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## **Between the Mosque and the State: The Identity Strategies of the Litong Muslims**

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### **State Loyalty of Minorities**

For a modern, sovereign state, one major goal of civic education regarding ethnic minorities is to transform their loyalty to the ethnic group into loyalty to the state. Before the establishment of the Chinese state in 1911 there was no such thing as civic education, 'minority' was not a concept and loyalty was a non-issue. Those who were not Han Chinese were regarded as aliens, and from its superior position the Chinese dynastic court was mainly concerned with maintaining the Confucian world order. In order to achieve minimal respect from aliens, the court resorted to various techniques including assimilation, separation, suppression, expulsion, annihilation, cooptation and appeasement. The choice of techniques was merely a matter of capability. Emperors never worried about losing the loyalty of the court officials even if sanctions failed to bring the aliens back to the Confucian system.

Since 1911 there has no longer been an emperor and China has been a sovereign state, within whose borders all citizens are deemed to be equal among themselves and loyal to the state regardless of their ethnicity. Efforts to mobilise citizen loyalty have continued ever since 1911, with varying degrees of success. In order to ensure the loyalty of ethnic people towards the state, civic education in China has attempted to individualise ethnic identities so as to render them irrelevant to the participation of citizens in state affairs. Members of ethnic groups therefore receive privileges, exemptions and promotion from the state as individuals, and perform civic duties (paying tax, signing contracts, attending schools and electing officials and so on) as single, separate, free participants. Thus the state does not deny ethnic identities, but creates a shared state identity at a more abstract level.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the emperors, who could simply conceive of those aliens who denied themselves the honour of joining the Confucian world order as unworthy, the modern Chinese state cannot afford to lose citizen identification if it is to claim sovereignty within its borders.

The transition from the age of the emperors to the age of the state was not spontaneous for most Chinese. Neither the revolutionary leaders nor the citizens of the new state understood the meaning of becoming citizens. The question of how to reconcile state identity and ethnic identity has concerned all national leaders since the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> This is a situation different from that in states such as Great Britain and the United States which are based on the concept of civic nationalism. In such a state it is legitimate for any citizen to feel proud of his or her own ethnic origin while at the same time respecting the ethnicity of others. Indeed,

ethnic groups stress their own distinctiveness: Italian, Irish, Jewish, German, African, Chinese, Hispanic. The foundation of civic nationalism is precisely that the state incorporates and protects all ethnic identities.<sup>3</sup> It is not hard to discern the liberal aspect of civic nationalism: liberalism, embodied in the protection of individual property and the various rights associated with it, prevents the state from discriminating on the basis of ethnicity.

China was no liberal state in 1911 and its legal system was yet to adapt to an individualised system of capitalist production. A collective lifestyle prevailed in the areas of production, religion and education. Even party politics was organised around friendship, rather than ideology or interests, and witnessed constant shifting or overlapping of party membership. Ethnic identities, which were clear in many peripheral regions, continued to exist in parallel to state identity, which was an obscure concept. Muslims were one of these ethnic groups and continue to retain a clear ethnic identity today.

Muslims have for a long time constituted a distinct ethnic group in China. This paper will examine the case of one group of Muslims in order to shed light on the process of becoming a citizen in modern China, with particular emphasis on the relationships between ethnic identity and state identity.

In the case of the Muslims, it appears that the state has made great efforts to mobilise and individualise Muslim citizens so as to distract them from a Muslim identity. On the other hand, the state wants to maintain 'Muslim' as a category of identity so that it continues to have a target for its 'civilising' (citizenship) projects. It turns out that in the field of economic and civic activities the state has been effective in occupying the agenda of all ethnic groups with its mundane businesses such as economic production, ideological indoctrination and political organisation. Outside the area of economic and civic activities, however, ethnic groups are free to retain features expressive of their ethnicity. For many groups, this will amount to nothing more than a distinctive style of clothing. For others, ethnicity is tantamount to an ethnic language. However, for those groups with a unique religious identity, like the Muslims, assertion of ethnic distinctiveness may amount to an unwitting undermining of the state's 'citizenship' project. As we have seen, the Chinese state knows no liberal tradition and has no basis for the individualising of Muslim citizens under a programme of civic nationalism. Particularly under prereform communist rule between 1949 and 1979, with its explicit ideological rejection of liberalism, the state had to intervene in religious affairs to make sure that ethnic identities bred there did not threaten state authority.

