

Asia Rising Podcast – China Veil

Professor Nick Bisley

Welcome to Asia Rising a podcast of La Trobe Asia where we examine news events and general happenings of Asia's states and societies. I'm your host Nick Bisley the Executive Director of La Trobe Asia and with me today is Doctor James Leibold, Senior Lecturer in Politics and Asian Studies here at La Trobe. Today we're going to be talking about China's efforts to ban the Islamic veil in its Western province of Xinjiang. Jim thanks for joining us.

Doctor James Leibold

Thanks, it's good to be here.

Nick Bisley

Well let's start with some general stuff around Xinjiang for those who are not familiar with the geography, the distribution of ethnicities in China, tell us a little bit about Xinjiang, where it is, who the Uighur people and why Islamic veils?

James Leibold

Well Xinjiang is a far Western region of China, it's not a province precisely, officially designated an autonomous region, about half of its population is comprised of roughly 10 million Muslim Uighurs. The Uighurs are Turkish speaking minority that practice a kind of syncretic modern form of the Islam. Xinjiang is the heart of the old silk road and still today, very strategically located. A lot of natural resources as well as a gateway into Eurasia for China in its new leader Xi Jinping.

Nick Bisley

Why did the government, well what's happened, what have the government sought to do in Xinjiang with regard to Islamic dress?

James Leibold

Well, for many years the Party-state in China has been battling a kind of low grade insurgency lead by the Uighurs a kind of separatist movement that has roots historically but is now in recent years, tied up with the global discourse against Islamic extremism and so in the last decade or so you've had two parallel phenomenon's going on. One of increasing religiosity amongst some segments of the Uighur community, that's been influenced both by domestic factors, and global factors as well as a rise of ethnic as well as religious imbued violence that has increasingly spread out of the region of Xinjiang.

We had pretty dramatic examples of that last year when there was an attack on a train station, innocent travellers at a train station at Kunming as well as a number of bombings, suicide bombings in Urumqi the capital of Xinjiang as well a really dramatic suicide car blast right in the heart of Beijing in Tiananmen Square that killed a number of people. And so the state is trying to respond to this violence by launching a year-long anti-religious extremist terrorist campaign in Xinjiang. The veil gets tied up with that.

Nick Bisley

So why now, so why target the veil in particular, a hardly threatening form of dress and why do it now given this thing's been going on for quite a considerable period of time? Has there been any particular spark or any issue that's brought this to a head?

James Leibold

Yeah well the campaign against the veil really has its roots around 2011 when the party launched

something called 'Project Beauty'. Project Beauty was kind of an educational campaign to try to persuade Uighur women to throw off their veils and adopt modern culture. Get people voluntarily to change their habits of dress.

We've seen since then the project has largely failed; in the wake of all this violence the party felt like it had to up the ante, and so it's gone from trying to persuade people from donning the full face, full body coverings to actually banning it through new legal regulations as well as enforcing it in a pretty heavy handed way in local communities.

Veiled women are being rounded up, registered, educated and if they refuse to change their ways, they're been either forcefully detained. We have some cases of families being denied social benefits for women who refuse to reform their ways and so we see an increasing pressure placed on Uighur women to change their, really very traditional practices of head and body coverings.

Nick Bisley

Is it something that's seen as a kind of visible way of saying we're clamping down on extremist Islam? Or is there that sort of strain that still exists in the party as seen as, try and modernise China and that this sort of stuff is a throwback to a backward anti-modern past? Are those two things playing in tandem?

James Leibold

Yeah, I think you've got a shift from one to the other. You know you don't have to go that far back, say a decade, of attitudes towards, let's say the headscarf in particular, but also other particular forms of head and body coverings. They were seen as symbols of traditional Uighur culture. The constitution in China allows the Uighurs to protect their traditional customs, this is a part of it no big deal.

But within the last decade you've had a shift particularly under Project Beauty to start to see the veil as kind of backward, abnormal forms that don't accord with traditional Islamic attire, and then recently in the last year or so you've seen the veil going from abnormal form or backward form of attire to what the party calls: "an outward manifestation of religious extremism." And the danger here is that they're making a very simplistic one to one equation between Islamic extremism and forms of head and body coverings and so it's really based on a false and facile assumption that what people wear is an indication of their political thoughts.

