Chinese Muslims and the Global Ummah
Islamic revival and ethnic identity among the Hui of Qinghai Province

Alexander Blair Stewart
The global spread of Islamic movements and the ascendance of a Chinese state that limits religious freedom have aroused anxieties about integrating Islam and protecting religious freedom around the world. Focusing on violent movements like the so-called Islamic State and Uygur separatists in China’s Xinjiang Province threatens to drown out the alternatives presented by apolitical and inwardly focused manifestations of transnational Islamic revival popular among groups like the Hui, China’s largest Muslim minority.

This book explores how Muslim revivalists in China’s Qinghai Province employ individual agency to reconcile transnational notions of religious orthodoxy with the materialist rationalism prevailing in the People’s Republic of China. Based on about one year immersed in one of China’s most concentrated and conservative urban Muslim communities in Xining, the book puts individuals’ struggles to navigate theological controversies in the contexts of global Islamic revival and Chinese modernization. By doing so, it reveals how attempts to revive the original essence of Islam can empower individuals to form peaceful and productive articulations with secular societies, and further suggests means of combating radicalization and encouraging interfaith dialogue.

As the first major research monograph on Islamic revival in modern China, this book will be of interest to students and scholars of Anthropology, Islamic Studies, and Chinese Studies.

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Alexander Blair Stewart
I dedicate this book to my beloved wife and oldest son, who patiently endured one year of my absence during my time in China and another year of virtual absence while I wrote this book.
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1 Xining’s Islamic landscape

O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is all-knowing and all-aware.

(Qur’an 49: 13)

Narrated Kathir bin ‘Abdullah that the Prophet said to Bilal bin Al-Harith: “Know.” He said: “I am ready to know O Messenger of Allah!” He said: “That indeed whoever revives a Sunnah from my Sunnah which has died after me, then for him is a reward similar to whoever acts upon it without diminishing anything from their rewards. And whoever introduces an erroneous innovation which Allah is not pleased with, nor His Messenger, then he shall receive sins similar to whoever acts upon it, without that diminishing anything from the sins of the people.”

(Jami’ at-Tirmidhi 41: 33)

It is lunchtime on a Friday, and the sidewalks and buses on the main street running through the center of Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province, are packed with men wearing small white hats and toting prayer rugs, from scrawny teenagers in patent leather blazers to wispy-bearded old men in long, gray coats. Most of them are headed to Dongguan (东关) Mosque, where so many Muslims attend prayer each Friday that the prayer hall overflows into the courtyard, and more of Allah’s devotees spill out of the front gate to cover the sidewalk and at least one lane of the street. Each Friday, when the sun is at its zenith, the Islamic faith requires all male believers to attend prayer in a congregation of at least three people, but in Xining virtually all devout Muslims converge in just three groups, leaving forty to fifty other mosques virtually empty. Xining is perhaps the only Chinese urban center in which most Muslims belong to the Yihewani (伊赫瓦尼, from the Arabic Ikhwan, or “brothers”) revivalist sect and attend a single mosque en masse. Loudspeakers broadcast the imam’s voice so that tens of thousands can move as one. On Muslim holidays, traffic is diverted, and the entire street is filled with prostrating, white-hatted masses. First built in 1380, the mosque is the oldest in town and its congregation is the largest in China.
Many renovations have combined Chinese temple-style prayer hall and classroom buildings with Arab-style dome and minarets over the front gate. The mosque’s architectural style and the Yihewani religious movement it houses illustrate the work in progress that is Chinese Islam, a constant struggle between Chinese-style syncretism and globalized Islamic universalism.

China is home to more than 20 million Muslims, divided into ten different ethnic groups. The Uygurs of Xinjiang Autonomous Region are the most widely known outside China due to violent separatist incidents and limits on Islamic practice within Xinjiang. However, the Hui are the most populous and influential Muslim ethnic group in China, and in Xining as well. It is tempting to call the Hui “Chinese-speaking Muslims,” because most of them are indistinguishable from Han Chinese except for their Islamic beliefs and practices, but they actually speak a variety of local dialects and include a variety of ethnic traits. Many of them can trace their ancestry back to Arab, Persian, or Central Asian traders who came to China in numerous waves beginning in the Tang Dynasty, married Han women, and raised Muslim children who spoke Mandarin or other local dialects. Many Hui live among other non-Muslim ethnicities, speaking their languages and physically resembling them, but their legal identification cards and self-identifications proclaim them to be Hui. Hui live scattered all over China in virtually every major city, but the largest concentration of them is located in eastern Qinghai Province, eastern Gansu Province, and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Most other Chinese ethnic groups share a common language, history, and territory, and Uygur separatist movements have largely been inspired by the threat Han migration poses to this heritage. However, I did not encounter such sentiment or sympathy for the Uygurs among the Hui. In fact, most of the Hui I encountered in Xining who were dedicated to practicing, studying, and preaching Islam regarded their hereditary ethnic label and local religious traditions as old-fashioned and virtually irrelevant in the modern world. These devout Hui sought to replace their parochial ethnic label with a universal religious identity that would transcend local traditions and politics by connecting them with an imagined transnational community.

