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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

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## **If Allah Wills It: Integration, Isolation and Muslim Authenticity in Yunnan Province in China**

SUSAN McCARTHY

The quest for an authentic spiritual and social existence drives cultural and religious movements throughout the world. Such movements are frequently riddled with divisions among members whose notions of the authentic vary, divisions that can have serious political consequences. Concern over these consequences may draw external actors such as the state into debates about what is, and is not, authentic.

This paper examines the politics of authenticity among the Hui, a Muslim minority in Yunnan Province, China. The Hui are one of China's 55 officially recognised minority nationalities, or *shaoshu minzu*. Like other Chinese minorities, the Hui have experienced a religious and cultural revival in the two and a half decades of reform following the death of Mao. Although Islamic activities are at times constrained by a wary Chinese state, the vitality of Islam in Yunnan Hui communities is pronounced. Yet this revival is not monolithic. Fault lines have emerged between adherents of different teachings, between followers of different spiritual leaders, and between the religious and the secular.

One emerging fault line concerns what it means to live an authentically Islamic existence. Hui Muslims differ over what traditions and what conceptions of Chinese Islam to promote. Throughout China some Muslims have embraced a Wahhabi Islamic identity that encourages detachment and insularity from the secular, modernising, non-Muslim society that surrounds them. For these Muslims authenticity entails the rejection of and isolation from the broader Chinese social and cultural milieu. Other Hui support the reconstitution of an existence and identity that is as Chinese as it is Islamic. They justify their vision of an engaged, 'civil' Islam through reference to previous generations of Muslim scholars, writers, officials and military leaders who were as immersed and proficient in the Confucian, Republican or Communist Chinese cultures of their day as they were in Islam.<sup>1</sup> This debate involves more than theology or historical accuracy, as differences of opinion are manifest in the organisation of religious education as well as in the pages of state-sponsored academic and policy journals.

This debate also concerns the Chinese state, which is profoundly interested in shaping the direction of the Islamic revival. Party-state intervention in cultural and religious matters is frequently aimed at suppressing what it terms 'feudal' and 'superstitious' behaviour or constraining activities alleged to undermine national cohesion. The Hui case shows that with regard to identity, tradition and practice, the state seeks to construct as well as constrain, promote as well as prohibit. It does so in

great part to channel the Islamic revival in ways conducive to its own developmental agenda. In its quest to promote economic and social modernisation the Chinese state has thus become something of a champion of tradition – or rather, certain definitions of tradition. Whether it can manage religious revival is another story. Competing notions of Islamic tradition and identity among the Yunnan Hui complicate the state's drive for legitimacy and modernisation and demonstrate that minorities may have ideals and goals that do not mesh with its own. In addition, the experiences of the Yunnan Hui indicate how minority cultural revival may aggravate interethnic, interminority relations.

The information in this paper is drawn from interviews with villagers, teachers and officials conducted in Yunnan during several months of fieldwork in 1997 and 2002, and on the published writings of Hui educators, scholars and party-state officials. The paper first provides an overview of the Hui Islamic revival in China and how it has been interpreted and understood. Following this it details how the revival has altered life for Muslims in Yunnan Province through an analysis of the transformation of one remote, impoverished Hui village. The experiences of Muslims in this particular multiethnic and multireligious community show that Chinese Islamic resurgence is more than a revival, as it has extended networks, identity and practice beyond what they were prior to the founding of the People's Republic. The case of this village also points to some of the aforementioned tensions regarding the direction and meaning of Islam, which are further analysed in the latter part of the paper. The experiences of the villagers and the concerns of Hui scholars and officials demonstrate that Islamic resurgence has sparked multiple waves of contention, as participants, including the state, seek to assert and define what it means to be authentically Hui, Muslim, and Chinese.

### **Interpreting the Minority Cultural Revival**

The Hui are one of China's ten official Muslim minority nationalities, and number approximately nine million. In Yunnan Province they number over 600,000, making them the eighth largest of more than two dozen minority groups in the province.<sup>2</sup> As they are throughout China, the Hui in Yunnan are dispersed throughout the province. Historically the Yunnan Hui were merchants, traders, metallurgists and mule caravan drivers, as well as peasants, and many Hui settlements are clustered around commercial and transport centres. Even where their numbers are relatively few the Hui often reside in tightly knit communities that maintain an ethnic and religious identity through worship and dietary practice. Yet because of their dispersed settlement patterns, over the centuries the Hui adopted and adapted to many of the economic, social and cultural practices of other groups among whom they lived.

The revival of Hui Muslim religious life is part of a broader resurgence of minority culture that was sparked by economic and social reforms implemented in the late 1970s. Reform policies promised greater tolerance for minorities' 'special characteristics', which had been ruthlessly suppressed during the high tides of Maoist radicalism. These more relaxed policies reflected a variety of state concerns. Foremost was the problem of party-state legitimacy. The excesses of the Mao years had alienated minorities and damaged the party's reputation, and new policies were aimed at restoring the authority and image of the government. As the revival has expanded, many officials, especially those in minority regions, have come to regard a thriving minority cultural life in positive terms. Officials often exploit or deploy cultural images, practices and institutions as commodities or as tools for garnering outside

investment (McCarthy, 2004; Schein, 2000). State involvement in the recruitment and training of minority religious leaders has created new avenues of surveillance and control (Litzinger, 2000, pp. 197–99), and officials increasingly rely on these religious leaders to help promote state policies (Shih, 2000). The Chinese government thus actively supports culture and religion when these mesh with its political and economic agendas.

