

Universal, yet local: The religious factor in Chinese Muslims' perception of world developmental hierarchy

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Abstract

Since its introduction in the late 19th century, developmental thinking has quickly diffused throughout Chinese society. Nowadays, Chinese people extensively employ the concept of development to understand different countries in hierarchical order. Using survey data collected in Gansu, China, we confirmed the nearly universal existence of such developmental worldviews. Overall, our respondents' perceptions conformed to the United Nations' developmental hierarchy based on the Human Development Index scores. However, local Muslims tended to deviate slightly more than other Chinese from the UN standard. This does not mean that Chinese Muslims were reluctant to adopt developmental thinking. In fact, in their eyes, developmental ideas have been prominently associated with Islam since the beginning of the 20th century. Our analysis shows that the observed Muslim–Han disparity is entirely due to Muslims' higher evaluations of development in countries with strongly Islamic populations – in this case, Pakistan. Other than this religion-based disparity, Gansu Muslims and local Han Chinese do not differ in their perceptions of the world developmental hierarchy.

Keywords

Development, Islam, China

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Introduction

A developmental worldview has come to influence individual minds since the 18th century (Thornton, 2001, 2005). According to this outlook, all human societies evolve from lower to higher levels of development. Due to variable paces of development, at any given time some countries may appear more developed than others. In the individual mind, this leads to the perception of a developmental hierarchy of different countries. Different interpretations have been proposed as to what development actually means, but in all versions of the developmental worldview, the qualitative differences between various human societies ultimately boil down to a single quantitative scale of development. Consequently, the developmental worldview appeals to ordinary people around the world as an accessible, albeit simplistic, schema of the world.

The developmental worldview originated in the elite class in northwestern Europe (Thornton, 2001, 2005). As it became increasingly widespread, however, more and more individuals around the world began to understand the world in terms of a hierarchy in which more or less developed countries occupy higher or lower positions. Since the Cold War, in particular, a global consensus on the developmental hierarchy has emerged. In this latest and highly influential version, development is defined in terms of certain aspects of human wellbeing, such as longevity, knowledge, and affluence (Deaton, 2013; Sen, 2001). These aspects have been measured, compared, published, and promoted by country governments and international agents of developmental thinking such as the United Nations (Stanton, 2007; Stiglitz et al., 2009).

Since the early 2000s, a developmental idealism research program has begun to systematically and critically assess the developmental worldview at the grassroots level (Thornton et al., 2010). Surveys were conducted in multiple countries in which individual respondents were asked to rate a list of countries in terms of each country's level of development. The findings have been consistent – individuals from different parts of the world were willing and able to rate different countries on a quantitative scale of development, and their perceived developmental hierarchies were very similar to those based on the Human Development Index (HDI) scores published by the United Nations (Thornton et al., 2012).

So far in the literature on developmental idealism, research on perceived developmental hierarchy has mainly focused on its prevalence and homogeneity (Binstock et al., 2013; Thornton et al., 2012). In this paper, we reaffirm this pattern with a detailed analysis of individual-level data from Gansu, China. More importantly, we further examine – for the first time in the literature of developmental idealism – how perceived developmental hierarchies differ across different social groups. While we acknowledge the global homogeneity of the perceived developmental hierarchy, we argue that individuals' developmental worldviews are not free from the influences of strong local ideational systems. In particular, we focus on the role of a crucial factor in northwestern China: Islam.¹

To see if Islamic religion makes a difference in the individual-level developmental worldview, we compare Muslims' and non-Muslims' perceptions of development.

Our survey data were collected in Gansu Province, where a substantial Muslim population, ethnically Hui and Dongxiang, live among the mostly non-religious Han majority. Compared to other Muslim groups living in further borderlands (i.e. Xinjiang), Hui and Dongxiang Muslims in Gansu are much more assimilated to the Han culture and population (Chang, 2006; Lipman, 2004; Ma, 2004). Nevertheless, they differ in important ideational aspects from their Han neighbors due to their adherence to Islam, as evidenced by Lai and Thornton's (2015) documentation of Muslim–Han differences in family values. In this paper, we go beyond the private sphere to investigate whether Chinese Muslims and non-Muslims also differ in their perceptions of country development. Specifically, we construct an eight-country developmental hierarchy for each respondent based on his/her ratings of Brazil, China, France, India, Japan, Nigeria, Pakistan, and the United States. We find that Muslims' perceived hierarchies deviate more than those of Han from the United Nations' HDI hierarchy.

To account for the observed religious difference in developmental worldview, we hypothesize that this is due to Chinese Muslims' favoritism towards other Muslim countries. Muslims in northwestern China are known to have been influenced by, and hold favorable opinions toward, major Muslim countries in Asia and the Middle East with which Han Chinese are less familiar (Lipman, 1997; Ma, 2000, 2012). We argue that this explains Chinese Muslims' relative deviation from the mainstream developmental hierarchy. To test this idea, we incorporate the relative size of the Muslim population in the rated countries. Our statistical models confirm that Chinese Muslims give higher ratings to foreign countries with higher proportions of Muslims. They also show that the observed Muslim–Han disparity in the developmental worldview is wholly attributable to such favorable ratings.

The developmental worldview in China

The developmental worldview was first introduced into China in the 19th century. Since then, three major historical experiences have been particularly influential in shaping it into its current version: China's confrontation with Western imperialists; the communist/socialist revolution; and the post-1978 economic reform.

Starting in the mid-19th century, imperialist powers became increasingly aggressive in encroaching on Manchu China. Pressured by a strong sense of national crisis, China's elites began to actively look outward towards the world for self-preservation (Schwartz, 1964). The quest for Western knowledge intensified after Japan defeated China during the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895, when Japan's victory was attributed to its efforts to model itself after the modern West. As a result, two profound changes occurred in the Chinese mentality – at least among the elites. First, the Sino-centric notion of *tianxia* ('under the heaven') was replaced by a broader view of a world consisting of multiple nation states, many stronger and wealthier than China (e.g. Fairbank, 1968; Ge, 2015: 291–485; Jin and Liu, 2009: 226–251; Zhang, 2014: 180–187). Second, China was seen as traveling, given due efforts, on a progressive path toward greater military power and national

wealth, rather than as a static regime making few changes in its lifestyle and governance (Pusey, 1983; Wang, 2000, 2002; Wu, 2005; Zhang, 2014: 47–175). These two ideas offered a new way to think about the world with a non-differential unit of analysis (i.e. nation state), two substantive outcome variables (i.e. national wealth and military power), and a historical mechanism (i.e. development/evolution/progress/modernization). This initial idea of national development was quickly and widely adopted by China's knowledge and power elites and resulted in numerous efforts under the banner of modernization.