On the eastern fringe of Xining’s historic Muslim quarter, three blocks from Dongguan Mosque, members of Yangjiazhuang (楊家庄) Mosque prostrate in unison under green and white minarets that were until recently encased in bamboo scaffolding as a new Arabic-style mosque that rivals the size of Dongguan took its place on the site of an older Chinese-style mosque. The only significant contrast with the other mosques in town is the presence of incense cauldrons, which facilitate a uniquely Chinese ritual practice proscribed by the more orthodox reform movements like Yihewani and its more recently arrived rival, Salafiyya. Worshippers here are eager to remind a curious outsider that their Gedimu sect (格迪目 or 格底木), (a transliteration of the Arabic qadīm, meaning “old”), a Sunni sect practicing the Hanafi school of law, is popularly known as the Old Teaching (老教) in order to differentiate it from both Sufi sects that began arriving in China during the Ming and Qing eras and the aforementioned reform movements. The Old Teaching contains the majority of China’s Muslims, and its adherents note that the unusual prominence of
Yihewani in Xining is merely the legacy of a Guomindang (国民党)-allied Muslim warlord named Ma Bufang (马步芳, 1903–1975). He supported this more unified and nationalistic, and thus easier to control, movement over the more fractious Gedimu and Sufi sects in the 1930s and 1940s. But these Gedimu worshippers are reluctant to openly criticize other sects, and one student here even tells me that which mosque one attends is just determined by one’s family and place of birth. While numerous Sufi brotherhoods exist all over China, only the Qadariyya is prominent in Xining, and its members are still so few in number that they often attend the Gedimu Mosque and are generally considered adherents of the “Old Teaching” in contrast to the “New Teaching” (新教), as Yihewani is commonly called.

Between the large and imposing Yangjiazhuang and Dongguan Mosques, down an alley off the main street, a third congregation meets for Friday prayer. The old Shulinxiang (树林巷) Mosque had no minarets, and one could easily overlook its modest doorway topped with Arabic lettering, but its prayer hall’s Middle Eastern-inspired arching windows were unmistakable once one stepped into its courtyard. This modest edifice was smaller than the previous two mosques, but its two-story prayer hall also would fill to capacity each Friday with members of the Salafiyya movement, the smallest and most recent to emerge among China’s Islamic sects. Many non-Salafis refer to it as Santai (三抬), meaning “three hand raises,” as raising the hands three times during each cycle of prayer is the most readily apparent practice characterizing this movement. During my time in Xining, the old Salafi mosque was demolished to make way for a new hotel development, and the temporary prayer hall in a run-down apartment building looked even less mosque-like. However, the congregants are building an ornate new building, which will rival other local mosques in size and “authentic” Arabic-style architecture.

Salafis are a much-maligned minority among Chinese Muslims, but they are quick to remind outsiders that their sect is dominant in the original homeland of Islam, Saudi Arabia. While imams and theological students at other mosques wear keffiyeh wrapped around their heads and trailing down their backs during prayers, as is common in Iran and Central Asia, the learned Muslims at Shulinxiang drape red and white keffiyeh over their heads Saudi-style as one way of laying claim to a more authentic Islam.

Both Yihewani and Salafiyya regard Sufism as heterodox and Gedimu as too Sinified, but Salafis also claim that the Yihewani did not go far enough in removing cultural accretions and returning to the original, universal Islam. Yihewani and Salafiyya both descend from the eighteenth-century Wahhabi movement that advocated a return to the practices of the Prophet and his followers, as described in the Qur’an and Hadith, which required purging the perceived innovations that arose in the latter days of the Ottoman Empire. Yihewani is related to the global Ikhwan or Islamic Brotherhood movement, but its Chinese manifestation has become strongly nationalistic, engaged in Chinese politics, and supportive of modern education. As the once-puritanical movement took on these characteristics (a process described in Chapter 2), it also gained the sponsorship of Ma
Bufang and other warlords, and more recently of the Chinese Islamic Association, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) bureaucracy dedicated to monitoring and controlling Islam in China.