A Muslim in China today is no longer simply an alien, as before 1911; nor is his identity expressed within a context of civic nationalism, as in the United States; nor is he still part of a collective socialist system as before 1979. The experiences of different groups of Muslims in different parts of China today display different mixtures of characteristics.

The ensuing discussion is based upon interviews conducted in the autumn of 1998 in Ningxia Autonomous District. Interviewees included civic officials in Yinchuan, which is the capital of Ningxia, and Litong, a city 10 miles south of Yinchuan. In Litong interviewees included officials of the Bureau of Education and the Bureau of Religion. Litong officials arranged visits to four villages (Zaoyuan Village in Zaoyuan Township, Wuxing Village in Gucheng Township, and Huasi Village and Jiefang Village in Shangqiao Township); two schools (First Primary in Biandanyi Village and Shuangjigou Junior School in Shuangjigou Village); two enterprises (Saicheng Drinks and Minle Muslim Milk); and two mosques (Nanguan mosque in

Yinchuan and the village mosque in Nioujiafang Village). All interviews were collective interviews of three to seven interviewees ranging from one to three hours. All except two interviewees were Muslims.

### **Religious Identity**

Religious identities in Muslim areas have always been strong. During the Cultural Revolution revolutionaries denounced religious rituals and did great damage to mosques.<sup>4</sup> Deputy Director Ma of Litong Civil Affairs calls himself an 'illiterate Muslim' because he was unable to go to the mosque during the Cultural Revolution and still does not know the Quran. Religious activities have resumed since 1978. With economic development, particularly since the 1990s, peasants in all villages have begun to donate money for the building of mosques. Of the villages visited, Jiefang has four, Huasi has four and Wuxing has three. Even in Zaoyuan, where Muslims account for only 30 per cent of the village population, there is one mosque.

The growth of mosque culture is partly the result of economic conditions, but also of a freer climate. It is intensified by the development of different tendencies within Islam. Before Litong became a city in 1998 there were two such tendencies; today there are four. There is no real conflict among them; they differ mainly in their style of praying, over which family and community traditions have definite influences. Typically, the neighbourhood determines a person's membership of a particular tendency.<sup>5</sup> It is interesting that Muslims are themselves eager to explain their religious practices in detail to visitors, in order presumably to demonstrate to the visitors and to themselves the serious nature of their religious identities.

All Muslims in the areas where the interviews took place are required to pray to Allah five times a day. Chief Ma from Ningxia Office of Civil Affairs describes the ritual procedures:

Among peasants in the mountains the tendencies have different mosques. Peasants may be related but their different religious tendencies remain distinct. This differentiation is, in my opinion, a matter of different economic levels and hence of levels of donations. Their books and rituals are almost the same and they all pray facing the West. The time for praying cannot be fixed, however, because each village has its own geography, which determines different times for the sunrise and moonrise. They must finish breakfast before sunrise and they may eat again only after they see stars shining. ... Before each prayer, the believer must take a bath. There are great baths and lesser baths. A lesser bath involves washing one's arms up to the elbows. Each mosque has a bath house. When taking a bath, the believer pours water out of it; he does not wash in the vessel, in order to keep unclean water out of the utensil. ... Muslim men can marry Han women but Muslim women cannot marry into Han families. Muslims can assimilate Han women through marriage into their families but Muslim women cannot be assimilated into Han families. ... Typically an '*a-hong*' [imam] is called in to kill sheep. *A-hongs* must bring the Quran and water. In the desert *a-hongs* can use sand as a substitute for water. After praying, the believer takes another bath before returning to work. The head imam in each mosque is appointed by the mosque itself. Only the head imam can teach classes [*kaixue*] in the mosque. If a mosque has no more vacancies for qualified imams [*chuan*

*yī*, literally ‘with clothes’], other mosques can invite them to come and teach. If no one invites them, they will have to stay where they are, under the head imam in their mosque. Once you have an a-hong in your mosque you can start classes [because he will be the head imam – Ed.]. Each mosque can only have one head imam but it can have eight or ten a-hongs.