While the developmental discourse was promoted in various self-strengthening efforts (Wang, 2002; Wu, 2005), its dissemination to the vast population of ordinary Chinese took place only after the Communist Party rose to power in the mid-20th century. Founded on strong ideology, the Party was dedicated to creating nationwide homogeneity of political ideas. To achieve this, the general notion of modernization was standardized to an official version of 'Marxist historical materialism' (Martin, 1990). This version declared that all countries in the world inevitably advance through a progressive sequence of different types of societies – from primitive society to slave-owning society to feudalist society, capitalist society, socialist society, and, eventually, communist society. According to this doctrine, socialist countries such as China, Cuba, North Korea, and the USSR were more advanced than the capitalist United States and European countries. This is not to say that the Party was bold enough to claim that China had surpassed the West in economic productivity. However, the essence of societal development was politically defined in terms of relations of production, which were believed to be increasingly classless and therefore more advanced in the later stages of societal development (Martin, 1990; Wang, 2003).

Compared to the previous version of the developmental worldview, which aimed mainly at national preservation, the communist interpretation further integrated a sense of revolutionary teleology. As a result, the positive value of development now includes not only self-empowerment, but also political legitimacy. In its extreme manifestation, during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), the entire country was mobilized in a violent movement to eliminate the 'four olds' (old customs, old culture, old habits, and old ideas) in which material and cultural legacies from pre-People's Republic of China times were stigmatized and destroyed. During the high tide of this socialist movement, things and thoughts in opposition to development were regarded as reactionary and prosecutable (MacFarquhar and Schoenhals, 2006: 113–116; Meisner, 1999: 319–321; Spence, 1999: 575).

The concept of development was once again revised in the post-1978 economic reform. Although the Marxist historical materialism remained the official philosophy of history, in policy terms and everyday language the word 'development' became tightly associated with economics. In 1985, Deng Xiaoping declared that 'peace and development are the two major issues of the contemporary world.' In 1992, Deng once again enshrined development as 'the hard truth' (Wong and Zheng, 2001). In Deng's political discourse during the 1980s and 1990s, the term 'development' was synonymous with economic growth (Urio, 2009: 45–102); tired

of the turmoil and poverty in the ceaseless class-struggle movements in previous decades (i.e. 1950s–1970s), the Chinese people welcomed Deng's new interpretation of development, the central tenet of which had shifted from relations of production to economic wealth. As a consequence, in the public's understanding, the communist society at the apex of the developmental hierarchy was soon replaced by the affluent Western countries which not long before were believed to be suffering from an evil capitalistic mode of production.

After a period of sustained and rapid economic growth, in the early 2000s the government began to campaign heavily on the idea of 'scientific development,' which championed a multi-dimensional view of wellbeing rather than solely focusing on material accumulation (Fewsmith, 2004; Song, 2008). This new turn of the development discourse in China echoed the United Nations' definition of 'human development' which uses the HDI to consider multiple aspects of social and economic wellbeing, including life expectancy, education, and per capita income (Sen, 2001; Stanton, 2007; Stiglitz et al., 2009).

As discussed above, China's developmental worldview has been constantly reshaped by the vicissitudes of modern Chinese history. Its focal content has shifted from national wealth and power to relations of production, to material economy, and finally to the multiple dimensions of universal human wellbeing. In addition, its scope of influence has expanded from a select group of elites to the general public throughout the entire country. Regarding China's current reality, we propose our first hypothesis: *At present, ordinary Chinese people perceive a world developmental hierarchy that is similar to the United Nations' version based on HDI scores (H1).*

Chinese Muslims, the Islamic world, and developmental worldview

Above, we have argued that the developmental worldview is now widely disseminated in China. This is not to say that it has influenced everybody to the same degree. China is a large and ancient country that houses tremendous cultural diversity. Many Chinese people are influenced by local ideational traditions that are not in total agreement with mainstream developmental thinking. In this study, we ask whether and how Chinese Muslims' adherence to the Islamic religion plays a role in their developmental worldview.

As Muslims in China have been exposed to more or less the same historical experiences and institutional changes as described above, we argue that China's Muslims have also extensively adopted the developmental worldview. At present, we expect to observe an overall conformity to the United Nations' HDI-based world hierarchy. However, as members of a global religion, Chinese Muslims are also characterized by a sense of belonging to the Islamic world. It is perhaps too bold to assume that their religious identity solely determines their perception of the world hierarchy, but it certainly constitutes an additional dimension when they evaluate how developed a country is.

The international Muslim community

Though prominent, the elite contemporary international organizations that champion developmental thinking are not the only global network. Long before the rise of post-World War II developmental international organizations, religious communities fostered strong group identities that transcended national boundaries. In 2009, 1.57 billion individuals, or 23% of the world population, were members of the international Islamic community. While Islam is popularly associated with the Middle East and North Africa, those countries account for only one-fifth of all Muslims in the world. The other 80% are widely distributed throughout other parts of the world (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009).

Despite numerous internal tensions throughout history and today, Muslims around the world share a common religious origin and have always been more or less connected internationally. Perhaps the best showcase of the supranational Muslim identity is Hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca – one of the five pillars of obligations in Islam. Between the mid-1920s and the mid-1990s, more than 25 million foreign Muslims traveled to Saudi Arabia to perform Hajj (Ministry of Pilgrimage, 1996). During the next two decades (1995–2015), over 30 million foreign pilgrims visited Mecca (Ministry of Pilgrimage, 2016). The annual figure has increased from 90,662 in 1925 to 910,157 in 1995, and to 1.8 million in 2011 (the number decreased to roughly 1.4 million during 2013–2015 due to site construction) (Ministry of Pilgrimage, 1996, 2016).