The Salafi in China gradually emerged out of the Yihewani movement in the 1930s and 1940s in response to perceived Sinification and loosening interpretation of the Qur’an as the Yihewani became entangled in Chinese politics. Today, Yihewani make up about one-fifth of China’s Muslims, but the sect is inordinately represented among powerful urban elites and bureaucrats. The Salafi remain a tiny minority making up about less than 1 percent of China’s Muslims, but the sect is rapidly growing, and Salafi ideas are very influential among foreign-educated Muslims, international businesspeople, and Arabic language teachers. Small, but important, contradictions in ritual practices and theology mean devout Muslims must choose membership in just one of the aforementioned sects, but there is one movement that manages to transcend these sectarian bounds.

A few hours after Friday noontime sermons, many Muslims return to the same mosque for afternoon prayer, but some prefer to gather in a small hotel prayer room instead, where a particular kind of religious study will follow prayer. Twice every day, after dawn and late afternoon prayer, participants in Tabligh Jama’at (“conveying [message of Islam] group”) sit in a circle on the prayer room floor and listen to one of their number talk. Eventually, he designates a small group of four to ten people, including a local guide and usually some amateur preachers visiting from out of town, to go out and knock on doors to invite other Muslims to join the study session. He chooses another to stand at the door to welcome and guide inside any Muslims this group manages to recruit. One more person sits and lectures the few people who remain behind on one of six virtues of Muhammad’s companions. Finally, an older man is entrusted with what they regard as the most important responsibility; he sits in a corner, facing Mecca and prays for the endeavor’s success. Eventually, the group returns, with or without new recruits, and one of its members delivers a sermon that concludes with the need for Muslims to leave their homes to embark on proselytizing trips in which they urge every Muslim they meet to more actively practice and promote Islam. Someone stands up and asserts that it is every Muslim’s responsibility to go out on such a preaching trip, or jama’at, for three days each month, forty days each year, or at least four months in a lifetime. Then he takes names and contact information of volunteers, so that the organizers may pray that they follow through on their pledges, drop by their houses and visit them, and help them form groups to embark on such trips in the future. Since the movement’s founding in 1920s India and its arrival in China in the 1980s, this practice has attempted to combat nominal adherence to Islam by striving to imitate the purported deeds of Muhammad’s companions in the early days of Islam when believers were few and they all had to struggle to spread the faith.

The Yihewani, Salafiyya, and Tabligh Jama’at movements in Xining and across China continue a historic cycle of reform and revival movements led by Chinese Muslims who return from abroad preaching new ways of attempting to
return to the original faith. Salafis claim that Salafism is not a sect, but a methodology of strictly interpreting the Qur’an and of solving disputes by looking for evidence in only the Qur’an and Hadith, without regard for unsubstantiated claims by imams of the past or present. Likewise, participants in Tabligh Jama’at attempt to transcend all sectarian divides by inviting everyone to live the simple lifestyle of Muhammad’s companions and refusing to discuss any contentious issues. Despite these attempts at inclusiveness, Salafis face opposition because they reject many Chinese Islamic practices as innovation, and Tabligh Jama’at is accused of criticizing existing Islamic sects by claiming that its method of embarking on proselytizing journeys is the only way to perfect one’s faith.

Proponents of Salafism in the 1930s and 1940s brashly highlighted the shortcomings of China’s other sects, including the Yihewani movement from which Salafism emerged. The result was a backlash both from leaders of those sects and from ordinary Muslims, who still tend to regard Salafis as ill-mannered extremists. Thus, today’s Salafis favor a more academic, inwardly focused and nonjudgmental approach to theological issues. Despite very different tactics, practices, and beliefs, adherents of both Salafiyya and Tabligh Jama’at claim a stronger link to the legacy of the Prophet because of their association with transnational movements very much in vogue throughout the Islamic world. These linkages to movements in regions of geopolitical importance create legitimacy as well suspicion in the eyes of the government. The adherents engage in some public service projects in China, but the party’s wariness of an emerging Chinese civil society also makes these movements and their activities subject to strict supervision even though both movements assiduously avoid politics.

