

Research on the coexistence
of multiple religions in
Xinjiang

THUS Driving Force

Abstract

As the geological position determines Xinjiang in a multi-culture and multi-ethnic place, different religions coexist in the region since a distant time. This paper discusses the different factors that affect the formation of multiple religions coexisting and Islam as the main religion in Xinjiang, such as war, policies, economy, transportation, etc. Modern changes in technology, media and education also have influences on religions in Xinjiang nowadays.

Chronology ^[1]

The development of religions in Xinjiang can be generally divided into 4 periods: Primitive religion, the coexistence of multiple religions with Buddhism as the main religion, the coexistence of multiple religions in which Buddhism and Islam were the main religions, and coexistence of multiple religions with Islam as the main religion.

From the distant past to about 4th century BC, the main religion in Xinjiang is the local *primitive religion* and the *Shamanism* which derived from the primitive belief.

Between the 1st and the 5th century BC, the first foreign religion, *Zoroastrianism*, through the Silk Road from Persia. It was once popular but after the Song Dynasty, with the introduction of Islam, it gradually declined.

At around the 1st century BC, *Buddhism* spread to Xinjiang through Kashmir, and then to all along the Silk Road. At approximately the 4th and 5th century AD, Buddhism became the main religion. Between the 5th and 7th century AD, it gradually declined with the unstable society.

During the 4th and 5th century AD, *Taoism*, which derived from the eastern part of China, spread to Xinjiang where the Hans lived. Along the way, it absorbed some ideas in Buddhism and became part of Xinjiang's multiple religions.

Around the 6th century AD, *Manichaeism* spread into Xinjiang with people moving along the Silk Road for settlement and business. In the middle of the ninth century, when the Uighurs, who were believers in Manichaeism, moved westward to Xinjiang, they promoted the development of the religion in the region. They left many temples, grottoes and murals. But with the Uighurs converting to Buddhism, Manichaeism declined.

During around the 6th century AD, *Nestorianism*, which was derived from Christianity in ancient China, spread across Xinjiang because of the religious freedom policy implementing at that time. After the Yuan dynasty, Nestorianism basically disappeared in the region.

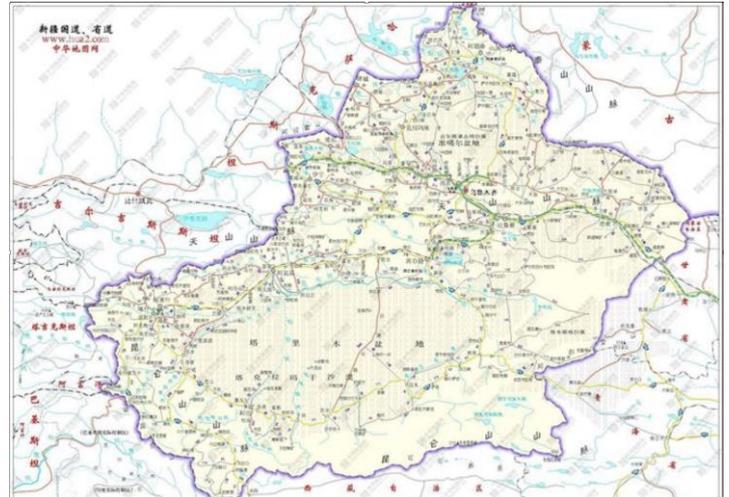
At around late 9th century AD and 10th century AD, the establishment of the Great Mosque in Artux and the acceptance of Islam by Sultan Satuq Bughra Khan who was the king of the Karakhanids Kingdom have become an important symbol of the introduction of *Islam* into Xinjiang.

Geology

Mount Tianshan divides Xinjiang into northern and southern parts. The main terrain part of XinJiang is the Tarim Basin.

The southern part is the well-known desert Taklimakan, and in the north lies the arid gobi. Out of its border, in the south is the highest plateau in the world—the Tibet Plateau. Its western boundary links to the middle Asia, which provided a path for the western civilization to expand in the past—the well-known Silk Road [2].

