CHINA’S GOOD MUSLIMS: THE HUI

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I answer why the People’s Republic of China (PRC) allows Hui Muslims relative freedom to practice and participate in religious activities, despite the Chinese Communist Party’s wariness of religion—particularly foreign religions, and despite the Chinese Communist Party’s rhetoric promoting the eventual demise of religion in favor of atheist ideology. I begin with two plausible explanations for why the CCP treats Hui differently than other groups: First, I demonstrate China’s tendency to conflate ethnic and religious identities with separatism; and second, I will show the CCP’s ability to use Hui Islam and Hui Muslims for its own benefit. Each play important roles in the Chinese government’s treatment of the Hui compared to other religious groups. I review each of these plausible explanations and indicate why they are only a piece of the puzzle. Ultimately, I argue that the primary reason for the Chinese government to allow Hui Muslims greater freedom of practice is the successful and ongoing political sinicization of Hui Muslims. To conclude, I offer my thoughts on the outlook for Hui Muslims in a context of growing anxiety over the connection between Islam and terrorism in China.

In answering this question, I hope to make clear the intentions of the CCP towards Islam, and general trends to explain why certain religions are given more freedom than others. This piece is particularly relevant to organizations working in the fields of religious freedom and human rights in China. Inaccurate criticism has the potential to delegitimize any other valid
criticisms we make. By understanding the nuances of Chinese policy and attitude toward
religion, we can unpack the goals and intentions of the Chinese government and the insecurities
those goals address. Knowing these insecurities can help such organizations work for human
rights and religious freedom in China in ways that both acknowledge the insecurities of the
Communist Party, and advocate on behalf of religious groups suffering as a result of these
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Introduction

In his new book *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao*, Ian Johnson chronicles a rising phenomenon among Chinese citizens. After decades of unprecedented and unimaginable change, development and heartache, Chinese people are looking for something more than simply material wellbeing. Many have found solace in religion. Revivals in Buddhism, Christianity, Daoism, and Islam have spread throughout China as people search for “China’s soul”.¹ While Johnson focuses on the ethnic Han of eastern China, the religious revival has taken place among minority groups as well: see Madsen, Richard 2010. Tibetans, Uyghur, and Hui alike are turning to religions that the previous generations were forced to shun. The campaigns to eradicate religion in favor of communism in the late 1950’s have failed.² Relative relaxing of religious restrictions following China’s opening in the 1980’s.³ allowed religious practice that once remained secret, to be practiced in the open. Instead of vanishing like the communists thought, religion grew and spread throughout the country.⁴

However, in the 1990’s a change occurred. Not all religions were treated equally—certain religions were perceived as potential compromises to state security. The government clamped down on movements such as the Falun Gong, Uyghur Muslims of Xinjiang, Tibetan Buddhists, and some Christian house churches they deemed subversive. Other groups however, continued to experience a relatively unhindered religious revival. The Hui, for example, found solace in the religion of their forefathers, where newfound wealth and materialism had left them wanting. One

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Hui man committed Islamic scripture to memory before it was destroyed during the cultural revolution, and reintroduced Islam to his community after restrictions were lifted.\(^5\) Stories like this happened throughout China. Many once nominal practitioners have taken on religious trappings as solace in a changing world.

One particularly interesting trend is that the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) does not treat all reviving religions the same. Some flourish while others continue to irk the state. According to the Chinese think tank Pushi, while the Chinese government protects the rights of “normal” religious groups, there is no overarching law over China to distinguish normal religious groups from abnormal religions.\(^6\) There are no clearly defined laws governing religion, and local governments are left to decide what is normal and what is abnormal.\(^7\) And they do. This context provides fertile ground for the state to treat religious groups as it sees fit, rather than by one universal standard.

In a February 2017 report, Freedom House, a US based non-governmental organization that conducts research and advocacy on democracy, political freedom, and human rights, labels the “Degree of persecution” in China and “trajectory of Religious Persecution in China across Faith Communities”. These ratings cover the 5 official religions of China: Islam, Buddhism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Daoism. While religious persecution scored very high for Uyghur Muslims and Tibetan Buddhists, Hui Muslims experience very low levels of persecution—levels on par with Chinese Buddhists.\(^8\) Only Daoism, a religion native to China and possessing little formalization is categorized as experiencing less forms of persecution than

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Hui Muslims. It should be noted that Freedom House does indicate that the Hui as well as the Uyghurs are experiencing increasing levels of restriction and persecution. The Hui however, continue to enjoy a significant gap in how they are treated compared to their religious counterparts in Xinjiang, Tibet, or even Protestants throughout the country. This fits the broader trend of tightening CCP control over civil society under Xi Jinping as the economy slows—Communist Party guided economic growth can no longer be relied on as the strong source of legitimacy and stability it has been for the past three decades.