Salafiyya, Yihewani, and Tabligh Jama’at all advocate a return to the original, authentic, and universal form of Islam practiced by Muhammad. Thus, all three of these movements can be considered modes of Islamic revival, but the exact definition of what they want to revive and the means of doing so are different in each case. There are also many Muslims who seek to revive Islam without participating in any of these movements. The same Hadith from the al-Bukhari collection inspires both Salafis and Tabligh Jama’at members: “The most superior among you (Muslims) are those who learn the Qur’an and teach it” (66: 50). Salafis insist that one must thoroughly learn the Qur’an before teaching; participants in Tabligh Jama’at emphasize the need to teach whatever one knows. While these modalities differ in goals, practices, and some theological aspects, it is important to remember that almost all of Xining’s Muslims still greet each other with a friendly “Asalaam alaykum!” and sometimes even pray at each other’s mosques. They each view their past and present differently, but they all aspire to a common future goal in which China’s Muslims will be more pious and united with the global ummah. Despite their differences, most adherents of all these congregations agree that all Muslims are brothers, and many of their ancestors have shared the same neighborhood for centuries. Together they compose the shifting theological terrain that is Xining’s Islamic landscape.
Xining’s Islamic landscape

The ethnographic context: seeking universality between Han majority and ethnic minority

Xining, a bustling city of 2 million (small by Chinese standards), is capital of China’s largest, least populated, and westernmost province (excluding the autonomous regions of Tibet and Xinjiang). Qinghai Province also has the unique distinction of sitting between China’s two most restive regions, Tibet and Xinjiang, with its capital situated at the confluence of Han (汉族), Tibetan (藏族), Mongolian (蒙古族), Uygur (维吾尔族), and Hui (回族) cultural realms. The Hui and Uygurs are two of the ten Chinese national minorities that traditionally adhere to the Islamic faith.

Traditionally, the Hui served as middlemen between more sedentary Han agriculturalists and the mostly nomadic neighboring ethnic groups. In Xining and other Chinese cities, Muslims historically lived outside the city gates in a buffer zone between the Han and other non-Chinese peoples. In spite of recent tensions between Hui and Tibetans, the two groups historically enjoyed a symbiotic economic relationship in which the Hui would bring agricultural trade goods from Han cities to Tibetan camps (Fischer 2005; Gaubatz 1998). Today, the vast majority of Xining’s mosques, and most of its Muslims still reside in the historic Eastern District (城东区) that once lay outside the city gates. Thus, Dongguan, whose name means “east gate,” and many of the city’s older mosques (or their modern incarnations) have names reminiscent of Muslim exclusion: Beiguan (北关, “north gate”), Nanguan (南关, “south gate”), Xi Guan (西关, “west gate”), and Shui Cheng Men (水城门, “Water City Gate”). During my time in Xining, I lived just outside the southern wall of this suburb, located on the fringes as a foreigner traditionally would be. The Hui, however, were neither fully within the city’s inner walls nor separate from Han settlements; both in imperial times and the present, they straddle the line between minority ethnicity and membership in the Chinese cultural and political community.

According to the 2010 census, Hui make up 16 percent of Xining’s population and 29 percent of that of the Eastern District, which contains all of the prominent mosques. Since these numbers include only those with an official hukou (户口, residence permit), the number of migrant workers and other transient residents doubtlessly makes the actual Hui population much higher. While the ambiguous nature of Hui ethnic identity gives religion an inordinate impact on members’ identity and makes them ethnographically interesting, Xining’s cosmopolitan Islamic revival movements include members of the Salar, Dongxiang, Kazakh, and Uygur ethnicities, as well as a few Han, Tu, Mongolian, and Tibetan converts to Islam. In contrast to the Hui, each of the other Muslim minorities has its own distinct language, common ancestry, and traditional territory within China. The Han and Hui sometimes regard other minorities as less civilized than the more assimilated Hui, but members of these minority nationalities themselves often take pride in their status as “pure Muslim people.”

In spite of clear differences among minority nationalities, Chinese people of all ethnicities commonly use “Hui” as a catchall category for Muslims in China.
Indeed, the term Huijiao (回教) or “teaching of the Hui” was the most common translation for “Islam” until the 1950s, and it is still the preferred nomenclature in Taiwan. Today, mainland revivalists correct those who use this term and point out that Hui is really an inherited ethnic category peculiar to the Chinese context, and devout Muslims of all ethnicities should actively embrace their common, universal identity as Muslims, now officially transliterated as Musilin (穆斯林), instead of dividing themselves into parochial ethnic groups. Thus, my discussion will use Hui or other terms to refer to ethnic categories and Muslim to refer to believers in Islam regardless of ethnicity. However, to understand the significance of this shift in identity, we first must explore the genesis of Hui as a somewhat unlikely and very malleable ethnic category.