Nick Bisley

Yeah, I was doing some reading around this and particularly looking at the article you wrote, it's on *ChinaFile* and also republished in *Foreign Policy* and how you talked about how the veil actually refers to this huge diversity of dress.

I wonder if you'd just say a little bit about the different kinds of things that are being banned, because I think often, certainly in Australia and much of the West, when people talk about the veil they automatically think about the really conservative chador or the burqa or the niqab and that's not really the case today.

James Leibold

Well this is one of the big problems of the party's campaign, it's not clear exactly what it is banning or what it's targeting for elimination. Part of the problem here is we're dealing with a number of different languages. So you've got various Arabic terms for different types head and body coverings. Jilbab the hijab, the niqab, etc., and then you've got Uighur terms for those, you know variations on those types of form, then you have Chinese terms for those, and so a lot of it is getting lost in translation and so the party has attempted to counter this by putting up posters, so

they've identified the so-called five abnormal types.

This includes people who wear what's called the jilbab or sort of a dark robe, the second the niqab the full face veil as well as the hijab which is very popular now quite globally, a sort of tight fitting scarf around that covers the ears and the chest. Those are the three and then there are two others targeted largely at males, the people with long beards to be held in suspicion as well as people who wear any clothing that has the star-and-crescent as the symbol on it. While those photographs and the so-called five types are quite clear, there's a lot of concern amongst the Uighur community that ultimately they will also target the very ubiquitous and popular head scarf, which has long been a symbol of Uighur female femininity and identity and there's great concern that that's the ultimate aim.

And in fact if you look at Project Beauty and you look at, they've also put forward images of what they see as a sort of normal type of traditional Uighur attire and that's these colourful ätläs dresses as well as braided hair and the doppa hat. So we can see where The Party wants to take people, but the danger is that, while the vast majority of the Uighur population is probably not opposed or against the wearing of full burka style coverings, they certainly would defend their headscarfs quite vehemently and if The Party were to extend it to headscarfs, they would have an even bigger problem on their hands.

Nick Bisley

So there's a kind of sense of The Party saying; "you can have one kind of traditional dress, we'll decide what it is and the rest of it..."

James Leibold

Exactly, there's a leading small group of the Regional Party in Xinjiang that has set up a bureau that has been tasked with standardising ethnic customs in clothing and so they are supposed to deliver a report later this year that will define and provide samples of traditional Uighur as well as other ethnic minority clothing.

Nick Bisley

Everyone can just relax, that's right.

James Leibold

That's right, we know exactly what we should be wearing and everyone will be fine.

Nick Bisley

You also noted that interest in this dress seems to have increased amongst the Uighur population since the early 2000, so it's becoming increasingly popular. Why is that the case?

James Leibold

Well here I mean, and I should say this research is done in collaboration with my colleague Tim Gross at Rose Holman University in the United States and Tim is; unlike myself an anthropologist, a man who gets his hands dirty out in the actual streets and he has a large store of Uighur informants. For over a decade he's been travelling to Xinjiang as well as interviewing Uighur students in coastal places like Beijing and Xinjing and what Tim has found talking to these Uighur women is they veil or they cover their heads and bodies for a variety of reasons and that should be no surprise to us because that's the case globally.

And so some of the reasons why they do it are as simple as; it's fashionable, it's a way of asserting my femininity in a colourful lively fashion. Others do it because of the Koran's requirement for female modesty, others do it not willingly, because their husbands or their parents have

encouraged or even forced them to wear it. Others do it as an assertion as being a part of a global Islamic community. And then finally some do it as an assertion of Uighur identity and opposition to the dominant Han Culture.

And so we see a variety of different reasons and one of the big problems with the Party-States, Anti-Veiling Campaign; which we should note has occurred in other places such as France and Belgium, but the difference here is that the voices of Uighur women and Uighur men for that matter have been largely denied from participation in this debate. It's really a paternalistic largely male Han faced Party-State telling Uighur women what they should and should not wear.

