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Infrastruktur Reproduksi Keagamaan di Xinjiang: Sintesis Komparatif Berbasis Sumber atas Konfigurasi Uyghur dan Kazakhtan

Infrastructures of Religious Reproduction in Xinjiang: A Comparative Source-Based Synthesis of Uyghur and Kazakh Configurations

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Abstrak: *Kajian tentang Islam di Xinjiang kaya tetapi terfragmentasi menurut tema, periode, dan bahasa, dan perbandingan antara komunitas Uyghur dan Kazakh sebagian besar masih bersifat implisit. Artikel ini menanyakan bagaimana Islam direproduksi secara sosial, bukan sekadar diperkenalkan, di bawah tatanan politik yang berubah-ubah. Artikel ini mengusulkan konsep infrastruktur reproduksi keagamaan, yakni pengaturan yang tahan lama tempat pengetahuan, otoritas, dan praktik keagamaan ditransmisikan dan dilegitimasi. Lima infrastruktur dibedakan: pendidikan, aksara dan teks, lanskap sakral dan bunyi ritual, jaringan otoritas, serta norma hukum-adat, dengan regulasi negara sebagai kondisi lintas-tema. Sintesis interpretatif berbasis sumber atas korpus multibahasa, yang dihimpun dari sumber-sumber sebuah studi multi-faktor terbaru, menghasilkan tiga temuan. Pertama, infrastruktur-infrastruktur tersebut saling bergantung. Kedua, wilayah oasis Uyghur menonjolkan infrastruktur berbasis tempat (makam keramat, rute sakral, silsilah Naqsyabandiyah), sedangkan wilayah perbatasan Kazakh menonjolkan pendidikan keliling dan integrasi hukum-adat. Ketiga, dokumentasi tidak merata antarinfrastruktur, periode, dan komunitas, sehingga membatasi inferensi.*

Kontribusi: *Artikel ini merumuskan empat proposisi yang dapat diuji dan agenda riset untuk memetakan rantai otoritas, jejaring makam keramat, dan sirkuit pendidikan. Sintesis ini tidak memeriksa ulang sumber primer, dan simpulannya dibatasi pada cakupan interpretatif korpus.*

Kata Kunci: *Islamisasi; Xinjiang; reproduksi keagamaan; pendidikan Islam; jaringan sufi; lanskap sakral; Uyghur; Kazakhtan.*

Abstract: Scholarship on Islam in Xinjiang is rich but fragmented by theme, period, and language, and comparisons between Uyghur and Kazakh communities remain mostly implicit. This article asks how Islam was socially reproduced, rather than merely introduced, under shifting political orders. It proposes the concept of *infrastructures of religious reproduction*: durable arrangements through which religious knowledge, authority, and practice are transmitted and legitimated. Five are distinguished: education, script and texts, sacred landscapes and ritual sound, authority networks, and legal-customary norms, with state regulation treated as a cross-cutting condition. An interpretive, source-based synthesis of a multilingual corpus, assembled from the sources of a recent multi-driver study, supports three findings. First, the infrastructures are interdependent. Second, Uyghur oasis settings weight place-based infrastructures (shrines, sacred routes, Naqshbandi lineages), whereas Kazakh frontier settings weight itinerant education and customary-legal integration. Third, documentation is uneven across infrastructures, periods, and communities, which limits inference.

Contribution: The article derives four testable propositions and a research agenda for mapping authority chains, shrine networks, and educational circuits. The synthesis does not re-examine primary sources, and its conclusions are limited to the interpretive scope of the corpus.

Keywords: Islamization; Xinjiang; Religious Reproduction; Islamic Education; Sufi Networks; Sacred Landscapes; Uyghur; Kazakh.

INTRODUCTION

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (hereafter Xinjiang) covers about 1.71 million square kilometers across the Tian Shan, the Dzungarian and Tarim basins, and the Taklamakan and Gobi deserts (Eruygur, 2025; Griffin, 1986). These conditions supported oasis agriculture alongside mobile pastoralism (Aizizi et al., 2023; Yin et al., 2023), a contrast that matters for how religious institutions took root. The 2020 census recorded 25.852 million permanent residents (Alpermann, 2024; China Statistics Press, 2020). Muslim communities include Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Tatars, and Dungans (Kang & Cho, 2015; Knüppel, 2023). Uyghurs are the demographic majority among them, and together with the Hui they are usually treated as China's principal Muslim groups (Pew Research Center, 2023; Wang & Zhang, 2024). Located on the Silk Road, Xinjiang has long been a zone of religious layering and circulation (Mackerras, 2015; Zreik, 2022).

