






# Islam in Xinjiang: Geopolitical and Ethnocultural Drivers of Social and Cultural Formation

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## Article History:

Received: October 20, 2025

Revised: January 8, 2026

Accepted: January 10, 2026

Published: February 10, 2026

## Abstract

*This article analyzes the main geopolitical and ethnocultural factors that influenced the spread and social embedding of Islam in Xinjiang (also referred to in some historical usages as East Turkestan). To address the recurrent mismatch between region-wide claims and community-specific evidence, the study adopts an explicitly comparative lens: it draws on the substantial English-language scholarship on Uyghur religious history and authority formation, while also integrating Kazakh- and Russian-language historiography and regional publications on Kazakh communities in Xinjiang as an analytically important minority case. Using a historical-comparative design complemented by geopolitical analysis and content analysis, the article applies a four-phase periodization and examines each phase through common explanatory lenses: (1) geopolitical setting and external linkages, (2) political power and elite incentives, (3) religious authority networks and institutions (including Sufi lineages), and (4) ethnocultural boundary-making and cultural production. The findings support a multi-driver account of Islamization in which connectivity, elite sponsorship, and authority infrastructures interact, with driver salience shifting across historical phases. By reducing language segmentation in the field and distinguishing majority (Uyghur) and minority (Kazakh) configurations, the study offers a mechanism-oriented synthesis and identifies priorities for future comparative research on Islam, ethnicity, and governance in Xinjiang.*

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**Keywords:** *Authority Networks; Ethnocultural Drivers; Frontier Governance; Geopolitics; Islamization; Religious Identity; Xinjiang*

## INTRODUCTION

Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (hereafter Xinjiang) is also referred to in some historical and political usages as East Turkestan. The region extends on both sides of the Tian Shan Mountains, encompasses the Dzungarian and Tarim basins, and covers approximately 1.71 million square kilometers. The terrain includes high mountainous systems, plains, and the Taklamakan and Gobi deserts (Aizizi et al., 2023; Eruygur, 2025; Griffin, 1986; Yin et al., 2023).

Drawing on the Xinjiang's first statistical communiqué on the Seventh National Census of 2020, Alpermann (2024) reports that Xinjiang's permanent resident population stood at 25.852 million, representing an increase of 4.039 million, or 18.52%, compared with 2010. The Muslim population of Xinjiang includes Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Tatars, and Dungans (Kang & Cho, 2015; Knüppel, 2023). In addition, Sufi currents have shaped local religious authority through the Afāqiyya and Khufiyya branches of the Naqshbandi tariqa (G. Chen, 2017; Papas, 2005).

### Scope and Case Selection

Xinjiang's Muslim population is ethnically diverse; however, Uyghurs constitute the demographic majority. To avoid overgeneralization, this article combines (i) evidence and debates from English-language scholarship on Uyghur Islam with (ii) Kazakh- and Russian-language historiography and regional publications on Kazakh communities in Xinjiang. The Kazakh material is therefore treated as analytically important variation (especially for nomadic and frontier settings) rather than as a proxy for Islam in Xinjiang as a whole.

For centuries, Xinjiang has been a zone of intense civilizational circulation and religious layering, strongly conditioned by its strategic location along the Silk Road (Mackerras, 2015; Zreik, 2022). This long-term “confessional plurality” makes the region particularly valuable for religious studies: it allows scholars to observe not only the historical replacement and coexistence of religious traditions, but also the social mechanisms through which religious identities become institutionalized, ethnicized, and politically salient over time.

Although there is a substantial body of scholarship on Xinjiang and Islam especially on Uyghur history, identity, and contemporary governance existing studies are often segmented by language and period. English-language research has tended to emphasize either (a) modern and contemporary dynamics of state policy, securitization, and identity politics, or (b) selected historical themes, without consistently integrating the extensive Kazakh - and Russian-language historiography and regional publications that document local institutions, actors, and interpretive traditions. As a result, the field still lacks a coherent periodized explanation that links (i) long-run geopolitical positioning and state formation, (ii) ethnocultural brokerage and elite incentives, and (iii) changing religious authority networks (including Sufi lineages) into one analytical account of how Islam became dominant in Xinjiang and how it reshaped social and cultural formation across communities.

### **Aim, Research Questions, and Central Argument**

This article aims to systematically examine the establishment of Islam in Xinjiang and to explain its significance for the region’s religious and cultural evolution. It addresses three guiding questions:

1. Through which geopolitical and institutional mechanisms did Islam expand and consolidate across Xinjiang’s shifting political orders?

2. How did ethnocultural drivers - including elite adoption, community boundary-making, and interethnic religious transfer shape the social embedding of Islam among different Muslim communities?
3. Which drivers mattered most across historical phases, and what does this imply for how religious identity is understood in the present?

This article says that Islamization in Xinjiang didn't happen in one straightforward way. Instead, it was influenced by different things at different times. These things are: (a) how the region was connected to other places and how it was governed, (b) how local leaders supported Islam to gain power and keep things in order, and (c) how religious groups, like Sufi orders, made Islamic rules understandable and useful for people living there.

### **Analytical Framework and Approach**

Methodologically, the study employs a historical-comparative and geopolitical analysis, operationalized through a multilingual literature synthesis and the systematic reconstruction of key phases. The analysis uses demographic and documentary references, archaeological and textual materials, and scholarship on religious currents and authority structures. Rather than presenting a purely descriptive chronology, the article applies a phase-based framework in which each period is examined through the same explanatory lenses: (1) geopolitical setting and external linkages, (2) political power and elite incentives, (3) religious authority networks and institutions, and (4) ethnocultural boundary-making and cultural production.

