

The Secularist Role in Forging National Identity in the Muslim Society: The Case of Xinjiang (Chinese Central Asia)

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There has been nothing straightforward in the development of "national identity" among ethnic minorities in the Muslim world of Central Asia. Cataclysmic events, the rise of the People's Republic of China (post-1949) and the strengthening of the Soviet imperial power followed by the fall of the Soviet Union (1945-1989) demonstrate that forces external to the local Muslim population have been critical. Among the Uyghur people of Chinese Central Asia, secularists and Muslims have alternatively cooperated and competed for leadership in cultural change. This investigation details the secularist influence on Uyghur identity. The situation in Xinjiang, the Chinese home of the Uyghurs, is politically difficult. The focus of the investigation will be on art and visual imagery, a subject that can more easily be discussed openly and freely. The role of identity in the imagery in painting and folk art will be investigated. Both folk art and fine art will be analyzed.

Keyword: Art, Muslim, Secularism, Uyghur.

The Rise of "Modernism" and the New Secularist Class in the Muslim World

The impact that the great historical transition, described by social scientists as the change from "traditional" to "modern" society, is quite profound. The momentous changes of the last two centuries, the wars and revolutions, and the transformation of the society lie behind this process. For social scientists, the useful analytic description of these organizational changes has been drawn from Max Weber's work on Protestant Europe. Since the interest here lies in art and culture, the framework of Larry Shiner will be employed. Shiner (1975: 246-247) has summed up the essence of this transition as follows:

"A survey of the various descriptions of the two types of societies yields the following list of typically paired traits: Politically, the traditional society is characterized by the minimal participation of the governed while the modern society is characterized by high participation of the governed. In work and in social organization traditional roles are structurally diffused while in modern society such roles are structurally differentiated. Typically, the traditional

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culture is permeated by sacred norms while the modern culture is highly rationalized or secularized. The social organization in traditional society is based on relatively small units based on kinship while in the modern society the organizational formation is the nation state. The 'state' itself changes. In traditional society the governing organization has limited the capacity to meet external or internal challenges while in modern society the governing organization possesses the capacity to meet mostly external or internal challenges."

The rise of secularism is a critical part of what has been defined as "modernization". The creation of a modern state and society involves the formation of a new class of administrative leaders that are trained in an analytic view of law, culture and politics. Eventually the influence of these leaders extends far beyond these dimensions.

To place this transformation in a historical framework applicable to the Muslim world of Central Asia and the Middle East, we should consider the approach of a contemporary Muslim sociologist, Monsoor Moaddel. As Moaddel observes, since the late Nineteenth century (Moaddel 1999: 108-109) the status of women in society has been one of the most hotly contested issues in the ideological discourse between the Islamic world and the West.

Muslim religious thought was especially influenced by Western ideas concerning women where Western colonialism gave Islamic theologians the "space" to replace the conservative and fundamentalist traditional leadership. This displacement of the old leadership provided an atmosphere conducive to liberalism on the issue of the status of women. In Egypt and India, a modernist exegesis of the Quran that employed women's access to education and involvement in social affairs was developed. Both of these societies were subject to British colonial influences in the 19th and early 20th century. For this reason modernism was then associated with being foreign to Islam. Eventually these modernist ideas spread beyond the boundaries of British colonialism.

"The Islamic fundamentalist discourse on women derives its legitimacy as much from Islam as from an anti-imperialist ideology that portrays the West as a decadent culture" (Moaddel 1999: 128).

The opposition to conservative Islam cannot be understood when limited to the condition of women. Rather, it involves the rethinking and reformulation of an entire set of cultural values. Secularism and rationalization involved the reformulation of institutions to train the new elite, and its parallel was an ideology, a theology, to reconsider human relations.

The Distinctive Character of Modernization in the Muslim World

In the 19th Century the Western European nations were the first to adopt economic, political, and military institutional changes associated with industrialism and free trade. This has generally been recognized as part of the

"long 19th century" from the French Revolution of 1789 to the end of the Great War in 1918 proposed by E. J. Hobsbawm (1962). When dealing with the modernization of the Islamic world, the historical experience is very different than that of Western Europe. 20th century modernism is characterized by former colonies and conquered states asserting their independence and adopting some practices drawn from the Western experience. Though a half-century has passed since the independence movements first appeared, so the ability of these governments to achieve satisfactory results is in question.