Yet cultural revitalisation poses dilemmas for the party-state. Some revived or newly created practices may obstruct the government's economic and social modernisation projects. The re-emergence of exorcism and other rituals among the Yi of north-central Yunnan, for example, has hindered local officials' efforts to implement market oriented agricultural policies (Mueggler, 2001). As this paper demonstrates, the reestablishment of religious education complicates the state's goal of implementing universal compulsory education. Moreover, while the 1984 Law of Regional Autonomy guarantees minorities freedom to practice their (officially recognised) religions, minorities may interpret this freedom in a manner at odds with the state and its agenda. According to a Dai local government official, among the traditionally Buddhist Dai religious revival has entailed not just the resurgence of their traditional Theravada Buddhism but the spread of the outlawed Falungong (Interview, 2002). The state also fears that certain religious identities and institutions facilitate actions aimed at 'splitting the motherland'. Tibetans in Tibet and Xinjiang Uighurs are viewed most suspiciously in this regard. Unfortunately officials (often local ones) have used the cover of the global war on terror to justify the suppression of non-separatist protests against corruption and human rights abuses (Forney, 2002; Wade, 2002).

Although the Hui are also a Muslim minority group, their situation differs considerably from that of the Uighurs, especially in Yunnan. As stated the Hui are a geographically scattered group, and because of centuries of habitation and intermarriage among other Chinese peoples they are highly acculturated to the societies and customs of the peoples among whom they reside. In Jonathan Lipman's words, the Hui are 'familiar strangers', simultaneously Self and Other in Chinese society (Lipman, 1994). Some observers however argue that the Islamic religious revival in general poses problems for Chinese national identity and cohesion. Raphael Israeli has put the issue in stark terms: Chinese Muslims 'pay lip service to the state when necessary, but this does not diminish the least from their yearnings to see their identity merging into that of the greater Islamic powers-to-be [*sic*]' (Israeli, 1997, p. 279). More ominously he predicts that the combination of 'lax' government policies and growing attention from a global Islamic community may lead to 'demands of outright secession from China' (Israeli, 1997, p. 280). Islam, as Israeli sees it, is incompatible with the Chinese order, and despite the 'Chineseness' of the Hui, religious revival compromises their political loyalties.

Other scholars argue that there is nothing inherently 'splittist' about the Hui Islamic culture or identity. Both Lipman and Gladney have highlighted centuries of efforts by Hui to accommodate successive waves of Islamic revival to Chinese culture (Lipman, 1994; Gladney 2003). Others have documented how the Yunnan Hui and other groups see their cultural revivals as compatible with broader Chinese goals and as extensions of national projects of cultural, economic and social modernisation (McCarthy, 2000). In similar fashion Maris Gillette demonstrates how the assertion of a distinct Islamic identity by the Hui of Xian is neither separatist nor anti-Chinese. Rather, it expresses a very Chinese commitment to modernisation and civilisation even as it challenges the Han-centric assumptions

informing these ideals (Gillette, 2000). In the end, the question of whether Hui Islamic revival displays either separatist or accommodating tendencies is overly simplistic. In what follows, I hope to elucidate the complexity of resurgent Islam among the Yunnan Hui.

### Reform and the Minority Response

Minority religious and cultural revival began soon after reforms were announced in 1979. In Hui areas of Yunnan the institutional and physical reconstruction of Islam commenced almost immediately. County branches of the Nationality Affairs Committee and the nationwide mass organisation that oversees Muslim religious affairs, the Islamic Association (*Yisilanjiao xiehui*), were re-established in areas with sizeable Hui populations. Mosques were rebuilt and reopened. During the Cultural Revolution mosques had been closed, damaged, destroyed and desecrated. Renovation and rebuilding were necessary, and the 1980s saw a spate of construction all over Yunnan. In the Hui village of Shadian in southern Yunnan mosque reconstruction was underwritten by a penitent government in compensation for a 1975 massacre carried out by the PLA. In most cases renovation and construction relied on private donations from the faithful, including overseas Chinese Muslims in Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong and elsewhere.

Mosque construction has continued unabated as economic conditions in rural Yunnan have improved and many Hui villages and individuals have prospered. One of the most striking aspects of this trend is the increasing use of quasi-Arabic or middle-eastern architectural design. Through the end of the 1980s most mosques in Yunnan were built in the traditional Chinese style. Such mosques greatly resemble Chinese temples in style and construction, with their wooden columns, peaked, tiled roofs, and elaborately carved doors. Many of the newer structures incorporate the domes and spires of mosques featured in the photographs of Saudi Arabia and Mecca that hang ubiquitously on the walls of Hui homes. The fact that these stylistic trends surfaced at the end of the 1980s suggests they are in part the result of increased prosperity. They also indicate the increased contacts between rural Muslim communities in Yunnan and the greater Islamic world made possible by reforms and economic prosperity. More and more Chinese Muslims are making the *hajj*, and greater numbers of young Hui are going abroad to study in Muslim countries. Though in some ways superficial, these architectural shifts suggest that Hui increasingly see themselves as defined by a religious identity that links them to a transnational Islamic community. They are the physical manifestation of an Islamic consciousness advanced by religious freedom and economic growth.