### **Periodization**

To trace the *longue durée* evolution of the region's religious landscape, the article distinguishes four broad phases in which

religious dominance and pluralism shifted in relation to social structure, ethnic composition, and political power.

1. Phase 1. Local beliefs and shamanic traditions (before the 4th century BCE). In this period, religious practices were largely oriented toward ancestral cults and the spirits of nature, with worship often associated with fire and a Sky God. Archaeological excavations in the Turpan Basin such as findings from the Astana Cemetery have uncovered extensive evidence of early material culture (T. Chen et al., 2022). These practices were not standardized “world-religion” institutions but clan- and community-based traditions.
2. Phase 2. Buddhism and religious pluralism (1st century CE to the arrival of Islam). From the first centuries CE, Xinjiang became a major node of Buddhist civilization and manuscript transmission (S. S. Lee, 2018; Natalia, 2022). Documentary discoveries such as materials from the Dunhuang context and the cave complexes around Kuqa (Kucha) attest to a dense religious ecology (Doumy, 2021; Hansen, 2013; Trombert, 2005). The period also included Manichaeic and Christian presences: Manichaeic temples are discussed in earlier historiography (Grigoriev, 1873), and travel narratives have referenced Nestorian churches in Kashgar (Marko Polo, 1955). The “Great Hymn to Mani,” found in Turpan, illustrates religious interaction by presenting Mani in Buddhist idiom (Lieu, 2025; Stebleva, 1989).
3. Phase 3. The spread and establishment of Islam (9th–16th centuries). Islam expanded in the region under changing political configurations and transregional linkages, including dynamics associated with the Kara-Khanids (Dillon, 2017). This phase is analyzed as a process of institutional consolidation and authority-building, not merely a diffusion of belief.

4. Phase 4. Islam as dominant tradition and the narrowing of religious diversity (16th century to the present). In modern and contemporary contexts, the study takes seriously both the broader Chinese Muslim landscape and the particular configuration of Xinjiang. Two major ethno-confessional groups in China - Hui and Uyghurs - are often treated as the primary representatives of Chinese Muslims, given their demographic weight and distinct cultural-historical profiles ([Pew Research Center, 2023](#); [Wang & Zhang, 2024](#)). Within Xinjiang, Uyghurs constitute the demographic majority among Muslims, while other Muslim communities (including Kazakhs) provide analytically important variation for understanding how Islam is embedded across different ethnocultural settings ([China Statistics Press, 2020](#)).

The article makes three contributions. First, it integrates Kazakh- and Russian-language scholarship and regional publications into dialogue with English-language research, reducing the language segmentation that has limited cumulative explanation. Second, it introduces a consistent analytical framework geopolitical and ethnocultural drivers of religious formation and applies it across a four-phase periodization to identify mechanisms rather than merely narrate events. Third, it clarifies how Islam's dominance in Xinjiang emerged through interacting political and cultural processes, and it specifies why the relative importance of drivers (geography/frontier governance, elite sponsorship, and authority networks) differs across periods thereby offering implications for how religious identity and social formation are interpreted in the present.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows: the next section reviews relevant scholarship with attention to language segmentation and thematic emphases; the subsequent sections apply the analytical framework to each historical phase; and the conclusion synthesizes

which drivers were most decisive and what this implies for future research on Islam, ethnicity, and governance in Xinjiang.

This study situates the Islamization of Xinjiang within English-language scholarship on Xinjiang's longue durée history, borderland governance, and religious authority formation. Building on historical syntheses of Xinjiang and its Eurasian connections (Millward, 2021; Millward & Perdue, 2004; Raczka, 1998), studies of Uyghur sacred history and pilgrimage landscapes (Dawut, 2007; Hällzon, 2010; Harris, 2024; Thum, 2014, 2023), and analyses of reform, nation-making, and frontier dynamics (Brophy, 2016; Ramachandran, 2024; Tung, 2021), the article also draws on work that conceptualizes Islamization in Inner Asia as an uneven, multi-carrier process shaped by political incentives, institutional infrastructures, and Sufi networks (including scholarship on Naqshbandi lineages and saintly authority). By integrating these works with Kazakh- and Russian-language historiography, we provide a multilingual, mechanism-oriented explanation rather than a purely descriptive narrative. By 'Islamization' we mean the historically contingent institutionalization of Islamic authority, norms, and practices, not merely individual conversion

## **METHOD**

This study employs a qualitative historical comparative design, complemented by geopolitical analysis and content analysis, to explain the Islamization of Xinjiang and to clarify how political power, spatial connectivity, and ethnocultural configurations jointly shaped religious change over time.

### **Research Design and Sources**

The empirical basis consists of (1) a systematic review of peer-reviewed academic articles, monographs, and regional historiography

on Xinjiang and Central Asian Islam; (2) published historical narratives and translated/edited historical materials cited in the manuscript; and (3) contextual contemporary indicators, including official census materials, international-organization datasets, and recent scientific research, used to describe the current ethnodemographic and confessional profile of the region.

