Technology-Mediated Communication and Representations of Islam in Northwest China: Insights from Visual Postings on Weixin

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Abstract

During the last few decades, Muslim communities in China have experienced a religious revival in which belonging to a global Muslim community has been a central element. At the same time, in recent years, the State’s campaign of Sinicization of Islam (yisilan zhongguohua) has supported Chinese nationalism and targeted symbols of Islam that are alleged to distance the believers from patriotism.

This study explores the capacity for texts, language, and visual choices to build and shape sociality and forms of devotion and to reflect social and political changes.

The research examines visual posting on the multipurpose app Weixin (WeChat), providing insights into local forms of religiousness, self-representation, and aspirational identities of part of the Muslim community in Xining (Qinghai province, Northwest China).

Keywords
technology-mediated communication – social media – Weixin (WeChat) – Islam in China – virtual linguistic landscapes

1 Introduction

Islam in China constitutes a complex and diverse religious environment, with believers living in different areas of the country and divided between various ethnic minorities, religious affiliations, and relationships with the State.
Despite the existence of different tendencies across areas and ethnic groups, Muslims in China have experienced a religious revival in which belonging to a global Muslim community has been a central element. At the same time, in recent years, state policies have underlined the importance of spreading sentiments of Chinese nationalism in religion. The State’s campaign of “Sinicization of Islam” (yisilan zhongguohua) has supported Chinese nationalism and targeted symbols of Islam that are alleged to distance the believers from patriotism.

Recent studies on Islam in China have explored religious practices, state policies, and global connections, both in daily practices (Steward, 2017; Stroup, 2017) and in the online space (Ho, 2013; Harris and Isa, 2018; Wang, 2019), providing a range of descriptions of Muslim communities’ self-representation and identities.

This study focuses on Islam-related pictures posted on the Chinese multi-purpose app Weixin (known in English as WeChat) by users living in Xining, the provincial capital of Qinghai, a diverse and multi-ethnic city in Northwest China. It explores the capacity of texts, language, and visual choices to build and shape sociality and forms of devotion and to reflect social and political changes.

The analysis is based on a total of 40 pictures posted between 2017 and 2020. This research aims to provide new insights into the understanding of contemporary Muslim communities in China in the online space. First, it contributes a study on the Muslim community of Xining, which has not been studied in its online practices. Second, it draws on studies on technology-mediated communication to disentangle the diverse meanings of the postings.

I argue that social media practices among this community, through the use of religious expressions, language choices and visual elements, constitute a way to extend practices existing in offline life and to portray religious aspirations, which tend towards interest in forms of piety and connections to an idea of a global and connected Islam.

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1 Muslim communities in China have experienced processes of Sinicization in various aspects of their life (architecture, theology, religious practices, etc.). These processes were both imposed by ruling powers and adopted by communities as strategies of integration. During the Qing-Manchu dynasty (1644–1912), strong policies of Sinicization were imposed on Muslim worship (Israel, 2002: 60–65).

In this article, I refer to the term “Sinicization of Islam” (yisilan zhongguohua) as part of the contemporary People’s Republic of China (PRC) official discourse on nation-building. The term zhongguohua, commonly translated into English as “Sinicization”, includes both Han and non-Han people in China as a civic national identity and in a project of nation-building that incorporates the historical, cultural, and linguistic diversity of its population, in which all people, no matter what their ethnicity, identify with the state (Ma Rong, 2017).
Moreover, the material analyzed provides evidence of local and national policies towards Islam, how they are ever-changing and sensitive, not only to time and space, but also to the means of communication.

2 The Context

Since the 1990s Muslim communities in China have experienced a religious revival, which has been visible in day-to-day practices, travels for the hajj, religious festivals, and the architecture of mosques. Scholars have seen various motivations behind this revival: reinventing heritage and promoting group solidarity (Hillman, 2004), social prestige and increased access to Islamic knowledge (Schrode, 2008), discontentment (Smith-Finley, 2013), and increasing contact with other forms of Islam (Stewart, 2017).

In 2015, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) launched the campaign for the “Sinicization of religion” in China (zongjiao zhongguo hua), and in particular, the “Sinicization of Islam” (yisilan jiao zhongguo hua), also termed the “indigenization” (bentu hua) of Islam. According to State media and statements from state-level and local figures, the motivations for the “Sinicization of Islam” are found in episodes of extremism and violence involving Muslim minorities (in particular Uyghurs), and the rise of a religious consciousness that exceeds the boundaries of the State. This is exemplified by the spread of mosques built in a global Islamic style, more commonly known as “Arab-style”, private Arabic schools, episodes of the recitation of the Qur’an in kindergartens, and halal entrepreneurship and consumption, which encompass a large spectrum

2 Discontent with various state policies implemented in Xinjiang (state-orchestrated Han migration, a sense of economic policies that have failed for the local population, social and ethnic inequalities, and issues related to religious freedom) have led to both violent (from clashes between protesters and police to premeditated attacks on civilians) and non-violent conflicts in recent decades. In particular, since 2001 and the war against international Islamic terrorism, the Chinese government has framed these responses as acts of terrorism or religious extremism, marginalizing the social and cultural factors that have led to discontent (Rodríguez-Merino, 2019). Moreover, some intellectuals, artists, and people from religious or impoverished and rural backgrounds have often been associated with separatism or extremism and seen as a threat to the security and unity of the State (Smith-Finley, 2019).