For Central Asia, in Xinjiang, during the 19th century the militarily advanced Chinese and Russian states began to conquer and incorporate the lands of their Turkish and Mongolian neighbors and adversaries. This constituted a much different type of colonial experience. The Qing dynasty in China in the 1880's gained significant control of the region now called Xinjiang. At that time Xinjiang was largely agricultural; the rural economy supported handicraft production and a handicraft industry. Xinjiang's distance from the coast limited opportunities for foreign investment, but its central location in Central Asia supported its place as a trading center. The "governing organization" of the Chinese, through the use of artillery and modern weaponry and effective transportation secured the Chinese control of Xinjiang.

The area conquered, Xinjiang, was home to the Uyghurs, a Turkic speaking Muslim group of people living primarily in an autonomous region in North West China. With a population of 8 to 10 million, the Uyghurs are one of the largest ethnic groups in China. They have more Mediterranean features compared to the so called Han Chinese features. Over the course of many centuries these nomadic peoples migrated from the Eastern part of Central Asia to what is now known as contemporary Anatolia..

Uyghur civilization grew up among the oasis cities that came to be called "the silk road", Aksu, Kashgar, Hoten, and Turfan in the Eastern part of the Central Asian steppes. Other cities along the Northern Silk Road that extended from Anatolia to China included Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Almaty, Herat - all located in the Central Asian republics.

The conversion to Islam was slow, and not completed until the 16th century, although the inspiration for the culture was the great dictionary of Mahmud Kashgari (Divan-i Lughat Turk) completed in 1072-1074.

Interaction between the Chinese speaking and non-Chinese speaking people in Central Asia (Mongols, Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Uzbeks) continued for many centuries. The Yuan dynasty in China (1271-1368) represented a period when Central Asians, Mongols with the help of Turkic speaking people such as the ancestors of the present day Uyghurs, represented the political and administrative ruling class of China. Also during this period the Han Chinese dominated their relationship. Thus, contemporary Xinjiang, like modern day Tibet and (Inner) Mongolia represent regions of at least two language groups, a large native non-Chinese speaking group and a sizeable group of Han Chinese who often relocate to these areas as the government opens up development opportunities.

What makes Xinjiang and Central Asia much different than the areas

discussed by Moaddel is that Western colonialism and neo-liberal economics shaped the character of the Middle East and Muslim rule in the Middle East including the Ottoman Empire and the Persian Dynasties. Historically in Central Asia it was the Russian (Czarist) and Chinese (Qing Dynasty) colonial influence that was dominant, and the profoundly transformative Russian and Chinese revolutions of the 20th Century that ushered in full-scale modernization. Historically, the Muslim experience under Russian and Chinese rule faced a far different colonial experience than that of the Arab Middle East.

The Post-Revolutionary World of China and the Development of Arts in Xinjiang

The history of Uyghur art is thousands of years old. The Mogao cave paintings of the Dunhuang region, just East of Xinjiang date back to the pre-Islamic period in the Fourth Century CE and were a feature of the Silk Road peoples in the Buddhist era, roughly at around 400-1300 CE (Brose 2004). The Islamic period of the Silk Road civilization began with the Mongol/Yuan Dynasty in China of the 1300's. The art of the Silk Road peoples was associated with crafts (Wussiman and Makofsky 2013), calligraphy (Ayit 2013, Torsun and Makofsky 2013) and miniatures (Eastman 1933). Islamic customs limited the representation of the human form and so the artistic production was substantially different from that of the post-1949 period.

After the Chinese revolution that established the new Chinese state in 1949, those that wished to enter the world of "Western oriented" art such as oil painting and realistic figurative drawings followed Chinese, Russian or Japanese models. The Uyghur modernistic artists described the pre-1949 art as "decoration" (Xinjiang Arts 2010: 63). In this sense, this new generation represented a complete break from the past.

The post 1949 People's Republic of China invested in the development of Western oriented China's arts and arts education. Universities throughout the country, including Xinjiang, established art departments. Tuition and living costs were low, and entrance was based on qualifying exams alone. At the same time Chinese schools of Art supported large numbers of ethnic minority artists.