### **Analytical Procedure**

The application of the methods followed three sequential steps:

1. Historical - comparative reconstruction. The method of this historical - comparative research was a search for the *longue durée* effects on institutional and social evolution of Islam, since major political events, regime changes, or an era during which such transformation had revolutionized it. This procedure defined a periodized history (“phases”) of Islamization and made it possible to compare time periods in a profile to identify the continuities, turning points, and shifts of dominant mechanisms.
2. Geopolitical analysis of spatial and international determinants. Geopolitical analysis was applied to examine Islam’s spread not only as a religious process but also as a spatial and political phenomenon shaped by connectivity corridors (e.g., trade routes), imperial expansion and border governance, security dynamics, and regional/international relations. This step specified how spatial factors and state capacity conditioned opportunities for transmission, consolidation, and regulation of religious life.
3. Content analysis and triangulation. Content analysis structured the systematic review by extracting and organizing recurrent explanatory themes (political drivers, spatial drivers, and ethnocultural drivers) across the scholarly corpus and the historical materials used in the manuscript. Claims were triangulated by cross-checking historical interpretations with demographic and institutional indicators (census and

international data) to strengthen plausibility and reduce reliance on any single source type.

### **Data Processing, Ethical Conduct and Certain Limitations**

All academic ethics rules have been followed in research. Content analysis and comparative reading were carried out on qualitative details like text and interpretations done by scholars while quantitative numbers like ethnogeography splits acted more like supporting facts and not strong cause-proving data. Because there are differences in the historical documentation, with some time frames having scarce sources and other periods overflowing with materials, results are described as history-based explanations with possible ideas or patterns keeping in mind that evidence is lacking for some eras. It is kind of important to mention that the analysis wasn't strictly quantitative but rather mixed methods which made the findings more nuanced. I explained this approach to the team, but they seemed interested in different perspectives. The nature of the data always requires careful handling and ethical considerations are important, you know. Some scholars have argued the validity of such methods however these methods provide valuable insights especially in contexts with limited data. The interpretations of experts in the field were considered paramount throughout the study.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Historical Stages of Islamization**

The period of 661-750 was the Umayyad Caliphate period, and Islam began to spread to Central Asia during this time. Claims indicate that Islam began to spread to Central Asia and the Xinjiang region during the 7th/eighth centuries. The documented history of the first Arab missionaries is around 670. Islamic missionaries spread throughout this region in the 710s. According to some historians,

during the reign of Caliph Hisham ibn Abd al-Malik (724-743), Arab Muslims first started attempts to spread Islam to the nomadic tribes in Central Asia ([Bartold, 1993](#); [Kholmatov, 2025](#); [Ummataliev, 2025](#); [Zein, 2022](#)).

The introduction of Islam into Central Asia took place during the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750). A specific starting point of this process is often associated with the military campaign of the Arab commander Qutayba ibn Muslim in 714 ([Khodjanliyazov & Kurbanov, 2021](#)). It was during this period that Turkic tribes first encountered Islam under conditions of military confrontation. According to [Gafurov \(1972\)](#), Qutayba's interest in Isfijab was not primarily commercial but strategic, since its capture would enable him to block the main routes through which Turkic armies supported their allies in Central Asia. This evidence indicates that the Arab military campaigns of that period were not aimed at the complete conquest of the Turkic peoples but rather at securing their own territories against external threats. According to historical sources, Islam began to penetrate Central Asia and Xinjiang around the 670s through the activities of Arab missionaries. By the early 8th century, the intensification of Islamic proselytization became evident ([Lenz-Raymann, 2014](#)).

Satuk Bughra Khan was ruler of Karakhanid state and became among initial Turkic leaders who accepted Islam, and he also worked for promoting it in the country ([Erım, 2022](#)). This situation caused Kashgar and Atush, both found in Xinjiang, to become leading centers for Islam culture. In 960, the Karakhanid dynasty made Islam an official state religion. There is an account from an Arab historian Ibn al-Athir, where he says: "In the year 349 of Hijra (960 CE), 200,000 families from a Turkic group embraced Islam." This is showing how Islam was spread wide in Zhetysu and over Xinjiang throughout 9th and 10th century ([Hansen, 2013](#)).

Development and distribution of Islam in Xinjiang was strongly guided by Central Asia. Even though some of Islamic books that could be read in region was written by Arab authors, many were written by thinkers from Central Asia area. Medieval Eastern societies gave a boost for progression of Muslim sciences and civilizations, creating how religious thoughts were structured in Xinjiang (Castets, 2010; Pickett, 2020). Between the 11th and 13th centuries, Xinjiang experienced the domination of the Khitan and later the Mongol powers. The political entities that emerged during this period generally followed policies of religious inclusiveness, which allowed Islam to coexist with Buddhism and other traditions. After the Mongol conquests, large parts of Xinjiang together with Transoxiana were incorporated into the Chagatai Khanate. Within the cultural framework of this state, the Chagatai literary language took shape. This language was raised to a higher level through the works of poets such as Alisher Navoi and spread as a folk language (Islam, 2016; Köshenova, 2024; Ungalov, 2025).

The literary and religious heritage written in the Chagatai language includes such works as Ibn Ali's "Kipchak book", "Nakhzh Al-Faradis", binoculars "Yusuf and Zuleikha", Saif Sarai's "Gulistan-i Ibn Turk". In addition, the works of such central Asian scientists as Muhammad Haidar Dulati and Shah Mahmud Zhoras were translated into Chagatai and widely distributed among the local population. This cultural and linguistic process continued during the Manchu rule of the Qing Kingdom (Manzhibayev, 2009).

During this period, the Sufi branch of Islam, which had a profound influence on the spread and consolidation of Islam in Central Asia and the Kazakh steppes, began to gain ground. Sufism appeared in the 8th century as a new religious movement in the framework of Islamic civilization, based on the ethics of Islam and spiritual-ascetic practices. Sufism aimed at the cultivation of the inner

self, the empowerment of the soul over the carnal self (nafs), and the achieving the closeness to God. The origin of the word Sufi is probably traced to the Arabic word suf (wool), referring to the woolen garments of the Muslim ascetics. The term Sufi may also come from the Greek word sophia (wisdom), referring to the intellectual and spiritual dimensions of Sufism (S. Ahmed, 2008; Cetinkaya & Billings, 2023; Faradila et al., 2024).