3 With “global Islamic style”, I refer to mosques characterized by large onion-shaped domes, minarets, and crescent moons, which can often be found in the religious landscapes of Northwest China. This style is often called “Arab-style”, although it mixes elements from different traditions. It differs from another authochthonous style characterized by sweeping roofs and symmetrical courtyards, similar to Confucian temples, considered more “Chinese”. I thank Francesca Rosati for pointing out this issue in designation.
of products where the halal distinction is not usually applied⁴ (Kunlun ce, 2016; Chinese Communist Party News Agency, 2019). As claimed by State discourse, a religion with a tight transnational network may affect and diminish attachment to the motherland and the support of patriotism (Chinese Communist Party News Agency, 2019). In contrast, the “Sinicization of Islam” can support national unity, national security, and Chinese economic development (Qinghai Province’s United Front, 2016). The ideological base of this initiative is that religion has no national boundaries, but believers – who are primarily Chinese citizens – must have a motherland. Patriotism, can solve the issue (Chinese Communist Party News Agency, 2019). A tangible implementation of this policy has been the removal of minarets and domes, substituted with more “indigenous” or “Chinese”-looking roofs (Stroup, 2021). Other recent developments of the state management of religion have been the change in policies on halal production and certification (Ptáčková, 2021: 161–162), the inclusion of Islam in the promotion of the tourist industry, with thematic parks and the touristification of mosques (Rosati, 2020; Ptáčková, 2021), and the destruction and desecration of holy Uyghur spaces such as the mazars (Thum, 2022).

While China promotes an Islam faithful to the State at the level of domestic policy, its diplomacy and foreign policy highly value relationships with Muslim-majority countries, and the presence of Muslim groups in China has often been used to develop political and economic ties.

Bilateral agreements and private commercial initiatives, visits of delegations of the World Islamic Association to China, Chinese Muslim friendship delegations sent to the Middle East, loans and donations from Arab countries or benefactors, university exchanges, translations of books from Arabic to Chinese and vice versa, and the import of products and consumption trends (halal toothpaste, henna, kohl, veils from Saudi Arabia and Pakistan) have nurtured the relationship between China and Muslim-majority countries in

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⁴ According to a speech made by President Xi Jinping (Chinese Communist Party News Agency, 2019), private Arabic schools are opened with the aim of understanding Hui culture and foreign civilizations and to cultivate multicultural consciousness and open-mindedness. However, this system of schools goes against regulations that state that secondary schools cannot hold religious classes and promote religious ideas. Regarding the halal brand, its expansion in several domains of consumption is increasing the cultural differences between Muslims and non-Muslims in China and interrupting the process of secularization of Muslims. In fact, the commercialization of the halal brand was also opposed by some Muslim consumers, who see in this designation an economic exploitation of religious belief (Ptáčková, 2021: 162).
recent decades (Gladney, 1991; Allès, Chérif-Chebbi and Halfon, 2003; Gillette, 2005; Ptáčková, 2018; Ptáčková, 2021).

Moreover, as shown in the Middle East and the Gulf countries, the Chinese government tries to build friendly relationships with Chinese turcophone and sinophone Muslims, in order to enhance the development of economic cooperation between China and Arab countries, but also to try to establish a cultural and ideological connection with the diaspora in order to avoid political activism against China, in particular concerning the issues related to Taiwan and Xinjiang (Al-Sudairi, 2018; Previato, 2020).

In recent years, domestic policy on Islam has affected the promotion of the Muslim communities and the public visibility of Muslims as a cultural bridge for commercial investments, as shown for the case of Ningxia, where its role as center of Chinese–Arab cooperation has been scaled down for fear of cultural radicalization and support of Islamism (Ptáčková, 2021).

Because of its religious vitality and connection between Muslim communities in China and Muslim-majority countries, the city of Xining, capital of Qinghai province, is a stimulating place to conduct research on religious practices and how they are represented on social networks.

This city of approximately 2,300,000 is inhabited by a majority of Han Chinese, and by Hui, Tibetans, Mongolic-speaking Tu, and Turkic-speaking Salar; Hui and Salar constitute the major Muslim groups in the city. Faith in Islam (with practices such as praying, not eating pork, not drinking alcohol), and descent (Persian and Arab Muslims for Hui, Turkic people from Samarkand for Salar) are part of their ethnic markers. Hui and Salar presence is evident in the city, in particular, in the central and eastern districts, because of the presence of mosques and halal restaurants.

The city has many exchanges with Muslim-majority countries: it is going to become one of the hubs of the Belt and Road Initiative and has started several cooperation initiatives in trade and science with Russia, Japan, Mongolia, UAE, Saudi Arabia, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Tajikistan (China Service and Trade Guide Network, 2019). The province has exported fabrics, agricultural products, and raw materials, and has invited foreign experts in different fields of business, geology, and agriculture to bring their know-how (ibid.).

Northwest China is home to several Muslim groupings (gedimu, yihewani, Sufi brotherhoods, the more recently established tablighi jamāʿat, and salafiyya), which differ in their historical legacies and rituals and have come into conflict with each other in their efforts to gain political influence. However, Muslims in Xining do not talk openly about these divisions, and differences are often avoided in order to favour a non-conflictual, official rhetoric and to highlight the importance of a single credo and the existence of a cohesive Muslim
community (Steward, 2017; Stroup, 2017). This sense of community encourages conversions from Han and other non-Muslim minorities, to the extent that Xining is considered a good place to live for Muslims (Steward, 2017: 137–138).