Islamic revival has also entailed the reestablishment of religious education (*jingtang jiaoyu*). Mosque-based schools, which instruct children and adults in basic knowledge of Arabic and the Quran, reopened throughout the province in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The speed of this revival is illustrated by enrolment rates in Weishan County, a Hui and Yi autonomous county in western Yunnan. Less than a year after the introduction of reforms over 2000 students were enrolled in Weishan mosque schools (out of a Hui population of roughly 16,000) (Weishan, 1992, p. 328). Religious instruction at the high school and college levels also surged. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Islamic institutions of higher learning were established in several of the larger Hui communities of Yunnan, including Weishan, which drew scholars and students from all over China. In the post-1978 period about a dozen or so Islamic high schools and colleges have opened or reopened in these areas. Like their predecessors,

these colleges attract students from as far away as Fujian, Henan, Gansu and Xinjiang Provinces.

The impact of Islam on daily life is unmistakable, particularly in rural Hui villages. Much as mosques dominate the skyline of Hui villages, so too does Islam dominate the rhythms of everyday activities. The call to prayer is broadcast over loudspeakers five times a day, a signal for men to make their way to the mosque and for women to lay out a mat and don a veil for prayer in the home. The walls of homes are laden with Islamic paraphernalia such as photographs and prints of Mecca, Chinese-style Arabic calligraphy, and calendars featuring famous Chinese mosques. Religious holidays such as Ramadan and the Feast of the Prophet punctuate the year. Such events are more than religious in nature. They are opportunities for the expression of not just Muslim but also Hui, and especially Yunnan Hui, identity and solidarity. In Dali Prefecture, for instance, many Hui observe Wangren Jie, which commemorates the victims of nineteenth-century Qing persecution, in particular the genocidal massacres that followed the defeat of an anti-Qing rebellion led by Du Wenxiu, a Yunnan Muslim. Wangren Jie is a distinctly local affair that highlights the historic fragility of Hui existence in Yunnan. The observance of Ramadan (in Chinese, *zhai yue*), meanwhile, temporally and ritually links Yunnan Hui to a global Islamic community.

Endowed with sombre religious and historic significance, these holidays and festivals provide opportunities for moral instruction and forums in which religious leaders remind Hui of their religious and civic responsibilities. They also enable people to socialise beyond the boundaries of village, township, and even county or prefecture. The Feast of the Prophet (also known as Muhammed's Birthday) is a case in point. Although in other parts of the world this holiday is celebrated on the twelfth day of the third month of the Muslim calendar, in Yunnan the date varies from place to place (Shadian, 1996, p. 95). It is often combined with events such as graduation ceremonies for newly minted *ahong* (those who have completed a course of Islamic and Arabic study) or dedication ceremonies for new mosques. It is typically a relaxed event, part socialising and part fundraising, along the lines of a parish spaghetti dinner. The variation of dates among settlements means that Hui can attend festivities in neighbouring villages, townships and even other counties, as well as in their own village.

These festivals and holidays reveal how community linkages as well as religious life have broadened over the course of the reform period. The reopening of mosques in particular has expanded the 'social capital' of many Muslim communities by providing institutions through which collective resources can be raised and allocated. Mosques serve primarily as places of worship and religious education for their members, yet they are also civic and economic institutions. It is through the mosque that Hui communities pool funds to be directed towards the public welfare. Donations are expended on matters specific to religious life, including mosque operating expenses, salaries, teaching materials and religious holidays. Yet economic and public welfare activities can benefit non-Muslims as well. For example, in the large administrative village of Huihuideng in Weishan County, between 1995 and 1998 approximately 370,000 *yuan* in mosque donations were raised and spent on village road construction and on classroom buildings for the village elementary and middle schools. During the same period in Yongjian Township, which includes Huihuideng, private donations totalling 2.1 million *yuan* funded the construction of eight classroom buildings and one teachers' dormitory at local state (i.e. nonreligious) schools (Hu Xuefeng, 2000, pp. 47–49).

### Reconversion and Transformation

Islamic revival among the Yunnan Hui has thus entailed more than a resurgence of worship; it has also activated intercommunity religious and commercial networks. These networks in turn contribute to the spread of the revival and the viability of Chinese Islam. As mentioned, the mobility and openness of the reform years has allowed for increased contact with a global Islamic world. International, Chinese, and provincial Muslim networks also allow more orthodox, more *qingzhen* ('pure and true') Yunnan Muslims to monitor the condition of the faith in far-flung settlements. An example of this phenomenon can be seen in the case of the Hui-Dai of Menghai County, in Xishuangbanna Prefecture, one of the more unusual subgroups of the Yunnan Hui. The Hui-Dai are descendents of a handful of Muslims who fled south after the defeat of the nineteenth-century Du Wenxiu Uprising. These refugees settled in two villages among the Tai people of what was then called Sipsongpanna, and over the decades adopted the local customs and language. Some of the Hui-Dai acculturated too well (in the eyes of more orthodox Hui), going so far as to eat pork and participate in animist and Buddhist rituals. To remedy this matter, in the late 1980s an Arabic and Islamic college in the central Yunnan Hui community of Najaiying dispatched a group of religious leaders and teachers to the two Hui villages in Menghai County to 'reconvert' the Hui-Dai and reacquaint them with 'pure and true' Islamic beliefs and practices. From all appearances and from conversations with students and a local *imam* the reconversion appears to have been a success.