Tasawwuf covers a Sufi belief method, spiritual routines and moral standards. Important principles are avoiding enjoyment of material life making oneself pure, trying for higher spiritual status and reaching closer to God with love and ma'rifat (gnosis). Sufi customs were not only attached to outer ceremonies in Islam but focused more with developing the internal self. That is why it was given an important part in how Islam got established especially with the Turkic communities (Ghosh & Mir, 2016; Salmorbekova & Zhalilov, 2025).

The Sufis paid special attention to spirituality and purity of souls in the name of love for Allah. In Islamic Civilization, Sufism has the main goal of overcoming human lust, striving for spiritual perfection. In Central Asia, Sufi tariqats were formed between the XII-XVII centuries and had a deep influence on the religious and spiritual life of the region. Among them, Khoja Ahmed Yasawi, the founder of the yasawi Tariqat, took a special place in the spread of Islam among the Turkic peoples. The tariqa took pride in viewing Islam as a spiritual teaching near folk culture and worldview. With the Yasawi tradition, Islam penetrated the customs, literature, and interpersonal relationships of the Turkic people and set the stage for the emergence of later Sufi schools (Baitenova & Dysenbaeva, 2012).

In general, the Mongol rulers did not exert religious pressure on the Muslim community but instead pursued a policy of tolerance. This situation created a favorable environment for the gradual strengthening of Islam in the region. The adoption of Islam by the

rulers of the Golden Horde increased the prestige of religion in state and public life. Berke Khan (1255–1266) is considered one of the first Mongol rulers to accept Islam. Medieval sources emphasize the significant role of the Sufi milieu in Bukhara in his conversion. For instance, Siraj al-Din al-Juzjani reports that Berke Khan accepted Islam at the hands of Sayf al-Din Bakhrazi, while 14th-century Arab historians Ibn Khaldun and al-Ayni note that he converted under Shams al-Din al-Bakhrazi, a disciple of Nazhm ad-Din Kubra. In a later period, Ozbeg Khan (1312-1342) elevated Islam to the status of the state religion. Contemporary accounts state that during his reign more than ten mosques operated in the capital of the Golden Horde, and the khan himself was known to perform the five daily prayers without fail. As a result, Islam became the primary factor of political and cultural integration among diverse tribes, serving as a unifying force across the steppe ([Tiesenhausen, 1941](#)).

Some medieval sources indicate that Berke Khan embraced Islam even before ascending to power. For example, the Arab geographer and scholar al-Umari records that Berke's conversion to Islam took place around 1251, on his return from the kurultai at which Möngke was proclaimed Great Khan. Similarly, the Franciscan missionary William of Rubruck, who visited the Golden Horde in 1253, recorded in his travel notes: "Berke considers himself a Muslim and forbids the consumption of pork at his court." These data indicate that Berke converted to Islam willingly and that his faith also directly influenced personal household customs ([De Rubrouck, 1997](#)).

The establishment of Islam among the nomadic people gradually began to take on a systematic character. In this process, preachers from Central Asia, the Volga region, and other regions of the Muslim world played an important role. Among them, representatives of the Sufi tradition predominated. The influence of the Naqshbandi and Yasawi orders affected both the ruling elite and the common people. The

ruling khans maintained close relations with Sufi sheikhs and used their religious authority to strengthen their political power. At the same time, Sufi doctrines harmonized with the traditional worldview of nomadic societies, which greatly contributed to the deep-rooted integration of Islam within the steppe milieu (Abylov, 2019).

Information about the spread of Islam in the region of Xinjiang is extensively presented in the works of numerous medieval Muslim scholars. In particular, valuable data can be found in al-Idrisi's *Nuzhat al-Mushtakh fi ikhtirakh al-afakh*, Zakariyya ibn Kazwini's (1203-1283) *Asar al-Bilad ua Akhbar al-Ibad*, Qudama ibn Zhafar's (d. 948) *Kitab al-Kharazh ua Sanat al-Kitaba*, Ibn Hurdadbeh's *Kitab al-Masalik ual-Mamalik*, al-Maqdisi's (947-1000) *Ahsanut Taqasim fi Marifat al-aqalim*, and al-Bakri's (11th century) *al-Masalik ua-l-Mamalik*. In addition, such works as Safi al-Din Orun Qoylaqidi's *Nasabnama*, Ibn al-Asir's *al-Kamil fit Tarikh*, Kashifi's *Rashahat*, Ibn Khallikan's *Wafayat al-A'yan*, Khazini's *Zhauahir al-Abrar min Amuaj al-Bihar*, Jami's *Nafahat al-Uns*, Zahir al-Din Muhammad Babur's *Baburnama*, Muhammad Haydar Dughlat's *Tarikh-i Rashidi*, and Utemish Hajji's *Chingiznama* also serve as significant sources for studying the history of Islamization in the region.

In the 16th–17th centuries, the widespread dissemination of Islam in the region of Xinjiang was strongly influenced by the close economic, cultural, and spiritual ties between the local Muslim populations and the Tatar Muslims of Central Asia and the Volga region. During this period, scholars and preachers from major Islamic centers such as Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, Khiva, and Turkestan arrived in the region, promoting Islamic teachings and consolidating religious-spiritual traditions. As a result of the integration of the Muslim community in Xinjiang with Islamic civilization, the religious and cultural development of the region reached new heights

([Abdullin, 1990](#); [Castets, 2010](#); [Kemper & Dudoignon, 1996](#); [Primov, 2024](#); [Tuna, 2020](#)).