During my fieldwork conducted in 2017 and 2018, signs that are forbidden or discouraged as signs of extremism in other parts of China, such as halal signs in restaurants, Arabic script in urban spaces, wearing veils and having long beards, and Arabic language courses in the mosques, were present in Xining.5 This does not mean that the area is not affected by the “Sinicization of Islam”. Local press reports meetings of representatives from the religious institutions, such as the First Islam Scholar Forum in 2016 (Qinghai province’s United Front, 2016), and a conference bringing together the Qinghai Buddhist Islamic, Taoist, and Christian leaders with local authorities in 2019 (The United Front Department of CPC Central Committee, 2019; Chinese Communist Party News Agency, 2019). The reports of the meetings do not provide details on practical policies. Still, they provide the ideological bases: the “Sinicization of Islam” is seen as a way to unite the different ethnic groups, to increase security, improve economic development, implement poverty alleviation strategies, and adapt religion to the model of Chinese society. Recently, the local administration removed the domes and the minaret of the famous Dongguan mosque in the center of Xining, in a renovation project that aims to take the building back to its ancient “Chinese” form, resulting in protests from part of the Muslim communities of the city (Stroup, 2021).

3 Studies on Technology-Mediated Communication

Technology-mediated communication embodies public discourse and popular trends and constitutes a way to build sociality (Venkatraman, 2017). Discursive acts portrayed in the media are embedded in existing social practices, set in a socio-historical context, and have targeted and tangible audiences (Akkaya, 2014).

Religion is one of the social practices extensively present in media technologies; linguistic anthropology has investigated how technology-mediated communication is shaping religious experiences, showing that forms of devotional

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5 For example, in Xinjiang “anti-religious extremism” targeted Islamic code and cultural elements such as the veil for women, beards for men, and behaviors such as avoiding drinking alcohol and smoking (Byler, 2017). Regarding the other regions inhabited by Muslim communities, academic research lacks recent studies. A blog article by Stroup (2019), drawing on reports from different newspapers, indicates attempts to limit religious expression also in Ningxia, Gansu, and Yunnan.
practices are strictly influenced by the social and political context and by new forms of sensibilities and commodification (Meyer, 2004; Schultz, 2006; Hirschkind, 2006; Oosterbaan, 2008; Eisenlohr, 2010; Venkatraman, 2017). For example, the circulation of sermons on cassette tapes in Egypt in the 1970s–2000s disseminated among ordinary Muslims pious dispositions and called for citizens’ participation (Hirschkind, 2006).

Electronic media change and create new devotional practices, as shown in the performance of the naʿt in the Mauritian Muslim diaspora, in which sound reproduction in electronic media establishes a connection with the divine (Eisenlohr, 2010), or in Hinduism, wherein posting of pictures of Hindu religious deities has been identified as a way to build good karma (Venkatraman, 2017).

The use of media to express religious content has often been connected with the emergence of a sort of public sphere in Muslim-majority countries: a shared idea of community (the umma), religious norms, and notions of moral duty have often been used to create forms of social and political organization and to achieve objectives related to identity and leadership (Eickelman and Anderson, 1999; Hirschkind, 2006).

It is difficult to apply this idea to the Chinese context. Forms of associational life and group mobilization have been described as not autonomous but embedded within state institutions (Herold, 2008; Erie, 2016). In the context of Islam in China, religious networks that carry out educational and philanthropic activities act between social and state limits (Erie, 2016: 123–128).

Another aspect of technology-mediated communication is that the use of bilingual, multilingual and multi-writing discourse contributes to shaping imaginaries, cultural affiliation, group solidarity, and pragmatic functions (Danet and Herring, 2007; Tsiplakou, 2009; Androutsopoulos, 2011; Ivković, 2013; Barasa, 2016). On the one hand, language choices are often embedded in offline cultural affiliations and beliefs. For example, language choices can perform ethnolinguistic and historical affiliations that are expressed in the context of competition between different countries and blocks of countries, such as in the discussions on the Eurovision Song Contest on YouTube (Thorne and Ivković, 2015). On the other hand, language choices can create identities and subcultures that do not emerge in the offline realm. They are able to perform online identities for pragmatic needs typically related to the medium of expression (the written interaction), and to challenge monolingual conventions of real-life communication (Tsiplakou, 2009).

Research on technology-mediated communication has also gone beyond the use of language, to see production of media content on social media as “multimodal” artefacts, as they consist of graphics, texts, and videos, sometimes combined (Adami and Jewitt, 2016).
The aspects mentioned above of how media shape religious experience, the connections between social practices and online practices, and the use of different semiotic resources to build cultural or ethnolinguistic affiliations are aspects that I encounter in the data analyzed. Moreover, these aspects are worth applying to online China, a domain highly controlled by the State, but also a place to develop cultural trends and address popular or sensitive topics (Herold, 2008; Leibold, 2011; Liu, 2011; Ng, 2015; Grant, 2017).

This study is based on material gathered from Weixin, a Chinese multipurpose instant messaging (one-to-one text, voice, and videochat), social media, and mobile payment app that has impacted the lives of Chinese citizens since the 2010s. Although there are differences in usage between people from different social or economic backgrounds (MacDonald, 2016) and rural or urban origins, Weixin is popular among all Chinese citizens, due to the low cost of cellphones and Internet plans and the presence of Internet networks even in remote areas of the country.

The app has extended offline practices (such as shopping, learning, building relationships) to the virtual world and allowed users to express themselves, share values, and build networks that have been lost because of phenomena such as migration and urban development (Zhao, 2017).

Regarding the use of Weixin among ethnic minorities, research in China has highlighted the danger of increased access to globalization, which could affect negatively the survival of minoritized cultures (Zhao, 2017), but also its potential for cultural dissemination and to connect communities (Tian and Yang, 2019). As shown in a study on the use of Weixin to disseminate Mongolian culture and lifestyle, the use of written, visual, and audio material can connect people who have lost contact with ethnic cultures, and can also attract outsiders (ibid.).