A similar reconversion has been effected in Haba, a remote, impoverished village in northwest Yunnan. Haba is an administrative village in Sanba Township, Shang-ge-li-la County (formerly Zhongdian), in the Deqin Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.<sup>3</sup> If Yunnan Province is part of China's periphery, Shang-ge-li-la is peripheral by Yunnan standards, and Haba even more so. Haba village lies about 150 kilometres south and east from the county seat of Zhongdian town, in a remote valley at the foot of Haba Snow Mountain. Public transport to Haba is infrequent and irregular; most public buses go only as far as Sanba township, and getting to Haba requires many hours on foot or hiring a car. The administrative village is a multiethnic group of hamlets home to members of at least seven nationalities, including Tibetan, Yi, Naxi, Lisu, Pumi and Han, as well as Hui. Altogether the Hui population of Haba numbers about 600 (Diqing, 1997).

Over the course of the twentieth century the isolation of Haba had two important effects. First, it cut off the Haba Hui from the Muslim commercial and religious networks that traversed Yunnan and beyond, and thus from other Hui communities. Second, it facilitated the adaptation of local habits, customs and cultural practice. This adaptation was a matter of survival: Haba is situated around 9000 feet above sea level, the terrain is mountainous, and the region bitterly cold in winter. The climate and terrain make the area unsuited for wet-rice cultivation. Like all residents of the area the Haba Hui adopted 'Tibetan' (i.e. local) agricultural techniques; they grow wheat, barley, and corn, and raise yaks as well as lowland cattle and goats. Tibetan-style cheese and salty butter tea are staples of the local diet. In language and dress, too, the Haba Hui adopted local practice. The local dialect contains grammatical elements from Deqin Tibetan (though Arabic words have begun creeping in), and men and women continue to wear the thick, brightly embroidered, multicolour Tibetan-style wool robes and aprons of the region, at least in winter. For good reason, the Haba Hui are known locally as the 'Zang Hui', or Tibetan Hui.

This acculturation extended to religious belief and practice. Prior to 2000, Islam was to all intents and purposes defunct in Haba. The Muslim resurgence that had so quickly and thoroughly transformed Hui life throughout much of Yunnan passed the village by. It is not that religious revival in general had failed to occur in Haba. Tibetan Buddhist, Naxi Dongba and other animist rituals and beliefs were in fact flourishing – and the Hui of Haba were active and willing participants in these ritual practices. As one young man explained to me:

Two years ago [before mid-2000], we knew we were Hui, and we didn't eat pork, because Hui people do not eat pork. But we didn't know anything else about Islam. We didn't pray or go to the mosque, and men and women did not wear hats or headscarves. We would join in religious activities of other villages. When Naxi, Han, Yi and Tibetans had their festivals, we would participate, and light incense and pray to their many gods and spirits.

Several villagers I spoke with admitted they had been quite content and untroubled in their ritual syncretism and Islamic ignorance.

All this changed in 2000. That year, a group of Haba villagers contacted the head of an Arabic school in Shadian, which is over 800 kilometres to the southeast near the Vietnam border. After hearing of Haba's predicament, the head of the Arabic school organised a meeting of various Shadian religious and community leaders, including the board of the school, the directors of the Shadian Great Mosque and the Shadian Foundation (which funds Islamic education and other religious activities). Along with religious leaders and educators from another prosperous Hui community, they raised funds to send teaching materials and instructors to Haba. A wealthy Shadian entrepreneur donated funds to construct a new mosque (Nu, 2002).

This attention and assistance yielded a rapid transformation. When I visited Haba in the summer of 2002, the vitality of the adherence of villagers to Islamic practice was striking. Muslim head coverings are ubiquitous throughout the village, and five times a day nearly every villager appears at the mosque for prayers.<sup>4</sup> One of the first structures one sees after climbing the steep path into the Hui settlement is the new mosque, a substantial grey brick structure built in traditional Chinese style situated at one of the highest points in the village. Prior to prayers, villagers avail themselves of hot and cold running water in the newly constructed bath facilities, also built with funds from affluent Muslims from other parts of Yunnan Province.