Freedom House reveals a trend that is shaping how the Chinese government treats religious groups, and Muslims in particular. In the case of Islam, there is a dichotomy in treatment between Muslim Uyghurs and Muslim Hui. While the Uyghurs experience restrictions to the most private practices of Islam, Hui Muslims enjoy a significant amount of freedom to express their religious identity in public and in private. In March 2017, Islam among the Uyghur was subject to restrictions on growing beards, wearing facial veils, minors attending services at mosques, holding private meetings for religious purposes, or even having “Islamic” music on mobile devices. On April 1, 2017, the State Administration for Religious Affairs or SARA restricted baby names that may contain Islamic and subversive sentiments that could further distinguish Uyghur identity from the Han majority. It should be noted that many of these regulations exist throughout China, but are selectively enforced. That being said, it is more noteworthy, that Hui Muslims are less likely to experience such enforcement.

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While the Hui Muslims experience much more relaxed religious policies, they are not completely free from restriction. They have experienced pushback in certain areas when building mosques, and providing madrasa schools for children. But these are still isolated incidents compared to what Hui Muslims experienced in the past and what Uyghur Muslims experience now. Religious revival is the most common trend among Hui Muslims as many increasingly turn to faith in an age of materialism. Hui government employees: teachers, civil servants, police officers, and workers at state owned enterprises, can openly wear headscarves, and are much more likely to obtain a passport and permission to go on Hajj to Mecca. Linxia, the capital of Ningxia Hui Autonomous region, is often referred to as the Quran Belt and has experienced a rapid growth in Mosques in the last decades.

In this paper, I answer why the People’s Republic of China (PRC) allows Hui Muslims relative freedom to practice and participate in religious activities, despite the Chinese Communist Party’s wariness of religion—particularly foreign religions, and despite the Chinese Communist Party’s rhetoric promoting the eventual demise of religion in favor of atheist ideology. I begin with two plausible explanations for why the CCP treats Hui differently than other groups: First I demonstrate China’s tendency to conflate ethnic and religious identities with separatism; and second I will show the CCP’s ability to use Hui Islam and Hui Muslims for its own benefit. Each play important roles in the Chinese government’s treatment of the Hui compared to other religious groups. I review each of these plausible explanations and indicate why they are only a piece of the puzzle. Ultimately, I argue that the primary reason for the Chinese government to allow Hui Muslims greater freedom of practice is the successful and

ongoing political sinicization of Hui Muslims. To conclude, I offer my thoughts on the outlook for Hui Muslims in a context of growing anxiety over the connection between Islam and terrorism in China.

In answering this question, I hope to make clear the intentions of the CCP towards Islam, and general trends to explain why certain religions are given more freedom than others. This piece is particularly relevant to organizations working in the fields of religious freedom and human rights in China. Before casting judgement on the Chinese government, it is important we can specifically articulate where religious freedom and human rights problems exist. Inaccurate criticism has the potential to delegitimize any other valid criticisms we make. For example, before we label China as anti-religion or anti-Islam, we should dive deeper into the details, and fully understand why China treats some religious groups well and others not. By understanding the nuances of Chinese policy and attitude toward religion, we can unpack the goals and intentions of the Chinese government and the insecurities those goals address. Knowing these insecurities can help such organizations work for human rights and religious freedom in China in ways that both acknowledge the insecurities of the Communist Party, and advocate on behalf of religious groups suffering as a result of these insecurities.

**Non-Interventionism and Wariness of Foreign Influence**

One would expect an atheist country, with legitimate fears of foreign subversion of communist rule, and a proven willingness to violate human rights, would be inclined to suppress possible ideologies separate from the state. The Chinese government sees itself as the only legitimate representation of the Chinese people. The founding of the PRC ended the Century of Humiliation when China was carved up by foreign powers, lost Hong Kong, Taiwan, Manchuria
and was humiliated by military defeats and unequal treaties. This is the oft mentioned narrative for China’s rise out of that humiliation and why China so staunchly is against interference into foreign affairs.

Legitimate fears of foreign interference persist in and out of China’s borders since the communist takeover. Anything that constitutes an infringement of a country’s sovereignty is a potential trojan horse for unneeded and unwanted interference. The Tiananmen Square Massacre was not seen so much as a massacre, but as the quelling of an uprising that was sponsored and promoted foreign ideas along with Human Rights and Democracy – useful tools for foreign actors to instigate regime change.\textsuperscript{14} Crackdowns on Protestant house churches are commonplace. While Protestantism has been in China for nearly 200 years it is still viewed as a foreign religion funded and supported by the West. They constitute a potential threat to the paramount authority of the state by answering to an authority outside of state control and influence. Taiwan is the prime example of how foreign influences, primarily the United States, successfully compromised Chinese sovereignty. Taiwan’s isolation from the mainland has continued the drawn-out conflict of the Chinese civil war, and been a thorn in Beijing’s side since 1949. Such fears of interventionism are especially salient in regions such as Tibet and Xinjiang with a history of foreign backers and a wariness of the potential persistence of such backing.