It is worth noting that all pilgrims did not come from a few major Muslim countries. The foreign pilgrims came from 188 countries in 2013, 163 countries in 2014, and 164 countries in 2015. Moreover, official reports stated that each year the vast majority of domestic pilgrims were, in fact, non-Saudi residents. This clearly demonstrates a shared sense of religious belonging among Muslims on a global scale.

International Islamic influences on China's Muslims before the 20th century

Although China's Muslims are known to have been influenced by indigenous cultures, they have always maintained a distinct religious identity and interacted with the Islamic world beyond China's state boundaries. Throughout history, major waves of external influence have played important roles in shaping China's Islamic landscape.

The earliest Islamic tradition in China, known as *Gedimu* (from the Arabic for 'old'), was established by the Muslim migrants from the Middle East and Central Asia between the 7th and 14th centuries. The migrants and their descendants mostly followed Hanafi of the Sunni tradition. Despite the highly assimilative Chinese culture, *Gedimu* communities survived in numerous mosque-centered residential clusters, each mosque being presided over by a learned *ahong* (teacher or imam) who traveled from place to place (Gladney, 1996: 36–41; Ma, 2007b).

The second tide of external Islamic influences entered China in the early Qing dynasty (1644–1912). Various Sufi orders were introduced into northwest China starting in the late 17th century whose influences had been strong and extensive for over two hundred years. During this period, a new form of Muslim community known as *menhuan* ('saintly descent group or school') emerged. Unlike the old *Gedimu* communities, *menhuan* followers, including the mosque leaders, pledged allegiance to the *menhuan* founders and their saintly lineages. Due to their prominent roles in the mid-19th century northwest rebellions, the Sufi *menhuan* were outlawed and systematically persecuted (Gladney, 1996: 41–53; Ma, 2007b).

The early 20th century: Islamic endorsement of developmental thinking

In the early 20th century, a third tide of influences came in from the outside Islamic world, which was motivated by a double jeopardy facing China's Muslims. First, the Muslim communities were greatly weakened under the oppressive Manchu regime (see Zhao, 1985: 948). Second, China's epic failure in its confrontations with the imperialists threatened the survival of the Chinese people as a whole. This double jeopardy led many Chinese Muslims to the Islamic centers in the Middle East and North Africa for comfort and solutions. It was documented that at least 834 Hui Muslims were known to have made the Hajj to Mecca between 1923 and 1934, and more than 33 Hui Muslims had studied at the prestigious Al-Azhar University in Cairo by 1939 (Gladney, 1996: 53–54).

In the context of a 'modernizing' world (see, for example, Kavas and Thornton, 2013), the messengers brought back the idea of development with Islamic endorsement. For example, religious elites in Arabia and Turkey urged Chinese Muslim visitors to advance modern education and modern entrepreneurship in order to influence the Chinese people and stay ahead in the competition between nations (Zhang, 2000). Of course, there must have been other messages from the major Islamic centers, but the double jeopardy facing China's Muslims had made the development/modernization story a most desirable promise of self-empowerment.

As a result, in the early 20th century, Chinese Muslims launched numerous social programs with the aim of 'modernizing' and strengthening China's Muslim society (Ma, 2007a). Elements of modernity (e.g. nationalism, social progress and competition, formal education) were actively promoted by Muslim organizations such as the Chinese Muslim Federation (founded in 1912), the Chinese Muslim Mutual Progress Association (founded in 1912), and the Society for the Promotion of Education Among Muslims (founded in 1931) (Gladney, 1996: 54). In the meantime, more than one hundred Muslim periodicals were published in China by 1949, most of which championed ideas concerning modernity and development (Lei, 2006; Li and Liu, 2000).

The particular significance of the third tide of external influences is the Islamic endorsement of the Western notion of development. While Chinese Muslims' religious identity was strengthened during this period, that identity worked in favor of developmental thinking (Ma, 2007b). Compared to that of non-Muslim Chinese,

whose mentors came solely from the West, Chinese Muslims' developmental worldview was reinforced by additional authority from the then 'modern' elites in major Islamic countries. Therefore, since its introduction to China, the developmental worldview has co-existed with the faith of Chinese Muslims in interdependence rather than mutual exclusion.

Islam and development in post-1978 reform China

The contact between Chinese Muslims and the Islamic world was interrupted during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) (but see Yang and Usiar, 1996). This did not change until the late 1970s, when China re-opened its doors to the world. In addition to foreign money, in 1979 the Chinese government also allowed for the receipt of religious work from abroad (Pillsbury, 1981), which meant that the Chinese Muslims and the international Islamic community were once again able to reach out to each other.

Once again, the idea of development became strongly associated with the international Muslim community. In fact, the re-connection between Chinese Muslims and the Islamic world was an integral part of the post-1978 economic development program. During the reform era, delegations of foreign Muslims frequently traveled to major Islamic sites in China, which facilitated numerous foreign investments and business exchanges between China and the broader Muslim world. In this process, China's Muslim heritage served as an important cultural asset for local economic growth (Ho, 2012; Israeli, 1981).

As China grew into a major player in global capitalism, the China–Islam bond became further involved in international development. In 2013, China launched the ambitious Eurasian development project – the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (also known as, One Belt, One Road). An estimated total of 6 trillion USD is to be invested in constructing infrastructure in more than 60 countries in Eurasia and part of East Africa and Oceania (Wang, 2016; Xinhuanet.com, 2015). When interacting with major Muslim countries in Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East, China tried repeatedly to convince the international community that 'development is the ultimate security' (*People's Daily* Online, 2015). Domestically, Chinese Muslims who are mostly concentrated in the 'underdeveloped' Northwest have received particular attention to make sure that they benefit from and engage in economic development. During a visit to the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in July 2016, China's leader Xi Jinping promised that when China accomplishes 'moderate prosperity' (*xiaokang*) as planned by 2020, no local ethnic groups (i.e. Muslim ethnicities in the Northwest) should be left behind (Xinhua News Agency, 2016).

