

Xinjiang's Islamic Resurgence: A View from 1990s Chinese Sovietology

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Abstract: After 1991, the religious factor in causing the collapse of the Soviet Union hit the panic button of China, which, like the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), is a multinational country with diverse religious faiths. Chinese Soviet-watchers paid particular attention to the impacts of Islamic resurgence in the newly independent Central Asian republics on China's Muslim populations in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Many of them criticized the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* (openness) that had encouraged atheism as well as the Islamic revival, which finally pulled down the pillar of Marxism in the Soviet Union. They also demanded that the Chinese government collaborate with the Central Asian states in combating Xinjiang's separatists, while adopting a harsher domestic religious policy.

First, after 1991, Chinese scholars tended to define the Xinjiang minorities who are fighting for religious freedom as political dissents opposing socialism. Such mentality reflects that China has learned the lesson of the Soviet collapse that the rampancy of any organized religion could threaten the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) dictatorship.

Moreover, scholars perceived that after the Soviet collapse the international forces would gang up against China, and the Xinjiang region is the most vulnerable to such foreign conspiracies, owing to Islamic resurgence and Western influence in Central Asia across the border. The research outcomes served and justified the agenda of the CCP after the Cold War, when the Party believed that Western countries have a master plan of peaceful evolution to undermine China.

Keywords: Xinjiang, Islamic Resurgence, Central Asia, the Soviet Union, post-communism, Chinese Sovietology

1. Introduction

The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 has had profound repercussions on China. The religious factor in causing the collapse of the USSR hit the panic button of the country, which, like the Soviet Union, is a multinational society with diverse religious faiths. As we will see in the article, in the 1990s, Chinese Soviet-watchers paid particular attention to the impacts of Islamic resurgence in the newly independent Central Asian republics on China's largest province—Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The region borders three Central Asian republics in the former Soviet Union and constitutes a crucial strategic position in China's policy-making. It is the home of China's largest Muslim populations, including Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and the titular nation Uyghurs (known in the West as Eastern Turkistan).

This article is going to show that after the Soviet collapse, Chinese scholars noted that religion had played a key role in awakening ethnic identities and provoking separation movements in many Soviet republics. After 1991, they perceived that the domestic religious forces would collaborate with the foreign elements to split China, like what had happened in the former Soviet Union. Their writings recommended that China works closely with the newly independent Central Asian republics to combat Xinjiang's separatists, while implementing a harsher policy to deal with the domestic religious forces. Their arguments correspond to China's increasing repressive religious policy in the years to come.

2. Methodology and Sources

With respect to primary sources, it should be mentioned here that this research is based wholly on the

“national core journals” (*Guojiaji hexin qikan*) published in the People's Republic of China (PRC), and mainly in the following four categories of journals:

The first are those journals focusing on research in the humanities and social sciences in general (*Shehui kexue yanjiu*, *Shijie jingjiyu zhengzhi*). Second are those journals dealing with problems of socialism or communism in the world (*Dangdai shijie shehui zhuyi wenti*, *Shehui zhuyi yanjiu*). The third group forms the core of this study; they concentrate on questions and issues relating to the former Soviet Union (later the Russian Federation and other Commonwealth Independent States after 1991) (*Sulian dongou wenti*, *Eluosi yanjiu*). Lastly, the research scope also included relevant articles in various university journals (*Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan yanjiu shengyuan xuebao*, *Zhonggong zhongyang dangxiao xuebao*).

Moreover, the paper examines the thinking of Chinese Sovietologists against the backdrop of political developments in the PRC in the 1990s. In order for this research to be successfully located in the rich fabric of intellectual activities and the changing environment of contemporary China, the investigator also consulted China's Party newspapers and journals. These include the *People's Daily*, *Guangming Daily*, and *Beijing Review* (English edition), and the writings and speeches of PRC officials, such as those of contemporary Chinese leaders.