China is quick to stop the precedent from being set for potential foreign interference because of human rights infringements. Since its inception, the PRC has maintained the importance of the 5 principles outlined by the Bandung Conference (Mutual respect for territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference, etc.).\textsuperscript{15} Non-intervention is in China’s DNA, largely because of the pain of the century of humiliation. In its foreign policy and


domestic policy, the principles of nonintervention are necessary to understand. China has seen what human rights can do in other parts of the world for the intentions of Western Powers, especially in the Middle East. As of writing this article, China has vetoed against 5 UN Security Council resolutions in Syria as well as abstained from 2 to prevent use of human rights as a pretext to intervene in Syria. Such interventions are reminders of foreign influence and proof that if allowed, the West led by the United States, is willing and able to use human rights in any sphere as pretext to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. China highly values its territorial integrity and sovereignty. This is not unique, but is present in Chinese rhetoric on human rights. Human rights are different from the West, and have more to do with security and safety of the country than individual liberties.

Despite all this, the Constitution of the PRC does grant and protect individual rights to practice religion: “All the Citizens of the People's Republic of China have freedom in religious beliefs”, but the Chinese government reserves the right to violate those rights if they are for the security of the states.\(^\text{16}\) Indeed, in the eyes of many Chinese, the lack of social stability is a significant problem for the United States, and while visiting the U.S. they miss the stability offered at home.\(^\text{17}\) China is more than willing and able to sacrifice individual liberties for the sake of stability and national security—these being the most important human rights indicators. The potential is there to do the same with Hui Muslims, but the Chinese government has chosen not to exercise their perceived right and ability. Hui Muslims have increasing connections to the global ummah of Islam and are increasingly influenced by Middle Eastern Muslims. If religion, human rights, or democracy is perceived as a threat to China, China will not hesitate to


implement the measures it deems necessary to inhibit such influences. In light of this, the state has called for religions to focus more on their Chineseness rather than their connection to foreign religious entities.\textsuperscript{18} Religion and ideology outside the influence of the Communist Party, especially those religions with foreign backing, are met with increasing pressure to remove the evils that might penetrate China through the manipulation of religion.

\textbf{The Opiate of the Masses}

The origins of the call to eradicate religion for the sake of development did not begin with the communist regime, but with the end of Imperial China. The Republic of China sought to make China a modern country, and while Western Christianity was a symbol of progress, traditional folk religions and practices were backwards and hindered societal progress.\textsuperscript{19} The Communists went a step further, and adopted the Marxist teaching that religion was not only a sign of a backwards society, but also the opiate of the masses. Antagonism against religion was greatest during Mao’s rule of China from 1949-1976. Temples and monasteries were destroyed, and foreign religions were labeled as ploys to subvert the state.\textsuperscript{20} Islam was no exception. Imams were prosecuted or killed and Sufi shrines were desecrated, mosques torn down and Qurans were burned.\textsuperscript{21}

But after the cultural revolution the communists took a more moderate view of religion. The Party religion as a symptom of the oppression and economic underdevelopment of China

that would one day end.\textsuperscript{22} The PRC is an affect regime always in ideological competition with religious faiths because it cannot fully coopt religions for its own purposes.\textsuperscript{23} The PRC maintains adherence, or at least lip-service to a Marxist ideology in its history and requirement that CCP members adhere to an atheist and communist ideology.

The PRC basic viewpoint of religion is stated in Document 19. Religion is a historical phenomenon and a result of:

“the helplessness of the people in the face of the blind forces alienating and controlling them in this kind of society; the fear and despair of workers in the face of enormous misery generated by the oppressive social system; and in the need of the oppressor classes to use religion as an opiate and as an important and vital means in its control of the masses”

This opiate will disappear once the construction of a fully socialist state is complete and the material needs of the people are met.\textsuperscript{24} Even today among ordinary Chinese the stigma of religion continues and use of the word zongjiao, or religion, is taboo, and even those who are religious will deny adhering to any zongjiao—a lasting effect of this anti-religious sentiment.\textsuperscript{25}

When the communists first came to Linxia in Gansu province where there was and is a large Hui Muslim population, they sought to convert Muslims to communist ideology. Doing so was just one of many coercive attempts at influencing Islam in China that began with the nationalists.\textsuperscript{26} The Party saw itself as transcending all other belief systems throughout China, and while these beliefs would be respected, they were subordinate to the laws and legal systems of

the party\textsuperscript{27}. Since China’s reform and opening, relative liberalization under Chinese government control has allowed Mosques to increase.\textsuperscript{28}

It is in this context that Hui Muslims find themselves, not holding beliefs distinct from the government but not incompatible with it. From here on, I will examine several reasons why the government looks favorably on Hui Islam compared to other religions, allowing Hui Muslims allowing them to toe the line between being good Chinese and good Muslims.