In theory, the arrival of a market economy will occupy more and more of the Muslim villager’s time and ritual praying five times a day will definitely affect people’s economic activity. However, 30 years of doctrinaire communism failed to undermine people’s religious attachment, and so far participation in the market economy has not diminished their dedication to religious activities. Besides the building of mosques in their own villages what now preoccupies older villagers is seeking opportunities to go on pilgrimage to Mecca. Haji Yang of the Nanguan mosque, who was already an a-hong before going to Mecca in 1997, comments:

Three or four million people go to Mecca each year on pilgrimage. I went last year. For a first-timer, the trip is called a ‘genuine pilgrimage’ (*zheng chao*). I went with one of five delegations from China. The Ningxia contingent comprised 271 pilgrims. A potential pilgrim needs to meet three criteria in order to go to Saudi Arabia: enough money, sufficient physical fitness, and enough time to complete the journey. Each pilgrim has to pay 25,000 remminbi. I had worked for many decades and I just saved, saved, saved and saved. When you come back you are just like a new-born baby, exempt from any evil.

One voluntary worker in the Nanguan mosque told the visitor that she did not think she was eligible for pilgrimage because she had never learned how to pray. She was explaining, on the basis of her own experience and that of her relatives, why a market economy would not alienate Muslim people from their religion. The key, she said, was the belief that every achievement in the market came from Allah.

Director Yang built this mosque and he opened a great shining avenue for us minority people [she meant Muslims only]. Of course we all want to go to Mecca, but we don’t have sufficient preparation. ... Anyone applying to go to Mecca must know how to pray in addition to meeting the economic and physical conditions. Director Yang prays five times a day; this is the basic homework for every Muslim. People like me who have never prayed in the mosque don’t know how to pray. When people have been to Mecca they receive the rank of ‘haji’ and become more sincere and more faithful to Allah. It’s like when you graduate from school: you need to study even harder. All hajis must pray five times a day. ... If there were no Allah, there would be nothing. The food we eat is Allah’s mercy. If we make money, we show our gratitude to Allah by donating more. All this is about faith. Han people say that everything comes from heaven. We Muslims say that everything is a gift of Allah. During the Iran–Iraq war, both sides put the gun down to pray when the time arrived. If you can’t find a mosque nearby, you should pray at home.

Every Friday the head a-hong preaches the Quran in the mosque to the praying villagers. More and more a-hongs now come from Ningxia Quranic College. According to Deputy Chief Wang from Ningxia Civil Affairs, they are actually better preachers than the old-fashioned a-hongs, because they learn philosophy and political

economy in college and are able to speak about social realities. Praising young a-hongs for combining religion and science, Deputy Director Ma is also simultaneously critical of old-fashioned a-hongs, as inclined to superstition. People's Deputy Ma of Shangqiao Township says that there are now women a-hongs, most of whom have taught themselves at home.

It is mainly the older villagers, those over 40, who participate in the Friday prayers in the mosque in Litong. These are also the ones who want to go to Mecca. Secretary Ma of the Huasi party division has to resolve the problem of too many wanting to go. He always arranges for the elderly to go first. People's Deputy Ma is confident that those of the younger generation who seem to have been distracted from their religious identities will come back to religion when they get older. She is not worried by the fact that the younger generation does not know how to pray because they nonetheless celebrate two festivals each year and will learn how to pray as time goes on. Director Qiao of Shangqiao Township notes that according to local custom those who come back from Mecca with the title of haji are not supposed to work: their task is to pray and prepare for the public prayers in the mosque five times a day.