Some studies have addressed the relationship between religious practices and Internet-mediated communication among different Muslim groups in China. In particular, they have investigated the dissemination of Islam reformist ideas within Uyghur society on Weixin (Harris and Isa, 2018), transnational identification and state interests in mainland China’s and Hong Kong’s Islamic websites (Ho, 2010), and self-censorship, social inclusion, and solidarity in online discussion forums (Wang, 2019).

Building on this literature, the research analyzes visual and textual elements of the pictures posted. It discusses how this content is embedded in the social and religious life of the community. Moreover, the study takes into account the latest approach of the Chinese state toward religious practices, giving insight into the possibilities of religious expression in Chinese social networks.
4 Methodology and Data

The research is based on a total of 40 pictures posted between 2017 and 2020, gathered and captured through screenshot from the Weixin accounts of five Hui male users aged between 30 and 40 years old. I employ in this article the definition of “picture” used in visual semiotics: any image or text or combination of image and text that forms a coherent single-framed sign (Scollon and Scollon, 2003: 214).

The content was posted on the personal pages of the users, called in the Weixin jargon, “friends’ book” (pengyou juan), translated into English as “Moments”, where it is possible to post comments, pictures, videos, and articles.

These users come from different areas of Qinghai and the neighboring province of Gansu, and all live in Xining, where they have family and work, with job positions ranging from private business to public administration. I have not investigated the specific religious affiliations of the users in terms of groups, given the sensitivity of the topic mentioned. However, they all frequented the mosques, and were interested in studying Islam. Two of them were studying Arabic in evening classes organized by the mosque.

Two features of Weixin, its private character and the presence of censorship, are important in discussing and contextualizing the data.

Regarding the first aspect, a Weixin feature that distinguishes the social network is the lack of public comment and the selective nature of the audience. For example, in the “friends’ book” only friends of the users are allowed to see content posted. On the one hand, this intimate and private character can be seen as a negative aspect, which affects the ability to share and diffuse content to a broader audience. On the other hand, it has also been seen as a way to construct community-based group cohesion and local mobilization (Harwit, 2016: 312–313). Furthermore, in online China there is a tendency to avoid being identified publicly, unless for financial gain, and links between online and offline identity, often demonstrated by the use of screen names (Farrall and Herold, 2011).

Regarding the second aspect, Weixin is, like other forms of expression, subject to control of the content posted.6 Online China can be a very restrictive space, through the Great Firewall, the blacklisting of specific words, the coercion

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6 According to research conducted on Weixin content between 2014 and 2015, Weixin had a lower number of posts being censored compared to other Chinese social media. Sensitive keywords were related to corruption, content related to June 4 (the Tian’an men events), but also posts related to tabloid gossip, fake news, and sensationalism by (Jason Q. Ng, 2015).
of technology corporations to control the web and real access control (Herold, 2008). At the same time, the State sets the limits of expression, with temporal and spatial changes, which allow netizens to debate on issues, in particular as long as online discontent does not turn into offline protests (ibid.). In the last decade, under Xi Jinping’s government, China has tried to increase national sovereignty and public security in cyberspace, extending and tightening existing regulations and increasing the restriction of web activities, in particular, those related to rumors, pornography, violence, and terrorism-related content (Herold, 2018).

The Islam-related content examined in this article was able to circulate without being the object of censorship. However, some other types of content related to religion were censored; for example, articles of protest against the demolition of and the changes in aesthetic standards for mosques. The majority of the pictures analyzed were posted in 2018 and at the beginning of 2019. This is also the period when the posting of this material reached its peak. After mid-2019 and in 2020, the number of pictures posted decreased and was limited to Happy Friday messages and wishes for religious festivals. The users may have been warned about posting such content or censored themselves.

The study follows an ethnographic approach, which sees the use of media embedded in everyday practices (Hine, 2000; Androuatsopoulos, 2006; Akkaya, 2014) and complements data on Internet-mediated communication with information on the social and political context where the community lives (Hine, 2000; Ho, 2010; Grant, 2017). I have therefore engaged in observations on religious practices and exchanges with members of the Muslim community. Moreover, studies on the Muslim community in Xining (Steward, 2017, Stroup, 2017) have helped in the discussion and contextualization of data.

Regarding the protection of data and users, this study followed as an example the research conducted by Grant (2017) and Harris and Isa (2018): avoiding asking the users for consent and adopting different strategies to anonymize data. The data shows exclusively the pictures posted, excluding reference to the personal lives of the users.

5 Islam-Related Visual Posting

The following sections discuss different aspects of religious content posted on Weixin: its social and normative function, the morality codes addressed, the connections with a global Muslim community, and the references to mundane concerns and the Chinese system.
5.1 “Do Not Forget That Today Is Friday”: The Normative Role of Sharing

Most of the pictures analyzed are related to Friday prayer, Ramadan, and the Eid al-Adha festivals.

“Friday prayers” messages, written in Chinese and Arabic, wish people a happy Friday and invite them to go to the mosque, as shown in Figure 1.

The picture displays content in Arabic and Chinese. At the top, in Arabic script, we find a religious formula, the greeting “peace be upon you as well as the mercy of God and His blessings” (al-salāmū ‘alaykum wa raḥmatu-llāhi wa barakātuh). At the center, the greeting “happy Friday” (zhuma jiqing) in Chinese, is followed on the line below by a message, again in Chinese: “Do not forget that today is Friday” (bie wangle jintian shi zhuma). In this picture, we can notice the use of Arabic to reproduce a religious formula that is also used in the greeting habits of the users in daily life (“peace be upon you”, al-salāmū ‘alaykum). Chinese is used for a greeting that shows a loanword from Arabic, “Friday” (jum’a), and expresses an exhortatory message.