The first half of the XVIII century was a difficult period for the people of Xinjiang. The local population had to fight for their independence with invaders from all sides. Because the Ural Kalmyks, Dzungars, Bashkir detachments and troops of the Central Asian khanates marched on the territory of Xinjiang. As indicated in historical sources, due to the constant pressure of an external enemy, a number of residents of the region began to forcibly migrate to the inner regions of Central Asia. Such resettlement, in turn, strengthened ties with neighboring Muslim states and peoples professing Islam, creating conditions for increased cultural and spiritual integration. As a result, Islam became more firmly established in Xinjiang society, which contributed to the strengthening of the Muslim tradition ([Arzybaiev, 2025](#); [Brophy, 2023](#); [Clarke, 2005](#); [Kim, 2023](#); [Sukhbaatar, 2025](#); [Waley-Cohen, 1989](#)).

In the period from the XIX-XX centuries, complex political processes and unrest took place in the Xinjiang region. During this period, external influences especially influenced the political structure and religious life of the region. The "Islamic Republic of East Turkestan", founded in Kashgar in 1933, in a short time left its mark on the political and religious history of the region. This structure determined the presence of political movements of an Islamic nature in the region ([Hasan, 2000](#); [J. R. Lee, 2006](#); [Tao, 2021](#); [Yurtcicek, 2025](#)).

Xinjiang came under the control of the Communist Party of China with the establishment of the people's Republic of China in 1949. In 1951, the region became completely part of China. Following this period, Islam and the religious traditions of the local population were compelled to adapt to the requirements of the new political system. Although the second half of the 20th century saw a relative degree of religious and cultural freedom for the inhabitants, since the

early 2000s this freedom has been significantly restricted ([Anand, 2022](#); [Bovingdon, 2024](#); [Dillon, 2015](#); [Lavička, 2021](#); [Millward, 2022](#); [Robertson, 2021](#)). Currently, the situation of Islam in Xinjiang and the restrictions on the religious and political freedoms of the peoples of the region are becoming one of the most relevant scientific topics that require special comprehensive research.

Connectivity and frontier governance repeatedly opened corridors of transmission, yet these channels alone were insufficient to secure durable religious predominance. Elite adoption and state-level patronage operated as catalytic mechanisms that enhanced institutional visibility and accelerated the diffusion of norms. Over the longer term, however, durable Islamization hinged on the consolidation of authority infrastructures – madrasas, textual repertoires, and Sufi lineages – through which normativity was localized and religious expertise continuously reproduced. Viewed comparatively across phases, the explanatory balance shifts from geopolitical access and mobility in earlier periods to institutional and network consolidation in later ones, accounting for both the expansion of Islamic authority and the subsequent contraction of normative pluralism.

### **Cultural Influence of Islam**

Islam spread widely in Xinjiang and had a significant impact on the ethnocultural life of the local peoples. Islamic values and worldview principles were deeply embedded in the culture and traditions of the region, becoming an integral part of their spiritual and social life. This influence was clearly reflected in the language and writing traditions, dance and musical art, architecture, as well as the astronomical calendar system. In addition, Islam introduced significant changes in the lifestyle and worldview of the local population, cooking features, and clothing styles ([Asatullaeva, 2022](#); [Israeli, 2012](#); [Oblaeva, 2023](#); [Usmanov, 2025](#); [Zhong & Sun, 2024](#)).

After the people of Xinjiang adopted Islam, the values inherent in human nature began to become the mainstay of the region's customs, traditions, and beliefs. While these cultural and spiritual values originated primarily from the verses of the Quran, a significant part of them was based on the hadiths and sunnahs, which are considered the second source of Islam. Tradition is a set of customs that have been accumulated over the centuries and created by life itself in accordance with the religion and beliefs, lifestyle, and national structure of each nation and people; patterns of behavior formed in a community and society. In everyday use, it refers to the accepted rules of behavior that distinguish one cultural group from another and regulate them informally, or to the term that regulates social actions. Tradition is based on the principle of life for the nation, the law of society, and has formed spiritual wealth - a moral experience for the nation's mind as a rule of consciousness, education, and life. The people strictly followed these requirements and rules and punished those who did not respect or observe them based on that law (Harris & Isa, 2019; Mackerras, 2018; Wang & Zhang, 2024).

### ***Uyghur Cultural Repertoires and Authority Practices (Majority Case)***

Recent English-language scholarship shows that Uyghur Islam is enacted through everyday ritual repertoires and distinctive religious “soundscapes” (e.g., Qur’anic recitation, devotional gatherings, and the circulation of pious audio practices), which embed religious authority and belonging in local social life (Harris, 2020; Levin et al., 2016).

It also highlights shrine (mazar) visitation and related practices as key sites where piety, communal sociability, and sacred geography intersect, sustaining religious life beyond formal institutions (Brophy, 2016). Finally, studies of “sacred routes” and historical memory demonstrate how pilgrimage landscapes and manuscript-based

sacred histories have long structured Uyghur understandings of the past and collective identity (Thum, 2014).

### ***Kazakh Ethnocultural Integration and Institutional Adaptation (Minority Variation)***

In the past, customs and traditions played the role of an inviolable law for Kazakh society. For example, weddings, Nauryz kozhe, weddings, konagasy, shashu, and erulik are considered ancestral customs. Customs and traditions have a great educational, educational, and folk significance among the people. The reflection of the historical, social, cultural, everyday, professional, ritual, behavior, education, and spiritual activities of the people, which are passed down and developed from generation to generation, is recognized through tradition. The wealth of customs and traditions is the wealth of culture. For example, respecting parents and elders, baigazy, kurimdik, sukhinshi, asking for gifts, greetings, horse racing, peer jokes, etc. belong to customs and traditions. The Kazakh people are rich in customs and traditions. Customs, rituals, gestures, rites, prohibitions, and habits are all manifestations of these customs and traditions (Adilbayev, 2018).