The average evaporation level for many years was over 1.7m, and on the other hand, the average water drop level there was only about 55mm per year. The majority of the land is covered by lifeless sands, with sparse oases embellishing it [3].



The low vegetation coverage rate resulted in the generally fragile and harsh ecological environment for human to survive and reproduce.

Predictably, the agriculture there is oasis-farming by and large, assisted by grazing, which leads to a very interesting fact. The widely but sparsely spread oases also determined the patterns of local tribes and communities to be relatively secluded. Consequently, with the lack of sufficient interactions within these scattering tribes, cultural diversity emerged, providing a breeding ground for different religions.

Also, in this pivotal area, through the silk road, cultures from the west and east often collided. And with the occurrence of trades and transactions, missionaries alongside the caravan would also bring in the influence of distant culture, including the exotic religion, Islam [4]. According to the documents, the Muslims entered Xinjiang the first time in Tang Dynasty, during which the county was rather remote from central government, and the emperor was just unable to take it fully under control [5]. The loss of it always alternated with its retrieval. Being away from this centralized ruling power did preserve the culture difference as well [6].

To sum up, with aids of the cultural instillation through silk road and the natural advantage of geology for conserving multi-culture, we get different religions in XinJiang until today.

Techno-economic

The development of transportation ^[1]

As traffic continued to develop throughout the centuries, different religions were introduced into Xinjiang, thus creating the current situation of Xinjiang as an area with multiple religions.

1. Primitive religion

During this period of time, people believed in the sun, the moon, ancient totems and their ancestors. People relied on carriage as means of transportation; therefore, cultural exchange was mainly restricted in a small area. Poor traffic conditions at that time prevented other religions from being introduced into Xinjiang.

2. The coexistence of multiple religions with Buddhism as the main religion

Zoroastrianism was the first foreign religion introduced into Xinjiang. Between the 5th century BC and the 1st century BC, the Zoroastrianism was introduced into Xinjiang from Persia (nowadays Iran). In 221 BC, Emperor Qinshihuang unified mainland China. In order to strengthen local control, the centralized state abolished the checkpoints between the previous six countries, which promoted the development of the nationwide transportation network and facilitated the exchanges between localities. A nationwide transportation network has initially taken shape, extra-territorial transportation has been opened up, and transportation modes have begun to show a diversified development trend. This contributed to the introduction and popularize of Zoroastrianism in Xinjiang.

At about 1st century BC, Buddhism was introduced to Xinjiang from ancient India along the Silk Road. The Silk Road is a land transportation route that traversed Asia. From the 2nd century BC to the 13th and 14th century AD, the Silk Road was an important channel for economic and cultural exchanges between China and India, ancient Greece, Rome, and Egypt. Merchants from Central Asia and West Asia came to China along the Silk Road and introduced Buddhism to Xinjiang. Along time, Buddhism became the religion with the longest spread, the largest number of believers, the greatest social influence and the richest cultural heritage in Xinjiang's history.

Taoism is a native religion of China, which was born in the 2nd century AD and was introduced to Xinjiang during the Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties (4-5th century AD). The period of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties was a period of division and integration in Chinese history. Transportation developed

regionally while the traffic outside China was temporarily stagnant, and the transportation mode with characteristics of the time was formed. The various regimes were committed to the development of transportation within their own sphere of influence, and the result was a great development of transportation in all regions of the country. Taoism also spread from the Central Plains to Xinjiang in the northwestern border of China.

3. The coexistence of multiple religions in which Buddhism and Islam were the main religions

Islam was introduced to Xinjiang in the late 9th century and became the state religion of the dynasty in 960 AD, it was widely spread at that time. During Qing dynasty, the trade with countries in Central Asia promoted the development of traffic, therefore introduced Islam.

4. The coexistence of multiple religions with Islam as the main religion

Although both land and water transportation were fully developed during the Qing Dynasty, the closed-door policy implemented in 1757 restricted the introduction of foreign religions and led to the development of Islam in Xinjiang.