Muslim religious identity is much older than that of the state and is not going to disappear in the face of state mobilisation, for both state loyalty and the intrusion of market economy are very recent phenomena. Muslim villagers have to adapt, however. The symbiosis of Muslim identity with the state and the market is an intriguing phenomenon. Muslim identity does not depend on the state for its continuing existence, but at the same time its continuing existence has to take place within conditions provided by the state. Muslims have to adapt to and abide by state regulations and market requirements; but they are also utilising resources available in the state and the market to enrich their religious activities. How Muslims in Litong acquire the trust of the state, make the state and the market contribute to their extant ethnic identities, and willingly introduce modern elements into their identities, are the subjects of the following sections.

### **Party Leadership**

The Communist Party understands the importance of religious identity to Muslims. Its Muslim policy claims respect for religious freedom. However, religious identities cross sovereign borders and may not always be conducive to the establishment of a solid state identity. We may recall the disputes in the Republican period about the number of seats to be reserved for the Muslim delegation in the National Assembly – disputes which gave the ruling Kuomintang government a very bad image.<sup>6</sup> The Communist Party therefore cannot but find itself torn between allowing religious identities and promoting state identity. It turns out that the Party expresses its religious policy in a negative tone. On the one hand, there is the warning that religious establishments should not interfere in politics. On the other, there is the instruction that the Party should not interfere in religious activities. All repeat the party line that politics and religion should not interfere in each other's business. To assure the loyalty of the a-hongs to the state, the Party demands that they all go to the Township Bureau of Religion every month to learn about current policies. On the other hand, party and government cadres are expected to avoid direct involvement in religious business, which is all handled by the Mosque Commission at each mosque. The Party and the government are concerned that Muslims should not become involved in politics. Deputy Director Ma reflects from his own Muslim perspective and maintains that 'once religious forces enter politics, trouble follows and ordinary

people face difficult problems'. He opposes participation in politics by a-hongs on the grounds that 'this is our Party's policy'. From the Muslim perspective, Deputy Director Ma believes, it is not proper for religion to involve itself in state affairs. 'In ordinary people's eyes a-hongs should be men of virtue and knowledge, with beards. People want to call them by respectful titles even if they're only in their twenties, and they think they can't be good a-hongs if they're involved in politics.'

All the interviewed cadres, however, came up with illustrations of how Muslims and Hans are not in practice distinguishable in politics. According to Deputy Township Director Ma of Shangqiao Township, for example, many Muslims are elected village directors in villages with a Han majority and Hans elected village directors in villages with a Muslim majority. 'We don't make distinctions', he says. According to Secretary You of Zaoyoun Village, there are roughly equal numbers of Hans and Muslims among the 53 party members in the village. Director He, responsible for civil affairs in Gucheng Township, stresses that all party members enjoy 'freedom of religion'. If a Muslim becomes a village director, however, the time left to him or her for religious activities necessarily shrinks. A production team leader, in his sixties, explains that 'the most important thing to do is to work in the village team. Going to the mosque is only of secondary importance'.

A number of interviewed cadres reiterated the instruction that politics should not interfere in religion.<sup>7</sup> Township Director Qiao says of the building of mosques that 'the fundraising is completely in the hands of ordinary people. The government does not step in at all, in order to avoid the extremely high sensitivity of the issue.' The emphatic tone of Litong Director of Education Ma reveals the same level of sensitivity regarding Muslim education: 'Religion? We don't touch it at all, no, not at all.' She says that there is absolutely no difference between Hans and Muslims in terms of texts used and emphasises that Hans and Muslims feel very much united. Religion-related teaching no longer appears on the school curriculum. In the past, primary schools could teach Arabic, but this is no longer the case, according to People's Deputy Ma of Shangqiao Township. Anyone who wants to learn the Quran has to go to the mosque 'after school'. The government has no intention of providing children with an understanding of what it means to be a Muslim.