\section*{Conflation of Ethnic and Religious Identity}

To Western eyes, conflation between Islam and extremism is most relevant to our collective consciousness. Muslims go on jihad and attack the West. Terrorists shout \textit{Allahu Akbar} before murdering innocent civilians. Indeed, in American media, the word Muslim is often juxtaposed to terrorist attacks, making it easy for Americans viewers to conflate the two.\textsuperscript{29} Even those Americans who know only a small, but influential minority carries out acts of terror, still have trouble not associating Islam with the attacks they see on the news.

This is not the case in China. There the discourse is a question of ethnicity and separatism as it is a religious one. In fact, while the American media risk conflating Islam and extremists, China conflates the term terrorist with ethnic separatism in Tibet and Xinjiang.\textsuperscript{30} Since September 11, 2001, China has shrewdly adopted the rhetoric of the West’s war on terror to justify cracking down on religious groups in Tibet and Xinjiang. Ironically, other than the Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement or ETIM, other Uyghur diaspora movements do not regard

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themselves as Islamic. Contrary to this fact, East Turkistan Independence Movement (ETIM) along with 4 other Uyghur independence groups are the basis of China’s terrorist labels in Xinjiang. Terrorism, while associated with Islam, is associated with the Islam that is relevant to Uyghur separatism. Islam is only one of several unifying factors for Uyghurs in Xinjiang, and the Uyghurs use their ethnic, linguistic, cultural, historical, and religious differences to justify themselves as people distinct from the rest of China. This is not the case for Hui Islam or China’s seven other Muslim minorities—even those with significant portions of their population in Xinjiang are against Xinjiang separatist movements. In fact, one of the most important criteria of lawful Islam is that it accepts the official position of Xinjiang as an integral part of the Chinese zuguo, or ancestral country, and denounces the ‘three forces’ of separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism.

China justifies cracking down on Islam among Uyghurs because Uyghurs use Islam to distinguish themselves from Chinese. Many accuse Uyghurs of being only marginally Muslim, abstaining from alcohol, cigarettes, or Chinese holidays on the grounds of religion, but really doing so to propagate a deviant culture. It is for this reason that the CCP has required alcohol and cigarettes to be sold in Xinjiang convenience stores. While these policies make very little sense to the outside observer, once we understand the conflation of ethnic and religious identity we can better follow why the government might instill such bizarre laws.

Because Hui Islam is the single unifying factor among Hui Muslims, there is little association between Hui Islam and separatism or terrorism. In fact, the term Hui itself may be a partial cause for the confusion. Nationalists originally used ‘Hui’ to denote all Muslim ethnicities in China.\textsuperscript{37} Since gaining a more limited definition, the term ‘Hui’ still includes a diverse group of people, languages, customs, practices, and regions in China. While Xinjiang is the home of the Uyghur, there is no true ethnic homeland for the Hui except China. You can find the Hui in any province, speaking almost all the languages of China, and partaking in different cultural practices from region to region just as the Han do. While the Uyghur identity is multifaceted, the “construction process of the Hui identity was multi-level, contextualized and diverse. As an identity attribution, the Hui identity was closely related to Islam and religious identity”.\textsuperscript{38}

A similar comparison is that of Chinese and Tibetan Buddhists. Tibetan Buddhists are concentrated largely in one province and among one unique ethnic group with historical ties to Tibet. While Buddhists in other parts of China do not have that unifying narrative of an identity separate from China, Tibetans do. Tibetan ties to the Dalai Lama continue to undermine Beijing’s desire to control Tibet.

The distinction between these two separate types of Islam or Buddhism is important to understand when researching or working on religion in China. While both groups are religious groups, not all religion is the same. In its campaign against the ‘three forces’ of separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism, the Chinese government has no need to fear Hui Islam expressions of individual identity. Theirs are not expressions of an identity that justifies statehood, but one that is compatible and paired with the essential nature of their Chinese

nationality. Islam for the Hui is not a subversive tool, but an expression of a unique Chinese ethnic minority identity. The Hui do not pose a threat to China’s territorial integrity or One China policy, and the government has no reason to direct campaigns and designations imposed on Tibetans and Uyghurs to Hui Muslims. To the Chinese, Tibetan Buddhism and Uyghur Islam are vehicles for separatism and terrorism. Hui Islam is not.

However, while this is an important piece to understanding why Hui Muslims are treated differently than Uyghurs and Tibetan Buddhists, it cannot explain why religions with large numbers of ethnic Chinese such as Christians or the Falun Gong, suffer under greater persecution from the state. These groups, like Hui Muslims, do not present a relevant security risk in terms of separatism or ethnic nationalism that the state would like to control. Nonetheless the conflation of ethnic and religious identity is a useful tool to explain why not all Chinese Muslims are treated equally. Islam in China is more complicated than simply just a religious issue, but is fraught with issues of ethnicity and identity: see Gladney, Dru 2007, and Horowitz, Donald 1985.40

Increase in Perceived Utility of Certain Religions Amidst Religious Revival

As Ian Johnson argues in his book, Mao in many ways was revered as a god, but a god with a very serious problem: “He died”. In 1976, China was stripped of its religious figurehead and robbed of its deity for the future.41 In the next few decades after unsuccessful attempts by post-imperial China to eradicate religious practices it saw as backward, religion is back. China’s “New Great Awakening” is partially due to China’s newfound view that religion—if properly

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controlled and contained—can benefit rather than hinder state policies. But why would an atheist government with a history of anti-religious rhetoric and action suddenly use religious revival in China as a tool for its own means?  