Nick Bisley

To what extent is this Party-State initiative part of a broader effort, not just a counter-terrorism and anti-Islamic extremism but part of a broader effort to ensure central control and the Party-States conception of what China is? Is this a small front in a larger war, as it were?

James Leibold

Very much so, I mean this has got deep roots in China as a Party-State that would like to control nearly every aspect of its citizen's lives. In the case of Xinjiang and its policies towards its Uighurs we're really seeing, particularly under Xi Jinping a kind of doubling down of effort to really penetrate down to the grass roots level. I mean you had a kind of situation where, under the Maoist era The Party was quite present in the people's lives, but the key to Deng Xiaoping's reforms after the death of Mao was really removing The Party from the back of ordinary people and letting them go on their way.

And we've seen a counter-movement starting with (unable to distinguish) but certainly I think she has doubled it in intensity in really getting down in the grass roots level, governing every aspect of peoples lives, and so in the case of the veil and the policy against the veil we see The Party really penetrating quite deeply down into the lives of women, telling them what you can and cannot wear. And certainly in the case of the Uighurs it's resulted in resistance and we've got many cases of direct counter-violence that has been spurred by the women who have been forcefully de-veiled or husbands that seek to hold up their honour by attacking police stations and other officials.

Nick Bisley

So what's at stake in all of this? I mean because it seems like this could potentially back-fire quite badly, set out to end the wearing of the veil, it sounds like it's got a big battle on its hands, it's almost certainly likely to lose. What's at stake if that happens?

James Leibold

Yeah, certainly it's going to make various forms of head and body coverings a kind of symbol of Uighur identity and Uighur resistance to The Party-State and the Han dominated culture. It's going to result in sporadic violence, but at the same time Nick, I think it's important to note that in Xinjiang we don't have something like what happened in Chechnya. We're not at that kind of level of ethnic conflict in counter-insurgency, you know The Party-State is quite capable, it's got a very large domestic security apparatus. It's quite capable of stamping out any resistance, but what it will do is it will force it underground and it will well up and from time to time it's going to explode out, so I expect we'll see additional attacks going forward, but at the same time nothing I think that The Party-State can't handle.

Nick Bisley

You mention in your piece that was in *ChinaFile*, a neat line which I want to explore with you for a little bit and that's this idea that what's going on in Xinjiang is a function of the nature of the

Chinese state, you use this great phrase that; *"it's an inherently fragile state"*. Do you think that's the case, do you think this is a paranoid reaction, overreaction and it's just going to move from here to another manifestation, or is there some other kind of structural imperative pushing this along?

James Leibold

Yeah it's a state that lacks confidence in some ways. It's aware of its growing stature around the globe, its growing economic power as well as military power but yet it's one that doesn't trust its own citizens so I guess you could say it's always looking over its shoulder, wondering who's out to get it and stab it in the back. That type of paranoid state structure is one and I think is inherently fragile, Mao once said: *"a single spark can lead to a prairie fire,"* and so one wonders, where is that spark? And I think the party is always going with a fire extinguisher trying to put it out but doing it on a full on way with lots of fire extinguishers, but also in a hap-hazard way, you know just lets spray blanketly rather than really targeting things.

While I don't think the veil is going to be that spark, you know, the Uighurs are too small a population, too marginal, certainly amongst the Han majority there are many sources, many irritants that could easily lead to our prairie fire at some stage. So it's a kind of cat and mouse game with the cat being an aggressive, the mouse many of them, you know *"rat's scurrying across the road,"* as Xi Jinping once called terrorists, and the party doing its best to stamp them out and we'll see who wins that game in the end.

Nick Bisley

Because it does seem to me objectively; as not someone who watches this type of thing closely a wild over-reaction, one that's counter-productive in so many ways and I think as you said, it's a function of this semi-paranoid state The Party-State seems to exist in, the whole house of cards can come tumbling down.

Well that's all the time we have for, thanks very much Jim for joining us and I look forward to following this up in the future.

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