Of course, the renewed bond between Chinese Muslims and the Islamic world since the late 1970s is not just a matter of economic development. During the reform era, substantial foreign funds were donated to build mosques and religious education institutions to preserve, enhance, and renew the Muslim traditions (Gladney, 1996: 63). For example, several Islamic Academies were opened to

train Islamic clergy with the sponsorship of the Islamic Development Bank (Dillon, 1994). Since the 1980s, the Islamic revival has caused unprecedented flows of materials, people, and ideas between China and Muslim countries (Armijo, 2008; Gladney, 1996: 62–63, 327–328; Ho, 2012; Ma, 2012; Yang and Usiar, 1996). In 2008, it was estimated that a total of 1,000 to 1,500 Chinese Muslim students were studying in Egypt, Iran, Malaysia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Turkey (Armijo, 2008). Since the mid-1980s, Chinese Muslims began to go on the Hajj in relatively large numbers (Ma, 2008). In 1987, the number of pilgrims was restored to the pre-1949 level, exceeding the official annual quota of 2,000 (Gladney, 1996: 63). In twenty years, pilgrims increased to more than 10,000 in 2007 (Xinhuanet.com, 2010). In 2014, about 14,500 Muslims went on pilgrimage to Mecca (Xinhuanet.com, 2014).

In the past thirty years, Chinese Muslims' identification with the contemporary international Islamic community has been reinforced. As a religious minority group contained in China, Chinese Muslims have come to attach more affection and ideational authority to the Muslim-majority countries. For example, Gladney (1996: 63) documented the glory and impact of a Hui pilgrim from Xi'an in 1987 whose return was celebrated with a procession of over 100 taxis owned by local Hui Muslims. The pilgrim was then invited to give lectures in various places in north-west China, where he called on local Muslims to reform China's Islam after the model of the contemporary Middle East. Since the mid-1990s, Chinese-style Islamic calligraphy quickly lost popularity relative to the original Arabic calligraphy (Armijo, 2008: note 3). Viewed as more authentic, Arabic-style posters and art crafts imported from Pakistan and the Middle Eastern countries are gradually replacing the traditional Chinese Islamic objects that had decorated Chinese Muslims' homes and mosques for centuries.

We therefore argue that, in the eyes of contemporary Chinese Muslims, on top of the mainstream developmental worldview, the Islamic world is prominently associated with development. As this association is largely absent from the minds of ordinary Han Chinese, it contributes to an evaluative premium among Chinese Muslims when they rate a Muslim country's level of development, which can possibly lead to a different view of the world developmental hierarchy. The source of the premium could be either the perception of socioeconomic advantages of certain prominent Muslim countries, or a sense of spiritual or moral superiority associated with Islam. Wherever the positive value comes from, Chinese Muslims are likely to associate higher levels of development with the Muslim countries.

In summary, the above discussion leads us to three interconnected hypotheses. First, *Chinese Muslims have a different perception of world developmental hierarchy which, compared to that of Han Chinese, is characterized by greater deviation from the United Nations' version (H2)*. Second, *compared to the Han people, Chinese Muslims rate other Muslim countries higher in the level of development (H3)*. Finally, *the Muslim–Han difference in perceived developmental hierarchy is due to the evaluative premium that Chinese Muslims assign to Muslim countries (H4)*.

Data and methods

The 2007 Gansu developmental idealism survey

To test these hypotheses, we use data from a developmental idealism survey conducted in 2007 in Gansu, a multiethnic province in northwest China. Data were collected from a random probability sample of adult residents (aged 18+) in Gansu Province. After deleting missing information, the analytic sample contains 623 respondents. Gansu was chosen because it contains a sizeable Muslim community, which consists mainly of two ethnic groups: Hui and Dongxiang. Nevertheless, the two groups account for only 6% of Gansu's population (Gansu Statistical Bureau, 2007: Table 2-1). To enable effective statistical comparisons between Muslims and Han, the Muslims were oversampled with a proportion of 13%. All other respondents in the analytic sample are non-Muslim Han Chinese.

During the survey, each respondent was asked to rate, on a scale from 0 to 10, the level of development in eight countries: Brazil; China; France; India; Japan; Nigeria; Pakistan; and the United States. The average respondent ratings are reported in Table 1. Moreover, for each individual, these ratings yield a developmental hierarchy of eight countries that can be compared to the ratings of other individuals and to the United Nations' HDI-based hierarchy.

It is important to note that our analysis involves information about individual respondents as well as the rated countries. In terms of the unit of analysis, the rated countries are nested in individuals rather than the other way around. We remind our readers that though different country names will be mentioned in our analysis, those are the countries rated by and therefore nested in individual respondents. Unlike in the usual multilevel analysis based on multiple country samples, in our analysis by 'country-level data' means information pertaining to the eight countries rated by our respondents, who all were from Gansu, China.

Methods

H1 requires comparison between each individual respondent's perceived developmental hierarchy and the United Nations' HDI hierarchy. Drawing on previous developmental idealism studies (e.g. Binstock et al., 2013; Thornton et al., 2012; Xie et al., 2012), we use a Pearson's correlation to assess their proximity. For each of the 623 respondents, we calculated a correlation coefficient between his/her eight country development ratings and the eight countries' HDI scores. If a respondent's correlation is positive and high, we interpret that as strong conformity to the mainstream developmental worldview. Otherwise, his/her developmental worldview deviates more from the mainstream. Results of the correlation analysis are shown in Table 2.

To test H2 we further look at the Muslim–Han disparity in this correlation. Using the HDI hierarchy as the frame of reference, it is straightforward to formally test if Muslims are further away from the mainstream developmental worldview.

Table 1. Average respondents' ratings on level of development of eight countries.