The “happy Friday” picture offers two layers of meaning: it indicates a greeting, but also a call to gather and meet at the mosque. In this way, it has the role of recalling forms of devotion.

A similar role is found on the occasion of Ramadan, in a picture that provides information on how to spend the celebration according to religious norms (Figure 2).

The picture is made up of nine small squares. The one in the center contains a white waning crescent moon and the characters for Ramadan (zhaiyue) on a black background. The remaining eight squares explain through images and short sentences written in Chinese how to spend and celebrate it, and what one is allowed and not allowed to do.

Figure 1
Happy Friday
The squares indicate (left to right, top to bottom):

1. Learning through fasting. During the day, from dawn to sunset, it is forbidden to eat and drink (*tiyan jie* – *baitian* (*cong richu dao riluo*) *jinshi* – *jinshu*).
2. Revere (Allah), limit desires and improve oneself, cultivate one’s moral character, revere the creator (*jingwei* – *qingxin guayu xiusheng yangxing* – *dai zaowuzhu de jingwei*).
3. Pray, for the peace of the nation and the happiness of the family, pray for peace and be grateful (*qidao* – *qiqiu guojia anning jiating xingfu* – *qiqiu heping gan’en*).
4. Overcome selfish desires; self-discipline body and mind (*kefu siyu* – *jieshou shengxin de molian* – *zili jianren*).
5. Be compassionate. Experience for oneself the feelings of impoverished people, help people in need (*ceyinzhixin* – *tiyan kunnanzhe de ganshou* – *fukunjwei*).
6. Exceptions for the fasting: sick people, pregnant women, children, elderly people, and travellers (*liwai* – *bingren yunfu ertong laoren luingzhe keyi bu fengzhai*).
7. Study, learn beneficial knowledge, improve oneself (xuexi – xuexi youyi de zhishi – tisheng de wo).

8. Give alms, give to impoverished people at least 2.5% of one’s yearly income (shishe – yinian shouru de 2.5 (zhishao) gei pinkun de ren).

The picture shows how the believers should engage in religious practices related to Ramadan, with indications for forms of devotion (fasting, giving alms), and personal development (study, to self-discipline body and mind).

The squares related to fasting are didactic: fasting includes food and drink and goes from sunrise to sunset: sick people, pregnant women, children, elderly people, and travellers are allowed to break the fast.

Practices to follow are represented by simple icons. For example, the general prohibition sign warns about the exceptions for fasting; the hands recall the gesture of raising or rubbing hands, common in religious practices of Islam; compassion is symbolized by a heart. In most of the squares, stylized figures represent the actions mentioned: limiting desires is exemplified by a figure gathering money; a figure reading a book stands for studying. Through easy and straightforward visuals, the picture establishes connections between images and principles to follow.

The pictures such as the ones shown in Figures 1 and 2 have an informative and social role. They reproduce what in the community is spread by word of mouth or the didactic teachings shared in a mosque.

Life and work schedules in Xining do not always accommodate scheduled prayers and frequent visits to the mosque (see also Turnbull, 2014 for Hui in Kunming).

In this context, through the picture posted, the users become actors who contribute to building a more pious religious community, and the social network acts as a megaphone addressing the online acquaintances of the user. Through the use of media, religion seems more approachable. The pictures, with their wishes and greetings, embody the community’s ties and play a role in regulating practices and following normative Islam.

The language choices of the pictures in Figures 1 and 2 display a symbolic connection through Arabic, the language of the Qur’an, and pragmatic objectives in transmitting informative and didactic content through Chinese.

Islam attributes sacredness and importance to the language and the writing system of the scriptures, which makes its diffusion among non-Arabic speaking communities a strong factor in spread (Fergusson, 1982). At the same time, language choices also accommodate the different levels of mastery of Arabic across the community. Some Muslims in Xining are familiar with religious expressions in Arabic; for others it is often self-taught or learnt at classes organized by the local mosques, in order to read Arabic script and recite the Qur’an.
There are also people who have studied in Arabic-speaking countries and are using the language in their professional life. Given the different levels of mastery of Arabic, Chinese is the language used to spread information and didactic content (see Liddicoat, 2012). This is valid particularly for Qinghai. In this province, Northwest Mandarin often acts as the lingua franca between different ethnic groups, and it is also present in the everyday linguistic repertoire of Muslim groups, such as the Salar, whose heritage language is endangered.

5.2 Morality Codes: What Makes a “Good” Muslim?

Other pictures indicate principles to follow in daily life, including respect for the elderly, for women (specifically, wives and mothers), compassion and respect for those who are in need.

Figure 3 portrays a son washing the feet of his mother, with a hadith of the Prophet written at the bottom in Arabic and Chinese: “Paradise lies under the feet of mothers” (tiantan zai muqin de dixia – al-janna taḥtu uqdāmi l-ummḥāt).

In this case, the message is bilingual, with Chinese at the top and more visible in terms of size.

Through the gesture of washing the feet and the reference to paradise, the picture invites people to care for their mothers.

The image recalls also a Confucian value, filial piety. The picture is, in fact, similar in meaning and visual elements to a painting used in propaganda posters related to the Chinese Dream, a term that captures the vision of a prosperous future for the Chinese State (Landsberger, 2018), shown in Figure 4.

In this way, Islamic notions of moral duty find a connection with values that can be shared outside the Muslim community, at the level of the whole Chinese citizenship.