In most cases, the widely recognized and officially celebrated characteristics of Chinese minorities are superficial—colorful clothing, ethnic cuisine, and traditional dances. Hui differ in that they do not invite tourists to dance in circles like other minorities, their cuisine is indicative of dietary restrictions that separate them from the Han (although Chinese of other ethnicities also enjoy Hui cuisine), and distinctive dress is just as often a sign of intra-Hui sectarian divides as it is of Hui unity. It may be impossible to address all of the multifarious regional and linguistic groups legally included within the Hui category in a single study. Indeed, numerous Muslims associate this vagary and variety with the chaotic and lax state of Chinese Islam, which inspires devout Muslims to emphasize a transnational religious identity over the questionable label of “Hui.” However, this ever-evolving and ever-broad government-defined category has made the Hui an ideal locus in which to explore individual and local agency in forming networks and shaping ethnic and religious identity on a national scale. This study will examine how individuals and groups involved in religious revival challenge the state-defined framework of ethnic identity through embracing a universalized and individually determined religious identity, a rival notion of modernity that transcends the Chinese state, and collective action that subtly threatens to supplant the CCP’s discursive role as sole purveyor of virtue.

A methodology of crossing boundaries
This project is based on eleven months of fieldwork conducted within the Eastern District (城东区) of Xining, where most of the city’s mosques and Muslims are concentrated. For nine months, I attended congregational prayers multiple times virtually every day, usually in the city’s only recognized Salafi mosque, Shulinxiang Mosque, and frequently in Yihewani mosques like Dongguan, Yudaiqiao (玉带桥), Nanguan, and Beiguan mosques. Nearly every day during the last four months in Xining, I prayed at least once and attended Tablighi study sessions in a certain hotel prayer room that will remain nameless because of the questionable legality of the movement. I also spent a cumulative total of about two weeks staying in an Islamic school in Ningxia Province, and at another school in rural Huangzhong (湟中) County outside Xining, experiences which included rooming with students and teachers, interviewing imams.
and students, sitting in on classes, and even waking at 2 a.m. for night prayer during Ramadan. I had the opportunity to fast as part of the Xining Muslim community for the entire month of Ramadan, including eating breakfast at an informant’s house every day at 3:30 a.m. and breaking fast with numerous generous hosts. In most cases, I will use informants’ Arabic names in order to preserve their anonymity, and for the sake of clarity because virtually all of them share the surname Ma (马), which most Chinese Muslims adopted in the Ming or Qing Dynasties as a brief Sinification of “Muhammad.”

During my time in Xining, I went from being considered a bizarre American academic with a strange appearance and unorthodox beliefs to being accepted as a Muslim brother with an outstanding beard struggling to pronounce Arabic and memorize surahs like everyone else. This transition was only possible due to a personal belief that each religion is an equally valid metaphor for the ineffable, and so accepting all of them in spite of their contradictions can only increase one’s grasp of the divine. While most Chinese would express atheism by saying, “I don’t believe in everything” (我什么都不信), I would omit the negative particle to say, “I believe in everything” (我什么都信). I personally appreciate how this koan-like profession places my theology beyond logic, but it only confused most people and distracted them from my project. As I became more immersed in the Islamic community, I would explain honestly that I perceived all of the world’s religions within the Qur’an. I wholly submitted to Islamic law, and became immersed in the Islamic community to such an extent that people began telling me that I was more devout and knowledgeable than most Hui.

In my first two months in Xining, I sought out every mosque I could find and chatted with the teens and preteens studying there as well as the old men who were always hanging around mosques. I would ask where they were from, what brought them to this particular mosque, and what they hoped to do when they completed their studies. They would tell me that they came from eastern Qinghai and Gansu; they chose the mosque because of convenience, family connections, or admiration for an imam; and they hoped to go abroad to continue their studies. They invariably asked numerous questions about the United States and what brought me to China, and when they asked about my religion, I would profess my faith in omnitheism, which only distracted from my line of questioning. Eventually, the call to prayer would sound, and they would say goodbye and disappear inside the mosque. This continued until the day I visited Shulinxiang, the Salafi mosque, and an old caretaker with whom I had been chatting invited me inside to pray. I told him that I was not Muslim and did not know how, and he said that it was OK, all I had to do was follow him. He led me into the mosque and indicated for me to sit next to him. When he stood, I stood. When he raised his hands and said, “Allahu Akbar,” I did the same. He bowed; I bowed. He prostrated; I prostrated. I returned for the next prayer and did the same. I kept coming back, and he and others showed me how to perform ablution before prayer, the proper way to prostrate, how to sit on my left foot with my right toe on the ground, how to properly pronounce “asalaam alaykum,” and gradually he
and other Salafis taught me all the recitations of obligatory prayer and began explaining all the non-obligatory daily practices of the sunnah.