	Proportion Muslim ^c (%)	HDI ^a × 10 (0–10)	Average score of respondents' rating ^b (0–10)				
			Total	Muslim	Han	Δ (Muslim–Han)	Net Δ (Muslim–Han)
Countries rated							
France	6.0	9.61	6.57	6.45	6.59	–0.15	–0.15
Japan	0.1	9.60	7.14	6.95	7.17	–0.22	–0.20
United States	0.8	9.56	8.33	8.25	8.34	–0.09	–0.03
Brazil	0.1	8.13	5.62	5.86	5.59	0.27	0.28
China	1.6	7.72	7.08	7.12	7.07	0.05	0.27
India	13.4	6.12	5.22	5.45	5.19	0.26	0.35
Pakistan	96.3	5.72	5.11	6.00	4.97	1.03***	1.05***
Nigeria	50.4	5.51	4.46	4.70	4.43	0.27	0.32
Sample size (N)	N/A	N/A	623	83	540	623	623

Notes: The last column controlled for age, gender, rural/urban residence, education, personal income, and marital status.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Sources: ^aHuman Development Report 2009 (UNDP, 2009).

^b2007 Gansu Survey (analytic $N = 623$).

^cMapping the global Muslim population: A report on the size and distribution of the world's Muslim population (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009).

Table 2. Individual correlations between Human Development Index and respondent rating, by ethno-religion.

	Total	Muslim	Han	Δ (Muslim–Han)	Net Δ (Muslim–Han)
% Positive correlation	93.4	88.0	94.3	–6.3*	–5.8 [†]
(standard deviation (SD)/ standard error (s.e.))	(24.8)	(32.8)	(23.3)	(2.9)	(3.0)
Mean	0.55	0.44	0.57	–0.14***	–0.14***
(SD/s.e.)	(0.33)	(0.40)	(0.31)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Median	0.63	0.49	0.65	–0.16**	–0.17***
(s.e.)				(0.05)	(0.04)
Sample size (N)	623	83	540	623	623

Notes: The last column controlled for age, gender, rural/urban residence, education, personal income, and marital status.

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: Gansu Survey (2007) (analytic $N = 623$).

[†] $p < 0.1$.

As shown in Table 2, we perform Muslim–Han comparisons in three distributional attributes of the correlations – % positive, mean, and median.

With regard to H3, we compare Muslims’ and Hans’ average ratings for each country. As discussed above, we expect to see a particular tendency among Muslim respondents to favor Pakistan, the world’s second largest Muslim population bordering on northwest China.

If H2 and H3 are supported, we may proceed to a formal testing of H4, which states that the Muslim–Han difference in the perceived developmental hierarchy (H2) can be explained by the Muslims’ evaluative premium for major Muslim countries (H3). A successful test of H4 should find ways to *simultaneously*: (1) operationalize and identify Muslims’ favoritism toward major Muslim countries; and (2) formally test if this accounts for the Muslim–Han difference in the correlation. The task would have been straightforward if we had asked our respondents how much they liked the eight countries on the basis of religion. We could then simply test if this variable explains away the Muslim–Han difference in the correlation. Unfortunately, that question was never asked, and we have to turn to modeling strategy for a solution.

The key challenge of testing H4 is the question of how to *simultaneously* incorporate the following variables. To determine Muslims’ favoritism for other Muslim countries, we need to know both which respondents are Muslims (variable 1) and which rated countries are Muslim countries (variable 2). To see if this relationship explains away the Muslim–Han difference in the correlation score, we also need the data behind the correlation – the development ratings (variable 3) and the HDI scores (variable 4).

While variable 1 pertains to individuals, variables 2–4 are all about the rated countries. In other words, we have two levels of units of analysis – individuals at Level 2 (higher level) and rated countries at Level 1 (lower level). Therefore, multi-level modeling is required for H4. In the multilevel scheme, individuals vary in many dimensions, such as age, gender, and religion at Level 2. For each individual, the country-specific information constitutes a variation structure at Level 1. Besides the respondent rating on development (variable 3), the Level-1 variables also include the HDI score (variable 4) and an indicator for Muslim country (variable 2). Given the fact that Muslims can be found in all eight countries rated, we chose to use the proportion of Muslims rather than a simple binary dummy indicator.

A multilevel model thus constructed can easily estimate how strongly the HDI influences the respondents’ ratings as a Level-1 process with a regression coefficient on HDI that is analogous to the aforementioned correlation; at the same time, the Muslim–Han disparity in that coefficient can be easily modeled by interacting the Muslim variable at Level 2 with the HDI at Level 1.

Multilevel modeling also allows us to identify Chinese Muslims’ evaluative premiums for other Muslim countries – all that is required is simply a cross-level interaction between the individual Muslim identity at Level 2 and the country-specific % Muslim at Level 1. By doing so, we not only directly estimate the

evaluative premium, but also formally test if it explains away the Muslim–Han difference in perceived developmental hierarchy (H4).

Statistical results

As described above, our statistical analysis involves several different methods to suit the substantive content of the four research hypotheses. The findings are compiled in three tables. In this section we follow the order of our hypotheses to navigate through the various types of analyses.

Hypothesis 1: HDI-informed developmental worldview

Table 1 summarizes respondents' average development ratings for each country as well as country-specific information regarding the proportion of Muslims in the population and the HDI score. The countries are listed according to United Nations' HDI scores in descending order. The original HDI scores are scaled up by a factor of 10 for easy comparisons with the respondents' ratings.

Overall, the respondent ratings are fairly similar to the HDI scores. Our respondents tended to underestimate all countries, especially those on the high end. Brazil, France, and Japan were all underestimated by more than 2 points on the 11-point scale. By bringing the top countries down, the respondents perceived a somewhat compressed version of the United Nations' developmental hierarchy.

Regarding rank orders, the eight countries fall into three tiers – France, Japan, and the United States into Tier 1; Brazil, and China into Tier 2; and India, Nigeria, and Pakistan into Tier 3. Our respondents put the three tiers in the same order as the United Nations did, though the countries within Tier 1 and Tier 2 were ranked differently. According to HDI, France (9.61) and Japan (9.60) were ahead of the United States (9.56) in development, but the respondents believe that the United States (8.33) outperforms Japan (7.14) and France (6.57) with fairly large margins. Possibly out of national pride, our respondents rated China (7.08) as more developed than Brazil (5.62), whereas the HDI is 8.13 for Brazil and 7.72 for China.

