chinese.

The Tang faced the really devastating situation hundred years later: An Lushan, a general of probably Sogdian and Turkic origin, mobilized his

army in 755 and marched against his Tang employers, capturing the Tang eastern capital, at that time based in Luoyang. Afterwards, he moved against Chang'an (nowadays Xi'an). In the meantime, the Tang emperor Xuanzong hired 4,000 Arab mercenaries to help defend Chang'an against the rebels [14]. Tang troops took up highly defensible positions in all of the mountain passes leading to the capital, completely blocking An Lushan's progress. Due to tactical mistakes, An Lushan could take the capital, too. Xuanzong abdicated in favor of one of his younger sons, the 45-year-old Emperor Suzong who decided to hire reinforcements for his decimated army. He brought in an additional twenty-two thousand Arab mercenaries and a large number of Uyghur soldiers – Muslim troops who intermarried with local women and helped form the Hui ethnolinguistic group in China. With these reinforcements, the Tang army was able to retake both of the capitals at Chang'an and Luoyang in 757. An Lushan and his army retreated east. His newly founded Yan Dynasty soon began to disintegrate from within. Although the Tang eventually defeated the An Lushan rebellion, the effort alone left the empire weaker than ever. Later in 763, the Tibetan Empire retook its Central Asian holdings from Tang and even captured the Tang capital of Chang'an. The Tang had been forced to borrow not only troops but also money from the Uyghurs – to pay those debts, the Chinese gave up control of the Tarim Basin. Internally, the Tang emperors lost significant political power to warlords all around the periphery of their lands. This problem would plague the Tang right up until its dissolution in 907, which marked China's descent into the chaotic Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms period. After the Tang dynasty's fall, non-Han Chinese empires gained prestige by connecting themselves with China, and the Kara-Khitai used the title of the Chinese emperor, gaining prestige by connecting themselves with north Chinese states to legitimize their rule to the Central Asian Muslims [15]. In the middle of the 10th century, Khotan came under attack by the Karakhanid ruler Musa, and in what proved to be a pivotal moment in the Turkification and Islamification of the Tarim Basin, the Karakhanid leader Yusuf Qadir Khan conquered Khotan around 1006 [16]. Its inhabitants converted to Islam then, as did those in the surrounding oasis towns, among them Kashgar [17]. Islam became the principal religion [18]. When the Kara-Khitai [19] conquered the region, the Karakhanids continued to function as administrators for sedentary Muslim populations [20]. The Kara-Khitai

themselves did not convert to Islam [21]. While the Kara-Khitai were Buddhists ruling over a largely Muslim population, they were considered fair-minded rulers whose reign was marked by religious tolerance. The Islamic religious life continued uninterrupted and Islamic authority persevered under their rule [22]. In 1211, the Naiman leader Kuchlug usurped the throne of the Kara-Khitai Dynasty and instituted anti-Islamic policies on the local populations [23]. In 1219, most of the dynasty as well as the population were swept away by Genghis Khan and his army from Mongolia (where the Uyghur also have their origin).

3. ETHNIC AND RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND OF CHINESE MUSLIMS WITH MAIN FOCUS ON THE UYGHURS

The Uyghur's ethnic roots are most understandable when their Empire was located in northwestern Mongolia, consisting of a Turkic-speaking nomadic society. The name was then equated with sedentary oasis inhabitants, which consisted of Buddhists, Manichaeans and Nestorians. Despite the definition "Uighur", the individual communities lived in isolation from each other in their respective oases, a stronger definition of their identity did not appear to be necessary. In the fifteenth century, they converted almost exclusively to Islam. The Chinese name for Islam is "Hui" (Huìjiào, "religion of the Hui"). Though, Hui is also a reference to the Muslims who are ethnically ("by their blood") Chinese. In addition to the Hui and the Uyghur, there are other Sunni Muslims, including Kazakhs, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, and Tartars. Those aforementioned Muslim immigration areas to China (via the port cities and via Central Asia) are also reflected in the Islamic schools (more specifically Sunni schools of law): On the one hand there are the Hanafites (Hanafi Madh'hab) [24] in the northwest [25], on the other the Shafi (Shafii Madh'hab) [26] (in lesser amount) in the south of China [27]. The Sunni mainstream of Huo (about 58 percent) in northwestern China belongs to the Gedimu-School [28], a very conservative interpretation of Islam, resisting renewal and unorthodox currents. In contrast, Xinjiang also has strong influences from the Central Asian Sufi schools (Yihewani, Jahriyya, Khufiyya, Qadariyya, Kubrawiyya) [29], being more flexible with the orthodox interpretation of the Qur'an, moreover, focusing on internal and esoteric aspects. These moderate religious currents are more progressive and open to social, political and religious changes. Both

religious orientations (Gedimu and Sufi) belong to the law schools of the Hanafites, one of the four law schools of the Sunni [30]. In contrast, the direction of the Shafi is more common among the Hui in southeastern China. One of the northern "Sufi-Hui" even adopted Taoist influences that merged with the Sufi philosophy.

Nevertheless, there were some serious clashes between the individual Sufi schools and between the Hui and Han (among them the Panthay rebellion and Dungan rebellion), especially during the 19th century. At the time of the Chinese Republic, significant importance was attached to the equal rights of all religions. During the Cultural Revolution, however, many Islamic institutions, cemeteries, and cultural objects were damaged, plundered, devastated, and destroyed in addition to many other religious institutions throughout China. Religions were banned as anti-socialist schools of thought.