The use of the term “Sovietologists” (or Soviet-watchers) - those who study and research the state of the USSR- in this paper is based on Christopher Xenakis' definition. Xenakis defines Sovietologists broadly, to include “political scientists, economists, sociologists, historians, diplomats and policy makers, working in academia, government, private think tanks, and the media.” He uses the terms “Sovietologists”, “Soviet experts”, “foreign policy analysts”, “Cold War theorists”, and “political scientists” interchangeably, citing the examples of George Kennan, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Richard Pipes and Strobe Talbott (Xenakis, 2002).

In terms of this elastic definition of the field and the diversity of scholars' backgrounds, the situation in China is similar to the situation in the US described by Xenakis. For example, as we will see, although some Chinese scholars specialize in either Soviet or world communism, most of those mentioned and quoted in this paper are generalists rather than specialists in Soviet studies. Their articles often express more political zeal than scholarly expertise or analytical insight. Generally speaking, the descriptions of Xenakis of US Sovietologists could also be applied to the Chinese situation. Chinese Soviet-watchers are a diverse group, rather than representatives of a single school of thought or central theory. Their publications never imply a complete homogeneity of views. However, although their academic trainings in different disciplines and by no means confined to Soviet studies, their research and publications are relevant to Sovietology in one way or another.

3. The Issue of Religion in the Chinese Communist Regime

While in the 1980s, the Chinese Communist regime still believed that by respecting minority's cultures and rights, giving them a certain degree of autonomy, and putting the economic development into a central position, its rule would be able to bring national stability, win sincere support of the ethnic peoples, and regain the ruling legitimacy after the disastrous Cultural Revolution (1966-1976).¹ However, since the crumbling of world socialism in the late 1980s, the religious revival in China's minority areas and especially that of Islam in Xinjiang has posed new difficulties to the Chinese government, which discovers that material goods alone could not easily stifle the awakening of national identities and demands for independence. As a state document on religious issue warned in 1992:

All party comrades should be psychologically prepared for the long-term nature of religion existing under socialism. The thought that used to regard religion would perish soon under socialism is unrealistic (Cai, 1992).

The religious issue is often interwoven with problems of ethnic groups and nationalities. Religious revival and its threat to China's sovereignty were a central topic in the 1990s Chinese Sovietology writings. First, religion is fundamentally in contradiction to a Marxist ideology that embraced atheism. Interestingly, the popularity of the topic in China coincided with the faltering of some multinational socialist countries with

¹ The Cultural Revolution was originally used by the Chinese leader Chairman Mao Zedong to purge remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society, and re-imposed his dominance within the state and the CCP. The movement paralysed China politically and negatively affected the country's economy and society to a significant degree.

diverse religion beliefs like the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. Therefore, the CCP regime might interpret the issue that would generate the political suicide of communism. Second, particularly considering that the discussion of religious revival in 1990s China focused on not the Han Chinese community but the Xinjiang Muslim populations, which means that the issue has less to do with filling the faith vacuum because of the death of Marxism. In this case, the religious revival is associated with national consciousness and the awakening of ethnic identities in China's minority regions. In the mind of the Chinese leadership, the religious revival was the source of Chinese minority's demands for independence, and it was the direct result of the impact of the Soviet and Yugoslavian collapses. It might constitute a major threat to not only state unity and social stability, but also the fate of socialism. As Ismail Amat (Chairman of the PRC State Ethnic Affairs Commission) stated in 1994:

We can draw a profusion of lessons from the evolution of Eastern Europe and the Soviet collapse, and the present social disturbances in the world owing to ethnic and religious conflicts. China's religious issue has its characteristics, and correctly handling the religious issue will have great implication for the future of socialism (Amat, 1994, January 12. Retrieved from <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66704/4495629.html#>).

After the 1989 Tiananmen Incident, and in the wake of the demise of socialism in Eastern Europe,² Chen Yun, Chairman of the CCP Central Advisory Commission, sounded a klaxon of alarm in a letter he wrote to Party Secretary General Jiang Zemin in 1990, expressing his concern about the new phenomenon of using religion to engage in reactionary activities and stating that was “a bitter lesson of some communist countries losing their powers.” He asked the CCP should rigorously deal with this matter (Chen, 1990, April 4. Retrieved from <http://cpc.people.com.cn/BIG5/64184/64186/66704/4495647.html#>). After the Soviet collapse, both Jiang Zemin and Li Ruihuan, a member of the CCP Politburo Standing Committee, warned the Party must remain vigilant against the collaboration between dissidents and international malevolent forces using religion to incite political disturbances and divide the country (Jiang, 1994; Li, 1994, July 4 & September 8. Retrieved from <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66703/4495555.html#>).