I began supplementing my Islamic education at my home in a youth hostel by memorizing the first surah of the Qur’an and other recitations necessary for prayer. Eventually, one of many informants at Shulinxing took me to buy a magnetically coded Qur’an with an electronic reciting pen, and a few men began teaching me the Arabic alphabet and correcting my pronunciation. One day, a learned Muslim man brought me a printout of the declaration of faith written in Arabic and roughly transliterated into the Roman alphabet. A day or two later, I recited it for him and others while sitting in the mosque between prayers; this effectively made me a Muslim. Both Salafis and Tabligh Jama’at participants loved to tell the story of how the other mosques turned me away because of my long, blond hair and white skin, and they would say that those who invited me inside were the only true Muslims, because they understood the universal nature of Islam and disregarded my appearance. Salafis would use this story to emphasize the veracity of their transnational sect, while Tablighis would say it illustrates the need to invite others to pray. I was careful to explain my research project to everyone I met, but they invariably interpreted my presence as Allah’s divine guidance and adherence to Islamic law as proof of Islam’s veracity, eagerly embellishing and deploying the story of my coming to Islam for their own purposes.

Upon hearing about my studies, my informants claimed that Islam was anthropology, a descriptive and prescriptive science of man. I have not written the evangelical text or moving narrative of conversion they recommended, but I hope my devout method has allowed me to present the world as seen through the eyes of Chinese Muslim revivalists. My omnitheist ideas were not completely alien to my Muslim interlocutors, but only the most open-minded would endorse them. Many Chinese Muslims were fond of saying that there is only one truth, so other sages could be divinely inspired, even if their latter-day followers have gone astray. Some Muslims remarked that Buddha, Confucius, and other great teachers could be prophets because the Qur’an says Allah sent many more prophets than are named therein. Others pointed out that the love and forgiveness Christians emphasize is also present in the Qur’an, although imams rarely emphasize such things. Traditionally, anthropologists participate bodily, but their minds observe from the sidelines, refusing to fully embrace the beliefs of their interlocutors. This too easily can lead to condescension, Orientalism, or mechanistic explanations of profound religious experiences. I threw myself into my research, body and soul, which allowed me to glimpse the subjectivity of my subjects, and my informants were better able to understand and embrace my presence as a Muslim brother than as a curious outsider intent on going through the motions.

During my time in China, I tried to follow through on every practice I learned from my Muslim teachers. Before long, I felt uncomfortable if I missed or was late for an obligatory daily prayer. I would enter buildings with my right foot and enter restrooms or leave homes and mosques with my left foot. I would eat,
drink, and accept things from people with my right hand and tried to reserve my left hand for dirty things like using the restroom. Of course, I would say, “Asalaam alaykum” and shake hands with all Muslim men, and sometimes I would commit a faux pas and say it to a Muslim’s Han friends as well. I began saying, “Insha’allah” (God willing) instead of “I hope so” or “probably,” “Bismillah,” meaning “In the name of Allah,” before starting to eat or before entering a building, and “Al-ḥamdu lillāh” or “praise Allah” after finishing a meal, after someone sneezed, or when hearing good news. There was another supplicatory prayer that I would recite before bed, and had I stayed longer, there are countless more I would have learned for nearly every daily activity. I confess that I have not continued praying or abstaining from pork and alcohol after returning to the US, but Arabic phrases still pop into my head at the appropriate times, my right foot always seems to enter buildings first, I feel slightly uncomfortable accepting something or eating with my left hand, and I am constantly surprised at how many embodied practices have become second nature. Perhaps most of all, I find myself missing the peace and camaraderie of the mosque and the obligation to take a quiet, meditative pause five times a day. In a sense, I still am experiencing a slight taste of the conflicted identity of Chinese Muslims. I obviously lack the hereditary and traditional ties to Islam that the Hui have, but I still am torn between a secular culture and Muslim habitus.