Research relevant to Islam in Xinjiang falls into six streams, each strong on its own terms. Historical syntheses place the region within Eurasian connectivity, Qing conquest, and borderland governance (Clarke, 2005; Millward, 2021; Millward & Perdue, 2004; Raczka, 1998; Waley-Cohen, 1989). Studies of pre-Islamic pluralism document Buddhist, Manichaean, and Christian presences and their textual traces (Lee, S. S., 2018; Lieu, 2025; Trombert, 2005). Anthropology and ethnomusicology of Uyghur practice foreground shrine (mazar) pilgrimage, sacred histories, and devotional soundscapes (Dawut, 2007; Harris, 2020; Thum, 2014). Work on Sufism and scholarly networks traces Naqshbandi khwajas, Yasawi traditions, and the circulation of ulama across Central Asia, the Volga region, and Xinjiang (Kemper & Dudoignon, 1996; Papas, 2005; Pickett, 2020).

Studies of modern identity, reform, and state policy address nation-making, securitization, and restrictions on religious life (Bovingdon, 2024; Brophy, 2016; Zenz, 2025). Kazakh-, Russian-, and other regional-language scholarship documents Islam on the steppe and among Kazakhs in Xinjiang, including customs, education, and religious worldview (Abylov, 2019; Adilbayev, 2018; Bihai, 2005; Manzhibayev, 2009). A recent

multi-driver synthesis connects several of these streams through a four-phase account of geopolitical setting, elite incentives, authority networks, and ethnocultural boundary-making (Makhmet et al., 2026). Appendix A maps every source used here to the infrastructures analyzed below.

Three gaps remain. First, the streams are rarely connected: work on pilgrimage and soundscape seldom engages with histories of madrasa education or script reform, and vice versa. Second, comparison between Uyghur oasis and Kazakh frontier settings is mostly implicit; Kazakh sources are seldom used to test claims drawn from Uyghur cases, or the reverse. Third, the multi-driver account identifies authority infrastructures as decisive for durable Islamization (Makhmet et al., 2026) but does not unpack them into components that can be compared across communities, and the literature on contemporary governance seldom specifies which historically accumulated institutions state policy actually encounters.

This article addresses these gaps in three ways. It defines infrastructures of religious reproduction and separates five of them analytically. It compares Uyghur and Kazakh configurations in a single matrix that also records how well each is documented. And it derives four propositions that later empirical work can test or refute.

The aim is to explain how Islam was reproduced socially in Xinjiang by comparing infrastructures across two communities. The questions are:

RQ1. Which infrastructures of religious reproduction recur across the corpus, and how do they depend on one another?

RQ2. How do Uyghur oasis and Kazakh frontier configurations differ in the weight and form of these infrastructures?

RQ3. How is the documentary base distributed across infrastructures, periods, and communities, and what inferences does that allow?

By “Islamization” we mean the historically contingent institutionalization of Islamic authority, norms, and practices, not merely individual conversion.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

Infrastructures of religious reproduction

An *infrastructure of religious reproduction* is a durable arrangement of people, places, texts, or rules that lets religious knowledge, authority, and practice be passed on and recognized as legitimate, independently of any single ruler or generation. The

concept refines the "authority infrastructures" named in the multi-driver account (Makhmet et al., 2026) by splitting them into components that can be compared. Five are used here.

Table 1. Types, Functions, and Carriers of Religious Reproduction Infrastructures.

Infrastructure	What it reproduces	Typical carriers in the corpus
Education	Religious knowledge, language, and ties to transregional centers.	Itinerant mullahs, mosque schools, madrasas, study abroad.
Script and texts	Access to a shared textual world and a literary canon.	Arabic-script orthographies, manuscripts, devotional poetry.
Sacred landscape and ritual sound	Memory, belonging, and local sanctity.	Shrines, pilgrimage routes, recitation, devotional music.
Authority networks	Legitimacy and lineage of religious experts.	Sufi orders, khwajas, scholarly chains, patrons at court.
Legal-customary norms	Everyday normativity.	Customary codes within a Sharia frame, life-cycle rites, festivals.

State regulation is not a sixth infrastructure. It is treated as a cross-cutting condition that enables, redirects, or constrains the five.