China's official publications have long been aware of the disintegrative role of religion under socialism. A reporter in the party-sponsored journal *Liaowang* (Outlook) remarked in 1983, that the anti-communist uprising of Solidarity in Poland was the impact of Christianity, which has a long tradition in the Polish society (Chu, 1983). From the 1990s onward, some scholars and officials commented that using religious institutions to destabilize the communist systems was part of the purposeful strategy of Western peaceful evolution.³ They criticized Vatican and the Roman Catholic Church for intervening the internal affairs of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, thus spelling the doom of those socialist regimes. They assured the readers that the next target of the West in using religion for subversion would be China, the last major communist power (Luo, 1991; An, 1991; Lu, 1998).

4. Chinese Official Reaction to Xinjiang's Islamic Resurgence in the 1990s

In the 1990s, however, it was not the religion of Christianity but Islam that provoked a heated debate in Chinese Sovietology writings, and the reasons of this are varied. First, China is not a Christian state and it has a strong atheist tradition even in the pre-communist times, therefore, domestic collaboration with Western

²The Tiananmen Incident happened in the summer of 1989. At the time a large group of Chinese university students gathered in China's capital city of Beijing. They took advantage of commemorating the death of former Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang, and spearheaded the hunger strike demonstrations at the heart of Tiananmen Square. Most of them wanted the Chinese communist regime to reform itself for a more efficient and clean governance. However, some of them demanded the introduction of democracy and the rule of law, and the resignation of the Party leadership. These requests were unacceptable to the ruling Communist Party. The demonstrations were later joined by many Chinese intellectuals, students, and civilians from all over the country. The Chinese Communist Party regarded the protests as a humiliation, particularly considering that the incident coincided with the historical Sino-Soviet summit taking place in May, when the leaders of the two largest communist countries in the world—Deng Xiaoping and Mikhail Gorbachev met in front of international journalists. The CCP regime decided to take firm action against the uprising at the end of May, and ordered the military force to crack down the demonstrators in the mid-night of June Fourth.

³According to Zheng Wang, the term “peaceful evolution” was first introduced by George Kennan, US ambassador to the Soviet Union in 1947. US Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, made it famous in the 1950s. In China, this US strategy was pointed out as a major threat after the demise of the USSR. See Wang, 2008.

Christianity for imposing the peaceful evolution in China might seem to be possible and evident than that in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.

Second, unlike the Soviet Union, China virtually does not have any nationality that claims Christianity as the official religion. On the other hand, China has numerous indigenous Islamic minorities which are powerful both demographically and socially, with the largest proportion being in Xinjiang.⁴ One month before the Tiananmen Incident in 1989, a large group of Muslim minorities, including Uyghurs, Kyrgyz and Kazakhs, gathered in Tiananmen Square to protest a Han Chinese writer's book, which content is extremely offensive to Muslim custom (Zhou, 1989, May 15). In the wake of the unrest, the CCP regime did not arrest or kill the demonstrators like what they did for the Tiananmen protestors. Instead, the Chinese government tried to placate the Muslims, by sentencing the Chinese author to a period of imprisonment and ordering the closedown of the publishing house that had printed the book (Gladney, 1996).

Third, up to the present, China has not established diplomatic relations with the State of Vatican City. The bilateral relations have been tense since 1989, because of the CCP, as mentioned above, always brands the Pope as having a plan up his sleeve for overthrowing communist regimes in Europe. On the other hand, China has strengthened its relations with the Third World, including many Islamic states, since the end of the Cold War, because the PRC intended to get many allies of developing nations to contain the capitalist West after the fall of world communism (Mackerras, 1995). Moreover, very few bordering countries of China are Christian states, but a number of those are Muslim nations, especially after the demise of the USSR.