Several dozen of these artists gradually became established in both China and internationally, forming the backbone of Xinjiang's Fine Arts scene. Schools of drawing and painting were also founded, such as the Xinjiang School of Painting, which had a major influence on the development of Fine Arts within the region. The successful artists were celebrated in museums and art schools, and their works appeared in Beijing, New York and corresponding cities in Europe. Uyghur television features ethnic culture and folklore. Museums, the exhibition place of the new system, are slowly being built all over the country.

The rise of professional art associated with university training represented a great benefit for young artists. These artists became professionally

credentialed, which meant they could be employed to teach in the public school system, and at the same time attempt to make their future as professionals.

The art that emerged in the first generation of Uyghur artists focused on the lives of working people. This followed the well-established tradition in Europe and the United States just as their counterparts in Europe, the Soviet Union and the United States had chronicled the lives of the non-elite in the industrial period. Industrialism had aroused concern for the poor. In France paintings by Honoree Daumier and Jean Francois Millet depicted rural poverty. In the American setting, Thomas Hart Benton, Ben Shahn, and Edward Hopper focused on the lives of urban migrants and city dwellers.

The Chinese government favored paintings of the lives of average people because this art represented an alternative to the Islamic tradition and was consistent with communist ideology. As in the West, both Chinese and Uyghur art celebrated national culture and were developed also in photography, film, and visual imagery of the post-1949 period.

Figure 1. *Turdi Amin Farmers Resting*



Source: Amin (n.d.).

The painting shown in Figure 1, *Farmers Resting*, presents interesting features that define the Uyghur cultural aesthetic. The painter, Turdi Amin was born in Kashgar in 1951 and specializes in the painting of Uyghur daily life, a subject that was not part of Uyghur or Central Asian art in earlier periods.

Modern farm equipment is not to be seen in this painting because it was not generally available at the time. There was no rail transportation to Xinjiang until the 1970's and agriculture was labor intensive until the 1990's. Simple tasks that would be handled by mechanization were carried out through collective work. Typically, farming was a collective endeavor in Xinjiang

throughout Central Asia. Thus the farmers are pictured as a group. They are dressed in Uyghur rural male attire with loose fitting trousers and jackets, each with a head covering, a *doppa*, a sash and a belt with a knife. The old man in the center has a beard that is typical for those older than fifty. Modern paintings in nearby Kirghizstan and Uzbekistan also show workers gathering at their collective farm, the *kolkhoz*.

Figure 2. *Mamet Heyit Farmer Family*



Source: Heyit (n.d.).

Mamet Heyit's painting in Figure 2, *Peasant Family*, presents a work that stands apart from the established art in the pre-revolutionary Islamic society. One break from the past is the figurative presentation of women, but additionally, this is a work that is intimate but not erotic. The woman's breast is shown and the family scene is not posed. All the figures have head coverings. Before the Revolution, farming and working class subjects were not depicted in paintings, which were exclusively devoted to the upper class subjects and patrons, and appeared as miniatures in a medium that was not oil.

The art of the post-1949 period was not limited to artists trained in non-Islamic style realistic painting. In the period of revolutionary enthusiasm in the Soviet Union during the late 1920's and throughout the 1930's and in China especially during the Cultural Revolution a style of art appeared that praised both the working classes, the Communist Party, and the state authorities. Paintings such as S. Malyutin's "Partisan", painted during the 1940's were an example of inspirational art that pleased Party officials.

For China, the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) represented the height of the glorification of Mao Tse-Tung and the Chinese Communist Party. Although the focus was on the average rural and urban dweller, the

desire of the authorities was that this visual imagery included projects promoted by the government.

An example of this movement in Chinese art as it applies to the Uyghurs can be found in a series entitled the "Farmer Painting" movement, which began in the period of the 1970's. The government was so pleased by the effort to teach interested farmers how to paint that this project continued for well over thirty years, and included a large number of participants who paint while working in their rural environment as farmers and herdsmen. The artists depicted here derive from the Makit, Kucha, and Awat provinces near Kashgar, at the farthest end of Xinjiang near the Afghan border. The movement received national recognition in China and in 1995 Makit was recognized by the Ministry of Culture, 2500 miles away in Beijing, as a model district for cultural achievement. The "Farmer Painters" are portrayed here as Uyghurs.