The legitimacy of the People’s Republic of China, which at its origin relied on the pseudo religion of the cult of Mao, gave way to economic reforms. The benefits of these reforms are not as strong as they used to be. After rocketing to the second highest GDP on the planet, the Chinese economy is beginning to slow, and the party is realizing that there is more to life for Chinese than money. In a surprising turn of events, the CCP that once condemned feudal societies for manipulating religion for their own purposes, now finds that religion may not be such a bad tool after all.  

There are two ways the CCP finds religion useful to their goals. First, it provides China with a moral framework that many believe China has lacked since the transition away from ideological communism and the attempted eradication of religion during the Cultural Revolution. Along with the materialism that accompanied the lifting of millions of Chinese out of poverty, comes a need for something more in China. As one Chinese religious practitioner said, “we thought we were unhappy because we were poor. But now a lot of us aren’t poor anymore, and yet we’re still unhappy. We realize there’s something missing, and that’s a spiritual life”. Even Xi Jinping has moved away from the decades of anti-religious sentiment in the party and found that religion might benefit China. He says, “if the people have faith, the nation has hope, and the country has strength”. Xi continues the tradition of his father who

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genuinely respected traditional Chinese faiths, and calls on Buddhists to unite and promote Buddhism in China⁴⁶.

Second, China has already used native Chinese religions for political legitimacy at home and soft-power purposes abroad. What the CCP once thought of as a threat to modernization, is now a tool for maintaining power in modernized China. The Party sees Daoism, free from connotations of foreign religion as the basis for traditional Chinese culture and potential base upon which to build party legitimacy.⁴⁷ Confucius, once demonized for creating the Chinese feudal system, is now a source of legitimacy as the Chinese government becomes the protector of Chinese culture.⁴⁸ Folk religions, were once seen as vestiges of the imperial past that needed to be eradicated to promote modernity among Chinese.⁴⁹ Buddhism is a tool for realizing party’s goals. China encourages Buddhist sects that worship Dorje Shugden, a god that has been outlawed by the Dalai lama.⁵⁰ This sect has a significant following in the West, and supporting this religious movement is a move to undermine the Dalai Lama’s peaceful image.

In addition, the Government uses ‘intangible cultural heritages’ to preserve pieces of its culture and religion that can be used to promote tourism and recognition abroad. The CCP has not been shy about using temples and shrines for its own purposes. In an effort to attract more tourists, some officials even going to the extent of creating their own shrines. According to André Laliberté, many local governments feel strong incentives to encourage religious activities

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to improve revenues through tourism, promote philanthropy, support social stability, along with offering a response to the growing spiritual needs of Chinese people.\(^{51}\)

In light of these modern developments, the CCP looks to its Muslim Hui citizens for potential benefits at home and abroad. A government that sees the utility of the Muslim Hui religious group, has little reason to suppress it. Since its inception, the PRC has used how it treats its own Muslims in efforts to build solidarity with other ‘third world’ countries in the Middle East. The CCP orchestrated to increase exchanges between Muslim Chinese and Islamic countries, organizing Islamic training abroad, facilitating hajj pilgrims and allowing Muslim countries to donate money for schools in China.\(^{52}\) The Chinese Islamic Association (ICA) hopes that pilgrims on the hajj have “safe, orderly and well-behaved Haj” to promote China’s image.\(^{53}\)

In 2007, the government started a direct flight from Ningxia to Saudi Arabia for the sole purpose of sending pilgrims on the Hajj.\(^{54}\) While the number of Chinese Muslims participating in the Hajj is increasing, up to 14,500 in 2015, Hajjis must take patriotic education classes and must apply through the IAC. The majority of opportunities go to Hui Muslims.\(^{55}\) Through these restrictions, China seeks to mitigate the potential Middle Eastern influence while also promoting an image abroad of a Chinese government that takes care of its Muslims by increasing interaction with Hui and other pilgrims.\(^{56}\) The Hui play an important role in fostering good relations with the Middle

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East and cracking down on Hui expressions of Islam would be detrimental to China’s attempts to create a “Muslim friendly” image.