The vitality of Islamic life in Haba belies the fact that it has only recently arrived. The strength of Islam in Haba is a testament to the strength of Yunnanese Hui religious and commercial networks, and to the growing economic resources of some (but not all) Hui communities. It also highlights the extent to which the practice of Islam is central to contemporary Yunnanese Hui self-understandings. From the perspective of the Hui in Haba and elsewhere, their revival is a resounding success. The Haba Hui have been brought back onto the straight and narrow, pure and true path. No longer are they 'confused and perplexed in their spiritual yearnings', as the head of the Shadian Arabic School put it, a condition that (presumably) drove them to un-Islamic superstition in the first place (Nu, 2002, p. 49). The re-Islamicisation of Haba also holds great significance for Hui throughout the province. It has given Yunnan Muslims a chance to put their faith to the test and to implement Islamic concepts of charity and benevolence in practice. The success of their efforts is viewed as an indicator of Allah's will and the truth of Islam.

Islamic revival in Haba has also produced tangible benefits. It has pulled them out of their isolation, their ignorance, and to some extent their poverty. This is evident in quite concrete ways. A number of Haba's young people in their late teens and early twenties now study at the Arabic school in Shadian, their fees and expenses paid for by the Shadian Foundation and wealthy private donors. Their education entails the study of Arabic and Islam and – thanks to the college's internet connection – access to a worldwide Islamic web, a remarkable situation for students whose home village lacks electricity. One young man in his early twenties described to me how during the summer vacation he had travelled with fellow students to Islamic centres around Yunnan Province and to other areas with sizeable Hui populations. This young man, who peppered his sentences with the Arabic phrase '*inshallah*', had previously received only an elementary school education, as family circumstances had forced him to drop out during middle school. Islamic revival for him meant the chance to get an education, albeit one that focused almost exclusively on Arabic and Islam. He expressed to me the hope that after graduating from the Shadian school he might continue his studies in Pakistan, Malaysia, or (best of all) Saudi Arabia – 'if Allah wills it'.

Islamic revival has thus served in some respects as a catalyst for the modernisation of Haba's Hui community. Not that Haba is 'modern', as villagers themselves lament. When I visited Haba, most of the village had been without electricity since a small hydroelectric generating station had been flooded half a year earlier. Pointing to an unusable washing machine and television, one village man complained that while the rest of China was leaping ahead, Haba was going backwards ('*Zhongguo fazhan, women tuibule!*'). Still, the integration of the Haba Hui into Yunnanese Islamic networks has brought things like better sanitation, new well constructed houses, and opportunities for Haba's young people to get an education. Islam is a vehicle through which the Haba Hui, especially the younger generation, experience China's modernisation and social transformation.

Yet not everyone is pleased with the way in which Haba's Islamic revival has transpired. Some of the non-Muslim residents of the administrative village are simply perplexed by the sudden transformation of their neighbours. One Han man, married to a Hui woman he met while she was living outside the village, privately expressed to me his incredulity at the abrupt adoption of Islamic belief and practice. To this man the revival seemed particularly odd, since his wife had not practised Islam when he met her; she adopted Islamic beliefs and behaviour only on their return to the village some months earlier. 'This is so uninteresting (ludicrous) (*tai meiyou yisi!*)' he exclaimed to me one evening after his in-laws had left for the mosque:

This village is so poor, they don't have electricity, and they barely have enough food. Look – her family's house is in such poor condition, the government gives them plastic to cover up the holes in the roof and the walls. So what do they do? They go off to the mosque five times a day, every day. To do what? To stare at a wall and pray to the sky. What's the use of that?!

Islamic revival had brought material benefits to the village, such as free Arabic education for young people in Shadian, a new mosque, running hot water for pre-prayer ablutions, clothing and household utensils donated by more affluent Hui communities and so on. But to this man, alienated by the new attitudes and practices of his wife and family, all this religious activity was a waste of time and energy, and

a diversion from the very real deprivations of life in this remote, impoverished hamlet.

Haba's Islamic revival has created resentment as well as perplexity. One of the sore points concerns the new mosque, which was built on land adjacent to a grove of trees, a raging stream and several mountain springs, sites of animist worship for the Naxi, Yi and other residents of the hamlets that comprise the administrative village. The placement of the permanent brick structure of the mosque is thus experienced by some as an affront. One Tibetan man summarised the complaint. 'A nationality must pay attention to and respect another nationality's religion and culture', he argued. 'Where the Hui built their new mosque is not good, it doesn't show respect. They could have built it just a little lower down the mountain, away from [other ritual] sites.' This man expressed support for the Hui in their religious rediscovery, but he viewed the manner in which they had proceeded as disrespectful of their neighbours' religious sentiments. I should point out that strain in interethnic relations has so far been manifest mainly in grumbling.

### **Whose Tradition is it Anyway?**

The case of Haba reveals other more subtle fault lines that have emerged over the course of the Islamic revival. In particular it points to trends in Islamic education that worry a number of Hui educators, scholars and cadres – and Chinese officials in general – trends that are simultaneously a source of pride and satisfaction to many Hui Muslims in Yunnan. Specifically Haba's transformation underscores what can be called the arabisation of Hui religious education in the province, and elsewhere. While many Yunnan Hui welcome this arabisation as making possible a more authentic, Islamic way of life, others see it as an inauthentic rejection of a traditionally Chinese Islamic identity and existence.