Last and most importantly, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the impact of the newly independent Central Asian republics on China's own Islamic populations in Xinjiang touched the nerve of the CCP. Sean Roberts (2004) reveals the influx of ideas of Western liberalism and democracy into Xinjiang since 1991, through the region's increased interaction with the Central Asians, which also brought new hopes to the Uyghurs to establish their sovereign state. Xinjiang traditionally has been the hotbed for national secessionism in China and such tendency was historically triggered by Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union. Several scholars once disclosed that there had been fierce competitions between both countries for creating favourable ethnic treatments to inspire and influence each other's border minorities since the Chinese Qing Dynasty (1644-1912) (Bennigsen & Wimbush, 1986; Bachman, 2005). Jian Zhang (2007) discovers that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 also stirred a resurgence of the Islamist movement in China. Influenced by the Afghan resistance to the Soviet occupation, Islamic populations in Xinjiang publicly called for "liberation of Muslims from Han Chinese" in the 1980s. The situation became worse in the 1990s. Numerous suicide bombings, violent protests, and public sabotages occurred in Xinjiang since then, which made the Chinese government tremble (Gong, 1998, March 13). The CCP leadership perceived the turbulences were the result of the influence of the Central Asian states from the former USSR. Jiang Zemin in his two speeches delivered before and after the Soviet collapse remarked that the Xinjiang unrests were due to "the changes of international climate," and "the influence of 'Pan-Islamism' and 'Pan-Turkism'." (Jiang, 1990, September. Retrieved from <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66704/4495645.html#>) He condemned the Uyghur anti-government force was attempting to establish the "Eastern Turkistan Republic" or "Great Kazakhstan Republic," for splitting China (Jiang, 1998).

5. Xinjiang's Islamic Resurgence in the 1990s Chinese Sovietology Writings

The official guidance inevitably passed to academic research and writings. In 1993, Li Tieying, President of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) in Beijing, hosted a state-wide meeting for the academic staff in international studies. He said that "owing to the new situation in international affairs," scholars of the field should focus on six research areas in the coming years, and one of them was the Islamic issue (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2010). In 1998, Chang Qing, Director of the Department of Central Asian Studies at CASS, expressed his great concern about Central Asia's political, social and religious repercussions on China's Xinjiang minorities, after the collapse of the USSR. Because the similar historical and cultural backgrounds between the two regions, Chang Qing raised the issue of "problems of the cross-border nations" (*kuajing minzu wenti*) (Chang, 1998). One year after, Kelsang Dhondup, an ethnic Tibetan and Chairman of the Yunnan Provincial Commission of Ethnic Affairs, featured an article in the CCP-sponsored journal *Minzu gongzuo* (Ethnic Work). Against the stormy change of international situation after the Cold War, the author

⁴ According to the statement of Chinese Premier Li Peng in 1997, at the time China had 20 million Muslim populations and more than 30 thousand mosques across the country. See Zhao, 1997, August 23.

worried that “some Chinese minorities may collaborate with the local minorities in surrounding countries to engage in secession activities.” He concluded that “China should do more research on the cross-border nations under the current perilous moment.” (Dhondup, 1999) According to the analysis of many Chinese Soviet-watchers throughout the 1990s, due to the Islamic revival and the Soviet collapse in the late 20th century, the waves of Pan-Islamism and Pan-Turkism had spread across Central Asia. The principle of these religious ideologies was aiming to unify the Muslims in the world or establish a grand republic consisting of all the Turkish-speaking peoples, including those in Xinjiang. In their opinion, such influence may generate Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism in Xinjiang, which would threaten China’s sovereignty as well as security (Wu, 1993; Pan, 1994; Yu, 1996; Xu, 1999).