Visual posting also refers to affection and love relationships. Figure 5 depicts a couple photographed from behind: a man with his arm around the shoulder of a woman and holding a red heart in his hand. The woman wears a hijab, and

![Figure 3](image-url)

“Paradise is under the feet of mothers.”
FIGURE 4
Chinese virtues
DESIGNER: PUBLIC SERVICE ADVERTISING ART COMMITTEE; IMAGE DESIGNED BY LIU ZHIGUI. TITLE: ZHONGHUA MEIDE – XIAO (CHINESE VIRTUE – FILIAL PIETY). PUBLISHER: CHINA INTERNET TELEVISION STATION. DATE OF PUBLICATION: 2013. NO PRINT NUMBER. AVAILABLE ONLINE ON WEBSITE OF THE CIVILIZATION OFFICE UNDER THE CCP CENTRAL COMMITTEE, HTTP://WWW.WENMING.CN/JWMSXF/_294/ZGGYGG/ZGFZBL/201309/T20130911_1464894.SHTML

FIGURE 5
Relationships
a mosque with a minaret constitutes the background. On the right, the picture displays the word "Allah" written in Arabic script.

The term for God may be found written in this kind of posting in Arabic, or in Chinese, for example, "true God" (zhenzhu), “the creator” (zaowuzhu), and the phonetic rendering of Allah (anla). In this picture, the term for God is not only a written element, but also a visual one that embellishes the picture through its Arabic calligraphic form. Arabic calligraphy, which fuses visual and written features to express religious content, is a way to embellish and add a religious flavor to the space. It is part of visual registers that circulate via global media, but also of conventional religious elements that are found in the material culture of Muslims in the Qinghai-Gansu area. Arabic calligraphies, objects with Muslim icons, such as models representing mosques, muqarnas, the Qur’an, rosaries, Fatima eyes, and crescent moons, are often bought and displayed in private or public spaces.

Another picture related to sentimental relationships depicts a couple reading the Qur’an (Figure 6). The man wears a dishdasha and the woman an abaya, items of clothing that are not used among Chinese Muslims; the picture is likely to represent a couple from the Gulf.

Love relationships are, according to these pictures, part of the religious life of a good believer. This is shown by the presence of religious icons: the name of Allah written in calligraphy, the Qur’an, the mosque in the background, the pious outfits of the people represented. Regarding this picture, the user comments on the role of women, in particular wives and mothers, who are seen as central to the well-being of men at home. The comment indicates traditionally assigned gender roles: “To the wife and mother who prepare the meal for me: While you are still sleeping soundly, your mother or your wife has prepared in advance the food to break the fast” (wei wo zhunbei zhaifan de muqin he qizi:

![Couple reading the Qur’an](image)
Other sentiments and attitudes addressed are moral discipline, modesty, the avoidance of jealousy, compassion for poverty-stricken people and lower classes, and the pursuit of a life of faith and simplicity, caring about other human beings. This is shown in a picture portraying a street cleaner standing close to a garbage bin (Figure 7). The caption in Arabic says: "Do not despise a poor person, he may be closer than you to God" (lā taḥtaqiru faqirun farabbimā yakūnu aqrabu minki ilā Allah). In contrast to the bilingual pictures analyzed above, the picture displays only a caption in Arabic. In order to make the message understandable, the user added a translation in Chinese on the post.

These thoughts are included in a broader discussion on material wealth: obtaining a prestigious job position with a good salary and being attached to material needs distract the believer from his or her spiritual life, inducing selfishness and individualism. In this context, technology-mediated communication is a tool to spread not only calls to devotion, but also morality codes. Listening has been identified as one of the activities to communicate religious and moral values in media communication (Hirschkind, 2006; Oosterbaan, 2008). In this case, the sensory experience is not formed by hearing, but by a visual experience.

5.3 Motivational Quotes and Emotional Content

Instilling motivation is another function that is found in some pictures. God is asked to help improve everyday life and encourage people to behave in a better way and take advantage of their opportunities.
This is often found in pictures with greetings, such as in: “Another day starts, peace be upon you. Good morning, may Allah give peace to you and your family!” and wishes, such as those for Friday prayer: “Happy Friday – all good things are in the mercy of the Creator” (zhuma jiqing yiqie meihao douzai zaowuzhu de cimin zhong), with as background a person holding a bouquet (Figure 8).

This picture also introduces non-religious visual elements. In this category, flowers, but also representations of natural landscapes such as lakes, sunsets, and cartoon-style animals, are popular. Like the religious ones encountered in the previous section, they constitute expressive means that circulate via social media across the world, and add an aesthetically pleasant touch to the religious messages.

God can be addressed for a particular occasion, such as studying issues, or the wish to live a successful life, as shown in the following caption: “Be happy about what you have, fight for what you want, remember, a happy and successful life begins in Allah and ends in Allah” (wei ni suoyou de shiwu gandao kaixinwei ni xiangyao dedao de shiwu er fendou-xingfu er chenggong de rensheng shiyu anla, zhengyu anla). Chinese is in this kind of posting the language used to express motivation and emotions.

In other cases, the relationship between God and the believer is seen as pure love. This is shown in some pictures with captions in Chinese, such as “Allah loves you, maybe you do not know it” (anla ai ni, huoxu ni bu zhidao) on a simple green circle background (Figure 9), and “Allah is very, very good to you” (anla dui ni zhende hen hao hen hao) on a white background with a heart.

These pictures introduce us to an emotionally charged way to live Islam, which differentiates itself from the more normative content shown in the previous examples.
5.4 Global Networks

Despite various sectarian divisions and more local or cosmopolitan intellectual trends, Muslims in China tend to underline the sense of belonging to the global Islamic community and their wish to learn more about the teachings of the Qur’an and hadith, the Arabic language, forms of devotion and authenticity, and to be in contact with other Muslim communities (Allès, Chérif-Chebbi and Halfon, 2003; Steward, 2017; Stroup, 2017).