The Hui ethnic category

The complex and often contradictory definition of the Hui as both a religious group and an ethnic category poses the question of how a minority group can simultaneously construct and contest an identity in the midst of a great deal of internal variety and under the often oppressive purview of a majority-dominated state that manipulates such categories to reinforce its own legitimacy. According to the 2000 census, China is about 92 percent Han Chinese, with fifty-five different minority nationalities (少数民族) making up the remaining percentage of the population. The “Hui nationality” (回族), with an estimated 9.2 million members, is the largest of ten such minorities that traditionally practice Islam. But Hui people lack the shared language and common ancestry that helps to define the other nine Muslim groups (listed in descending order of population): the Uygur, Kazakh, Dongxiang (东乡), Kirghiz, Salar, Tajik, Uzbek, Bao’an (保安), and Tatar. Like any system of ethnic or cultural taxonomy, the Marxist–Stalinist-inspired system of classification adopted by the Chinese is highly problematic, and this is especially true when considering constructions of Hui identity. Still, the government and many Hui perceive more or less common origins in periodic influxes of Islamic traders and mercenaries over the past 1300 years. Throughout this time, the Hui have displayed and maintained boundaries separating them from the Han through the practice of Islamic customs, especially the observance of the pork taboo. However, there is a great deal of variation within Hui ancestry and religious practices, making them both questionable charters for identity.
Of all the fifty-five officially recognized Chinese minority nationalities, the Hui are the most diverse and widespread, which helps to make their definition as a single nationality the most problematic. When the CCP formed the classification system for nationalities in the 1950s, it viewed all non-Han peoples as fossilized remnants of earlier stages in a unilinear evolution towards socialism. Of course, all of these nationality categories, especially that of the Hui, are in a constant state of contention and reinvention (Caffrey 2004), but most Chinese minorities, to some extent, have accepted a construction of their own identity as a set of traits that must be commemorated and preserved, a few relics of the past that must be carried unchanged into the future, and can sometimes be exploited for economic gain. Some may clamor for recognition of ignored or mislabeled ethnicities, but the officially recognized groups are—at least officially—set in stone and projected backwards in time as historical fact (Caffrey 2004). At the same time, the state claims to be ushering these loyal subjects forward into a Chinese, socialist modernity.

The earliest known occurrence of the term *Huihui* (回回) occurs in the records of the Western Liao Dynasty (西辽朝) around 1124 CE as the name of one of the kingdoms its founder, Yelü Dashi (耶律大石), encountered in his campaigns near Samarkand (Dillon 1999). It might have been a transliteration for the Uygur people (then usually transliterated as Huihu or Huihe) who also occupied Central Asia at this time (Gladney 1996). Today, many Hui claim that the character 回, which means “to return,” describes their perpetual status as sojourners in China, and others claim the pictograph was chosen to represent the ka’aba in the Grand Mosque of Mecca. Regardless of its origins, the term became commonly used in its reduplicated form to refer to all Muslims during the Yuan Dynasty when numerous Muslims and other foreigners were imported to help oversee China. Today, this form is used solely to deride old-fashioned or uneducated Muslims as “Lao [old] Huihui” (老回回). From the twelfth century until the advent of the present Communist era, the term “Hui” referred to all Muslims in China, regardless of ethnolinguistic distinctions, and it still retains this meaning in popular usage, although upon reflection most people now realize this usage is erroneous. Gladney (2010) credits Bai Shouyi, the Marxist historian of the mid-twentieth century, with successfully persuading the party authorities that the religion of the Hui should be called *Yisilan Jiao* (伊斯兰教, Islamic religion) and not Hui jiao as it is an indigenization of Islam and not a faith unique to the Hui.

The Chinese Nationalists recognized the Hui as one of five nationalities making up the Republic of China, and the Communists maintained this category when they further subdivided the population into 41 nationalities in the 1953 census, and 53 in 1964, before arriving at the present number of 56 in 1982 (Gladney 1996: 17). The inclusion of the Hui alongside of and parallel with the other ethnic nationalities (some of which are also traditionally Muslim) transformed the concept of the Hui from a religious to an ethnic community and created a unique minority nationality originating in China. The diversity and lack of cohesion among various Hui communities complicated this transition.
Nevertheless, Hui people generally embrace their inclusion as a minority nationality and the government-granted benefits that come with it. Various regional and sectarian Hui groups seek to define themselves as the normative Hui variety and their brand of Islam as the definitive faith not just for people of Hui ethnicity, but for all Chinese Muslims. The status of the Hui as the largest in population of China’s Muslim ethnicities, the fact that most of them share a common first language with the Han, and their history of involvement in Chinese politics gives them inordinate influence in shaping and defining Chinese Islam. However, the CCP’s construction of minority nationalities as quaint fossils of previous stages of cultural evolution entails a notion of identity that is frozen in time and tasked with coming to terms with the present. Thus, Hui identity is in a state of constant tension among conflicting notions of history, modernity, and proper Islamic practice.