Hui Muslims in China have also fostered economic connections with their Muslim counterparts in the Middle East. The Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, part of Gansu province, is dominated by the Hui and has become a zone for foreign investment and tourism. In 2003, the Ningxia Halal Food Industrial zone was created, establishing trade relations with Muslim countries in the Middle East as well as Malaysia. In 2009, it reached a total net worth of 20 billion.\(^{57}\) Linxia Hui autonomous prefecture, is home to China’s Quran belt. According to some estimates, there are more Mosques per square foot than there were in the Mameluke period of Egypt.\(^{58}\) The government of Gansu has invested billions of dollars in Linxia, seeing its potential for attracting Muslim investment and tourism. Arabic signs and Middle Eastern style mosques are some of the many Muslim identifiers that have proven useful for the province’s government.\(^{59}\) Linxia is also a global leader in production of inexpensive Islamic headwear, combining the attractiveness of Chinese goods with the importance of keeping one’s Islamic practices.\(^{60}\)

The proven usefulness of Hui Muslims for political and economic influence internationally is a significant part of why Hui Muslim practitioners are met with much less restrictions than other religious groups—namely, Uyghur Muslims. The Chinese government


does not view all religions as equally valuable as a means to achieve its political objectives.\textsuperscript{61}

The government perceives the benefits of Hui Islam in contributing to social stability, promoting of philanthropy by their religious organizations at home, and satisfying the spiritual and communal needs of its citizens.\textsuperscript{62} The Chinese government has a vested interest in the flourishing of Hui Muslims as long as they prove useful conduits of Chinese soft power. However, religions like Falun Gong and even Christianity have the potential of soft power if properly used by the government. This brings us to the most significant reason the CCP treats Hui Muslims relatively well. The ‘usefulness’ of religion is dependent on the extent to which believers submit to government legitimacy and authority. Without that, the Hui are just another group of Muslims.

**The Sinicization of Muslim Hui**

In 2015, Xinjiang’s then top Communist Party official Zhang Chunxian, said that forces in and out of China are using religion to engage in “destructive activities”. Zhang said this before 700 religious leaders that included Muslim, Buddhist, and Christians representatives. He called religions to “sinicize” and steer their respective adherents “under socialism to serve economic development, social harmony, ethnic unity and the unification of the country”.\textsuperscript{63} In addition, he told religions to “immerse [themselves] in Chinese culture… in order that religions can develop in a normal and healthy way”.\textsuperscript{64}

Sinicization is the most important factor in explaining why the Chinese government does not impose the same number of regulations on Hui Muslims as it does on Muslim Uyghurs or


other religious groups in China. As Richard Madsen states, “there is in principle no space in official Chinese policy for an independent civil society, and therefore no space for independent religious association”. Submission to and acknowledgement of government calls to sinicize by Hui Muslims, has largely satisfied the party’s agenda and allowed for an environment of more cooperation than coercion. Hui Muslims prove that they are not a threat to the CCP, disassociating themselves with subversive elements of religion, and proving their worth in through contributions to social harmony.

According to the 2010 Chinese census, Hui made up 10.586 million people, or less than one percent of China’s 1.338 billion population. Hui can be found in every Chinese province and autonomous region. Hui trace their roots to Muslim merchants, militia and officials who immigrated to China starting in the 7th century. There is no one unifying language for the Hui, each adopting the local dialect of their home. This is an important factor in Hui ability to integrate into Chinese society. Because the Hui are not monolithic, they have easily adapted to the iteration of Chinese culture that surrounds them. Some argue that Hui are just Han with a mythical connection to the Arab world. These people use the term Han-Hui or accuse the Hui of not being real Muslims. Granted, not all Hui are Muslims, but many among those who are, have experienced an Islamic revival in Hui communities across China. What is remarkable about Hui Muslims is their ability and willingness to adapt and integrate into Chinese society, but also

their ability and insistence to maintain their own religious identity in the face of the dominant Han culture.

Hui Muslims for centuries have adapted to Chinese culture, and for centuries worked with Chinese authorities and citizens to promote understanding of Islam and find compatibilities between Islam and Chinese culture. In Hui communities, it is common to see architecture that blends Arab and Chinese sensibilities. On the surface, these mosques look much like a Chinese temple. Unlike Chinese temples there are no idols or pictures of animals, but calligraphy and frescos and art of flowers—a testament to Hui cultural adherence to Islam.

Compatibility between Islamic law and state control is thanks partially to state intervention. During the communist era, Sharia law was considered both ethnic and feudal. The communist government saw itself as propagating socialism, a far superior theology, that would eventually eradicate the feudal and backward beliefs of the religious in China. Nevertheless, the PRC allowed Chinese to practice these religions until the inevitable day when they would succumb to the communism and socialism of the communist party.

