
Islam in China and the Challenge of Sinicization of Religion—Past and Present

by Osman Bakar

INTRODUCTION

As a government policy, Sinicization of foreign religions has been promulgated and enforced during several different periods of China's history. From China's traditional perspective, only two of its religions are acknowledged as indigenous, namely Taoism and Confucianism.¹ These two religions were born in China, Taoism in the sixth century BC founded by Lao Tzu (b. c. 604 BC) and Confucianism in the same century founded by Confucius (551 BC – 479 BC).² The other major Chinese religions – Buddhism, Islam and Christianity – are all foreign in the sense they originated from outside the country. Buddhism, which originated from India, entered China in the first century CE, mainly via the Silk Route. Islam, which originated from the Arabian Peninsula, came to China in the seventh century during the Tang dynasty (618 – 907) through trade and dip-

lomatic missions. Christianity came to China from the West in the early seventeenth century through Jesuit missionaries, although the religion itself was of Middle Eastern origin.³ From China's own historical experience, it is possible for a foreign religion to be accepted as a “national teaching” upon having gone through a long historical process of Sinicization as were the cases with Buddhism and Islam. Following its Sinicization during the late Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644), its first ever, Islam in China came to be officially recognised as the fourth national teaching coming after Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism.

SINICIZATION OF RELIGION: ITS MEANING

The idea of Sinicization of a foreign religion needs a little explanation. The word Sinicization and other words pertaining to China like Sino and Sinologist

¹ In Communist China Confucianism is not officially recognised as a religion. Rather it is treated as a philosophy. In my view, Confucianism is both a religion and a philosophy. For my detailed arguments, see Osman Bakar, 'Confucius and the Analects in the light of Islam,' in Osman Bakar and Cheng Gek Nai, eds., *Islam and Confucianism: A Civilizational Dialogue* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC-IIUM Publications, 2019), new edition, pp. 73 – 86.

² According to Chinese tradition, Lao Tzu was an older contemporary and teacher of Confucius.

³ Eastern Christianity, of the Nestorian branch, arrived much earlier during the Tang dynasty.

are derived from the Arabic word for China (*al-Sin*) and its adjective *sini*, meaning Chinese or with Chinese characteristics. The adjective *sini* was Latinised into *sinicus* or *sinae* that were understood to mean 'of Chinese origin or having Chinese characteristics.' Thus, the modern term Sinicization⁴ conveys the meaning of 'making something Chinese in form and/or character or changing or modifying it by Chinese influence.' As applied to a foreign religion, Sinicization would then mean the process whereby the religion in question is subjected to changes or modifications as dictated by the need to be in conformity with the Chinese cultural and political norms.

UNDERSTANDING PRESIDENT XI JINPING'S 'SINICIZATION OF RELIGION' POLICY

Sinicization of religion is currently a national issue in China, since it is now an integral component of the present government's policy on religion. It mainly affects Islam and Christianity, but Buddhism is also affected to a certain degree. It is to be noted, however, that in China it is not Christianity per se that is accorded the status of officially recognised religion but rather two of its main branches, namely Catholicism and Protestantism, which are treated as two distinct and separate religions. Between the two, it is Catholicism that encounters more difficulties with the Chinese authorities by virtue of the long-strained Sino-Vatican relations arising especially from the contested issue of appointment of Chinese bishops.⁵ Since the four religions have followers all over the globe and there exist deep bonds of faith between their respective followers in China and those outside the country, Sinicization of religion has aroused serious concern throughout the world. Quite clearly, Sinicization of religion has also become an international issue.