Some arguments of Chinese scholars were quite interesting. Against the rampant Islamic revival in Xinjiang owing to the influence of Central Asia, Guo Zhengli, Vice-President of the Ningxia Academy of Social Sciences, in his 1996 article suggested that the Chinese government reconsider its long-time policy of respecting the freedom of religion, which has been officially implemented since the founding of the PRC in 1949, and treat religious practices with big sticks rather than kid gloves in the future. In his observation, “The menace of Pan-Islamism in Xinjiang has provided a breeding ground for ideas of Uyghur independence and produced a new generation of secessionists.” (Guo, 1996) On the contrary, Yu Zhengliang, a professor of international relations at Fudan University in Shanghai, in another 1996 article wrote that the Chinese government should introduce more favourable policies to its Muslim populations, while stemming religious politicization and Islamic radicalism. He remarked, though being antagonistic to both the West and communism. However, the main target of Islam was the former. Therefore, “China may take advantage of this to side with the Islamic force for containing the West in power balance of the world.” (Yu, 1996) In the opinion of Wo Jiayin, a scholar at Beijing University, the root of Islamic revival in Central Asia and the rampant Turkish nationalism in Xinjiang was the economic destitution in these regions. He asked the Chinese government should cultivate a close economic link between Xinjiang and Central Asia for future modernization development, which was the best measure to tackle with the scale of the problem (Wo, 1995). Several Chinese scholars concluded it was Gorbachev’s *glasnost* and political pluralism that had encouraged atheism as well as Islamic revival, which finally pulled down the seventy-year pillar of Marxist ideology in the Soviet Union (Zhang, 1992; Zheng, 1994; Deng, 1997). On the other hand, another group of scholars argued that the outside influence on the Islamic revival in Central Asia was not necessary from the West or democratization. They wrote that many Middle East countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, had made their strong imprints in the region even before 1991 and continued to do so after the collapse, for funding thousands of mosques and competing for the influence there with each other. They took the example of Turkey, whose President Turgut Özal once secretly received the exiled leaders of Eastern Turkistan Republic, and warned that the spillover effects had slipped into China. They all strongly recommended that the Party respond heavy-handedly in preventing such thing to repeat in Xinjiang in the future (Liu, 1992; Wu, 1993; Jin, 1998).

6. Conclusion

Arriving at the conclusion, first, while having expressed their concerns about the repercussions of Islamic revival in Central Asia, many scholars quoted above did not favour using tough measures to grapple with the Muslim populations and their religion in China. In their opinion, as long as the Muslim populations advocated socialism and reform policy, and did not tie with oversea hostile forces to split China through religious activities, those people should be treated fairly. Such attitude jibed with the Chinese official orientation in the 1990s. Indeed, after 1991 the CCP regime adopted a more protective policy toward Islam and attempted to seek a closer relation with its Muslim community. The Party even agreed to sponsor the founding of mosques in Xinjiang (Song, 1992, June 15. Retrieved from <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66703/4495575.html#>), and banned any publication that was offensive to Muslim in China (Anonymous, 1993, October 19. Retrieved from <http://cpc.people.com.cn/GB/64184/64186/66703/4495563.html#>). Although China after the Soviet collapse did try some efforts to dilute the influence of Central Asia on its Muslim minorities, such as the reversal of language writing system in Xinjiang, which would become Latin-based scripts modelled after *pinyin* (the PRC transliteration system for Chinese) and thus subsequently made communications between Turkic minorities who live on opposite sides of the border more difficult (Dwyer, 1998). However, the PRC was quite eager to establish good-neighbourly relations with Central Asia. It was keen to win the Central Asian cooperation in cracking down religious extremism and ethnic separatism in Xinjiang, and ensuring regional security (Bu, 1999, September 13). It is reported that China was even willing to offer territorial concessions to its bordering Central Asian republics, which Beijing would by no means do for the Soviet government before 1991, in order to exchange for frontier stability and the guaranteed Central Asian cooperation to prevent the potential unrests in

Xinjiang and contain separatist activities (Fravel, 2008). As such, Beijing's post-1991 making concessions to its Muslim populations seemed prompted by a perceived need for the stability and unity of Chinese minorities against the Soviet collapse, rather than by a change in attitudes toward ethnic groups.