At the same time, the government often finds it expedient to give in and show respect to religion. Deputy Director Ma cites three cases. On one occasion the government decided that a new road being built must bypass the graveyard of the ancestors of a local head imam even though it was much more expensive to do so. On another occasion a mosque being built turned out much taller than the government building it was next to; the government's response was to move out of the building rather than to protest. The rationale is that 'the Party must concede at certain times and places and to certain ethnic people' to show that it cares about 'ethnic peoples' emotional reaction'. Not all agree in all circumstances, however. Secretary Yang of Gucheng County believes that in cases like the latter the Party should not allow the masses to have their way unchallenged. Director Mai of Wuxing Village similarly feels that 'the problem today is that there is too much freedom'. Deputy Director Ma's third case is about an internal report on Muslim customs which argued that 'the practice of closed-circle marriage leads to lower intelligence among the Muslim population and is responsible for an increase in the number of Muslim families living below the poverty line'. The report was not approved precisely because its contents might lead to protests from the Muslims.

Although the Party consciously avoids interference in religious affairs it does not miss opportunities to utilise religion for the promotion of its policies. 'For the

Muslim people religion is supreme and the words of the a-hongs are like the instructions of emperors', says Deputy Chief Wang from the Ningxia Office of Civil Affairs. People's congresses and political consultative conferences thus try to recruit a-hongs in order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of Muslims. In order to be able to rely on a-hongs for policy promotion, however, the government needs to support religion and religious freedom in the first place. Chief Ma from the Ningxia Office of Civil Affairs confirms that the government always approves applications for building new mosques, the only question being whether or not the township has the land available. The government helps to manage Muslim restaurants by requiring that all chefs be Muslims; the owners of the restaurants, sometimes Hans, are not allowed to intervene in food purchasing and cooking. All this is said to embody the policy that all religion-related activities take place 'within the scope of the constitution, the law and religious teaching'.

Party and government support for religious activities provides a solid base for using religion for policy promotion. The government's Committee for Ethnic Groups (*minzu weiyuanhui*) regularly organises educational trips for a-hongs outside their regions, and the Party is always behind this type of government-sponsored trip. All major mosques have party members and people's deputies among their a-hongs. The Bureau of Religion is most assiduous in holding policy sessions for a-hongs. Township People's Deputy Ma describes what the Bureau calls the three-fix session:

A-hongs must develop their religious activities under the leadership of the Party and the government. Each month the a-hongs in a particular township are summoned to the township government to learn the policy guidelines of the Party. They go there willingly; you don't need to push them. This is the so-called three-fix [*sanding*] session: fixed time, fixed place, and fixed contents. The Mosque Commission of the mosque sometimes joins in too. We have a total of 34 mosques in our township. If the had imam goes, then the haji may not go. If an a-hong is a haji, he always goes.

Mr Jin from the Bureau of Religion of Shangqiao Township adds:

Each Mosque Commission is composed of three to nine members, always an odd number. The township will call the Bureau of Religion to go there and hold a session. Two hours per session. We normally finish around eleven in the morning, but sometimes the session lasts until twelve. We appoint a-hongs to be our policy promoters. A-hongs use the Quran to explain the government's current policy. The government sends us the relevant documents. We stress interethnic unity and interact with each other frequently.

While showing visitors the mosque in his village, secretary of Li of Nioujiafang Village told them that a-hongs were expected to promote national unity and instruct their people to accumulate virtue and good deeds. Policies that a-hongs apparently help most effectively with are birth control and the fight against drugs. Secretary Ma of Huasi Village told visitors that five big problems for Muslims are tobacco, gambling, alcohol, prostitution and drugs. Village directors may not convince villagers to accept birth control, but if a-hongs promote the policy, it easily prevails. Director Mai of Wuxing Village believes that he can now legitimately 'fine to the edge of bankruptcy those who violate birth control policy'. In recent years party secretaries have been able to go to the mosques without too much political sensi-



tivity. Secretary Ma of Huasi, for example, goes to the mosque occasionally in order to 'strengthen ties with Muslims by participating in religious activities'. Township People's Deputy Ma even encourages him to take advantage of religious occasions to promulgate the Party's policy. In anecdotal form Deputy Director Ma of Litong Civil Affairs reveals the ambiguous relationship between state and religion:

Once there was an a-hong in Gucheng who was very unhappy with the Communist Party. At a conference he started going on about the fact that all Muslim people came from abroad; from Gibraltar, he said. All his geography was wrong. He was purged and labelled a rightist at that time. Later he was rehabilitated. All Muslims in China are the motherland's indigenous people. All a-hongs oppose independence for Taiwan.