Corpus and its limits

The study is an interpretive, source-based synthesis. The corpus consists of the sources cited in the multi-driver study by Makhmet et al. (2026): monographs and articles in several languages, regional publications, medieval narratives in edition or translation (De Rubrouck, 1997; Polo, 1955; Tiesenhausen, 1941), and contextual datasets (Alpermann, 2024; China Statistics Press, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2023). Three limits follow from this choice. The corpus was assembled for another purpose and not through a documented search protocol, so it is not exhaustive. It reflects that study's emphasis on elites and authority and may therefore under-represent popular practice. It also gives weight to Kazakh- and Russian-language materials by design, which affects the counts in Table 2. And it mixes sources of unequal weight, including short regional publications and secondary summaries of medieval accounts. The synthesis relies on what each source reports and does not re-examine primary materials.

Analytical procedure

The analysis followed five steps, such as: (1) Each source was assigned to one primary infrastructure, and to a secondary one where it clearly spans two (Appendix A). (2) For each infrastructure, the carriers, actors, and periods that sources report were extracted. (3) Uyghur-majority oasis material was compared with Kazakh frontier and nomadic material, noting where sources address both communities or neither. (4) Each

cell of the comparison was given an evidence rating: *substantial* (five or more community-specific sources), *moderate* (three or four), or *thin* (two or fewer). Only sources assigned to the Uyghur or Kazakh case count toward a community; general and comparative sources do not (Table 2 and Appendix A). Ratings describe documentary support in this corpus, not historical importance, and secondary uses of a source outside its primary category are not counted. (5) Propositions were derived from recurring patterns and framed so they can be disconfirmed.

Terminology and sensitivity

The region is named Xinjiang, while acknowledging that some historical and political usages prefer East Turkestan (Eruygur, 2025; Makhmet et al., 2026). Contemporary restrictions are reported as documented by the cited studies, without adjudicating normative questions. The corpus contains almost no Chinese-language scholarship or official sources, and very little on Hui, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, or Tatar communities; findings should be read with that gap in mind.

RESULTS

Preconditions: corridors, courts, and a plural religious ground

Islam reached Central Asia under the Umayyads, and the campaigns of Qutayba ibn Muslim in 714 are often taken as a starting point (Khodjaniyazov & Kurbanov, 2021; Zein, 2022). His interest in Isfijab is described as strategic rather than commercial (Gafurov, 1972). Among the Karakhanids, Satuk Bughra Khan is remembered as an early Turkic convert who promoted Islam, and Kashgar and Atush became centers of Islamic culture (Erim, 2022), and Karakhanid-era accounts describe wide conversion among Turkic groups (Hansen, 2013). Khitan and Mongol rule generally tolerated Islam alongside Buddhism, and the Chagatai *ulus* nurtured a literary language that later carried Islamic and Turkic culture (Islam, 2016; Köshenova, 2024). On the steppe, the conversions of Berke Khan and Ozbeg Khan and their ties with Sufi milieus show how elite sponsorship and religious authority reinforced each other (Abylov, 2019; Tiesenhausen, 1941).

These courts and corridors created opportunities. Whether Islamic norms were then reproduced depended on the infrastructures analyzed below. They operated on a plural religious ground: Buddhist, Manichaean, and Christian presences are attested in

manuscripts, art, and travel accounts (Doumy, 2021; Lieu, 2025; Polo, 1955), and some textual forms were syncretic (Stebleva, 1989).

Education

Education is the most consistently documented infrastructure, especially for Kazakhs. In nomadic settings, children of a village or clan gathered in winter and a mullah was invited from outside to teach them (Allès, 2003; Muratkhan et al., 2021; Sanik, 1994). As demand grew, wealthy patrons and community heads pooled funds for small madrasas (Brophy, 2016; Muratkhan et al., 2021). Mosque-attached and private madrasas spread, and affluent families sent children to Bukhara, Samarkand, and other centers (Beisenbayev et al., 2024; Mukminova, 2007). Teaching in Arabic, Persian, and Chagatai brought new religious and intellectual vocabulary into everyday language (Hussain, 2025; Yktiyar & Zhuldyz, 2026). Where authorities restricted religious activity, community leaders are reported to have invited scholars from Central Asia and founded village schools (Allès, 2003; Liu & Yang, 2023).

In Uyghur oases, instruction was anchored in mosques, madrasas, and manuscript transmission, linked to shrine-centered sacred histories (Millward & Perdue, 2004; Papas, 2005; Thum, 2023). Studies of student mobility and curricula elsewhere, such as the Nizamiyya madrasas, medieval Azerbaijan, and the Bukhara Khanate, provide comparative context for these circuits (Najaf & Najafov, 2025; Nematjonovich, 2025; Yeşildurak, 2022). Work on modern Uyghur educational elites shows that mobility and uncertainty persisted into the contemporary period (Yuan & Zhu, 2021).