With the exception of the Han majority and the Hui, the CCP determined that each minority nationality generally meets (or once met) Stalin’s four criteria for defining minority nationalities: they speak their own language, are concentrated in the same general region, have some common subsistence strategies, and share certain customs that can be construed as evidence of a common “psychological makeup.” The Hui loosely fit the last two requirements as they traditionally engage in trade, halal butchering, and operating halal restaurants, and they share in a variety of other customs associated with Islam. But it seems that these traits are common among all Muslim populations and not constitutive of an ethnic identity. Most Hui can recite a little Arabic from the Qur’an, but this hardly constitutes a common language. In spite of this ambiguity, the Hui were among the first nationalities that the Communists recognized, receiving their first autonomous county in 1936.

It seems that both Nationalist and Communist parties recognized the Hui as an ethnic minority and as a practical component of nation-building efforts, which somewhat arbitrarily imposed an ethnic designation on a religious community. Sun Yat-sen included them, lumped together with all other Chinese Muslims, as one of the five nationalities of the Chinese Republic. The lack of a common language, territory, and uniformity of customs creates the (somewhat accurate) impression that the Hui comprise all Chinese Muslims whom the government does not consider distinct enough to warrant their own nationality. This extremely malleable ethnic category has evolved into a discursive arena in which disparate sectarian, regional, and individual actors manipulate religious signifiers to contest the meaning of Hui identity, the nature of Chinese Islam, and the role of religion in individual and group identity.

Although Hui usually live clustered around mosques in urban neighborhoods or rural villages, their communities are scattered all over China, and clearly do not constitute a common territory. The Hui have the third largest population of all minorities and the most autonomous administrative areas, but even in their autonomous region of Ningxia, Hui comprise only one-third of the population, with over 80 percent of Hui people living elsewhere in China. Hui reside in every major city and scattered in villages throughout the countryside. Some
number of Hui resided in 2308 of the 2372 counties across China in 1982 (Gladney 1996). However, the Hui population is most concentrated along trade routes on the fringe of China proper, especially in the Gansu–Ningxia–Qinghai corridor leading from Xinjiang toward Xi’an. The wide dispersion of Hui communities is associated with a tradition of pilgrimage and travel for religious study, as well as generations of involvement in trading, military endeavors, and acting as intermediaries on the frontier between the Han and other ethnic groups. Some scholars (Broomhall 1910; Ekvall 1939) contend that strong social, spiritual, and Confucian ties to kin, native villages, and ancestors’ graves historically discouraged extended travel among the Han, while spiritual value placed on pilgrimage to Mecca and travel to tombs and theological institutes within China had the opposite effect on Hui. Of course, Han also go on Buddhist or Daoist pilgrimages, and they have migrated all over the world in the Chinese Diaspora, but the relative tendency of the Hui to travel for both religious and secular purposes may have been more pronounced in the era before modern transportation. In the eyes of party officials determining ethnic categories, this proclivity for travel and commerce could have been used to define a common Hui territory around trade routes and centers of exchange or—just as problematically—as a common economic life.

Although the Hui have always made up only a small proportion of the Chinese population, they have historically dominated several profitable trades. Stereotypic Hui today run halal noodle restaurants or engage in freelance trade. I met numerous Hui who stated their occupation simply as “trading” (做买卖) and many spent at least half the year in Guangzhou or other major commercial capitals doing business. Halal requirements historically involved Hui in restaurant and hospitality businesses, and today Lanzhou-style beef noodles have spread from the Hui heartland to become comfort food all over China. Several other occupations, such as butchering sheep and cattle as well as leather working, also are outgrowths of Islamic customs. It could be argued that trading excursions are often a secondary outgrowth of religious travel. The Arabic language skills contemporary Hui learn in mosques garner careers in translation and international business more often than religious vocations. As China has opened to the outside world, Han also have been seeking opportunities to work and study abroad, but Han with such ambitions study English, while Hui study Arabic. In short, Hui economic life is just as variable as that of the Han—although the proportions may be slightly different—but other practices set the two apart more clearly.

The taboo on eating pork has created a separation from the Han that has been a major factor in preventing Hui assimilation over the course of their many centuries in China. In my experience, even the least observant Hui who consume alcohol and eat meat that has not necessarily been slaughtered in the halal fashion still refuse to eat pork. This shapes Chinese perceptions of Hui identity more than any other tenet of Islamic faith or practice. Some Hui, and many outsiders, consider this to be the defining aspect of Muslim identity, and all others are lumped into a single group of pork-eaters (Caffrey 2004). This creates a