The paintings shown here (People's Republic of China 2013) depict the landscape, the rural lifestyle of the Uyghurs, and folk traditions that lend a high level of authenticity to the paintings. Some paintings reflect techniques rarely found in traditional Chinese art such as the use of thick brilliant colors and bold expressive brushwork. The work of the "Farmer Painters" was first shown in the United States in 2004 as a part of the traveling exhibition.

The first two paintings in the Kucha art series, Figure 3 and Figure 4 reflect a customary Islamic and Uyghur view of "women's work" and "men's work" and thus are not part of the modernistic school which often challenged separation. The women are engaged in embroidery while the man is an *usta*, a Uyghur craftsman. The differentiation here does not imply a denial of skill on the part of women; it represents a gender separation of work. This separation is not a unique Uyghur tradition, but has its roots in Turkish culture. *Usta* work can only be used to describe non-factory production. In the modern context, and in the contemporary Chinese context, the future of these craftsmen is in question (Wussiman and Makofsky 2013), yet despite the impact of factory and mass production this tradition continues in Xinjiang and in China.

Figure 3. *Salat Zayit Embroidery Women*



Source: People's Republic of China 2013.

Figure 4. *Rachmen Bayez Box Maker*

Source: People's Republic of China 2013.

The final painting taken from the collection, Figure 5, is an important part of this series. Relating political campaigns to the celebration of popular art is an integral part of Communist ideology, and was especially prevalent during the period of the Cultural Revolution. The slogan "Upholding the Two Principles" states the goal of the political campaign. The Uyghur man and woman are dressed in traditional clothing with head coverings and the older man has a beard, although by the 1980's many Uyghurs wore western style clothes. It would appear that the man in the blue suit is Han Chinese as well the soldier, although there are many Uyghur soldiers. The young girl is Uyghur, but is dressed in a Party youth movement outfit with a scarf, rather than Uyghur clothes. She is the only female in any painting with no head covering, a point that the Communist Party would wish to underscore.

Figure 5. *Ismail Abla Upholding the Two Principles*

Source: People's Republic of China 2013.

A General Formulation of the Role of Secularism in Muslim Art

The describing "modernity" Shiner (1975) presents a summary of the European/Western developmental process and defines the role of secularism. The application of this model to Chinese Central Asia raises the problem of how changes in European society can be applied to changes in Muslim society two centuries later.

A more general Anthropological perspective can be brought to bear on the role of secularism in contemporary Muslim societies. If we look at the dynamics of social change there is a great deal of similarity in the role of artists who employ a modernist style throughout the world of Islam. To demonstrate this let me introduce the analysis of Jessica Winegar (2006, 2008) that discusses the problems faced by Egyptian secular artists in the early period of the rule of President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, in the 1980-1990's.

Winegar places the artist and the work of art "...at the intersection of culture and modernity" and "Egyptian modernism involves the selective adoption and repudiation of certain concepts of European modernity ... but always through a process of translation that produces a "difference" (Winegar 2008: 7, Ramadan 2008: 2).

What makes an artist a secularist or a modernist is not his or her values or religious practices, but a choice of medium (oil painting), a choice of subject matter (individuals from the non-elite classes) and the use of borrowed concepts such as realism in the composition of the painting. Inevitably this merging of local subject matter with a European framework produces common problems for the artists across Muslim societies. There is an "East-West" bind

faced by artists who produce work that they would hope is internationally recognized but locally grounded" (Winegar 2008: 304).

In Xinjiang as in Egypt, the artist faces the issue of how his or her work connects to a public that is not accustomed to seeing art painted in a modernistic school. The Uyghur artist implicitly realizes that there is a problem concerning the audience to whom this painting is addressed - to Europeans, to Chinese, to an international art public, or to ordinary citizens? For formally trained painters such as Turdi Amin (see Figure 1) or Mahmet Hayit (see Figure 2), although their subject matter is indisputably Uyghur, the local population rarely sees or understands paintings made in this tradition. Homes and restaurants are decorated with carpets and calligraphy, not paintings.

Moreover, what functions does art play in the contemporary popular Muslim culture? Winegar (2008: 3) observes that artists and their paintings continue to play an important role in the military regime that established the Egyptian Republic in the early 1950's. Ramadan, summarizing Winegar, says: "In Egypt the major goals that remain central to the Ministry (of Culture)'s mission today: to define the national identity, to protect the cultural patrimony, to uplift the so-called masses by exposing them to the arts (Ramadan 2008: 3)".