China's new policy of Sinicization of religion was decreed by President Xi Jinping during his address at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Par-

ty on October 18, 2017.⁶ Leaders of all the officially recognised religions in China were invited as special guests to the Congress. However, his reference to the policy of Sinicization of religion was brief. He merely provided the main outlines of what may be termed his policy on religion, of which Sinicization is the core element. There are four major points in his policy outlines that he wants the Party to understand and implement.⁷ **First**, the Party should "uphold the principle that religions in China must be Chinese in orientation, and provide active guidance to religions so that they can adapt themselves to socialist society." **Second**, the Party has to "rigorously protect against and take resolute measures to combat all acts of infiltration, subversion, sabotage, as well as violent terrorist activities, ethnic separatist activities and religious extremist activities to safeguard national security." **Third**, as major steps to develop socialist society and the rule of law, the Party should work for "the flourishing of a socialist consultative democracy" through the "consolidation of the patriotic front and the adoption of new approaches to works related to ethnic and religious affairs." And **fourth**, to uphold and develop socialism with Chinese characteristics the Party has to "undertake a thorough analysis of issues and provide policy guidance in ethnic and religious affairs."

It is quite clear from the above summary of the part of Xi's speech dealing with religion that the whole purpose of his Sinicization of religions policy is to guide them in their contributory role in the development of socialist society with Chinese characteristics. To speak of socialist society means that one has also to speak of the societal values that it is championing and that are directing its development. It is, therefore, possible to say that Xi has introduced the new religion policy in the name of safeguarding "socialist core values" with Chinese characteristics. Since Communism is China's official national ideology, the intention to preserve "socialist core values" with Chinese characteristics is quite logical. Apparently, Xi has been thinking aloud for quite some time

⁴ The first known use of the word 'sinicize' was in 1889.

⁵ The contentious issue of who has the right to appoint bishops – whether it is the Holy See or Beijing – has split Chinese Catholicism into two factions: one is the Catholic Church comprising mainly the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Bishops' Conference for the Catholic Church in China that are independent of the Vatican and recognised by the government; the other is the "underground" or unregistered church but recognised by the Holy See.

⁶ President Xi delivered his three and a half hour-long address during the opening session of the Congress in his capacity as Secretary-General of the Communist Party. His address content that covered a wide range of policy issues has been dubbed by political commentators the "Thoughts of Xi Jinping."

⁷ This four-point summary of the part of Xi's speech on his religion policy was published in *Weyan Zhongjiao*, a Wechat official account of the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA), China immediately after the speech was over. See Li Yuan, 'At the Congress Xi reaffirms Sinicization of religions under the Communist Party', *AsiaNews.It*, October 19, 2017. In 2018 SARA was dissolved and absorbed into the United Front Work Department, an authority directly under the Communist Party.



One of the few Uyghur mosques dating back to the 10th century CE not destroyed in Xinjiang

about the need for Sinicization of religion. He first mooted the idea of Sinicization of religion at the Central United Front Work Meeting held in 2015. Since the United Front Work is an apparatus of the Communist Party, the significance of the occasion was not lost. He wanted the Party to take charge of the Sinicization of religion agenda. But his campaign to strengthen the Communist Party's grip on religion began in earnest only after he attended the 2016 National Conference on Religious Work. At that Conference, Xi was reported to have "provided a series of new thoughts and views as well as new requirements on religious works and mapped out a series of important decisions."⁸ His main message to the Conference was that the Party should take an active role in "guiding religions to adapt to the socialist society."⁹ This message sums up the Communist philosophy of Sinicization of religion, which is "adaptation to the socialist society" through the preservation of "socialist core values." In the words of Ying Fuk-tsang, Director of the Divinity School at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Sinicization of Religion would be "the core religious theory for socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era."¹⁰

It is quite clear that the main motive underlying Xi's Sinicization of religion policy is political and only secondarily cultural. The political motive in question stems from the perception that in the new twenty-first century religion has indeed emerged as the single most important factor that could challenge and even undermine the hegemony of socialist thought in the country. The motive is viewed as political, since it is grounded on the issue of the need to meet existing challenges to the supremacy of the country's political ideology. In this context, religion is seen by the ruling Communist Party as a serious challenge in two main respects. First, religion is linked to separatism, which mainly refers to the Buddhist separatist movement in Tibet and the Uyghur Muslim separatist movement in Xinjiang. And second, religion is making a big revival in the post-Mao era.¹¹ In both respects, religion is perceived as a threat to national security. In the former case, Buddhism and Islam are respectively implicated in the separatisms in Tibet and Xinjiang for their roles as sources of inspiration and empowerment. From the perspective of the Chinese leadership, to not contain the two separatisms would only undermine China's

⁸ The report was contained in an article published in *Qiushi*, a top-level bimonthly journal on Communist political theory run by the Party's Central Committee. See "Theory and innovative practice on religious work since the 18th National Congress of the CPC in 2012," *Qiushi*, September 15, 2017, quoted by Li Yuan, 'At the Congress Xi reaffirms Sinicization of religions...'