War, Policies & Economy ^[1]

The influence of war and policy factors started to produce a marked effect at the second, third and fourth period.

1. Buddhism

The prosperity of Buddhism roots deeply in the social factors. When Buddhism was introduced into Xinjiang, Xinjiang was in the stage of slavery development. There were numerous regional regimes with constant mutual confrontation and incessant wars, which caused both security and financial burdens for people in the region. The cruel plunder and oppression of the Hun nobility further aggravated the suffering of the people and intensified social contradictions.

The people needed hope of changing their lives through belief in Buddhism. On the other hand, slave owners also hope to eliminate the rebellion and dissatisfaction of working people through Buddhism. As a result, the slave owners supported the spread of Buddhism, which was quickly accepted by people in the region.

At around the 4th and 5th century, Buddhism became the main religion in Xinjiang and many temples and towers were built. The translation of Buddhist scriptures and research on Buddhism developed to a high level.

Then with the continuous harassment of the Rouran Khaganate and the Turkics, and the

annexation war of regional regimes, the society fell into turbulence with its people suffering and natural economy being damaged. The continuous expansion of the monks, the excavation of the thousand Buddha grottoes and the holding of Buddhist activities placed a heavier burden on the people. People didn't acquire neither improvement in life nor spiritual comfort from Buddhism, which resulted in lost of passion in the religion. Buddhism gradually lost its important status in Xinjiang.

In conclusion, the effects of war, policies and economy are significant during the development and decline of Buddhism.

2. Islam

During the 7th century, the Arabs started their invasion in Asia. At the end of the century, Arab armies had started to invade Middle Asia, and Islam became the main religion in this region. After the Arab force declined, there were many regimes built based on Islam belief. For example, the Samanid Dynasty was one of the Islam regimes built just next to Xinjiang.

At that period of time, there were mainly three regimes dominating the Xinjiang region: Khotan, Gaochang and Karakhanids. The Kingdom of Karakhanids was closest to the Samanid Dynasty and was the direct victim to the latter's invasion. In 893 AD, the capital of Karakhanids fell into the enemy's hand and the ruler Oghulcak was forced to move to Kashgar.

Not soon after, internal dissension occurred in the Samanid Dynasty and Prince Nasr who lost the fight over power fled to Kashgar and asked Oghulcak for shelter. Not only did Oghulcak agreed him to stay at Artux, but he also appointed Nasr chief executive, in order to take advantage of their conflict. Nasr then used his blarney to talk Oghulcak into building a Mosque in Artux so that he could pray for his God. Nasr also secretly developed a member of the royal family, Sultan Satuq Bughra Khan, into a Muslim.

It was said that the ruler Oghulcak was Sultan Satuq Bughra Khan's uncle, and only was the governor because Satuq's father who was the true king was dead and Satuq was too young for the throne. Oghulcak promised to give back Satuq his throne but didn't abide by the promise. Instead, Satuq secretly developed a group of Muslims, launched a palace coup, and successfully overthrew his uncle's rule.

Immediately after Satuq became the king, he announced the legalization of Islam in the Karakhanids Kingdom. Although he promoted Islam for his whole life, he didn't successfully spread it to all corners of the kingdom.

After Satuq Bughra Khan died, his son Musa Bughra Khan succeeded to the throne. He took actions both from the inside and the outside, promoting Islam to every region,

while launching a holy war against Bacharagon Khan who was not religious. The victory of the war made Musa the one and only king in the Karakhanids Kingdom, with Kashgar the center of culture, economy, politics and religion.

Musa then collaborated with the upper class of Islam to launch Islamic propaganda activities and successfully promoted them to all parts of the kingdom. According to *The Complete History* of Ali ibn al-Athir, an Arab historian, 200,000 tents of Turks accepted Islam in 960 AD. This indicates Islam replacing Buddhism as the main religion in Xinjiang.

With the demise of Khotan, Buddhism ended about a thousand years of rule in the region.