Hui have made important efforts to practice a Sharia that does not challenge the political authority in China or undermine their faith in Islam. Hui Muslims adhere to a wide range of Islamic schools. Most Hui Muslims follow the relatively flexible Hanafi school of jurisprudence—a belief system more compatible with Chinese religion. This school of Islam, especially its manifestation of the xidatong—a school of Islam founded in Lintan, China—contains elements from the Han Kitab and incorporates Confucian and Daoist ideals. In recent

efforts to show compatibility with Chinese Communist culture, Hui Muslims have led a campaign to explain why halal food is good—showing off images of Hui Muslims using Weibo or WeChat while sitting down and eating in a Chinese fashion.74

A quote from a Hui Muslim sums up well why the Chinese government does not place extensive restrictions on Hui Muslims in China: “I want [the Han] to know Muslims are virtuous people. We are peaceful. We are reasonable. We are tolerant. And we are good Chinese.”75

While it is not difficult to find different religious groups claiming to be peaceful, reasonable, or tolerant, you will not find a strong claim among Uyghurs or Tibetans to be good Chinese. Good people yes, Good Chinese is a different question. Hui Muslims call their coreligionists to be active members of a diverse Chinese society, while other groups call for greater autonomy to express their unique ethno-religious identity. Groups like the Tibetans and Uyghurs are culturally distinct from the rest of Chinese culture. These groups use their religious differences to promote a separate sense of identity from the rest of China to maintain their own autonomy. Instead of finding compatibilities they find incompatibilities, like not drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, or attending Chinese traditional festivals citing incompatibility with their religion. Some Uyghur Muslims go as far as to declare all government documents as Haram or unclean.76 Stunts like these often justify government intervention.

Unlike other groups, the Hui have successfully navigated the line between maintaining their identity and finding mutual compatibility between their religion and Chinese culture. Doing so shows how the Hui see themselves as Chinese citizens as well as adherents to Islam. For the

Hui, both identities are very important, and the Chinese government respects them for their ability to be both different and Chinese. A compatible and integral part of the tapestry of Chinese culture under the purview of the Communist Party.

This fits in well with how religious groups like Daoism and Chinese Buddhism increasingly thrive in China. There are an estimated 185-250 million Buddhists in China, more than any other religion. Daoism and other indigenous Chinese religions are harder to count and it is more difficult to determine whether someone is Daoist, as they may not claim to adhere to any religion but actively participate in Daoist activities and practices. These religions are historically Chinese and either began in China or have been, as in the case of Buddhism in China for over 2,000 years and has adopted many of the traits and characteristics of Chinese traditional religions, using Daoist and native religious terminology to translate the sacred Buddhist texts into Chinese. Chinese adopted the Buddha as a god and the Buddha can often be seen juxtaposed to Daoist or traditional Chinese deities.

The astute observer may notice the definition of sinicization means to become more Chinese, and by that definition, many religions in China have already culturally sinicized, but do not enjoy the same freedom to practice their religion as religious groups like the Hui do. As requested by party official Zhang Chunxian in 2015, groups Chinese Christians have sinicized by “[immersing themselves] in Chinese culture”. Members of Early Rain Reformed Church in Chengdu were quick to highlight the legacy of Chinese Christians before them, along with tying themselves to the global church community and history. This church emphasized the importance of prominent Chinese protestants, and the contributions of Chinese Christians to Christianity.

They made Christianity Chinese. They do not however, work to bring their followers “under socialism to serve economic development, social harmony, ethnic unity and the unification of the country”. They may be “Chinese” Christians, but they believe in a higher power than the party. The government actively seeks Chinese religions to submit to the authority of the party as the paramount leader of China, and work to comply their beliefs and practices with the goals of the state. Those who do not open themselves up to suffer the consequences. Hui Muslims have largely complied with this, and so enjoy more freedom to practice their religion.

According to André Laliberté, “the respect for the rights of the public – religious believers and non-believers as well – is conditional on the observance of the following four requirements: observance of the laws, patriotism, support of the socialist path, and approval of CCP leadership”. Hui Muslims act according to Chinese government wishes and directives, and by and large have both taken on Chinese culture and respect for the Chinese government. Hui Muslims hold a disproportionate representation in Islamic patriotic associations. The Chinese Islamic Association (ICA) is not based regionally by ethnicity. Because Hui Muslims are present in all Chinese provinces of China, the Hui form a disproportionate part of ICA membership. Hui Muslim individuals have a significant influence on the government controlled Islamic institutions and find it much easier to propagate their particular version of Islam throughout China, as in the practice of jiejing, or exegesis, interpreting the Qur’anic scriptures. Jiejing is an indispensable tool in fighting the three forces that plague Xinjiang-- separatism, terrorism, and religious extremism. Such exegesis directly complies with government calls to sinicize. This reality signals loyalty to the government, earning greater support and resources, and incriminates Islam associated with Xinjiang Separatism, and therefore distinguishes Hui Islam from deviant

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groups associated with separatism, Wahhabism or Salafism. They view true Islam to be that which is supported by the ICA, which promotes interests of patriotism from within Islam, aiguoaijiao, love your country, love your religion. By complying with the ICA, Hui Muslims adhere to the authority of the party.