In this study, this interest in a connection with global Islam is represented, for example, by the posting of quotes from influential Muslims. A picture allegedly quotes Nouman Ali Khan, a Pakistani-American Muslim speaker and Arabic instructor, famous for his inspirational quotes that fuse faith in Allah and belief in personal achievement. An image represents his thoughts through three stylized little figures: the first is kneeling, the second is reading a book, and the third is seated on a question mark. Each represents an action written in Chinese characters: “pray” (libai) + “study” (xuexi) + “reflect on” (sikao) = “comprehend” (lingwu). As noted in Steward’s ethnography (2017: 65), many Muslims in Xining are attracted by American Muslim converts, both for the knowledgeable way they address Islamic principles and for their mastery of English and personal success.

Other pictures affirm the connections with other Muslim communities, in China and the world.

Regarding China, some pictures originate in official accounts of Muslim communities in Yiwu (Figure 10). This large trading center has attracted foreign businesses from all over the world since the end of the 1990s, in particular, from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, the Middle East, and North African countries. The presence of foreign traders has attracted Muslims from other parts of China, who also serve as interpreters (Wang, 2015: 168).
The diffusion of posts made by Muslim communities in Yiwu indicates an internal network that connects Northwestern China with the Muslim centers on the coast and, through the cosmopolitan city of Yiwu, with a wider global community.

Figure 10 is related to the celebration of the Eid al-Adha, the Feast of the Sacrifice, and displays the logo of a Sinoarab group in Yiwu. As observed for Figure 1, it employs Chinese and Arabic, and two different scripts for Arabic. On the top line we find the wish in Arabic script “Happy blessed Eid al-Adha” (a'īdū l-ādḥā l-mubāraku sa'iyydūn), followed below by a shorter version of the wish, in Romanized Arabic “Happy Eid” (Eid Adha mubarak). On the line below, the same message is translated into Chinese “Happy festival of the sacrifice” (gu'erban jie kuai.le). In the Chinese version, the word Guerban is a phonetic translation of the Arabic term qurbān “sacrifice”. The term festival (jie), is translated with the term usually used to refer to Chinese celebrations.

Here, we can observe a symbolic and pragmatic use of languages and orthographies. On the one hand, the employment of different languages and scripts reinforces the global character of the picture and the connection between Yiwu and an interconnected Islam. On the other hand, wishes in Arabic, Romanized Arabic, and Chinese include a large spectrum of the community and their different levels of mastery or knowledge of the languages involved. In particular, Romanized Arabic does not offer the symbolic sacredness of Arabic script, but facilitates the understanding of Arabic.

Regarding the visual features, the figure representing a lamb is characterized by a style that recalls cartoon and educational primary-school print materials, which is not unusual in China (for example, police officers are often represented in public signs and civic advertisements in this way).
As for Muslim communities outside China, the pictures posted also recall connections with Islam in Southeast Asia. So far we have encountered material written in Chinese and Arabic, or with Arabic as the only language. In the next case, we find another foreign language, Malay. The picture below (Figure 11) shows a woman reading the Qur’an, with a caption saying “Muteness is not a hindrance to reading the Qur’an and getting to know Allah” from the account “Let’s spread the good version of Islam” (Jom Dakwah). It is a message of encouragement for those who have physical disabilities, about the possibility of reciting the Qur’an using sign language instead of the voice.

Malay is not a language the Muslim community in Xining is familiar with. However, the picture still conveys religiosity, with ideas of piety represented by the woman reciting the Qur’an using sign language.

The connection with the global umma also touches geopolitical issues, such as the conflicts in the Middle East or Central Asian countries such as Afghanistan. These orientations are found in various pictures posted. For example, one picture portrays the presidents Barack Obama, George W. Bush, and Bill Clinton. The caption says: “During 23 years these 3 people invaded 9 Islamic countries, murdered 11 million Muslims and nobody called them terrorists”. The message is in English, and a Chinese translation was provided in the post by the user. The message plays on the number of deaths among civilians, the word “terrorist”, and the high number of casualties inflicted by the allies during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The post reproduces a debate on U.S. military intervention that it is usual to find on a global scale, and that, as shown in the post, is also found in the Muslim community in Xining.

More recent facts are also mentioned, such as the killing by U.S. forces of General Qasem Suleimani of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.
A caption refers to his death, describing the general as a counter-terrorist hero (fankong yingxiong), accusing the U.S. of hegemonism (baquanzhuyi), Israel of Zionism (youtaihuzhuyi), and Saudi Arabia of Wahhabism (wahabijid-uanzhuyi) to persecute countries in the Middle East.

Connections with other Muslim communities outside China are also related to the search for a more normative Islam. This is shown in a picture wishing a happy Ramadan posted by the mosque in Jianguo street (Xining) saying: “Salam to all the members! [Situation of the observation of Ramadan of all countries] So far, reliable news has been received from different places. Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Southeast Asian countries, and Jordan, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and the Gulf States have declared the 6th as the first date of Ramadan” (saliamu wenhou ge wei jiaoyou – gedi guangyue qingkuang: dao muqian weizhi, yijing jiedao gedi kekao xiaoxi: malaisiya, yindunixiya, taiguo, deng dongnan guojia he yuedan, keweite, alianxi deng haiwan guojia yijing xuanbu 6 hao wei zhaiyue diyi tian). The date of the break of the fast in Xining varies according to religious group. While some groups such as the yihewani and the gedimu decide the days for Ramadan locally, Salafis wait for the official information from Saudi Arabia (see also Steward, 2017: 44).