As mentioned, a number of young people from Haba now study in privately run mosque-based Arabic schools in Shadian, Weishan and other Hui communities. The curriculum of many of these schools consists primarily of Arabic, as well as Islamic religion, philosophy and history. Students are not instructed in Chinese language, literature, history, natural science, social science or maths. Nor do they receive any instruction in technical, vocational subjects. The curriculum is oriented primarily towards the cultivation of devout Muslims possessed of a modicum of Islamic knowledge and Arabic proficiency. When asked about the practicality of this education, students in Haba were enthusiastic. Arabic, one stated in all earnestness, is the mother tongue of the Hui, because they are Muslims. It was thus important that he learn to read and speak the language of his nationality. Like other Haba students I spoke with, he expressed the hope that he might go abroad to continue his studies, in which case knowledge of Arabic, he believed, would serve him well. Naively or not, this student saw his future as linked to an Islamic world, not necessarily a Chinese one.

The use of an Arabic- and Islamic-only curriculum is not unusual: many Islamic schools in Yunnan approximate this model. Their ability to do so is buttressed by the Chinese state's educational institutions and policies. Since officials in Yunnan have implemented (or are in the process of implementing) nine-year compulsory education for all children, religious education in theory need not address subjects such as Chinese, maths or science. Were the state education system to function as it should, then, religious education would be supplemental. Yet in Yunnan compulsory education remains an ideal rather than a reality. Although primary school enrolment

rates among the Hui are equal or superior to those of other Yunnan nationalities, middle and high-school enrolment rates in some Hui communities are relatively low. Some of this is attributable to the attitudes of parents:

Some Hui parents feel it doesn't matter if their children attend school or not; if they don't attend school, they can get a job in a factory or a small business, and make money. Other families emphasise religious education, but not regular schooling. For these families, learning scripture is a must, but a proper education does not interest them. This thinking is common not only among the Hui masses, but in some places reflects the attitudes of Hui cadres. (Na, 2001, p. 214)

While the opportunities created by economic reforms have lured some youngsters away from the classroom, for others mosque education is seen as a viable alternative to a state-provided, Chinese education.

While the purely Arabic and Islamic focus is widespread in Yunnan, there are alternatives (Armijo-Hussein, 1999). The village of Wuliqiao in Dali Prefecture is the site of the Dali Muslim Culture College (*Dali musulin wenhua zhuanke xuexiao*, or *Dali muzhuan* for short). Though this too is a private (*minban*) school, the curriculum is patterned after secondary and tertiary schools in the state education system. Students receive instruction in Chinese language and literature, history, physics, social science and maths, and in Arabic and religion. Most students terminate their education after graduating, but the curriculum has enabled many to continue their education at universities in China and abroad. The Dali *muzhuan* also offers a state-accredited, university-level self-study programme in Chinese language and literature. Students who complete the programme and pass nationally administered exams are qualified to teach Chinese in public elementary and middle schools.

Teachers at the Dali *muzhuan* explained that the school sought to train students to be both devout Muslims and productive members of Chinese society. Several that I spoke with expressed concern about the trend towards an Arabic- and Islam-only curriculum in many mosque schools. According to the retired principal of the college this trend represented

... a kind of return to the past ... based on a narrow thinking. There are those Muslims who wish to separate themselves from all non-Muslims and believe that the only suitable course of study is an Arabic and Islamic one. At the same time, many people believe that non-Muslims should not study Arabic or anything having to do with Islamic religion, philosophy or history.

The problem with Islamic education in Yunnan, the retired principal explained, was twofold. First, while *minban* Islamic and Arabic schools were required to win state approval, there existed no state standards that they had to meet or curriculum they had to follow. Second, religious educators themselves had not yet developed any standards or curricula, and thus these varied from school to school depending on the personal views of religious leaders and teachers.

From the principal's perspective, the phenomenon of Arabic- and Islamic-only education, while seen by some as a return to the past – to 'fundamentals' – ignored the real past of Yunnan Hui Muslims. That past, he argued, was one of engagement with and achievement in Chinese society, and traditional Hui education reflected that. The

most accomplished Hui scholars in history, he pointed out, knew the classics of Chinese culture as well as the canon of Islam, and they utilised the former to explain and disseminate the truths of Islam. Moreover, Islamic instruction in Yunnan was historically Chinese Islamic education, or *zhong'a bingshou*. Muslim-run schools offered an education that included Islamic theology, philosophy, history and Arabic as well as Chinese philosophy, history, language and literature. Many of these schools produced successful imperial exam candidates during the Ming and Qing dynasties. The principal also pointed to the Mingde Schools established in Yunnan in the early twentieth century. These were influenced by the student-led, nationalist May Fourth Movement (*wusi yundong*) of 1919 which called for, among other things, the modernisation of Chinese education and the integration of modern science and mathematics into school curricula. Like their classical predecessors, Mingde schools provided a Chinese education almost indistinguishable from that offered in many non-Muslim schools of the period. Their curricula aimed to cultivate not just devout Muslims but learned, cultured *Chinese* Muslim students. In the eyes of the retired principal from Dali, the Wuliqiao Muslim college epitomised an authentic Hui tradition, while the arabised approach rejected it.