In conclusion, policies and wars between regimes prove to influence the status of religions in Xinjiang greatly.

3. Multiple religions

In the 12th century, the Khitans established the Western Liao regime in the western regions, but the rulers adopted the policy of religious freedom and tolerance, which gave the various religions in Xinjiang an opportunity to develop.

Although there were shifting between each religion's status in Xinjiang, the main situation is:

- ① Multiple religions coexist in the region throughout the history.
- ② The formation of coexisting multiple religions in Xinjiang depends greatly on the various nations in the area, which relates to geology mentioned before.
- ③ **The attitude, policies and belief of the governors play an important role on the formation of religions in Xinjiang.**

Ideology^{[7][8][9][10][11]}

1. Essence of belief ^[7]

In addition to the geological position of Xinjiang which was remote from the central government in mainland China where people form mostly Confucian civilization, the essence of the cultures and beliefs also explain the religious situation in Xinjiang.

Confucian civilization is a kind of secular civilization which relies on the relationship between man and land in a specific farming settlement society. Because of its attachment to specific geographical space, the Confucian world view can only be imagined in the Han area of the Central Plains, which is difficult to implement without it. Its theoretical universality is "less universal" in real politics and has its particularity.

On the other hand, Islam is a monotheistic belief with the same origin as Judaism and Christianity. It is a kind of universal civilization, which does not rely on the specific spatial order of the world, but calls for and aims at the belief in the only real God (Allah).

No matter what the complex nature of Islamic civilization is, the fundamental difference between Confucian civilization and Islamic civilization lies in: one is secular, the other is monotheistic. The difference in the influence and shaping of the two civilizations on the society is essentially **the difference between the secular world and the belief.**

Confucian civilization is a form of civilization which originated from the settlement farming society in the Yellow River Basin of the Central Plains. Feng Youlan once said on the economic basis of Chinese Confucian Civilization: China is a mainland country, and the Chinese people live on agriculture; the peasants only depend on the land, and the land can not be moved, so does the landlord as a scholar. Because of economic reasons, several generations of people have to live together, thus the Chinese family system has been developed. Most of the Confucianists demonstrate that the system is reasonable, or it is the theoretical explanation of the social system. As the Confucian civilization is based on the relationship between man and land in the farming settlement society in a specific geographical space, as long as this economic geographical basis exists, it has a strong vitality; only by breaking the economic foundation of Confucian civilization, can its existing form be changed.

For nomads, their way of life is mobile, contrary to the Confucian settlement, which partially explains why Confucian's view wasn't accepted in Xinjiang.

2. Multi-ethnic

Xinjiang borders many countries in the world, especially in some sensitive areas with ethnic hot issues, such as Central Asian countries, South Asia and West Asia. The eastern and Western civilizations are buffered here, and **the western civilizations are eclectic**. They are processed and transformed according to their own cultural background, and different language, culture, customs and religious psychology are formed.

The fragility and limitation of an ecosystem in southern Xinjiang and the seasonality of grassland in Northern Xinjiang make it difficult for the northern and southern Xinjiang to survive only by one economic situation. Therefore, the agricultural culture formed by the nomadic and commercial ethnic groups of agricultural nationalities, including herdsmen and commercial culture, has **formed different economic and cultural models in Xinjiang**.

3. The transmission of religion among different ethnic groups

Different cultural contexts give birth to different types of religion with obvious local characteristics during early development. While being introduced to the rest of the world, inevitably **they blended with customs of different areas and nations, thus absorbing cultural elements of those areas and nations**. For example, Chinese Buddhism was developed when Buddhism was introduced into areas populated by the Han people; when it was introduced into areas inhabited by Tibetans and Mongolians, Tibetan Buddhism came into existence.

Even today, the ideas and old customs of ancient religions and Shamanism can still be seen, to varying degrees, among many ethnic groups of Xinjiang. One of such examples is the worship to fire.