The separation between each other on a religious or ethnic scale cannot be set so clearly due to migration, but also due to political and religious changes. It had not been so strict in the past either, because boundaries often shifted. In the 18th century, when the Qing dynasty conquered the region what is now Xinjiang, they tolerated as a pluralistic empire the Uyghurs but categorized them for control. After all, this region has always consisted of a collection of different ethnic groups, where today thirteen officially recognized groups are listed. On the other hand, Xinjiang is important for many reasons, above all – how could it be otherwise – economic ones. Covering one-sixth of the Chinese area of land and an estimated 30 percent of the oil and gas reserves, the province is the symbol of the Silk Road legacy, which is being revitalized to improve the infrastructure. While in times of Sino-Soviet tensions the region served as a bulwark against the Soviet threat, today it defines itself as the gateway to the markets of Central Asia and as a springboard further westward [31]. Nowadays, all nations' focus on preventing or fighting terrorism along with incorporating the Central Asian States in China's vision of the "New Silk Road" [32].

The ethnic term was already used by exiled citizens in Soviet Central Asia in 1924. The Uyghurs – originally separated from each other by oases – could be culturally and linguistically distinguished from all other groups such as Kazakhs, Han, and Dungsans, and became by this new definition the strongest ethnic group in

Xinjiang. It is worth mentioning that the Uyghurs are not only restricted to the province of Xinjiang. They are scattered all along in other provinces, too. Mainly in the province Gansu live also Säriq / "Yellow Uyghurs", who practice the Lamaistic Buddhism, as it was still the mode of life of the first Uyghur Empire (744/5-840 CE) attach. Therefore, an interesting aspect is that the Uyghurs were previously associated with Buddhism and never with Islam. The "redefined" Uyghurs never addressed this aspect of their history. They emphasized a strong nationalist (Pan-Uyghur) and yet Pan-Turkic ideology for the unification of all Turk tribes in the world. Self-definition and reconciliation with the situation, however, are more complicated, depending on the social strata and the extent to which a city or oasis benefits from the political (and, above all, the economic situation). The border regions gain access through the openings to the other states.

Also remarkable is the Uyghur language and its writing system: From the 8th century CE, the Uyghurs – speakers of a Turkic language from the Kingdom of Qocho (see above) – settled in the region. The peoples of the Tarim city states intermixed with the Uyghurs, whose Old Uyghur language spread through the region. The Tocharian languages (in Chinese Yuezhi) [33] are believed to have become extinct during the 9th century. Between the 8th and the 16th century, Uyghur was written with an alphabet derived from Sogdian [34]. Unlike Sogdian, written from right to left in horizontal lines, the Old Uyghur alphabet was written from left to right in vertical columns, as it rotated 90° to the left. Uyghur was also written with the Syriac alphabet [35], mostly in Christian documents [36]. From the 16th until the early 20th century, Uyghur was written with a version of the Arabic alphabet known as "Chagatai" [37]. During the 20th century, several versions of the Latin and Cyrillic alphabets were adopted to write Uyghur in different Uyghur-speaking regions. However, the Latin alphabet was unpopular, and in 1987 the Arabic script was reinstated as the official script for Uyghur in China. The name of this language is variously spelt Uigur, Uighur, Uighuir, Uygur, Uyghur or in Chinese, 维吾尔语 (Wéiwú'ěryǔ). Usually, Uyghur is the preferred spelling in the Latin alphabet: This was confirmed at a conference of the Ethnic Languages and Script Committee of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region held in October 2006 [38]. The original term "Uyghurs" "united" is under those circumstances even more appropriate: After all it goes back to the union of various Indo-European, Turkic, and probably also

Mongolian ethnic groups from Central Asia. This political decision of various writings reflects this mixture.

4. CONCLUSION

The Silk Road is legendary and embraces at the same time today's world politics and globalized economy. In addition to the "nostalgic" routes for those interested in culture and adventure, the Xingjiang province plays a key role in the development of the New Silk Road, being the gate to Central Asia. In recent years, its revival has become one of the most economically significant projects. The northwestern province plays a major role in this context with some of the better-known sites and cities. On the one hand, the routes around the Taklamakan (southern and northern routes) are being expanded again, and on the other hand, there are many major construction sites in the mountainous regions (Tianshan), to establish a more rapid connection to the west.

Rising economy can be observed in China's "Wild West", along with better infrastructure, though still being more rural. Due to resources the province plays an important role for the country. But Xinjiang's population has to pay the prize of losing its identity. Despite the Chinese attempt to sinicize the Uyghur (along with Kazakh, Tajik, and other ethnic groups located there), their cultural ties lie closer to the neighboring Sitan-countries. Along those continental paths are some of the most important oasis cities, between nowadays Xinjiang to Uzbekistan, either in the hands of Uyghurs (though an increasing number of Han-Chinese are settling down in the cities) or further west in those of other Turk peoples (Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Tajik), all of them being Muslims. Islam, therefore, dominates nowadays along the Silk Road that became revived. For the time being, all participants are optimistic and see only advantages in its revival. Its paths follow mainly the same tracks.

Geopolitical and social conditions in the individual regions can be regarded as a basis for similarities, despite cultural and religious differences. Accordingly, religious and archaeological sites were visited, customs of the current inhabitants observed, discussed and catalogued. Culture's influence and the trade along the Silk Road on today's populations, but also the (re)construction of traditions for survival's sake became challenging in this

globalized world. Cultural transfer and production of knowledge is always subject to cultural, political and ideological conditions. In any case, there had barely been isolated cultural developments. Confronted with "foreign" influences, transfers and construction for cultural identities had been set. Another idea is the "lending" and "borrowing" culture under the aspect of transfer as re-importation. The question arises, "Will the Silk Road now be a one-sided deal, or a mutual exchange?"

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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