Script and texts

The Arabic script displaced Old Turkic and Old Uyghur scripts from roughly the 10th and 11th centuries and became the carrier of much Uyghur and Kazakh written heritage, including *Kutadgu Bilig* and *Diwan Lughat al-Turk* (Eshchanov, 2025; Mohlaroyim, 2025; Yıldırım & Çapa, 2022). Adapting it to Kazakh phonology was a recurring problem. Baitursynov's 1912 reform (*Töte jazu*) was adopted in madrasas from 1913 and is reported to have become the native writing system of Kazakhs in China (Anarbekova & Salkynbay, 2024; Maralbek, E., 2024; Moldasheva, 2022). Related scholarship traces its orthographic logic and its press use (Maralbek, Y., & Oralbai, 2024; Momynova, 2020). Comparative work on alphabets among other Turkic communities shows that script choice was a wider regional question (Noor & Eynel, 2024).

Texts did more than record religion; they reproduced it. Kazakh poets reworked Qur'anic narratives, as in Zhusipbek Shaykhislamuly's *Qissa-i Hazret Zhusip and Zuleikha* (Kazan, 1899) and Akyt Khaji's didactic poems (Makhmet et al., 2019; Manashkyzy et al., 2025; Tadzhiev & Qydyr, 2024). Studies of Kazakh belief systems show that such Islamic texts coexisted with older fire-cult elements (Nurgaliyeva et al., 2017), and local religious figures such as judges, imams, and madrasa teachers were their producers and transmitters (Egamberdiyev & Turgunbayev, 2025; Nurtazina et al., 2022). *Evidence: substantial for Kazakh settings, where sources focus on orthography and poetry; thin for Uyghur settings, where only a few sources address script and classical works directly.*

Sacred landscapes and ritual sound

For Uyghurs, shrine (mazar) visitation is a central site where piety, sociability, and sacred geography meet (Dawut, 2007; Hällzon, 2010; Papas, 2008). Pilgrimage routes and manuscript-based sacred histories have structured collective memory over long periods (Thum, 2014, 2023). Recitation, devotional gatherings, and festival music embed religious authority in local life (Harris, 2020; Harris & Dawut, 2002; Levin et al., 2016), and orthodoxy and heterodoxy are negotiated in practice (Schrode, 2008). Material landscapes include Qing-era mosques such as the Khayitkar Mosque in Kashgar, while nomadic Kazakh and Kyrgyz groups developed permanent architecture later (Bihai, 2005; Zhong & Sun, 2024).

The corpus is nearly silent on Kazakh sacred landscapes, but this silence needs careful reading. Sources on Kazakh religious figures treat mosques, madrasas, and mausoleums as one field of activity, and others discuss sacred practices of the steppe (Egamberdiyev & Turgunbayev, 2025; Nurtazina et al., 2022). The apparent contrast with Uyghur oases may therefore partly reflect what has been studied, not what existed. *Evidence: substantial for Uyghur settings; thin for Kazakh settings.*

Authority networks

Sufism is described across the corpus as a spiritual-ethical tradition centered on purification of the self and closeness to God (Ahmed, S., 2008; Faradila et al., 2024; Ghosh & Mir, 2016; Salmorbekova & Zhalilov, 2025). Psychological research links Sufi practice to well-being (Cetinkaya & Billings, 2023), a reminder that these networks had personal as well as institutional appeal, although that review concerns contemporary populations

and cannot be projected onto the past. In Central Asia, the Yasawi order presented Islam as close to folk culture and worldview, which helped it enter customs and literature among Turkic peoples (Baitenova & Dysenbaeva, 2012). In Xinjiang, Naqshbandi khwajas tied political authority to saintly lineage (Chen, G., 2017; Papas, 2005), while on the steppe Naqshbandi and Yasawi preachers influenced rulers and commoners, and khans drew on the authority of sheikhs (Abylov, 2019).