Second, as discussed above, many Chinese scholars wrote that Xinjiang ethnic minorities might have collaborated with foreign or Western hostile forces to use religion for fomenting national separation movements and threatening China's security. Such statement was able to drum up the support of the Chinese people for the CCP regime in the wake of the collapse of world socialism. Firstly, historical memories of the Opium War (1839-1842), the unequal treaties imposed by the imperial West, and the Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) seem to have left the negative impression in the minds of some Chinese regarding the role of foreign religion in China (Lutz, 1988). Secondly, Chinese have consistently adhered to their long time tradition of grand unification (*dayitong*), which is a key concept in China's civilization and mentality that articulates the unification of the country is the norm and division of it is an aberration (Fairbank, 1968). Under this mind-set, Chinese take state sovereignty and unity as the foremost priority. They could not tolerate any attempt by foreign forces to divide the country. Particularly considering that the Xinjiang ethnic minorities are not Han Chinese, therefore, their alleged religious conspiracy with foreign forces deemed by Chinese scholars for demanding independence from the PRC, might stir the passion of ethnic Chinese to advocate the government's tough measures in dealing with those aliens who were perceived to own no allegiance to the Chinese state. Thirdly, the discourse of Islamic revival and its potential danger of splitting China was staging along with the prevalent peaceful evolution doctrine in early 1990s China, and the theory was created by the CCP regime since the late 1980s for using the imagined fear of foreign subversion to safeguard and justify its rule, after the international cascading collapse of communism. As such, the discussions of Islamic religion and its subversive potential in the 1990s Chinese Sovietology writings also played a role in reinforcing the weakened legitimacy of the CCP, which has desperately sought whatever means, such as the fanatic nationalism, against any kind of imagined foreign intervention to rescue its authority after the end of the Cold War.

Last, the Chinese concern about Islamic religious affairs in Xinjiang could also explain China's increasing repressive religious policy, owing to the impact of the Soviet collapse, from the 1990s onward.⁵ While being firmly under the control of the Party, religion in 1980s China was treated by the CCP leadership with appreciation and interest. It was a target of cooperation but not repression, since the Chinese government did not want to repeat the oppressive religious policy during the Cultural Revolution. However, since the 1990s, owing to the alleged role of religion in toppling down communism in Europe, China's perception of religion turns to be more hostile. Gleaned from the Chinese scholarly writings above, since the 1990s, religious affairs in China became a highly politicalized issue and were always at the expense of the CCP's priority of maintaining stability and unity at all costs. Ethnic peoples from Tibetan, Xinjiang and Inner Mongolian regions who are fighting for religious freedom and national autonomy or independence would be defined as political dissents opposing socialism. It shows that China has increasingly viewed religious activities through the prism of not only national unity and state sovereignty, but also the survival of the socialist regime, as those may have the ability to threaten the Party dictatorship. To take an illuminating example of the *Falungong* (Buddhist Law Society) religious movement, whose members once staged a sit-in outside *Zhongnanhai*, the CCP leadership compound in Beijing, in protest against China's repressive religious treatment (Tong, 2009). Although the CCP leadership is aware of *Falungong*'s organizational power, financial success and ideological authority that might constitute a challenge to its rule (Jiang, 1999), however, many of *Falungong*'s demands are no more than the freedom of religious practices and the right of forming associations guaranteed by the Chinese Constitution (Tong, 2009). The subsequent state-wide crackdown on *Falungong* and the mounting Chinese scholarly denunciation of the movement as "*xiejiao*" (heathendom) (Qi, 1999; Ma, 1999; Wei, 1999), reflect that China has learned the lesson from the Soviet collapse that the rampancy of any organized religion might pose risk to the communist power base. Such understanding is consistent with the abovementioned Chinese criticism of Gorbachev's excessive tolerance in religious freedom. The Chinese perceived Gorbachev's liberalization and hands-off approach in religious policy had cultivated many anti-government forces and led to the final demise of the USSR. The reactions of the Soviet collapse and Xinjiang's Islamic resurgence are China's tightened control and coercion on civil society and the appearance of any NGO in the years to come, which may gradually stifle the future possibility of democratization of the country.

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⁵ On how the factor of the Soviet downfall has become China's justification for its over-restrictive religious policy since the 1990s, see Lambert, 2001.

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