The Party maintains that Muslims and Hans have the same duties and enjoy the same rights. However, Muslims are in fact privileged in various ways. In Muslim areas like Yunnan or Western Hunan the most frequently mentioned privileges are the right to manufacture tobacco, exemption from birth controls and promotion of cadres. In the interviews in Ningxia the most frequently mentioned privilege was the assignment of extra credits for Muslim examinees to enter high schools or colleges. Moreover, according to Director Ma of Litong Education, the government usually recruits more teachers to teach at Muslim schools. Muslim primary schools in these areas are all complete schools, whereas in other ethnic areas there are many partial schools which do not provide fifth- or sixth-year education. Exemption from birth controls is similarly applicable in Ningxia. Muslim families are allowed two children. One-child families receive special awards from the government. Two-girl families may receive a government grant to cover school expenditure for both girls up to junior high school level. The township government and the city government together share the cost of the mother's retirement pension and insurance. In addition, single-girl and two-girl families are given priority if they enter the bidding for contracts for government work projects.

Muslims are given various privileges, then, but neither Hans nor Muslims go further in specifying how 'Muslim' as an ethnic identity might be different or unique in a social or political context. In the private sphere, however, Muslims can easily identify themselves with their religious activities. In fact, they consciously use the resources they earn in the market and the trust they enjoy from the state to strengthen their religious identities. When they reach their forties they begin to go to the mosque, start saving money to build their own village mosque, and start preparing to go to Mecca. Director Ma of Litong Education estimates that there are over two hundred mosques in the Litong area while there are only about one hundred primary schools. In brief, the Party and the state are successful in achieving the conformity of Muslims in the social and political arena because Muslims have all the room they need to preserve their identities in the private domain.

### **Market Economy**

Muslim identities should matter little in the market, which recognises only cost and efficiency. Litong is perhaps among the better-off places compared with other Muslim areas in China. Director Yang of Civil Affairs in Litong points to the conventional Muslim fondness for beef and lamb as an explanation for the popularity of milk production in the area. (Pigs are most commonly raised by Han peasants.) Other popular businesses include the paper, construction and plywood

manufacturing industries. Eighty per cent of the businesses are owned by local people. Little investment comes from outside the region. Machines needed for manufacturing are imported from other parts of the country. Secretary You of Zaoyuan Village describes the style of business in his village as 'self-investment based upon our own investigation of the market'.

In all four villages we visited, village directors and village party secretaries receive the largest share of bonuses from the collective investment of the villages, the exact amount depending on the revenue of the year. In Wuxing Village, for example, six village cadres including the director and the secretary shared a bonus of 20,000 remminbi in 1997. In 1997 in Huasi Village, the director and the secretary shared half the total: 5500 remminbi each. Three of the four villages we visited – Wuxing, Huasi and Jiefang – are suburban villages. Acreage per capita is small and the inhabitants take advantage of their proximity to the city. Secretary Yang of Gucheng Township reported that the director of Wuxing has been ousted by the villagers the previous year because of poor management of village finance. At the last election for director in Zayouan Village the incumbent had been voted out for a similar reason. According to Deputy Director Yang of Civil Affairs in Litong, when the city government evaluates the performance of village autonomy, economic revenue is among the most important indicators. Secretary Wang of Shangqiao Township mentioned 'civil reconciliation' as one of the activities taking up most time. Activities under the heading 'civil reconciliation' are closely related to economic productivity: they include land distribution, land usage and productive work management.