The influence of Islam on the peoples of Xinjiang, including the Kazakhs in China, who are part of the demographic composition of the region, can be classified as follows. The ethical and Sharia foundations of Islam were combined with the traditional beliefs of the Kazakhs of China, forming a worldview based on loyalty to the Creator and humanity (Jing, 2019; Keskin & Chen, 2020, 2021). Many religious figures of various levels, including judges, clerics, imams, Islamic scholars, and religious madrasah teachers, emerged from among the Kazakhs, who made a significant contribution to the religious and cultural development of the community (Egamberdiyev & Turgunbayev, 2025; Makhmet et al., 2019; Nurtazina et al., 2022).

With the broad dissemination of Islam among the Kazakhs, elements of Arab literature and cultural tradition gradually entered and influenced Kazakh society. Kazakh bards composed unique works based on various Qur'anic narratives. For example, in 1899, Zhusipbek Khoja Shaykhislamuly (1857-1937) published *Qissa-i Hazret Zhusip (Joseph) and Zuleikha* in Kazan. Similarly, Akyt Khaji Ulimzhuuly authored works such as the didactic poem *Akhyrzaman Kui* and the poem *Shughaip*, which depicted Qur'anic events, including apocalyptic scenes and the story of Prophet Shuhaip. In all of these works, the poets glorified Allah and offered blessings upon the Prophet (Manashkyzy et al., 2025; Myrzakhmet et al., 2024; Nurgaliyeva et al., 2017; Qydyr et al., 2024; Tadzhiiev & Qydyr, 2024).

The Arabic script continues to serve as the writing system for the peoples of Xinjiang to this day. During the 10th-11th centuries, the spread of Islam in the region gradually displaced the previously used Old Turkic (Orkhon) and Old Uyghur scripts, establishing Arabic script as the dominant writing system. The majority of Uyghur and Kazakh written heritage has been preserved through the Arabic alphabet. Notable works include *Gulistan bi-t-Turki* (Saif Sarai), *Diواني Lugat at-Turk* (Mahmud al-Kashgari), *Kutadgu Bilig* (Yusuf Balasaguni), and *Hibat al-Haqa'iq* (Ahmad Yugnaki), among others (Eshchanov, 2025; Mohlaroyim, 2025; Noor & Eynel, 2024; Yildirim & Çapa, 2022).

However, the use of Arabic script presented certain challenges. In 1912, A. Baitursynov introduced the first reforms to adapt the Arabic script to the Kazakh language, identifying phonemes unique to Kazakh that were absent in other Turkic languages and creating new characters to represent them. This orthography, called the "New Orthography" or *Töte jazu* ("direct writing"), marked a significant advancement in literacy. Beginning in 1913, it was adopted in madrasahs and, until 1929, in Soviet schools. Baitursynov's modified

Arabic script, Töte jazu, became the native writing system for over 1.5 million ethnic Kazakhs in China, playing a crucial role in their social, cultural, and educational development ([Anarbekova & Salkynbay, 2024](#); [E. Maralbek, 2024](#); [Y. Maralbek & Oralbai, 2024](#); [Moldasheva, 2022](#); [Momynova, 2020](#)).

## **Religious Education System**

Following the spread of Islam, the peoples of Xinjiang regarded the preservation of their national identity, culture, language, and religion – and the transmission of these to future generations – as inseparable from the eradication of illiteracy and the establishment of a national educational system. Consequently, a religious education system adapted to both sedentary and nomadic lifestyles developed. Among nomadic communities, during the winter months, children from a single village or clan would gather, and a mullah would be invited from outside to provide religious instruction. This process became the foundational form of education at that time ([Allès, 2003](#); [Castets, 2010](#); [Sanik, 1994](#); [Yuan & Zhu, 2021](#)).

Over time, interest in religious education increased, and the number of children acquiring it grew. This created the need to consolidate educational institutions in one place for systematic teaching. During this time, wealthy persons along with some community heads in big areas of Xinjiang gathered their funds together so they could set up little madrasahs, which focused on religious teaching ([Brophy, 2016](#); [Muratkhan et al., 2021](#)).

Islam performed many tasks, leading to introduction of different ideas that changed how people thought and understood. It demanded that people develop strong morals based on faith. These moral teachings paid attention to truth, justice being equal, freedom and peace. The religious education system, which originated in the Chagatai language, began to spread widely across the Xinjiang region. In areas and villages settled by Muslims, private madrasahs or those

attached to mosques were established. Consequently, many affluent families began sending their children not only within Xinjiang but also to Central Asia and even Arab countries to pursue religious education (Beisenbayev et al., 2024; Najaf & Najafov, 2025; Yeşildurak, 2022).

### *Uyghur Parallel*

In Uyghur-majority oasis settings, Islamic learning and religious authority historically developed through mosque-based instruction, madrasah infrastructures, manuscript transmission, and shrine-centered sacred histories. English-language research emphasizes that these locally grounded authority infrastructures and memory practices were central mechanisms through which Islam remained socially embedded over time, beyond simple accounts of diffusion (Millward, 2022; Millward & Perdue, 2004; Papas, 2005; Thum, 2023).