These orders ran along wider scholarly circuits. Teachers and texts moved between Bukhara, the Volga region, and Xinjiang (Abdullin, 1990; Castets, 2010; Kemper & Dudoignon, 1996; Pickett, 2020; Primov, 2024; Tuna, 2020). The pattern is consistent: authority networks supply teachers to schools, legitimacy to shrines, and texts to scripts. *Evidence: moderate for Uyghur settings; thin for Kazakh settings; thin for both on how lineages were reproduced at village level.*

Legal-customary norms and everyday practice

For Kazakhs, customs and traditions functioned as binding norms that sources describe as harmonized with Islamic Sharia (Adilbayev, 2018; Shakizada & Rakhimgaziyev, 2024; Zakhai & Tyshkhan, 2022). Studies of Muslim legal culture in Xinjiang and of Islam in China describe how customary and Islamic norms were combined, including the codified "Law of Four Princes and the Ruler," which continued earlier steppe codes (Jing, 2019; Keskin & Chen, 2020, 2021). Marriage, charity, Qur'an recitation, naming, and festivals show integration of Islamic and earlier traditions (Bihai, 2005; Manzhibayev, 2009; Matibaeva et al., 2025), and work on Movarounnahr describes how Buddhist and shamanic practices were absorbed into Islamic ceremonies (Ungalov, 2025).

For Uyghurs, the corpus speaks mostly about modern and contemporary practice: online devotion and revival (Harris & Isa, 2019), religion and Uyghur identity (Mackerras, 2018), dress and headgear as markers of Muslim ethnic distinctiveness (Kang & Cho, 2015), and identity formation among students and in comparison with Hui practice (Grose, 2015; Ponka et al., 2019; Tung, 2021; Wang & Zhang, 2024). The two sets are not like-for-like. Kazakh legal-customary evidence is largely late imperial, and Uyghur evidence is largely modern, so differences between them may reflect period as much as community. *Evidence: substantial for both communities, with a chronological mismatch.*

State regulation as a cross-cutting condition

Political orders shaped which infrastructures could operate. Qing conquest, warfare, and migration reshaped regional populations (Brophy, 2023; Clarke, 2005; Kim, 2023; Waley-Cohen, 1989), and in Kazakh and Kyrgyz accounts displacement strengthened ties with neighboring Muslim societies (Arzybaiev, 2025; Sukhbaatar, 2025). The Kashgar-based republic of 1933 left a mark on Islamic political movements and regional diplomacy (Dillon, 2017; Hasan, 2000; Lee, J. R., 2006; Tao, 2021; Yurtcicek, 2025). Under the People's Republic, a relative degree of religious and cultural freedom was followed, from the early 2000s, by significant restrictions, documented in legal, policy, and securitization studies (Anand, 2022; Bovingdon, 2024; Dillon, 2015; Lavička, 2021; Lenz-Raymann, 2014; Millward, 2022; Robertson, 2021; Zenz, 2025). Reform movements and borderland politics shaped Uyghur nation-making (Brophy, 2016; Harris, 2024; Ramachandran, 2024), and regional foreign relations conditioned the field (Mackerras, 2015; Raczka, 1998).

Table 2. Comparative Matrix of Uyghur and Kazakh Religious Reproduction Infrastructures and Evidence Coverage.

Infrastructure	Uyghur oasis configuration	Evidence	Kazakh frontier configuration	Evidence	Periods mainly documented
Education	Mosque schools, madrasas, manuscript transmission, reported mostly indirectly	Thin	Itinerant winter mullahs, patron-funded madrasas, study in Bukhara and Samarkand	Substantial	Medieval to early 20th century
Script and texts	Arabic-script classics, Old Uyghur script displaced	Thin	Töte jazu reform, Qur'anic-narrative poetry	Substantial	10th century to 1929 and after
Sacred landscape and ritual sound	Mazar pilgrimage, soundscapes, urban architecture	Substantial	Mausoleums and sacred practices noted, little studied	Thin	Medieval to present (Uyghur); late 19th to early 20th century (Kazakh)
Authority networks	Naqshbandi khwajas, shrine lineages	Moderate	Naqshbandi and Yasawi preachers, links to khans	Thin	Medieval to Qing
Legal-customary norms	Pious everyday practice, identity markers	Substantial	Customary law within a Sharia frame, life-cycle rites	Substantial	Late imperial (Kazakh); modern (Uyghur)

The corpus describes regulation and describes infrastructures, but it contains no study that traces how particular policies changed particular infrastructures. Reading regulation as acting on the five loci is therefore an analytical hypothesis, taken up as Proposition 4, and not a finding. Table 2 reports how many sources each infrastructure

rests on, by community focus. Each source is counted once, under its primary category (Appendix A); counts describe the composition of the corpus, not the literature as a whole.