⁹ See Cristina Maza, 'Communist China President Xi Jinping now wants to control religion too,' *Newsweek*, 24 October 2017; <http://www.newsweek.com/china-xi-jinping-unveils-plans-nationalizing-religion-691610>.

¹⁰ Li Yuan, 'At the Congress Xi reaffirms Sinicization of religions...'

¹¹ For an informative study on religious revival in post-Mao era, see Hongyi Harry Lai, 'The religious revival in China,' *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies*, 18 (2003), pp. 40 – 64.

territorial integrity. Acting tough, the government “has cracked down heavily on Muslim and Buddhist groups suspected of separatism.”¹² In the latter case, the conviction shared by the leadership is that uncontrolled religious revival would only weaken, if not spell death for, the national ideology. As their argument goes, the religious worldview and the socialist worldview embraced by the Communist Party are diametrically opposed to each other. Furthermore, religion has a wider appeal. The present Sinicization of religion policy needs to be understood in the light of these perceived challenges and threats to the Chinese socialist ideology. And it is an indirect admission that the national ideology is not strong enough to withstand the challenge posed by societal forces unleashed by the country’s religious revival phenomena.

Xi’s Sinicization of religion policy is, for all intents and purposes, a declaration of control of the Communist Party on religious life and thought in China. When the President speaks of the Party “giving guidance” to religions in adapting themselves to the socialist ideals, many people inside and outside China hasten to interpret the phrase as “exercising control.” Inside China itself, its religious communities generally believe in this interpretation. They have a real fear that the policy would be a licence for the Party leadership at all levels to control their religions. Their fear is quite justified, for they have already seen in recent years a new wave of controls and suppressions on their intellectual freedom and religious activities, including religious education in mosques and churches and spiritual life in monasteries. As they see it, whatever religious freedom they have gained during the last several decades of religious revival is now being curtailed. They go on to argue that they could not see how they could interpret guidance in a better light than control when, in traditional Chinese Communist practice, the two words always mean one and the same thing.

Outside China, many individuals and organisations greeted Xi’s policy statement on Sinicization of religion policy with a similar concern about the fate of religious freedom in the country. But still, for the sake of argumentation, we could give Xi the benefit of the doubt. He should be given the chance to prove the point that, although he has entrusted the Communist Party with the task of providing guid-

ance to the officially recognised religions, he actually has in mind the idea of partnership between the Party and religious leaders in the development of a socialist society in the Chinese mould. We all know too well that religion is the traditional enemy of the Communist creed. But he need not continue with that tradition. The third point in his Sinicization of religion policy emphasises the need for “the adoption of new approaches to works related to ethnic and religious affairs.” His “new approaches” are still awaited. Hopefully, these new approaches would include a genuine dialogue between the Party and the religious communities on the issue of Sinicization of religion and the role of religion in a socialist society. Such a dialogue would be in line with Xi’s idea of promoting “the flourishing of a socialist consultative democracy.” He has to be committed to such a dialogue if he is indeed keen to have a “religious theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics in the new era” that was highlighted by Ying Fuk-tsang. Moreover, if Xi has envisaged an internationalization of socialism with Chinese characteristics, which he describes as “blazing a new trail” for other developing countries seeking to modernise and preserve their sovereignty,¹³ and also deliberated on the theme of “building a human community with a shared future,”¹⁴ then he has to come to terms with religion, which anyhow is already acknowledged as a major influential force in the new century, both at home and abroad. However, until his new approaches to religion are made clear to the public, critics will continue to view the Sinicization of religion policy as nothing more than a state instrument to control and suppress religions in China.