### Using the Past to Serve the Present

In making his case, this retired principal echoed the claims of recent scholarship on the Hui, much of it produced by Hui researchers, educators and officials. This scholarship, which includes provincial, county-level and national histories, social scientific analyses of contemporary Hui life, and studies of Islamic religion, typically advances several key points. First it stresses the historical and cultural 'Chineseness' of the Hui. The Hui are who they are because of the melding of Islamic and Han Chinese cultural elements; the linkage of these two streams of culture is what gave rise to this nationality. As one Yunnan Hui scholar writes, 'without Islamic culture there would be no Hui, just as without Han culture there would be no Hui nationality' (Gui, 2001, p. 167). In the words of another, the culture of the Hui is 'Islam with Chinese characteristics' (Kong, 2001, p. 242).

This scholarship further stresses that this Han Chinese acculturation has long been a central component of Hui culture and tradition. The Hui are a 'relatively advanced' (*bijiao fada*) nationality in great part because of their adoption and adaptation of *Han wenhua*, that is, Han Chinese culture. This adaptability enabled Yunnan Muslims to attain great economic, political and social influence, from the Yuan Dynasty to the present. As writers on the subject are apt to point out, the adaptation of Han Chinese culture is no threat to a 'pure and true', *qingzhen* (i.e. *halal*) existence. This latter claim is often buttressed by reference to the late-Ming, early-Qing movement by Yunnan Islamic scholars who used Confucian, Daoist and Buddhist principles to explain the truths of Islam. Finally, this scholarship argues that the Islamic revival must embrace this tradition of Chinese integration and acculturation, as it is central to Hui advancement. It is central also to the development of China: as one Yunnan Hui scholar argues, 'the revival of the greatness of the Chinese nation requires that Islam advance with the times, and the development and progress of the Islam of the Hui is inseparable from the greatness of the Chinese nation' (Kong, 2001, p. 243). Among the proposals put forward by contemporary reformers is the demand that, along with instruction in Arabic, religion and Chinese language and history, mosque schools offer technical training appropriate to their surroundings in subjects such as agricultural technology, small enterprise management and computers. Educators ought to model

themselves on earlier generations of Muslim teachers and religious leaders; *jingtang jiaoyu* (religious education) should ‘meet the needs of Hui masses in the twenty-first century’ (Ma Bin, 2001, p. 202).

Practicality (or the lack thereof) is one of the main themes of these critiques of contemporary religious education. Hui advocates of a curriculum that can meet both the spiritual needs of Muslims and the demands of life in the twenty-first century are concerned that in its current incarnation mosque education is an obstacle to the continued vitality and economic development of their nationality. Yet these very ‘Chinese’ calls for educational modernisation are simultaneously an assertion of identity – of a particular understanding of what it means to be Hui, and of the traditions and practices that constitute and express that identity (Ma Shiming, 2001, pp. 282–85). What appears to worry many of the writers on this topic is that the widespread embrace of an Arabic- and Islamic-only education entails not just a rejection of a modernising Chinese society but a repudiation of Hui identity and tradition. The genius of the Hui in bygone eras, they argue, was their ability to meld Islamic and Han Chinese cultural elements. This melding was more than useful – it was and is who the Hui are. In advocating reform and challenging the isolationist tendencies of much contemporary religious education these Hui scholars, writers and cadres are trying to counter what they see as a false tradition with one that is ‘authentically’ Hui.

### **Conclusion: Contending Traditions**

Arguments for a distinctly Chinese Islamic Hui identity and veneration of a tradition of Islam ‘with Chinese characteristics’ reflect the concern of many Yunnan Muslims that Islam remain relevant in a China that is increasingly modern, global and market-oriented. It should be recognised that these arguments dovetail with the views and interests of the party-state, with the oft-stated goal of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) of ‘nationalities unity’ (*minzu tuanjie*). In articulating their concerns and plans for religious education reform, then, Hui teachers, scholars and officials are articulating an official, and officially sanctioned, position. Most of these individuals are directly or indirectly linked to the state – they are party and state cadres, scholars at Chinese universities and research institutions, prominent members of mass organisations like the Islamic Association (*Yisilanjiao xiehui*) and Hui Studies Association (*Huizu yanjiu xiehui*). The books and articles that express their views, moreover, are published by state-run presses and journals.

It is thus through these scholars’ and officials’ contributions to this debate – and it is a debate of sorts, even though advocates of the ‘arabised’ or ‘islamicised’ approach are heard informally and through their actions rather than in the pages of state-approved journals – that the state’s positions are expressed. This indicates that the contemporary Chinese state is interested not only in what minorities do but also in how they think about themselves and their place in Chinese society. Certainly behaviour and practices are chief among the government’s preoccupations, and it seeks to contain or quash those that appear to contravene its political and economic agenda. Yet self-identity, tradition and the definition of these are also matters of state concern, as the discourse on religious education reveals.