Table 3. Distribution of Sources across Religious Reproduction Infrastructures and Community Categories.

Infrastructure	Uyghur (U)	Kazakh (K)	General or comparative (G)	Total
Education	1	5	7	13
Script and texts	2	10	2	14
Sacred landscape and ritual sound	8	2	2	12
Authority networks	3	2	9	14
Legal-customary norms	6	7	4	17
Total	20	26	24	70

The remaining 64 sources are setting and demography (9), early history and political preconditions (16), pre-Islamic and plural ground (10), state and regulation (23), general overviews (5), and the framing study (1).

Interdependence and propositions

The matrix supports an answer to RQ1: the five infrastructures recur and depend on one another. Networks supply teachers; teachers transmit scripts and texts; texts legitimize shrines and law; pilgrimage routes carry manuscripts and memory (Thum, 2014); customs make authority socially legible. For RQ2, the weights appear to differ, subject to the documentary caveat below. Uyghur oasis settings emphasize place-based infrastructures, and Kazakh frontier settings emphasize mobile education and customary-legal integration. For RQ3, Table 2 shows that Uyghur-specific sources concentrate in sacred landscape and everyday practice and are sparse for education (1) and script (2), whereas Kazakh-specific sources concentrate in education, script, and norms and are sparse for sacred landscape (2) and authority networks (2). These patterns partly mirror the design of the corpus, which gives weight to Kazakh- and Russian-language materials, and should not be read as the state of the field.

Four propositions follow, each framed so it can be tested. P1 (interdependence). Religious continuity is greater where at least two infrastructures reinforce each other than where one carries the whole load. P2 (ecology and form). Place-based infrastructures predominate in sedentary oases, and mobility-based ones among pastoral communities; settled Kazakh communities and pastoral Kyrgyz communities offer a test. P3 (documentary artifact). The apparent scarcity of Kazakh sacred landscapes, and of

Uyghur educational and script sources, reflects research focus and corpus design more than historical absence; mapping Kazakh mausoleums and sacred sites, and a documented search on Uyghur education, would test it. P4 (regulation and loci). Regulation bears more heavily on visible institutional infrastructures (schools, shrines, public ritual) than on diffuse ones (customary norms, family transmission), shifting reproduction toward the latter. The corpus offers no direct evidence for this, and it should be tested against dated policy and field data.

DISCUSSION

Localization of Normativity through Sufi Traditions

The findings confirm that the resilience of Islam in Xinjiang was fundamentally dependent on the reproduction of religious authority through internal community mechanisms rather than solely on geopolitical factors. The Sufi tradition, particularly the Yasawi and Naqshbandi orders, localized Islamic teachings into idioms legible to Turkic societies, which explains why Islam penetrated deeply into customs, literature, and interpersonal relationships (Ghosh & Mir, 2016; Salmorbekova & Zhalilov, 2025). This localization was crucial because it avoided imposing a foreign normative system and instead translated Islamic principles into familiar cultural frameworks. The symbiotic relationship between political power and Sufi authority further reinforced this process, as ruling khans used religious authority to legitimize their rule while Sufi sheikhs gained patronage and protection (Abylov, 2019).

The Yasawi tradition's emphasis on inner self-cultivation and spiritual closeness to God resonated with Turkic cultural sensibilities. Unlike the formalistic aspects of Islam, Sufi customs focused on developing the internal self, which made them particularly effective in establishing Islam among Turkic communities (Ahmed, 2008; Cetinkaya & Billings, 2023; Faradila et al., 2024). This emphasis on interiority and spiritual experience allowed Islam to penetrate the customs, literature, and interpersonal relationships of the Turkic people. The Yasawi tradition viewed Islam as a spiritual teaching near to folk culture and worldview, facilitating its integration into local cultural frameworks (Baitenova & Dysenbaeva, 2012). This cultural resonance was essential for the long-term consolidation of Islamic authority in the region.

The Naqshbandi order further reinforced this localization process through its hierarchical structure and transregional networks. The Afaqiyya and Khufiyya branches

of the Naqshbandi tariqa shaped local religious authority in Xinjiang, connecting local communities to broader Sufi networks across Central Asia (G. Chen, 2017; Papas, 2005). The ruling khans maintained close relations with Sufi sheikhs and used their religious authority to strengthen their political power, while Sufi doctrines harmonized with the traditional worldview of nomadic societies (Abylov, 2019). This integration of Sufi authority with political power created a durable framework for the reproduction of Islamic normativity. The localization of Islamic authority through Sufi networks thus explains the deep social embeddedness of Islam in Xinjiang.