Therefore, the finding is consistent with the previous literature on developmental idealism (Thornton et al., 2012): individual perception of country development is, to a great extent, constructed by the authoritative version articulated by elite international organizations. Of course, what Table 1 shows is a similarity between the sample averages of country ratings and the HDI scores. We now turn to Table 2 to further demonstrate that similarity at the individual level.

Table 2 presents our analysis of the Pearson's correlations between respondent ratings and HDI scores that we computed for each individual. For each respondent, we have a structure similar to columns 2 and 3 in Table 1 – except that the respondent ratings are not sample averages but the raw development scores given by individual respondents. Using this 8-by-2 matrix, we were able to calculate a correlation coefficient for every respondent. This way, we assigned each

respondent a standardized score that indicates the proximity, based on a sample of eight countries, of his/her perceived developmental hierarchy to the mainstream version constructed by the United Nations. H1 implies mostly positive and relatively strong correlations. As shown in the first column, the vast majority of our sample (93.4%) has positive correlations. The sample mean is 0.55, and half of the respondents scored higher than 0.63.

Hypothesis 2: Muslim–Han disparity in the developmental worldview

Table 2 also shows that there is a significant difference in the correlation between Muslims and Hans. While 94.3% of the Hans conformed more or less to the HDI ratings, only 88% of Muslims rated the countries in the same direction as the HDI. This difference in proportion (6.3%) is statistically significant at the 0.05 level and remains significant at the 0.1 level after controlling for the demographic and socioeconomic covariates, including age, gender, rural/urban residence, education, personal income, and marital status. Furthermore, the mean correlation is 0.57 for Hans and 0.44 for Muslims, yielding a highly significant difference of 0.14, which is again robust in the face of statistical controls. Not surprisingly, the median correlation yields the same result, with the Muslim–Han difference even greater (0.16, and 0.17 net of covariates).

The conclusion is clear: there is a significant difference in the developmental hierarchy perceived by Muslims and Hans, with the former deviating more than the latter from the HDI version. Moreover, this deviation cannot be accounted for by demographic and socioeconomic factors. Can it, then, be attributed to Muslims' more favorable opinions concerning countries with stronger Islamic features, such as Pakistan?

Hypothesis 3: Muslim country premium

Are there disagreements between Han Chinese and Muslim Chinese? As shown in Table 1, Muslims rated top-tier countries (i.e. France, Japan, and the United States) lower than Hans did, but rated all other countries higher. However, none of those differences is statistically significant except for Pakistan, where Muslims constitute 96.3% of the population. Also, there is a big difference in the effect size: while the Muslim–Han gap for other country ratings never exceeds 0.3 points, Muslims rated Pakistan 1.03 points higher than Hans rated it. Moreover, this Pakistan premium cannot be explained by demographic or socioeconomic factors. After controlling for age, gender, rural/urban residence, education, personal income, and marital status, the Pakistan premium increases slightly from 1.03 to 1.05 points and remains statistically significant at the 0.001 level.

One might wonder if this premium is due to Muslims' favoritism toward Pakistan or Hans' discrimination against Pakistan. The answer is likely the former. As shown in Table 1, all average country ratings by our respondents are lower than the HDI scores – the only exception being Muslims' ratings for Pakistan. In

other words, benchmarked against the HDI scores, Muslims underestimated all other seven countries but overestimated Pakistan alone. As for the Hans, it is unlikely that they thought of Pakistan in any special way. It is true that the Hans underestimated Pakistan, but they did the same to all other countries – in fact, Pakistan is the least underestimated country other than China.

Technically speaking, Nigeria is also a Muslim-majority country (50.4% Muslim). Whereas data show an evaluative premium of 0.27 points for Nigeria among the Muslim respondents, it is not statistically significant. Also, its magnitude is not as striking as the premium for Pakistan. In addition, it is worth noting that India receives a premium of 0.26 which, albeit statistically insignificant, may relate to the fact that India has the world's third largest Muslim population. In this sense, the absolute Muslim population size might be another factor giving rise to an evaluative premium. Even so, we note that Pakistan has a larger Muslim population than India – in fact, it is the world's largest Muslim country except for Indonesia.

It is not surprising that Pakistan stands out in the eyes of Gansu Muslims. Pakistan borders upon China's Islamic heartland in the northwest and opens China's overland pathway to the Islamic world. For centuries, Muslims have traveled to and from China via today's Pakistani territory. The opening of the Karakoram Highway across the border with Pakistan in 1986, in particular, has dramatically increased the exchanges of goods and people between the two countries (Gladney, 2003). Pakistan has been a major destination for Chinese Muslim students who took up studies of Islamic classics and Arabic language. Limited by the pilgrimage quota, many pilgrims obtained visas to Saudi Arabia in Pakistan (Ma, 2008). In a sense, to Chinese Muslims Pakistan is the window that opens to their spiritual homeland in the Middle East. Compared to Pakistan, Nigeria is a remote country in central Africa that rarely enters the mind of Chinese Muslims. India, on the other hand, may even invoke negative feelings due to Hindus' conflicts with Muslims in India as well as the Islamic Pakistan.

Could the religion-based evaluative premium explain the observed Muslim–Han difference in the developmental worldview? Table 1 suggests some hints for a positive answer. For example, among our Muslim respondents, Pakistan led India by a large margin of 1.4 points in development, whereas the Han story resembles the HDI version in which India is more developed than Pakistan. To conduct a formal test, we now move on to construct multilevel models.

Hypothesis 4: Muslim country premium accounting for overall Muslim–Han disparity

Results in Tables 1 and 2 have supported the first three hypotheses. We now proceed to the multilevel models for our final hypothesis – it is the Muslims' higher ratings for Muslim countries that account for the observed Muslim–Han differences in the perceived developmental hierarchy. As specified before, the multilevel models are built upon a mixture of personal level variables (i.e. Muslim identity,

age, sex, urban/rural residence, number of years of education, income, and marital status) and intrapersonal level variables that are country-specific (i.e. development rating, HDI score, and proportion Muslim). As this is a more general framework, the multilevel analysis also provides more systematical and rigorous tests for the previous hypotheses.