The influence of Buddhism is more far-reaching. Buddha niche, lotus patterns, lotus throne and the likes can still be seen in some old temples. As for lots of well-known Islam mazars in Xinjiang, some originated from ancient religions and others used to be the Holy Land of Buddhism and other forms of religions. This results from nationalization of foreign religion.

During the spread of foreign religions in Xinjiang, it's inevitable for them to be nationalized. Only in this way is it possible for such religions to be widely accepted in areas with different cultural contexts.

4. Interpenetration between different religions

The long-term coexistence of multiple religions in Xinjiang leads to **the interpenetration between different religions, which in turn strengthens the coexistence pattern**. For example, Islam in Xinjiang was influenced by local Buddhism. In some mosques in southern Xinjiang, we can find ancient Buddhism art style, such as the use of lotus, auspicious clouds, and golden halo, in the murals and sculptures there.

In addition, there is a special “begging” group among the Moslem in southern Xinjiang that is originated from palmers, a special group of monks travelling from shrine to shrine under poverty, in Buddhism. They are neglectful of their appearance, extremely resent their lives in the real world, refuse to get married to have children and do not have jobs, just wandering all day and begging for a living. It shows that Islam in Xinjiang recognizes some of the spirits and culture of Buddhism. This kind of interpenetration promotes an inclusive cultural atmosphere in Xinjiang, which helps to establish a peaceful relationship between various religions, consolidating the coexistence of religions.

Modern changes

Technology

With the development of technology, the integration and communication of different religions become much easier than before. To some extent, this **alleviates the religious contradictions in Xinjiang.**

In the past, many religious conflicts and wars broke out in Xinjiang due to lack of communication. For example, In the late 9th century and early 10th century, the Karakhanids accepted Islam. It started a 40-year-long religious war in the mid-10th century against the Buddhist Kingdom of Khotan, conquered it in the early 11th century and imposed Islam there, putting an end to the thousand-year history of Buddhism in that region. With the expansion of Islam, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and Nestorianism declined. In the mid-14th century, the rulers of the Eastern Chagatai Khanate (1348-1509) spread Islam to the northern edge of the Tarim Basin, the Turpan Basin and Hami through war and duress ^[12].

However, nowadays the development of technology might be a way to solve these problems. Thanks to the advent of the Internet, people's communication has become much easier than past, which enables people to **understand each other's cultural and religious backgrounds.** This has greatly **reduced the probability of religious conflicts and made Xinjiang more stable and harmonious.**

Media & Education

As time goes on, the media develops faster and faster. TV, radio and social media platforms, such as Weibo and Douban, have become the latest means of information transmission. The faster the speed of information dissemination is, the higher the degree of information diversification is, and the more extensive the sources of information are. Therefore, religions can be spread through media and gradually become diversified. As information sources become more and more extensive, information redundancy has become a major problem in information dissemination, which has also become a reason that affects the multi-religions in Xinjiang. As **information redundancy affects people's ability to capture and judge information** ^[13], Xinjiang is geographically isolated, and the diversity of religions is quickly reflected here.

Education is also a major social factor contributing to the multi-religious development

in Xinjiang. Due to the great disparity in the distribution of educational resources among different regions in Xinjiang, **the residents' cognition of religion is also different due to the different educational level and level they have received** ^[14]. Some schools provide religious education, while some schools do not, so the religious and cultural backgrounds of residents are different. Therefore, multiple religions can coexist in Xinjiang.

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Contribution

Cindy Liu wrote the *abstract, chronology, 'War, policies and economy'* in *Techno-economic*, and *'Essence of belief'* in *Ideology*; revised the paper; recorded the references.

Jize Li and Yuhao Chen researched and wrote *Geology*.

Xukan Zhang researched and wrote *'The development of transportation'* in *Techno-economic*.

Yaxuan Li researched *'Essence of belief'* in *Ideology*.

Ruochong Zhang researched and wrote *'Muti-ethnics'* in *Ideology*.

Bohui Zhan researched and wrote *'The transmission of religion among different ethnic groups'* in *Ideology*.

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Xiaocheng Li researched and wrote *'Technology'* in *Modern changes*.

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