In the "post-Islamic traditional" period the modernist paintings celebrate the national rather than the Islamic part of the contemporary life. The leaders in Egypt are secular military figures who hope that the public will recognize their regime as representatives of the national movement.

Similarly in China, the military and the Communist Party, and the Uyghur leaders who are appointed by the rulers Beijing, all hope to promote a Uyghur culture entirely compatible with the leadership and ideology of the post 1949 regime. The unified vision of Chinese rule and Uyghur culture can be accomplished through the application of armed force, but as far as the Chinese leadership is concerned it is much more desirable to accomplish this through education. Uyghur art is part of the educational framework. School textbooks feature the type of modern art discussed in this review and the national prized favor art that furthers these goals.

Uyghur artists, like their Egyptian counterparts, are anxious to underplay their connection to state institutions. At times, there is a desire to see their artistic works as independent of official sponsorship, but the desires of the State and Party are an important consideration in awards. It is not an easy matter to obtain foreign contacts, to travel abroad, and to exhibit art abroad. The opposition of state authorities can be fatal for a creative artist, although it involves no criminal charges.

As Winegar points out, there is also tension in receiving training based entirely on a Western model of art education, but stressing the importance of producing a work that is authentically Egyptian. (Ramadan 2008: 120). The visual component of modern life is not to be taken lightly in Muslim society. The visual can re-enforce symbols that the ruling powers believe represent a unifying factor for the people. The emphasis here has been on the laboring classes, but this represented only the initial post-revolutionary period of art. There is a universal power to art, but as state power evolves new symbols and

messages are required. Circumstances change and the current political line in China favors the "harmonious society" rather than the working class.

In a discussion concerning Uyghur arts (Xinjiang Arts 2010: 64) Turdi Amin, one of the artists reviewed here, stated that there is no Uyghur painting style now, only Uyghur painters. Yelkin Ghazi, another artist pointed out that there are no Uyghur museums. [This demands some explanation: There are museums but there are no art museums for the exhibition of Uyghur painting]. There are some galleries, people rent a space, works of art are exhibited, but other than this there are no means of exhibiting one's work. The same artists pointed out that there are no copyright laws that apply to painting. Restaurants will hang prints of paintings, but no one asks the permission of the artist. Zoram Yasem then said "...previously people would decorate their homes by buying carpets, but now people purchase paintings. Some people have some extra money, but most people in Xinjiang cannot understand a painting. There is a real problem (Xinjiang Arts 2010: 63)".

Conclusion

The Uyghur artists who are established in the cultural world of Xinjiang and China, like the Egyptian artists described by Winegar, are never independent from state authorities. There is only the beginning of a civil society both in Xinjiang and in China, and this may be true for Egypt as well.

Looked at in retrospect, the first generation of Uyghur cultural leadership was fortunate to emerge at a remarkable time. The Chinese Communist Party established military control and eliminated its rivals, but there were no clear guidelines about the form of culture and society that would emerge. Funds for schools, museums, journals, and textbooks were available but there were no definite ideas about exactly what was to be expected. As long as "sensitive topics" were avoided, there was not necessarily any great gap between the attitude and values of the Uyghur artists and the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party, except that the Party itself could not be subject to criticism.

The initial period evolved slowly, and the national and secular values in the first generation of Uyghur modernist painters met little resistance in Xinjiang. The population did not know what to make of this new type of art. Modernistic themes had been championed in the West, religious conservatives did not share the enthusiasm associated with socialism but these attitudes were largely silent at the end of the 20th Century. Galleries and museums were open to art from a different perspective, and many in this new class of ethnic artists gained a great deal of wealth and success.

Contemporary and modernistic artists in the Islamic setting had virtually no audience among the people whose cultural symbols were being promoted. Throughout the Islamic world, the glamor and promise of the secular modernization is being called into questions, and the division between an educated and secular minority and the conservative masses has placed the representatives of culture into an uncomfortable position.

What has been called the Islamic awakening is the participation of the masses in determining their own cultural symbols. Modern practice is associated with "foreignness" and the opposition to Islam. As a practical matter the painters, though some are personally successful, are challenged by contemporary cultural attitudes that may support customary Islamic practice. The initial victory, the establishment of a modern Uyghur art, has been achieved. In the age of post modernization, conservative Islam has launched a counter-offensive against the initial success.

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