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, literacy among Kazakh society was largely concentrated among members of the ruling and religious elite, including khans, sultans, mullahs, and qazis. Children from affluent families commonly pursued education in major centers such as Bukhara and Samarkand, where they studied Arabic, Sharia, and classical Islamic works composed in Arabic, Persian, and Chagatai (Hussain, 2025; Mukminova, 2007; Nematjonovich, 2025).

The establishment of the religious education system and the teaching of Arabic, Persian, and Chagatai languages in madrasas began to introduce new vocabulary into the lexicon of the Muslim populations in the region. In addition to religious terms such as Allah, fard (duty), iman (faith), namaz (prayer), imam, shari‘ah, jannah (paradise), and jahannam (hell), numerous other words entered every day and intellectual use, including terms related to culture, literature, truth, happiness, the world, nature, science, and books (B. Z. Ahmed, 2020; Umarov et al., 2023; Ykhtiyar & Zhuldyz, 2026; Zenz, 2025).

The local authorities governing the Xinjiang region suppressed religious activities and kept the population in ignorance, which compelled community leaders to resist and awaken spiritual consciousness. They invited religious scholars from Central Asia, established mosques and madrasas in their villages, and began educating children (Allès, 2003; Hussain, 2025; Liu & Yang, 2023).

### **Religious, Social, and Cultural Impact of Islam**

Islam prompted to pay attention to the signs of god's power in the universe, and it called upon believers to contact Allah. It was by focused acts of worship and through the fulfillment of their obligations that sojourn Muslims Kazakhs lived out this connection. Converted Muslims pursued knowledge and art, morality, patriotism and brotherly relations. In addition, Muslims paid particular attention to the respect and care for parents. Any learned person with a proper command over Islamic ideology was respected and followed (Bihai, 2005; Shakizada & Rakhimgaziyev, 2024; Zakhai & Tyshkhan, 2022).

### ***Uyghur Parallel***

In addition to steppe and nomadic lifestyles, communities with a Uyghur majority established unique systems of religious authority and social order. These were influenced by the urban institutions found in oases, the paths of pilgrimage, and Sufi traditions. Research on shrine visits, sacred pathways, and Naqshbandi networks shows how moral authority and shared memory persisted beyond traditional state institutions. It also demonstrates how Islamic practices were adapted to fit everyday life (Brophy, 2016; Harris, 2020; Papas, 2005; Thum, 2014).

### ***Kazakh Case***

Islam shaped the customs and legal traditions of the Kazakhs in Xinjiang. Islamic Sharia law was the basis of public order, regulated

by Abak Kerei's "The Law of Four Princes and the Ruler". As a result, private property was strictly protected among the Kazakhs in China, and the principles of private property were strengthened. Crimes, including murder, were severely punished according to Sharia law. Punishments for offenders, depending on the nature of the crime, were public beatings, stonings, insults, fines, and throwing to the ground.

The "Law of Four Princes and the Ruler" was a continuation of earlier steppe legal traditions, such as Qasym Khan's "Qasqa Zholy" (The bright path of Qasym Khan), Yesim Khan's "Eski Zholy" (Aboriginal way), and Tauke Khan's "Zheti Zhargy" (Seven Charters). However, it was the first codified customary law system established in the region after the city of Altai near Beijing was administratively ruled by Wang and Gong officials. Unlike the ancient steppe laws, this legal system was unique in ensuring that all citizens were equally responsible before the law within the framework of shariat.edu.

Special features developed in proper names. It is worth noting the predominance of names related to religious concepts influenced by Islam. These include the names of prophets in the Quran, such as Musa (Moses), Yunus (Jonah), Dawud (David), Ishaq (Isaac), Suleiman (Suleiman); names associated with the beloved Messenger of Allah, the Prophet Muhammad; and names meaning "servant of Allah", such as Abdullah (Servant of the One), Abdul Baqi (Servant of the Eternal), Abdurrahman (Servant of the Most Gracious), Habibullah, and Izzatullah (Beloved or Honored of God). Names dedicated to Hazrat Ali, such as Karimali, Asadullah, Haidar, and Zulfiqar, are also common.

Female names also frequently exhibit religious anthroponyms. Anthroponymy (from Greek anthropos "human" and onoma "name") refers to the collection of personal names within a particular language or region. Examples include Aklima (wisdom, intellect, insight),

Adiya (honor, respect), Nurinisa (light of God), Sharipa (kind, noble, sacred, powerful), among others.

The influence of Islamic culture was strongly evident in music and dance. The Chinese historian and expert of music, Zhou Jingbao, writes in his study *Music Culture along Silk Road* that the Islamic change in the Xinjiang's music started in late 16th century. At this time, a Persian music styles merged with Turkic ones, which resulted into an Islamic-Turkic music. This new type of music eventually became foundation of old Silk Road musical traditions and matched Silk Road city music customs.

When considering calendar system, most Muslim communities started using the Hijri calendar. Festivals connected to religion like Eid holidays were recognized as the most remarkable for Muslims. Eating habits, how people dressed and funeral practices were handled according to an Islamic Sharia law.

The building styles and architecture of Muslims living in Xinjiang developed especially during Qing Dynasty era. As an illustration, the Khayitkar Mosque present in Kashgar (where Uyghurs live) was built at this time. Still, because Islamic groups lived in different ways, their architecture did not grow at same manner among all groups. Nomadic groups such as Kazakhs and Kyrgyz, whose main work is herding, have a later history regarding building development ([Bihai, 2005](#)).

## **Religion and Traditions**

### ***Marriage Traditions***

Traditional marriage ceremonies of the peoples of Xinjiang are similar to Islamic marriage rituals. For example, the consent of both parties and the presence of witnesses are important to confirm the legality of marriage.

