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Epilogue to "Islam in China/China in Islam"

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In my opening comments during the conference "The Everyday Life of Islam: Focus on Islam in China," held at Cornell University on April 27 and 28, 2012, I proposed a number of themes, tensions, and conflicts on which we might focus our discussion of the papers. This epilogue will summarize some of the conversations that ensued and note areas of particular interest that emerged from revisions to the five essays presented in this special issue of *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*.

Some conference participants attempted to make generalizations at national and transnational levels, while others stuck tenaciously to local details. Our discussions sometimes strayed from "everyday life," but rarely from diverse, sometimes divisive, solutions to the everyday problem of "being Muslim and being Chinese" and its macrocosmic projection, "Islam in China/China in Islam," or, in Rian Thum's contribution, Islam *not* in China. The essays here, influenced by conversations and debates during the conference, suggest future agendas for study of Islam in China and research on Muslim minorities and comparative religion and politics.

Categories and Paradigms

Intellectual contexts deeply influence academic arguments, which depend upon, and arise directly from, the categories scholars use to order information and the questions they ask of their materials. Readers should particularly note the conjunctions and contrasts between the paper by a scholar from China (Wang) and those by U.S.-based scholars (Caffrey, Erie, Thum, and Turnbull). Pairs of "translated" terms such as *minzu*/ethnic group and *zongjiao*/religion do not embody simple one-on-one mappings. Rather, they exemplify differences between complex discourses influenced by languages, national histories, state interventions, academic cultures, and more.

In this collection, the essayists and many of their informants pursue understandings of Islamic or Hui or Uyghur *authenticity*, the right way to believe or understand or pray or eat as one of "us"—as a Muslim in China—but they clearly disagree about what that right way might be, or even in what discursive realm the right way might be found. Erie's abstraction of local arguments about *shari'a* makes a valuable analysis of this point—who has the authority to determine what "Islamic law" (or Islam itself) might be in a China dominated by the Communist Party? One could ask the same question about the Qing government, or that of the Republic of China. Though those earlier regimes intruded into everyday life less urgently,[1] Muslims sometimes called on them to adjudicate Islamic rectitude, orthodoxy, or authenticity.[2]

Most obviously, some contributors focus on Islam as doctrine (orthodoxy), others on Islamic practice (orthopraxy), and still others on the Islamic behavior of people defined as Muslims (that is, how to act like a Hui, Uyghur, etc.). In the People's Republic of China (PRC) these distinctions engage the separation between *zongjiao* and *minzu*, a conceptual differentiation so crucial to the state that two separate government bureaucracies have been created to deal with its two sides. Reifying a discursive practice over a century old, the PRC has organized the society it governs into discrete, unquestionable groupings called *minzu*, formerly anglicized as "minority nationalities" but now officially translated as "ethnic groups."[3]

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Minzu Commission of the PRC government identified precisely fifty-six "minority *minzu*" within its borders, theoretically based on criteria developed by Stalin in the 1920s and on the "avowedly scientific scale of material stages of social process (derived from Morgan and Engels, refined by Lenin and Stalin)" (Harrell 1995, 9). No one in the PRC can question the facticity of these *minzu* entities, despite the political, subjective, local, sometimes cursory process of their identification or, more accurately, "differentiation" (Ch. *shibie*)—a process that included both observation and creation. No one, inside or outside the PRC, can doubt the draconian power of the institutions that have perpetuated and strengthened the state-recognized *minzu* since then while denying the existence of any others.[4]

While religious affiliation and practice remain more or less voluntary in the PRC, membership in a *minzu* is held to be genetic, biological, and therefore (in theory) necessary and determined.[5] Every citizen has a *minzu* designation on the officially issued identity card necessary for access to many government services or even to physical mobility. Ten of the officially designated *minzu* are called "Muslim," meaning that their members' ancestors were

Muslims, but the classification says nothing about their current relationship to their ancestral religion. The state has thus created two official possibilities for "being Muslim," one involving *zongjiao* and the other *minzu*.