I would caution, however, against interpreting the reformist writings of Hui scholars, educators and officials as mere expressions of the party line, or as the hegemonic reproduction of party-state power through intellectuals and the institu-

tions of state-led civil society. These writers are certainly constrained in what they may publicly advocate. Yet recent research reveals that organisations that are linked to and even created by the Chinese state may possess a great deal of autonomy (Foster, 2001; Unger, 1996). State linkages can also facilitate such groups' agency and effectiveness. As Richard Madsen argues,

... an organization in China that is formally subordinated to a government agency and whose leaders can be chosen only with the approval of the Communist Party can in fact have a great deal of actual autonomy. Its members may be deeply committed to one another and determined to pursue their common goals in spite of interference from the Party, and they may be deeply committed to exerting some peaceful, constructive influence on public affairs (Madsen, 1998, p. 14).

Moreover, interviews with teachers, students and ordinary Hui, including the retired principal of the Dali college, underscore the resonance of a Hui identity that is as Chinese as it is Islamic, as modern and forward-looking as it is traditional.

One of the difficulties facing these advocates of an engaged Chinese and Islamic Hui identity is that the strictly Arabic and Islamic focus of much contemporary religious instruction and existence can also be said to be traditional and authentic. It hearkens back to earlier movements in Chinese Islam, in particular a fundamentalist *Yihewani* Islam that gained currency in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The leaders of the *Yihewani* (from the Arabic *Ikhwan*, or Brotherhood) were influenced by Wahhabi teachings, and advocated an Islam stripped of the Chinese aesthetic and ritual elements that characterised much Chinese Muslim practice. Key figures in this movement, such as its founder Ma Wanfu, called for a 'return' to a purified, arabised aesthetic in dress, speech, architecture and education, and even for the separation of Muslim and non-Muslim communities (Gladney, 1991, pp. 55–56; Lipman, 1994, pp. 204–11; Gillette, 2000, pp. 76–79). While a later generation of *Yihewani* were ardent Chinese nationalists and modernisers, the *Salafiyya*, a movement that developed out of the *Yihewani* in the 1930s, called for 'a return to non-politicized fundamentalist Wahhabi ideals' (Gladney, 1991, p. 56).<sup>5</sup> In some Yunnan Hui communities – including Shadian, the site of the school where many Haba young people study – the influence of the *Yihewani* on worship and education in the early twentieth century was profound, despite the numerical strength of other sects (Shadian, 1996, pp. 91–92). These teachings continue to shape religious practice and education in some Yunnan Hui communities, because of this history and the growing global prominence of the Wahhabi Islam on which they are based. Though hard to quantify, Wahhabi (including Salafi) influence in China itself is increasing, and the *Yihewani* are now judged by some to be the 'predominant force' within the official Muslim mass organisation, the Islamic Association (*Yisilanjiao xiehui*) (Israeli and Gardner-Rush, 2000, p. 451); and it is in great part this fundamentalist version of Islam, one that rejects Chinese cultural influences as un-Islamic, that has transformed the identity and practice of groups like the Haba Hui.

Yet it is important to recognise the broader political context of Hui Muslim efforts to withdraw from mainstream Chinese social and cultural life. Isolationism and withdrawal are not inherent in Islam; they do not simply spring from Hui Muslim identity or beliefs. Rather, they are born of centuries of conflict between the Chinese state and Muslims, and between Muslims and other social groups – conflicts in which

Muslims have often been singled out for discrimination, repression and violent persecution. Tensions between state and Muslims are aggravated by the global War on Terror, which has provided the Chinese state with an excuse to crack down on Islamic activities that it alone deems troublesome, with little if any condemnation from abroad. The desire to constitute an existence apart from mainstream Chinese society perhaps stems from a self-protective impulse more than anything. In any case, the persistence and appeal of this isolationist Islamic vision, and the criticisms of those who reject it, suggest that the question of Muslim authenticity will remain contentious.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In his study of Chinese Catholicism Richard Madsen has cautioned against assuming that social institutions in China constitute civil society. Some groups may hinder rather than promote trust, openness and solidarity across the social spectrum, and if they do, Madsen (1998, pp. 13–15) suggests we consider them ‘uncivil’ in their orientation and social effects. The isolationist conception of Chinese Islam analysed in this paper represents a kind of ‘uncivil’ Islam, while those who stress the need for an integrated, modernising religious practice articulate a model of Chinese Islam that is civically engaged.
- <sup>2</sup> The Hui population in Yunnan at the end of 2002 was estimated at 633,420 (see Yunnan, 2003, p. 677).
- <sup>3</sup> Zhongdian County was renamed Shang-ge-li-la in 2002 after county officials ‘proved’ it was the inspiration for Shangri-la, the earthly paradise described in James Hilton’s novel *Lost Horizon* (see Hillman, 2003).
- <sup>4</sup> Muslim women in Yunnan typically pray at home, but in Haba they attend the mosque. One woman explained that their homes were primitive and ‘unsanitary’, and that it was difficult to create the clean and pure environment required for prayer. The mosque is divided into separate sections for men and women.
- <sup>5</sup> Regarding the paradox of Ikhwan Chinese nationalism, Lipman (1994) states that ‘[within] one generation of its fundamentalist, antiacculturalist founder, the movement had become an ally of Chinese nationalism, a tool of an acculturating Muslim elite, and an important bridge between Muslim communities and the burgeoning Chinese nation-state’ (p. 205).

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