The localization of Islamic normativity through Sufi traditions also explains why Islam remained resilient across political transitions. When political authorities suppressed religious activities, Sufi networks provided alternative channels for the transmission of religious knowledge and practice (Alles, 2003; Hussain, 2025). Community leaders invited religious scholars from Central Asia and established mosques and madrasas in their villages, often drawing on Sufi networks for personnel and legitimacy. The adaptability of Sufi institutions allowed Islamic authority to persist even under unfavorable political conditions. This resilience was not merely a matter of survival but also of continuous reproduction and adaptation of Islamic norms to changing circumstances.

Divergent Pathways of Institutionalization

The comparative analysis of Uyghur and Kazakh configurations reveals distinct pathways of institutionalization that explain variations in religious resilience. The Uyghur case relied on shrine-centered sacred histories, mazar visitation, and Naqshbandi networks, which sustained moral authority and shared memory beyond formal state institutions (Brophy, 2016; Harris, 2020; Thum, 2014). Uyghur Islam is enacted through everyday ritual repertoires and distinctive religious soundscapes that embed religious authority and belonging in local social life (Harris, 2020; Levin et al., 2016). These practices created dense networks of devotional sociability that sustained Islamic authority across generations. The Uyghur pathway thus relied on the interconnection between shrines, soundscapes, and everyday ritual practices.

In contrast, the Kazakh case adapted Islamic education and law to nomadic kinship structures, as exemplified by the "Law of Four Princes and the Ruler" (Adilbayev, 2018). This legal system codified customary law in accordance with Sharia while maintaining

continuity with earlier steppe legal traditions such as Qasym Khan's "Qasqa Zholy" and Tauke Khan's "Zheti Zhargy" (Bihai, 2005). The emergence of indigenous religious elites from among the Kazakhs—including judges, imams, and madrasah teachers—was crucial for this adaptation (Egamberdiyev & Turgunbayev, 2025; Nurtazina et al., 2022). These elites mediated between Islamic normative requirements and steppe social practices, creating a hybrid legal order that was both Islamic and culturally familiar. The Kazakh pathway thus relied on the integration of Islamic norms with pre-existing social and legal structures.

Despite these differences, both configurations shared a common reliance on Arabic script as a medium of knowledge transmission and on religious elites as brokers of authority. The Arabic script connected both communities to the broader Islamic ecumene and preserved a shared literary heritage (Eshchanov, 2025; Yildirim & Capa, 2022). Religious elites in both communities functioned as mediators between external scholarly centers and local populations, translating Islamic norms into culturally legible idioms. This shared reliance on script and elite brokerage created a common foundation for Islamic authority despite divergent institutional pathways. The comparative perspective thus reveals both convergence and divergence in the resilience of Islamic authority across different ethnocultural settings.

The divergent pathways of institutionalization also reflect the different ecological and social conditions of sedentary and nomadic communities. The sedentary oasis setting of the Uyghurs allowed for the development of dense institutional infrastructures, including madrasas, shrines, and mosques. The nomadic setting of the Kazakhs, by contrast, required more flexible and mobile forms of religious authority, including kinship-based networks and adaptable legal arrangements. These ecological differences produced distinct institutional pathways while maintaining a shared commitment to Islamic normativity. The resilience of Islam in both communities thus depended on the capacity to adapt to specific ecological and social conditions.

The Longue Durée Shift in Explanatory Mechanisms

The longue durée perspective further reveals that the explanatory balance shifts from geopolitical access and mobility in earlier periods to institutional and network consolidation in later ones. The Mongol rulers' policy of religious tolerance 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, with Berke Khan (1255-1266) considered one of the first Mongol rulers to accept Islam (Tiesenhausen, 1941). Medieval sources emphasize the significant role of the Sufi milieu in Bukhara in his conversion, highlighting the importance of Sufi networks in elite conversion. Later, Ozbeg Khan (1312-1342) elevated Islam to the status of the state religion, making Islam the primary factor of political and cultural integration among diverse tribes (Tiesenhausen, 1941). This elite adoption was a catalytic mechanism that enhanced institutional visibility and accelerated the diffusion of Islamic norms.