Lesley Turnbull's essay crystallizes the potential conflict between the two definitions. Her study finds that Hui from Shadian insist that only Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxy can define a Muslim—a member of the transnational congregation of Islam (Ar. *umma*)[6]—thus rendering *minzu* identification irrelevant. In sharp contrast, her Kunming Hui informants argue that their *minzu* heritage makes them *better* Hui, and that their descent from the Prophet renders religious practice unnecessary.[7] This mutual put-down has not yet generated any direct confrontation in Yunnan, but it clearly engages two very different notions of Muslim reality.[8] Local contexts and personal preferences all over China allow Sino-Muslims to occupy numerous positions *between* the poles of the *zongjiao-minzu* spectrum, rather than making a simple either-or choice.[9]

Matthew Erie's essay presents this terminological dilemma with regard to *shari'a*, Islamic religious law, and its co-optation and redefinition as "customary law" by the PRC. What is Islamic law supposed to be? Who should define it and enforce it? What relevance does it have in a modernizing, reforming China? The state-created China Islamic Association—mistrusted by many Muslims as too conciliatory to antireligious, atheistic party policies—has occupied the supposed middle ground between Muslim communities and the central government and attempted to answer these questions, but its answers almost always privilege the state.

Tension has been constant, and sometimes violent, between the strictly delimited party-state definition and the much more capacious and broadly mandated notions of *shari'a* prevalent elsewhere in the Muslim world. The Ramadan fast, for example, one of the most crucial religious obligations of Muslims, has sometimes been allowed by the party-state, sometimes forbidden, and usually ridiculed in state discourse as "unscientific" and dangerous to Muslims' health. Erie's narrative demonstrates that even private religious duties have become part of a state-dominated discourse that defines Islam as entirely compatible with the party-state's demands for harmony and unity (which some parse as "homogeneity"), rationalism, and social stability.

Rian Thum's detailed study of Turki documents presents a much less common perspective—that of culturally non-Chinese Muslims, living in what is now part of China, for whom "China" remained only a distant, hazy other. Examining the vocabulary of reference to

their eastern neighbor, Thum's Altishahri informants call into question the most basic terms of our conference, "Islam" and "China," demonstrating the greater salience of the former, encompassing not only Altishahr but the entire Turko-Persian world to its west, even under indirect Qing rule. How does the state or religion appear to people for whom China might be a distant oasis city rather than an empire or culture area, and its ruler a *khan* rather than a *huangdi*? This unfamiliar perspective can undermine our habitual reference to "China" as something assumed, solid, and obviously central. [10]

Reformism and Fundamentalism

One of the most obvious tensions in the work of our conference lay in the confrontation between conventional Muslim institutions and practices and reformist trends, often seen as emanating from Saudi Arabia or Southeast Asia. The Sufi *menhuan* based in northwest China, inter-*minzu* religious syncretism and Sufism in Yunnan (Caffrey, Wang), even the basic structures of Sino-Islamic knowledge—all have come under attack as "innovations" (Ar. *bid'a*) or "local accretions" by reformists associated with movements such as the Ikhwan and Salafiyya.[11] An Arabicization trend, taking the transnational, transcultural *umma* as its foundation and Arab culture as its mode, has been described in many parts of China, including in Turnbull's study of Shadian. Wang Jianping's paper addresses an early example of precisely this conflict—Ma Dexin, a widely respected nineteenth-century cleric, producing a systematic (and "modern") critique of Shi'ism and Sufism.

Kevin Caffrey's essay adds another diachronic dimension to the tension between reformism and "the way things have always been," intensely focused on a Yunnanese multi-*minzu* village. In his account, the disappearance of the Naxi altar from behind the Dragon Village mosque—an event—illuminates larger processes of change within Hui communities and of relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims in diverse Chinese contexts. In Dragon Village, unlike in Turnbull's Kunming, a modern reformist version of orthopraxy—fundamentalist, Wahhabi, anti-accretion, anti-Sufi—overtook (temporarily, at least) the previous practices of inter-*minzu* sociality, except for one stubborn non-Muslim herdsman who refused to give up his white skullcap. Taking a more conciliatory position, of which state authority would likely approve, the local Muslim educator Ma Xiaoxiong advocated that, "Hui should be students of

Islam and recognizably Chinese in their Hui tradition" (Caffrey, this issue, p. 28). Even within one small and remote place, different definitions of authenticity were articulated and acted out.

