

Introductory Comments for the Congressional-Executive Commission on China

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The presence of considerable numbers of Muslims throughout the Chinese culture area has created difficulties of both perception and policy for every China-based state since the 14th century. Living in every province and almost every county of the PRC, the people now called Hui have managed simultaneously to acculturate to local society wherever they live and to remain effectively different—though to widely varying extents—from their non-Muslim neighbors. Most of them use local Chinese language exclusively, and they have developed their "customs and habits" in constant interaction with local non-Muslims, whom they usually resemble strongly in material life. Intermarriage has made them physically similar to their neighbors (with some exceptions in the northwest), but their Islamic practice and/or collective memory of a separate tradition and history allow them to maintain distinct identities. In short, they are both Chinese and Muslim, a problem that must be solved within many local contexts, for there is no single isolated territory occupied primarily by Hui people which could serve as a model for Hui all over China.

Many of the characteristics of the Chinese Muslims can only be understood through the localness of Hui communities, despite their common Muslim religion and (state-defined) minzu identity. Their adaptations include learning local language and fitting into local economic systems, sometimes, but not always, in occupations marked as "Hui," such as tanning, jade selling, and keeping *halal* restaurants. Chinese scholars posit two simultaneous interlocking processes—ethnicization (minzuhua) and localization (diquhua)—as responsible for the formation of the Hui within the Chinese cultural matrix, but those processes have not generated any uniformity among their communities. Even the centrality of the mosque, obvious in Muslim communities anywhere, has been modified by acculturative processes in some eastern Chinese cities.

Hui intellectuals emphasize the national quality of Huiness, its "minority nationality" core, while many ordinary Hui stress the local in discussing who they are. Religious leaders and pious individuals, of course, place greatest importance on Islamic religion as a unifying valence of identity, but they also recognize its limits. Despite the claim that "all Muslims under Heaven are one family," most Hui clergy do not connect themselves easily or comfortably with Turkic-speaking Muslims in Xinjiang, either their culture or their (sometimes imagined) sociopolitical ambitions. After all, the vast majority of Hui, even those who have traveled extensively in the Middle East, are clearly Chinese in their language, material culture, and textual lives outside the mosque. However much they might identify with Muslims elsewhere—even unto donning Arab clothing and headgear for photo opportunities—Hui are not members of Malay or Turkish or Persian or Arab or any other "Muslim" culture in which Islam is a "natural" component of identity. On the contrary, they must distinguish themselves constantly from the overwhelming majority of Chinese-speakers, who are not Muslims, while still remaining part of the only culture and polity in which their identity makes sense--that of China.

Seen in that light, my study of the Hui suggests some conclusions regarding their place in contemporary China. First, "the Hui" do not exist as a unified, self-conscious, organized entity. Some would argue that no ethnic group conforms to these criteria, but our commonsensical notion of "the Tibetans" or "the

Uygurs," discussed in endless newspaper articles and web postings, indicates that many of us believe that they do, or should. The Hui have national leaders, but they are all empowered and thus, to some subjective extent, delegitimized by their intimate association with the state--through the national Islamic Association (Ch. Yixie), the Nationalities Commission (Ch. Minwei), state-sponsored *madrassas*, universities, and other government-approved organizations. The separatist Eastern Turkestan movement based in Germany and the USA, the independent Republic of Mongolia, and the Dalai Lama's leadership of a substantial portion of Tibetans from exile--all headquartered outside of China--represent models for ethnic identity which the Hui (and, I would suggest, at least some other minzu) do not, indeed cannot, follow.

Second, some Hui communities are more difficult, sensitive, volatile, and potentially violent than others. This could be due to historical memory of confrontation and desire for revenge, to bellicose or inflexible Muslim leadership, to local geographical or economic conditions which militate against harmony with non-Muslim neighbors and/or the state, to insensitive or downright discriminatory policy or behavior from functionaries at several levels of government. Negotiation between Muslim leaders and state authorities has succeeded in some cities and prevented the escalation of conflict in others, allowing Hui communities to thrive. On the other hand, in places such as Yuxi and Shadian in Yunnan, western Shandong, and southern Ningxia, Hui communities exploded in violence against one another or the forces of law and order. Similar and geographically proximate communities in Yunnan have had very different histories. How much more disparate must local Hui histories be in Gansu, Henan, Beijing, or elsewhere?

Third, we cannot ignore the power of PRC minzu policy and its underlying vision of "the minorities" (including the Hui) as primitive peoples who require the leadership of the advanced Han minzu in order to advance toward the light of modernity. This mixture of condescension and fear toward non-Chinese people has much power in Han society. There can be no question that some Hui resent this attitude and its attendant policies. But others do not, or at least mute their enmity with acknowledgement of Hui achievements and successes, in both the past and the present. An oft-heard contemporary claim, that "We Hui can always defeat the Han in business; they are afraid of us," echoes edgy old Han proverbial knowledge--"Ten Hui, nine thieves." Though this persistent ethnocentrism will always produce small-scale confrontation, even rage and violence, there are no Hui leaders or organizations calling upon all Hui, all over China, to reject the authority of the current system in favor of Hui hegemony or emigration. In this the Hui of China strongly resemble the Muslims of India, who persist in their homeland despite constant tension and occasional open ruptures with a majority society which, to some extent, denies the validity of their sense of belonging and brands them as dangerous and foreign. But unlike the Indian Muslims, the Hui have no Pakistan, no Bangladesh to which they can turn as a "more authentic" homeland, and they constitute an incomparably smaller percentage of the general population.

Finally, as far as most Hui are concerned, neither separatist movements nor Islamic fundamentalism should undermine the unity of China as a nation-state. The Hui can only be Hui in China, however orthodox or orthopractic they may be in their Islamic lives. Even if increasing international communication raises the consciousness of Middle Eastern issues and Islamic identity among the Hui, this will result in calls for "authentic" religion rather than separatism. The small communities of Hui living outside of China--in Turkey, for example, or Los Angeles--have not attempted to set up governments in exile but rather *halal* Chinese restaurants, conforming to the pattern of other Chinese emigrants in those parts of the world. Thus, despite the Hui being defined as a "minority nationality," we must nonetheless regard them as unequivocally Chinese, though sometimes marginal or even despised Chinese. Some among them, especially young and militant imams, might claim that the unity of the Islamic umma overrides national (Chinese) identity, but this contention cannot be shared by most Hui. Like African Americans or French Jews, the majority of Hui participate as patriotic citizens in the

political and cultural life of their homeland, even when antagonistic elements in the society or state challenge their authenticity or loyalty.