The establishment of Islam among the nomadic people gradually began to take on a systematic character through the activities of preachers from Central Asia, the Volga region, and other regions of the Muslim world. Representatives of the Sufi tradition predominated among these preachers, and the influence of the Naqshbandi and Yasawi orders affected both the ruling elite and the common people (Abylov, 2019). 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, contributing to the deep-rooted integration of Islam within the steppe milieu. This mutual reinforcement between political authority and religious infrastructure was a key mechanism of Islamization.

The shift from geopolitical access to institutional consolidation is evident in the changing role of madrasas and Sufi lineages across historical phases. In earlier periods, connectivity and mobility facilitated the initial transmission of Islamic knowledge and practices. In later periods, 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. The establishment of madrasas and the circulation of manuscripts created durable infrastructures for the transmission of Islamic knowledge (Brophy, 2016; Muratkhan et al., 2021). These infrastructures ensured that Islamic authority could be reproduced across generations even when direct geopolitical connectivity was disrupted. The longue durée perspective thus reveals a shift from access to consolidation as the primary mechanism of Islamic resilience.

The contraction of normative pluralism in later periods further illustrates the importance of institutional consolidation. As madrasas and Sufi lineages became entrenched, they increasingly defined the boundaries of acceptable Islamic belief and

practice. The consolidation of authority infrastructures led to the marginalization of alternative religious traditions, including Buddhism and Manichaeism, which had previously coexisted with Islam (Lieu, 2025; Stebleva, 1989). This narrowing of religious diversity was not merely a matter of political imposition but also a consequence of the institutional consolidation of Islamic authority. The longue durée perspective thus explains both the expansion of Islamic authority and the subsequent contraction of normative pluralism.

Implications for Future Research

These findings have important implications for future research on Islam, ethnicity, and governance in Xinjiang. The study highlights the need for systematic use of local archives, mapping of shrine (mazar) networks, reconstruction of lineage transmission and scholarly/Sufi chains, and interethnic comparison that distinguishes Uyghur, Kazakh, and Hui configurations of religious practice (Millward, 2021; Papas, 2005). A longue durée perspective clarifies why policy effects are often mediated by long-standing institutional and networked formations rather than confronting a "blank slate." These implications are limited to the historical scope of the analysis and do not presume a single contemporary causal pathway.

Future studies should also address period-specific evidence gaps through triangulation across textual, archaeological, and demographic sources. The uneven documentation across different historical phases poses significant challenges for comparative analysis. Systematic use of local archives and published primary materials, where accessible, would strengthen the empirical basis for future research. Mapping shrine networks and reconstructing lineage transmission would provide valuable insights into the mechanisms of authority reproduction (Dawut, 2007; Thum, 2014). Interethnic comparison that distinguishes Uyghur, Kazakh, and Hui configurations would further illuminate the diversity of Islamic institutional pathways in Xinjiang.

The findings also have implications for understanding the relationship between religious authority and political governance in Xinjiang. 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" (Brophy, 2016; Millward, 2021). 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. Understanding these historical dynamics is essential for any nuanced analysis of contemporary religious life in Xinjiang.

Finally, the study underscores the importance of multilingual scholarship for understanding Islam in Xinjiang. The integration of English-, Kazakh-, and Russian-language sources reveals dimensions of religious history that would remain invisible within a single linguistic tradition (Alpermann, 2024; Yktiyar & Zhuldyz, 2026). Future research should continue to bridge linguistic and thematic segmentation in the field. Such integration would contribute to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how Islamic authority was reproduced and transformed across different communities and historical periods.

Limitations

Most evidence comes from secondary and regional literature, including short publications whose claims need verification. The corpus was assembled for a related study, under-represents popular practice and Chinese-language scholarship, and says little about Hui, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, or Tatar communities. Evidence ratings follow the composition of the corpus, and a documented search beyond it could change them.

CONCLUSION

Islam in Xinjiang was reproduced through interlocking infrastructures of education, script and text, sacred landscape and ritual sound, authority networks, and legal-customary norms, under changing political orders. Uyghur and Kazakh configurations weight these differently, but the uneven documentary base means that some contrasts may be artifacts of research focus.

Future work should (a) map shrine networks and their regional articulation, including Kazakh sites; (b) reconstruct scholarly and Sufi chains of transmission; (c) compare educational circuits across Uyghur, Kazakh, Hui, and other communities; (d) use local archives and primary or translated materials; (e) broaden the corpus through a documented search that includes Chinese-language and official sources; and (f) test Propositions 1 to 4. The findings are interpretive and rest on a corpus assembled for a related study. They depend on what sources report, are limited by uneven documentation, and do not presume a single contemporary causal pathway.

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