Like their informants, the participants in the conference held widely differing notions of the flexibility or rigidity of Islam as a religious-cultural system, demanding different analyses of Muslim (or Hui or Uyghur) legitimacy. Here, too, a worldwide spectrum of possibilities exists for both scholars and Muslims on the ground, and many questions arose. For example:

Is Islam a limited body of texts and ideas susceptible to correct and incorrect interpretations, or is Islam "what Muslims believe and do"? How do particular groups of Muslims reconcile the tensions between their chosen right way and the many (to them) wrong ways to be a Muslim?

Is there a point in localization at which what Muslims believe and do ceases to be "Islam?" We can all recognize the differences between Lesley Turnbull's Mrs. Yang and Mrs. Na, but is one of them more Muslim or more Hui than the other? If so, by what standard of orthodoxy or orthopraxy do we make the judgment, which might well disagree with the self-conceptions of some of her informants?

Can local culture(s) legitimately play a role in determining how Muslims practice Islam? Or must we recognize a pure Islam, to which all actual Islamic practice must be compared, reifying a transcultural standard for Muslim authenticity? Who has the authority to define that pure Islam?

What can we say about a more extreme example of Muslim diversity—a member of the Hui *minzu* and thus, by genealogical definition, a Muslim, who has joined the Chinese Communist Party and thus publicly accepted atheism, never goes to a mosque or prays, and eats pork and drinks alcohol with his non-Hui colleagues in order to fit in?[12]

Finally, can the study of Islamic communities and their texts even call into question the nature of the "China" they supposedly inhabit?

Both our collection of scholars in Ithaca, New York, and our diverse informants must deal with these and many more definitional questions.

Modernity and Religion

The place of Muslims (however defined) in *modern* China, and of Chinese Muslims in the modern world, received considerable attention from the conference participants. Modernity

dilemmas, some of them common to all religions and believers, have been particularly acute in China, where modernity arrived—at least in the conventional story—borne by aggressive, amoral, greedy imperialists. The "China" they invaded, the Qing Empire, was deeply mired in "feudal" and corrupt politics, which are generally blamed on the Empress Dowager and the Qing elite she led. Like all subjects of that empire, Muslims had to adapt to the traumatic presence of the overwhelmingly powerful foreigners, bearing their alien weapons, goods, sociopolitical structures, and beliefs. In response, Chinese nationalists, including many Muslims, advocated a strong, centralized, militarily and economically powerful state to defend China, defined as the entire territory of the former Qing Empire, including all of Xinjiang and Tibet, against foreign aggression. Thum's nineteenth- and early twentieth-century manuscripts, of course, saw the Qing and the Chinese Republic as the outside aggressors, flying directly in the face of Chinese nationalism and branding it as foreign. Given this conflicted history and its diverse impacts on different communities and regions, Muslims in China can no more agree on what "modern" ought to mean than they can on a homogeneous vision of Islam.

The Heterogeneity of Authenticity

Given their rich ethnographic and historical detail, it would be impossible to summarize these papers in a few terse themes. All the essays, however, reflect the wide variety of "ways of being Muslim (or Hui or Uyghur or Turki)" in the People's Republic of China and its ancestor states. That multiplicity itself presents an epilogue writer with an obvious conclusion—namely that our informants themselves, whether individuals or texts, cannot define a single, invariable, authoritative "way of Islam in China." Their specific communities, stubbornly local and heterogeneous, have evolved under influences as diverse as Central Asian Sufism, Saudi Arabian reformism, Persian storytelling, Middle Eastern Islamic modernism, transnational tourism, and Chinese communism.

As always when we study China's vast, highly differentiated spaces and convoluted modern histories, we must attend carefully to context, both geographical and chronological. Muslims in Shadian and Kunming, only four hours apart by road, presented Lesley Turnbull with radically different notions of "being Muslim." How much more diverse might the picture become if we include Caffrey's Dragon Village (in the same province), Thum's distant Qing-period Khotan, or the tens of thousands of other Muslim possibilities within the PRC? Erie did his

fieldwork in Linxia, so we must ask what local and regional historical evolutions have shaped the arguments over the content, scope, and even fundamental legitimacy of *shari'a*? To interrogate Wang's essay, we may wonder what criteria of orthodoxy and orthopraxy lay behind Ma Dexin's rejection of Sufism in the particular conditions of Yunnan in the 1870s?