Hui Muslims use the term minjian to delineate Muslim ethnic groups in China that deviate from party sanctioned Islam. Their willingness to conflate party sanctioned Islam with true Islam is a testament to their desire to be considered as Chinese and follow Chinese customs and laws along with their own Muslim practices. They prove their loyalty to their religion does not interfere with the loyalty to the party. This is what the CCP calls for. According to Richard Madsen, “The state claims the prerogative of determining what counts as “true” and “false” religion, and uses its police power to attempt the eradication of “false” religion”. Not only does this separate Hui Muslims from separatist movements, it also adheres to state sanctioned Islam. The CPC advocates such a move, as the paramount organization and authority of China. The state has accepted that religion is unlikely to disappear anytime soon, but the religious revival of China must be under state control. Part of that is ensuring it is not tied to any foreign or subversive groups, and a potential benefit is finding utility in a faith that adheres to government supremacy and party loyalty.

A blemish on Xi Jinping’s career in Zhejiang province was its inability to demolish a Christian Church declared illegal by party officials. Even at the top of the communist party there is strong awareness of the subversive potential of religions not under the purview of the

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state, and the potential for these groups to undermine CCP legitimacy and sovereignty.

Christians in Zhejiang have had crosses torn down and churches demolished during Xi’s tenure as the leader of the government. This is not necessarily because Xi is against Christianity, but because they represent a black mark on his authoritative power.  

Another example are the Falun Gong, whose practices adhere to common Chinese religious traditions and practices. However, Falun Gong do not fall under state sanctioned religious authorities of SARA, or have the influence of a united front work department to align the beliefs and practices of clergy and lay with the policies of the state. With more adherents than the CCP, national Falun Gong protests met swift and severe crackdowns. Religion is not a threat if it is under government surveillance and control. Adherents to Falun Gong were not. They were part of an increasingly influential movement out of Party control. The government is eager to show that no religion controls the lives of the people of China. The Party does.

The importance of sinicization has increased in recent years. The debate within the Chinese government over whether to allow minority groups to practice their religion freely or to push them assimilate to the Chinese national identity has reached a tipping point. Those calling for relative autonomy are being phased out in favor of those who believe in stronger policies of ethnic assimilation. This was the case for Wang Zhengwei, a Hui official from Ningxia who was suddenly dismissed after helping secure space to build mosques and promote the revival of Islam in the region. The Hui are much more accepted because they work with Chinese culture and institutions—but the government is still officially atheist and there is a line one should not cross.

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This is a difficult balance. There is a fine line between adhering to party control and giving up one’s religious identity. For the present, most Hui Muslims have followed the directives of the state to sinicize, making a compromise between religious tenants and the authority of the state. While maintaining their unique identity, Hui Muslims have proven to the party their willingness to satisfy Party demands for social harmony, sinicization, and adherence to government supremacy, showing the government it can enjoy the social benefits provided by religious groups without suffering a threat to state authority.

**An Uncertain Future**

The Hui enjoy a unique place in Chinese society. Uniquely religious, but unshakably Chinese. However, as indicated by Freedom House’s report, Hui Muslims are experiencing increasing restrictions despite the fact they have been largely compatible with state religious goals. While the government is responsible for, and has encouraged contact with Muslims abroad, this has exposed Hui Muslims to more traditional Islamic ideologies. Hui Muslims typically follow the Hanafi school, but as exchanges with the Middle East increase, some Hui have converted to Wahhabism—a form of Islam that is often associated with radicalism and religious extremism. For Uyghurs, this has been a means in which to express discontent over restrictions on religious practices and economic inequalities compared to their Han neighbors. If Hui Muslims act similarly and look to the roots of Islam in the Middle East for inspiration in their faith, they may begin to lose their special status as China’s ‘good Muslims’.

In a recent post on Weibo, Xi Jinping responded to Chinese fears of creeping Sharia, saying Islamic groups “are using [creeping Sharia] to create ethnic opposition, destroy national

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safety, and seize more political rights and interests.” The post was later deleted, but indicates government willingness to call out Islam, and not just Islam associated with Uyghur separatism. If Beijing blames radical Islam for the problems in Xinjiang rather than ethnic separatism, distinctions between Hui and Uyghur Muslims may become blurred. China’s dichotomy of Islamic treatment may fade much like it has in Western dialogue. Indeed, recent cases of Islamophobia in China have been met with little government censorship—allowing Chinese to associate and blame Islam for the country’s troubles.

As the conflation between Islam and extremism outweighs the perception of the Hui as ‘good Muslims’, Hui Muslims see persistent and increased restrictions on their religion, and become subject to increasing hate speech from Han associating Islam with the violence they see on the news. Perceived preferential treatment of minority groups and fear of such radical Islam will make the Hui an easy target if the government continues to support and allow these fears to persist.

Until then, Muslim Hui efforts to actively comply with government goals of social harmony, economic development, and party authority, have allowed Hui Muslims to practice their religion relatively freely, despite a government suspicious of foreign connections and strong atheism. How long, and to what extent will this bifurcation between favorable and unfavorable religion continue? How long will China continue to distinguish good and Muslims? Only time will tell.

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Bibliography