IMPLICATIONS OF XI’S SINICIZATION POLICY FOR ISLAM IN CHINA

The rest of this essay is now devoted to the discussion of the implications of Xi’s Sinicization of religion for contemporary Islam and its possible responses to the policy in the light of what the religion went through during the Ming-Sinicization era. Xi’s Sinicization of religion covers both issues that are common to all the religions and issues that are particular and specific to each religion. The idea of the Party mapping out important strategies for the different religions has been

12 Cristina Maza, ‘Communist China President Xi Jinping now wants to control religion too.’

13 For a critical essay on Xi’s perspectives on internationalization of socialism with Chinese characteristics see Daniel Tobin, *How Xi Jinping’s New Era Should Have Ended US Debate on Beijing’s Ambitions*, A Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Report dated May 2020.

14 On the Xi-inspired discourse on the theme see *On Building a Human Community with a Shared Future* (Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2019).

emphasised by the United Front Work Department. In the light of this Party strategic planning, Chinese Muslim leaders and intellectuals are strongly advised to come up with their own strategy on how best to respond to the current Sinicization of religion policy that would best serve the present and long-term interests of the Muslim community. They would first of all need to conduct a thorough study of the Ming-Sinicization policy and its overall impact on Islam of the time. The findings of such a study could be of great help to them in their challenging task of undertaking the right responses to the Xi-Sinicization of religion policy.

Ming-Sinicization policy is known to have opened up a new chapter in the history of Islam in China. It impacted almost every aspect of Muslim life and thought. The religion underwent a thorough indigenization and assimilation into the Chinese cultural milieu to become at once a truly national religion and a distinctive branch of the global Muslim *ummah*. The most visible impact of this Sinicization was particularly in mosque architecture, calligraphy, dress culture, cuisine, health and medical practices, and even religious discourse. Not all of the Muslim cultural and religious elements that were Sinicized turned out to be negative or that ended up in being considered as anti-Islamic. For example, the traditional Chinese mosque, which was influenced by indigenous religious architecture, was not considered as un-Islamic just because it is dome-less. On the contrary, just as the dome, a characteristic feature of Middle Eastern mosques, has been given a religious significance in mosque architecture by virtue of the symbolism of earth as a mosque and the sky as the dome that is found in Islamic teachings, so has the multilevel roof structure of the traditional Chinese mosque been given a likewise religious significance but, in this case, by virtue of it symbolising a multi-layered cosmos. Commonalities between traditional Chinese and Islamic cosmologies facilitated the indigenization of mosque architectural designs.

Until more recent times, the traditional Chinese mosque architectural heritage was generally accepted as being in conformity with Islamic built cultural values. Today, however, due to ignorance of tradition and modern influences, there are clashes of preferences, either for mosques with domes or the traditional domeless ones, with the authorities getting dragged into the dispute as they naturally prefer the latter in line with the Sinicization policy.

But an even more meaningful impact of Ming-Sinicization policy was the indigenization of Muslim religious and philosophical discourse through its adoption of Confucian concepts and terminology. Not only did Muslim scholars during the Ming-Sinicization era have to write in Chinese, but also in Confucian terms. A Muslim religious discourse with Confucian characteristics was thus set in motion that subsequently helped generate a national "Islam-Confucianism dialogue." This particular aspect of Chinese Muslim historical experience of Ming-Sinicization could serve as a useful guide to contemporary Muslims in their difficult task of having to come to terms with Chinese socialism of the Xi era. If discovering the common ground between Islam and Confucianism proved to be helpful to Muslim responses to Ming-Sinicization policy, there is a strong reason to believe that finding a common ground between Islamic social philosophy and Chinese socialism could work wonders for contemporary China.

A dialogue between Islam and socialism is not new to the Muslim world. It now appears that Xi's new era of socialism with Chinese characteristics is about to rekindle dialogues between these two major thought systems of the world. We are quite sure that Chinese Muslims in particular would welcome such a dialogue, since it is of great importance to their own country. But for Xi himself, he probably realises that, for a good number of reasons, he could not find a better dialogue partner than the Muslim world to discuss the international dimension of his Chinese socialism policy and its global implications.

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