Recently, in COVID-19 times, pictures posted portray families praying at home, keeping precise rules of distancing (head of the family, male children, and then women behind the men). These pictures are related to life during lockdown and the opportunities to pray at home. They started circulating on Weixin in April 2020, when lockdown measures were about to be lifted or already lifted in some provinces in China but began to be enforced in the Middle East and Gulf region. Indeed, the pictures come from the official account of the Presidency of the Two Holy Mosques in Saudi Arabia, and others show the rules of praying in Arabic, without translation in Chinese.

As for the other cases cited above, the social network exposes users to different events and trends from the outside Muslim world. The pictures show universalizing tendencies, as found by Stroup (2017) in other religious attitudes among Hui communities. The interest in Islam as it is experienced in other parts of the world increase global group identity based on a shared faith.

5.5 Mundane Concerns and the Chinese System
As we have seen in the previous sections, Islam-related pictures embody ideas of piety and devotion, but also social and personal achievements. To what extent are these “secular” elements included in the Chinese state’s model of social and economic development?

Indeed, Muslims in Xining have access to diverse kinds of job positions and revenues and differing levels of education. A common concern is hardship and lack of education, and a common aspiration is achieving wealth. Moreover,
Muslims, in particular Hui, are praised in the Chinese collective imagination for their achievements in business and commerce, and some Hui communities see themselves as actors in China's development discourse (Gladney, 1991; Gillette, 2005).

Some content shown in this study represents these ideas, such as overcoming life's obstacles, studying, working hard, and achieving wealth but with modesty. These elements are also found in the discourse on China's progress and modernity, such as in the concept of raising the quality (suāzǐ) of one person in terms of behavior, education, and ethics, and building a moderately prosperous society (xiaokang shehui; Gow, 2017; Hizi, 2019). Furthermore, building a family, respecting parents and elderly people, and cultivation of moral character, which we have encountered in the previous sections, are values also found in Confucian ethics, which gives the cultural foundation to the Chinese dream (Gow, 2017).

Supporting the Chinese political ideology can also be explicit, showing the need to balance the interests of the State and the interests of the community. Statements such as those shown in Figure 2: “to pray, pray for the peace of the nation and for the happiness of the family”, highlight the fusion of religion and patriotism condensed in the slogan “Love the country, love religion” (ażıguo aijia).

6 Final Remarks

This article has discussed local realities, religious experiences, and questions of faith among the Muslim community in Xining, in their use of Weixīn. This space reproduces ideas of piety, sociality norms, and communicative repertoires of the community, transmits religious content and morality codes, and nurtures interest in religious connections.

Language choices and visual elements play a role in shaping the posts and transmitting religious content.

Chinese is often found as the language of communication, which transmits informative and didactic content: it explains how to celebrate religious festivals (Figure 2) and is used to express motivation and emotions (Figures 8 and 9). Arabic, in contrast, is used in particular for religious formulae and gives a touch of authenticity and symbolic connection to Islam.

The way languages are used in these pictures reflects their use and mastery in the offline lives of the users. Similarly, the use of religious and non-religious backgrounds is linked to global and local visual registers that are part of the material culture of the community.
The pictures reflect interest in a more normative Islam and learning more about moral behavior. A universalizing attitude and a connection with the broader *umma* is displayed in the themes addressed: the connection with other Muslim communities, the interest in conflicts in which Muslims are involved, and the search for a normative Islam. These interests are expressed on the linguistic and visual levels by the use of Arabic, and by religious visual backgrounds and icons that circulate via social media.

Certainly, this is an attitude that emerges in the online interface of a group of users and it shows only a trend of the Muslim community in Xining, in one of the many ways to live Islam in daily practices.

The pictures also provide an insight into the implementation of policies on Islam in China. In the years 2017–2020, while written content in Arabic and religious signs and attitudes were erased or discouraged in other parts of China and seen as dangerous for state security, Islam-related pictures posted on Weixin among this community of users based in Xining seemed not to be affected. This can be interpreted in different ways. Probably the state exerts a less strict control on this kind of Islam-related content, consisting of pictures, which are less easy to detect in censorship activities. Sensitive issues, such as articles or posts opposing the changes in the architecture of mosques, were indeed censored. Control also varies according to the area, as posting this kind of pictures in Xinjiang would be considered a sign of extremism. Furthermore, the campaign of “Sinicization of Islam” presumably focuses on other more tangible religious phenomena, such as the construction of “Arab-style” mosques and the halal brand.

Nonetheless, the decrease since mid-2019 and through 2020 in the number of such pictures posted and the nationalistic turn of some religious content show that these online activities are also sensitive to state policies. The expression “love the state, love religion” (*aiguo aijia*), is indeed often found on Weixin religious public accounts, as a way to privilege the State over religious beliefs.

This aspect also demonstrates that the sharing of this kind of religious content cannot be attributed to the development of a “public sphere” understood as a space to discuss politics and organize forms of social mobilization, as has been pointed out in the use of media and Islam in other parts of the world. This case study indicates the existence of a faith-based community in the digital space, but within the limits sets by the State, which are ever-changing and sensitive to time, areas, and ethnic groups. Regarding this matter, this study shares the same concerns as raised in the literature review about the lack of existence of a public sphere in the use of technology-mediated communication in China.

This work has shed light on local religious sensitivities and trends and on local and national policies towards these forms of expressions. In particular,
in a period where access to China is difficult if not impossible because of the pandemic, and when the sensitive developments in China's domestic policy and a tense geopolitical situation make research more challenging, studies on small media give access to political tendencies, global connections, and ways of expression in the digital world that Muslim communities in China follow.

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