The outcome measure is respondent's development rating, a lower level variable that varies across individuals as well as by the rated country. Under the regression framework, it is straightforward to test if it is influenced by HDI (H1) and how this effect differs toward Muslims and Hans (H2). As explained in the methods section, the key advantage of the multilevel structure is that it allows for interactions between variables at the personal level (Level 2) and at the intrapersonal level (Level 1). This way, we can easily test for Muslims' favoritism toward a country's Islamic feature (H3) with a cross-level interaction term between Muslim identity (Level 2) and proportion of Muslims in the rated country (Level 1). Finally, by including this interaction term, we can formally test if it explains away the Muslim–Han difference in the perceived developmental hierarchy (H4).

Table 3 summarizes the results of four nested multilevel models. The full specification (Model 4) is helpful for understanding all the models. In the Level-1 equation (1), the outcome variable y_{ij} is the development rating of country j by individual i ; x_{ij} and z_{ij} denote the HDI score and proportion of Muslims, respectively, which vary across the eight countries, and the same values repeat for all respondents. In other words, we have expanded the 623 individual-level data records by a factor of 8 to 4,984 individual-country records. In Level-2 equations (2a–c), the Level-1 intercept (η_{1j}) and coefficients (η_{2j} and η_{3j}) depend on individual characteristics (i.e. the w variables), with w_{1j} – w_{7j} denoting Muslim identity (1 = Muslim), age in years, gender (1 = male), residence type (1 = urban), years of education, logged personal income in 2006, and marital status (1 = currently married), respectively. In addition, we allow for three random components (ζ_{1j} , ζ_{2j} , and ζ_{3j}) to capture the unobserved heterogeneity at the individual level that might affect the respondents' rating patterns.

$$y_{ij} = \eta_{1j} + \eta_{2j}x_{ij} + \eta_{3j}z_{ij} + \varepsilon_{ij} \quad (1)$$

$$\eta_{1j} = \lambda_{1j} + \gamma_{11}w_{1j} + \gamma_{12}w_{2j} + \cdots + \gamma_{17}w_{7j} + \zeta_{1j} \quad (2a)$$

$$\eta_{2j} = \lambda_{2j} + \gamma_{21}w_{1j} + \gamma_{22}w_{2j} + \cdots + \gamma_{27}w_{7j} + \zeta_{2j} \quad (2b)$$

$$\eta_{3j} = \lambda_{3j} + \gamma_{31}w_{1j} + \zeta_{3j} \quad (2c)$$

In Model 1, we exclude z_{ij} and all the w variables to estimate the overall observed impact of HDI on the respondent rating (analogous to the average individual-level correlation of 0.55 in the first column of Table 2). Results show that respondent's development rating is significantly influenced by the HDI score. As both variables

Table 3. Multilevel models predicting respondents' rating on level of development.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Intercept	1.37***	1.16***	3.54***	3.73***
Level-1 variables:				
Human Development Index (HDI) (x_{ij})	0.62***	0.65***	0.30*	0.28*
Proportion Muslim (z_{ij})				0.00
Level-2 variables:				
Muslim (ref. = Han) (w_{1j})		1.54***	1.66***	0.65
Age (w_{2j})			-0.01	-0.01
Male (ref. = female) (w_{3j})			-1.04***	-1.03***
Urban residence (ref. = rural) (w_{4j})			-2.01***	-2.03***
Years of education (w_{5j})			-0.18***	-0.18***
Logged personal income in 2006 (w_{6j})			0.12	0.12
Currently married (ref. = currently unmarried) (w_{7j})			-0.89*	-0.90*
Cross-level interactions:				
HDI \times level-2 variables				
Muslim (ref. = Han) ($x_{ij}w_{1j}$)		-0.18***	-0.18***	-0.07
Age ($x_{ij}w_{2j}$)			0.00	0.00
Male (ref. = female) ($x_{ij}w_{3j}$)			0.12***	0.12***
Urban residence (ref. = rural) ($x_{ij}w_{4j}$)			0.23***	0.23***
Years of education ($x_{ij}w_{5j}$)			0.03***	0.03***
Logged personal income in 2006 ($x_{ij}w_{6j}$)			0.00	0.00
Currently married (ref. = currently unmarried) ($x_{ij}w_{7j}$)			0.10*	0.10*
Proportion Muslim \times Muslim ($z_{ij}w_{1j}$)				0.01*
Model $\chi^2(df)$	1,684.46(1)	1,706.79(3)	1,888.15(15)	1,874.88(17)

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

Source: 2007 Gansu Survey (analytic person-level $N = 623$; analytic person-country $N = 4,984$).

are based on an 11-point scale (0–10), a coefficient of 1 on HDI would indicate perfect concordance. Our coefficient is 0.62, which means a strong and positive influence – a one-point increase in HDI would lead to an increase of 0.62 point in respondent's rating.

Model 2 further includes the Muslim–Han dummy variable. We not only introduced its main effect at the personal level (w_{1j}), but also estimated its cross-level interaction with HDI ($x_{ij}w_{1j}$). The main effect of 1.54 gives Muslims a higher intercept of the development rating. The interaction term bears a highly significant coefficient of -0.18 , which means that the positive influence of HDI on

development rating is weaker for Muslims. Note that this echoes our previous findings that Muslims' perceived developmental hierarchy differs from Hans' and is more deviated from the HDI version (cf. the Muslim–Han gap of -0.14 in the fourth column in Table 2).

Moving on to Model 3, we can see that the impact of HDI on development rating (0.3), Muslim–Han difference in development rating (1.66), and Muslims' relative deviation from HDI (-0.18) hold significant controlling for demographic and socioeconomic factors ($w_{2j} - w_{7j}$ and $x_{ij}w_{2j} - x_{ij}w_{7j}$). This is not to say that the control variables do not make a difference – men's ratings are more influenced by HDI (0.12), and so are the ratings by urban residents (0.23), people with more education (0.03 per year), and married individuals (0.1) relative to their counterparts. But none of these changes the Muslim–Han difference in the perceived developmental hierarchy. Again, this is consistent with the previous finding in the last column of Table 2, where the mean Muslim–Han difference in the correlation remained a highly significant -0.14 despite the control variables.

