

СЕКЦІЯ П. КИТАЙ В СУЧАСНОМУ СВІТІ: МІЖНАРОДНО-ПОЛІТИЧНИЙ АСПЕКТ

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Golod V. Yu.

ORCID: 0000-0002-2853-0359

Ph.D. in Economics, Junior Fellow

A. Yu. Krymskyi Institute of Oriental Studies

of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine

Kyiv, Ukraine

THE ROLE OF THE CHINESE ISLAMIC ASSOCIATION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

Key words: Chinese Islamic Association, Chinese Muslims, the Hui ethnicity, the Uyghur ethnicity.

On September 20, 2022, Xinhua news agency reported on the meeting of Wang Yang¹ with the newly-elected leadership of the Chinese Islamic Association [Xinhua]. The Chinese senior leader stressed the importance of the official political direction and further strengthening the Chinese position on developing Islam in China. Wang's meeting with the Association came with the backdrop of the UN Human Rights Commission's recent report that highlighted human rights violations against Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang. Beijing defended its crackdown against Xinjiang, explaining the move was aimed at containing the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM) which is linked to radical groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. China also advocates the sinicization of Islam with the policies of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). In this context, the role of the Chinese Islamic Association is particularly important.

The Chinese Islamic Association (中国伊斯兰教协会, the CIA) is the official government supervisory organ for Islam in the People's Republic of China [Wikipedia]. It is responsible for interpreting government policy

¹ Wang Yang, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and chairman of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference.

toward Chinese Muslims and for representing their interests to the government, as well as for directing Islamic education in China. As Chinese leadership in Central Asia becomes more of a focus and Chinese and Arab economic ties have strengthened, the CIA has played a significant role in China's soft power campaign. According to Mickey Spiegel, Consultant to Human Rights Watch to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom [Human Rights Watch], the CIA serves as the state's instrument of control and executes the government's religious policy relating to Islam.

The major strategies of the CIA over the years have been lauding the uniqueness of Chinese Islam and its compliance with Party ideology while urging caution against foreign influence. This ideological campaign has expanded since 2016, with calls to "Sinicize" the country's religions.

In 2001, the CIA established the Religious Affairs Guidance Committee (教务指导委员会) to conduct and publish interpretations of Islamic scripture and law in accordance with government policy. The new project, known as *Jiejing* (解经, interpreting scripture), includes two main directions: the compilation and distribution of state-sanctioned religious opinions in the form of sermons; and the revision and standardization of the curriculum and textbooks at the Islamic Scripture Academies (伊斯兰教经学院), where imams are trained and licensed.

The CIA claims to represent all Muslims in China, but in fact the Hui people's interest are prioritized [Glasserman]. As Glasserman explained, the CIA is a principally scriptural modernist organization. The Hui dominate the scriptural modernist movement and the Uyghurs are mostly Sufi or at least Sufi -influenced. The CIA publications, including the standardized textbooks for the Islamic Scripture Academies, support the historical narrative of the Hui Muslims.

The CIA is located in Beijing, and there are hundreds of local district, city, and province-level Islamic Associations. The Hui are scattered across China, but the majority of Uyghurs live in Xinjiang. The Hui and the Uyghur nationalities constitute 0.84% and 0.81% of the total population of the PRC [National Bureau of Statistics], respectively, but in the current 270 member CIA Committee, Hui hold 79% of the seats and Uyghurs hold 17% of the seats, with 4% being held by other ethnic groups [CIA]. This dynamic can easily create a pro-Hui, anti-Uyghur agenda.

The CIA in its rhetoric, as well as in *Jiejing*,^g explains to all Chinese Muslims that they have inherited a long tradition of patriotism (爱国爱教 loving country, loving religion). The political loyalty to China is articulated in Islamic terms. The separatism in Xinjiang has been identified as a major impetus for starting *Jiejing*. The CIA was always politically loyal to the government in order to earn greater support and resources to advance its interests. *Jiejing* began to be read at mosques on Fridays and holidays.

However, according to Włodzimierz Cieciora, a Polish historian working mainly on the 20th century Sino-Muslim Hui elites, the CIA's real influence and decision-making has become increasingly difficult to gauge since Xi Jinping's rise to power. The current head, Yang Faming (杨发明) [CIA], an imam from Ningxia, the first representative from the Chinese Northwest in this position in decades, is very cautious to tread his steps carefully.

The CIA plays a significant role in international relations with Muslim states and societies. As an example, the CIA has adopted a three-pronged approach defending the governmental policy in Xinjiang for an Arabic-speaking audience: defending the uniqueness of Chinese Islam and warning of the threat of foreign influence; engaging in "Hajj diplomacy"; and conducting exchanges with Muslim leaders and Islamic institutions [Naser, Al-Tamimi]. Since the launching of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, Beijing has used Islamic soft power to build relations in Central Asia and across the Muslim world. The growing strategic importance of Muslim countries to China make them the latest targets of Chinese Islamic soft power, and the CIA plays its building-relation role.

The CIA in Xi Jinping's government system plays a political, security and ideological role with the aim to promote patriotism and inter-ethnic harmony, denouncing the "three forces" of separatism, terrorism and religious extremism. In other words, the CIA, along with regional Islamic organizations, serve as a perfect instrument of Muslim's assimilation into Chinese society.

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