### ***Benevolence and Charity***

In the traditions of the peoples of Xinjiang, helping others and showing kindness are considered important. Similarly, in Islam, performing acts of charity is an obligation for Muslims. The parallels between these traditions and Islamic principles demonstrate the close integration of Islam into the region's culture. Former customs, such as offering blessings and honoring ancestors, were adapted to align with Islamic requirements.

### ***Recitation of the Qur'an***

One of the most important religious customs among the peoples of Xinjiang is the recitation of the Qur'an and its transmission from generation to generation. Among the peoples of Xinjiang, it is a religious rite to read the Koran, present it to the public at meals and weddings.

### ***Traditional Holidays and Islamic Holidays***

Such holidays of the peoples of Xinjiang as Nauryz, Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr and the tradition of burying the deceased are combined with important Islamic holidays. This illustrates the deep interconnection between the customs and traditions of the peoples of Xinjiang and the Islamic faith, founded on principles of mutual respect and harmony. These two cultural systems complemented one another, playing a vital role in the spiritual and cultural advancement of Xinjiang society (Harris & Dawut, 2002; Matibaeva et al., 2025; Papas, 2008).

Islam with time got deeply rooted in ancient cultures from many Muslim ethnic groups in Xinjiang and is now a main part in the inner identity of the. But most of those groups kept important things from their old traditions. This type of thing is kind of particularly noticeable in public customs, family special events national festivals and holding onto the old beliefs long time ago. Yet, after a long time of Islam

getting popular all over the area, people's cultural habits and beliefs kind of match with Islam and finally blended with it. Now they turned into one religious plus cultural system that combines Islam parts and parts of much older habits together (Grose, 2015; Ponka et al., 2019; Schrode, 2008).

## **CONCLUSION**

The results of the study show that the spread of Islam in Xinjiang was closely related to several geopolitical and ethnocultural factors. While geopolitical conditions, the development of trade routes, and the influence of external states directly influenced the dynamics of the religious process, ethnocultural factors - language, traditions, folk beliefs and customs - facilitated the penetration of Islam into local societies.

The spread of Islam changed not only the religious sphere, but also political and cultural life, leading to significant transformations in the social structure of the region. Religious values and institutions influenced the daily life of society, legal and moral norms, and their cultural influence was reflected in the literature, art, and traditional holidays of the people.

In addition, local peoples, integrating Islamic values with their traditional culture, formed a unique religious and cultural system. This process ensured an adapted and stable adoption of Islam, taking into account regional characteristics and ethnic diversity.

## **Implications**

For purpose of research and theory, the changed summary is supporting idea about an Islamization model that has more than one driver where geopolitics, elite advantages and authority structures work together and not just separately. The focus on stages shows that every period makes these drivers important different, so sometimes

similar “access” situations result in other kinds of institution results. Especially, the authority infrastructures like madrasas textual traditions, with Sufi family lines come up as major ways normativity is made local and how religious knowledge is repeated. For future empirical work.

The framework points to several priorities for targeted research: systematic use of local archives and published primary/translated materials where accessible; mapping shrine (mazar) networks and their regional articulation; reconstructing lineage transmission and scholarly/Sufi chains to specify mechanisms of authority reproduction; and interethnic comparison that distinguishes Uyghur, Kazakh, and Hui configurations of religious practice and governance exposure. Future studies should also identify period-specific evidence gaps (e.g., uneven documentation across phases) and address them through triangulation across textual, archaeological, and demographic/policy sources.

### ***For Society and Policy Discourse (with Caution)***

A *longue durée* perspective highlights how historical layering can make religious identity resilient, as governance interventions tend to interact with pre-existing infrastructures of authority, memory, and practice rather than confronting a “blank slate.” This does not imply normative conclusions about contemporary governance, but it clarifies why policy effects are often mediated by long-standing institutional and networked formations.

### ***Overclaim Control***

These implications are limited to the historical scope of the analysis and do not presume a single contemporary causal pathway.

## **Author Contributions**

Conceptualization: M.M., K.Y., R.M., K.K., & U.K.; Data curation: M.M., K.Y., R.M., K.K., & U.K.; Formal analysis: M.M., K.Y., R.M., K.K., & U.K.; Funding acquisition: M.M., K.Y., R.M., K.K., & U.K.; Investigation: M.M. & K.Y.; Methodology: M.M. & K.Y.; Project administration: M.M. & K.Y.; Resources: R.M., K.K., & U.K.; Software: M.M., K.Y., R.M., K.K., & U.K.; Supervision: K.Y.; Validation: M.M., K.Y., R.M., K.K., & U.K.; Visualization: M.M., K.Y., R.M., K.K., & U.K.; Writing – original draft: M.M. & K.Y.; Writing – review & editing: K.Y. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

## **Funding**

The article was supported by the Committee of Science of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan within the framework of the program – targeted scientific project No. BR24993035 – Traditional Islam in Kazakhstan: Scientific and Practical Foundations and Ways of Development.

## **Institutional Review Board Statement**

This study was approved by Egyptian University of Islamic Culture Nur-Mubarak, Almaty, Kazakhstan.

## **Informed Consent Statement**

Informed consent was not required for this study.

## **Data Availability Statement**

The data presented in this study are available upon request from the corresponding author due to privacy and ethical restrictions.

## **Acknowledgments**

The author thanks Egyptian University of Islamic Culture Nur-Mubarak, Almaty, Kazakhstan for financial and administrative support for this study.

## **Conflicts of Interest**

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

## **Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process**

During the preparation of this work, the authors used ChatGPT and PaperPal to improve the clarity of the language and readability of the article. After using these tools, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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