That is, we cannot define being Muslim, being Hui, or being Uyghur (or Turki) in univocal, static, stereotypical, or doctrinaire terms without violating the realities of historical or contemporary China. This should not surprise anyone familiar with religious history anywhere—including that of Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, or Islam—or with ethnography and ethnohistory. Large-scale definitions, attractive or useful though they may be, invariably break down in the face of detailed, local, careful understanding. We owe many thanks to the organizers and participants in the Cornell conference for advancing the specificity, complexity, and diversity of our knowledge of everyday life and everyday Islam among Muslims in China.

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Notes

1   As the conventional Chinese proverb had it, "The sky is high, and the emperor is far away."
2   For the Qing, see Lipman (2006). For the Republican period, see Mao (forthcoming).
3   I shall leave the term *minzu* untranslated, to emphasize its difference from any English equivalent. In the twentieth century, it clearly derives from the Japanese *minzoku* (K. *minjok*), a kanji term chosen in the 1870s as a translation for European words such as Fr. *la nation*, Ger. *das Volk*, and Eng. *nation*, a concept without an obvious East Asian equivalent until then.
4   For a meticulously documented history of the "nationality differentiation project" (C. *minzu shibie*), see Mullaney (2010).
5   Children of "mixed marriages"—with parents in two different *minzu*—have either been registered automatically in the *minzu* of their fathers or allowed to choose between the two when they reach adulthood. Some hundreds of thousands of PRC citizens do *not* belong to a recognized *minzu*; in the relevant census data, they are listed as "other" (C. *qita*).
6   As she writes, "By consuming international Islamic literature and media, Shadian Muslims imagine a religious past, present, and future that temporally and spatially incorporates the *umma* as an entirety and marks them as members of that *umma*" (Turnbull, this issue, p. 52).
7   In Turnbull's words, "authentic identity for Kunming Hui precluded religious practice: because a solid ethnic pedigree could absolve a person of the religious obligation to

practice Islam, a known Hui Muslim who did not pray five times a day could be, among certain elite urban Hui, viewed as more ethnically authentic than one who had to prove his Huiness" (Turnbull, this issue, p. 47).

8 I have been struck many times during my years of research on Islam and Muslims in China by the resemblance of this twentieth-century Chinese contrast—Islam as *zongjiao* identity versus Huiness as *minzu* identity—to parallel conflicting definitions in the Euro-American Jewish world in which I grew up. For some, "being Jewish" refers primarily to orthopraxy, for others only to ethnic (often "cultural") heritage. Many Orthodox Jews, like the Shadian Muslims, exclude nonobservant Jews from Jewishness, while many "cultural" (or "ethnic") Jews, like the Kunming Hui, claim an identity more "authentic" than that of their orthopractic critics.

9 Gladney (1991) provides numerous examples of intermediate positioning, as does Gillette (2000). Some modernist, atheist Hui of my acquaintance, for example, have become more observant and orthodox as they age, going to the mosque more often after retirement or reading religious texts "to prepare for the end." Similarly, Dautcher (2009) observed Uyghur informants undergoing substantial changes in their religious observance and piety, almost conversion experiences, after returning from the *hajj* or entering a new phase of life.

10 In my work on the Sufi orders of Gansu, I have found even culturally Chinese Muslims reversing conventional Sinocentric categories. They called their spiritual ancestors *outside* China the "inner generations," while their own leaders in northwestern China constituted the "outer generations." This nomenclature, like Thum's Turki vocabulary, does not appear in current Chinese scholarship.

11 Common throughout the Muslim *umma*, these accusations are often characterized as "Wahhabi" or "fundamentalist" and considered to be an unavoidable part of Islam's adaptation (like that of many religions) to the modern world.

12 During my fieldwork in northwest China, I heard a Chinese proverb about Hui flexibility—"One Hui is no Hui, only two Hui are Hui"—meaning that a Hui alone will drink alcohol or eat pork, but will not if another Hui is present to observe his transgression.

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