By now, our first two hypotheses – overall conformity (H1) and the Muslim–Han difference (H2) – are both confirmed. Does the multilevel analysis also show a Muslim country premium (H3)? And if so, does that premium explain away the Muslim–Han difference (H4)? To answer these questions, Model 4 finally includes the proportion of Muslim population in the rated country (z_{ij}) and its cross-level interaction with Muslim identity ($z_{ij} w_{1j}$).

First, with regard to H3, the significant and positive coefficient 0.01 on the interaction term $z_{ij} w_{1j}$ indicates distinct favoritism when Muslims rate countries with higher proportions of Islamic believers. In terms of the magnitude, across the span from 0 to 100 percent Muslim population, a Muslim respondent is expected to award that country a premium of up to 1 point in his/her development rating score. Again, this result echoes our previous finding very well (cf. the last column in Table 1).

Second, once the above premium is taken into consideration in Model 4, the Muslim–Han differences become weaker and lose statistical significance. Not only does the difference in the intercept drop from a significant 1.66 (as in Model 3) to an insignificant 0.65, but the difference in HDI's effect on their ratings also decreases from a highly significant coefficient of -0.18 (as in Model 3) to an insignificant -0.07 . In other words, H4 is supported – once the Muslims' religion-based evaluative premium is accounted for, Chinese Muslims and Han people do not differ in perceived developmental hierarchy in any statistically significant way.

Conclusions and discussion

While recognizing the universal influence of the developmental worldview in China, this paper highlights Islam as a local religious factor that modifies the story. Specifically, we analyzed survey data from Gansu Province in 2007 and found evidence for four substantive hypotheses: (1) ordinary Chinese people hold a developmental worldview that is similar to the United Nations' worldview based on

HDI scores; (2) Chinese Muslims deviate more from the United Nations' developmental hierarchy than Han people do; (3) other things being equal, Chinese Muslims consider countries with Islamic cultures more developed than non-Islamic countries; and (4) other than this evaluative premium, Chinese Muslims and Han do not differ in their developmental worldviews.

Grounded on the Chinese reality, this paper adds an important extension to the literature on developmental idealism. While previous studies have focused on the worldwide commonality of the perceived developmental hierarchy (e.g. Thornton et al., 2012) we argue that local ideational systems have the power to revise it. In this study, we highlighted the impact of Islam on Chinese Muslims' views concerning the world developmental hierarchy. In addition to identifying Islam's influence, we also articulated its mechanism by attributing the influence to Muslims' favorable attitudes toward countries with strongly Islamic cultures.

The developmental worldview might have become the most powerful and general framework for understanding different countries, but for the fact that alternative perspectives, with well-articulated country hierarchies, have long existed. We have made a case for this concerning Islam. Other candidates include, but are not limited to, geopolitical traditionalism (see Fairbank, 1968, for a Chinese example), various ethnocentrism, communism/socialism, and other religions. Since World War II, particularly after the Cold War, the influences of those alternative worldviews in general have declined. In China, for example, the communist world hierarchy with socialist countries pinned on the top has been replaced by the developmental schema defined by contemporary elite international organizations based on measures of human wellbeing. This is not to say, however, that those ideologies have disappeared altogether. As we have shown, Islam plays a role in how Chinese Muslims rank different countries in the world.

While Islam affects Chinese Muslims' views of different countries, the master framework remains the developmental paradigm – at least in the minds of Hui and Dongxiang Muslims in Gansu in 2007. After all, without favorable considerations for the international Muslim community, our Hui and Dongxiang respondents would have rated the countries in the same (in a statistical sense) way as their Han neighbors did, and thus demonstrated equally strong conformity to the mainstream developmental schema. Like all authors of other literature on developmental idealism, we understand the developmental worldview as a socially constructed ideational structure – it is not necessarily true, but it has its origins and consequences. In this paper, we have reviewed its historical background and analyzed its current form. In Gansu, China, the idea of development provides a common basis upon which Muslims and non-Muslims imagine the world. This is a result of China's century-long national development program. Importantly, it might serve as the domestic ideational infrastructure – in the northwestern borders – for China's New Silk Road Economic Belt. To what extent China will succeed in promoting the idea of development in the Muslim countries along the Economic Belt makes an interesting question for future research.

Finally, we maintain that the significance of Islamic religion should be examined in a broader context than Gansu, China. Islamic internationalism has become more vibrant around the world in recent years. In other parts of the world or other Muslim communities in China, it is not impossible that some variants of the Islamic worldview, in which the world hierarchy is based on certain Islamic features, have become equally or even more influential than the developmental paradigm. For example, Thornton et al. (in press) examined the perceived relationship between development and morality in Egypt, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. As a result of the widening influence of Islam, the associations with development are substantially more negative than Americans perceive. In addition, the three Middle Eastern countries show great differences in the outcome distributions. And that is just an example in the Middle East – at the global level nearly one-quarter of the world's population are Muslims. Given such enormous heterogeneity, the Islamic ideational system defies any easy conclusions.

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Note

1. In China, 10 out of 55 Chinese ethnic minorities are predominantly Muslim, including, in order of population size, Hui, Uyghur, Kazak, Dongxiang, Kyrgyz, Salar, Tajik, Bonan, Uzbek, and Tatar. In 2010, these ten ethnic groups added up to more than 23 million Muslims (China Statistical Bureau, 2012: Tables 1–6). While representing no more than 1.74% of the Chinese population, the population of Chinese Muslims is comparable to that of the Muslim populations in Syria (20 million) or Saudi Arabia (25 million) in 2009 (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009). Approximately 77% of all Muslims in China live in the five provinces/autonomous regions in northwestern China: Xinjiang, Ningxia, Gansu, Qinghai, and Shaanxi.

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