The area in which economic activity impinges on Muslim identity is that of religious observance. Work schedules leave little time for the latter. Secretary You of Zaoyuan, for example, does not even have time for farming, which he leaves to his children and wife: he certainly has no time to attend religious sessions in the mosque. Construction workers are especially disadvantaged in terms of their religious devotions since they cannot allow themselves the physically demanding ritual of diet during the daytime. The general manager of Minle Muslim Milk goes to the mosque regularly, but his wish to go to Mecca is unlikely to be realised because he 'cannot leave the factory too long, and the trip to Mecca takes a minimum of 40 days'. He never encourages his young workers to go to the mosque. Many who do business have to travel and are thus unable to fulfil the ritual of praying. Secretary Ma says that he personally takes a liberal approach to all these phenomena. Deputy Director Ma of Litong believes that young men who go to the mosque must be doing so because their parents make them.

The associate general manager at Saishang Drinks is a Han and the sales manager is a Han, too, but the production manager is a Muslim. Meanwhile, although Muslims comprise 30 per cent of the population of Litong, 90 per cent of the workers at Saisheng Drinks and Minle Muslim Milk are Muslims. Deputy Director Yang believes that this has come about because Muslims have a traditional concern with hygiene, which is particularly appropriate in the food and drink industry. In addition, Muslim workers will introduce new Muslim workers when there are openings at the factory and Muslim managers have an easier time managing them. Another factor is that Muslims traditionally farm cows and sheep, and the milk manufacturing industry needs to find easy access to farmers in Muslim villages.

The rise of the market economy has influenced education policy. Education Director Ma has made enormous efforts to promote occupational education in recent years with the hope of helping those who fail high school entrance examinations. Her main goal is to equip them as useful workers in Muslim villages:

I have started a new division in the second year of the Junior High School. If students decide that they are not going to take the entrance examination to the Senior High School, I will provide them with an additional year of training in our occupational classes to learn bicycle and motorcycle repairing or the skills necessary for them to go home to cultivate the land. Many students are tired of learning. Their parents want them to take the entrance examination against their own wishes. After my training, some students are able to open their own shops within a few years, and they can make a living for themselves. ... I have been promoting the slogan 'love peasants, love agriculture' in order to persuade students to devote themselves to village development. I try to convey my idea to school principals, encouraging them to recognise the fact that we are in an agricultural area. I did a survey and found that 97 per cent of students in elementary and junior high schools wanted to escape from the 'agricultural trap'. This is impossible, however. I realise that school principals are having second thoughts. I want to bring their thinking into line with my own. ... The old idea was that people would study and become officials, but there is a limit to how many officials there can be. Most of us are common people. ... You aren't in a position to choose what job you're going to do.

Education Director Ma does not mention Muslims specifically. However, if her vision is to be fulfilled it is clear that Muslim identities must be taken into account. Occupational training applies both to Muslims and to Hans, but in order to be persuaded to stay in a particular area students must at the same time be provided with a motivation beyond that to be found in simple occupational training. This training may create more Muslim human capital, but it cannot guarantee that the capital will be applied to the growth of Muslim areas. Indeed, training which is exclusively economic in nature tends to work against the goal of having students stay in a particular area. Therefore it is inevitable that the Education Director is relying on Muslim identity to motivate students to stay; and this identity is bound up with religious activities which take place outside the market arena. A stress on similarities between Hans and Muslims in terms of qualifications or years of training is not helpful in this context. All this explains why Education Director Ma's goal is not appreciated by school principals who are used to evaluating performance against purely educational criteria.

### **Muslims and Hans**

The inhabitants of Muslim villages have plenty of room to engage in activities outside the arenas of the state and the market. So do the inhabitants of Han villages. Muslims and Hans share many common features in their life outside the state and market, including a political culture characterised by collectivism and by the rule of the local 'strongman' despite efforts to establish mechanisms of village autonomy throughout the country. The envisaged system of village autonomy has features reminiscent of western civic culture, emphasising democratic election for village cadres, democratic policy-making, democratic control of policy implementation and democratic management of village affairs. In theory, village affairs should be openly discussed and policy-making and implementation procedures should be detailed in a village contract agreed upon by all villagers. It is the villagers rather than govern-

ment officials who are to be responsible for executing state policy.<sup>8</sup> In reality, however, village autonomy reveals strong collectivism. The function of village autonomy is understood to be to assist the government in implementing its policies rather than to operate as a check on abuse of power by the government; the concept is therefore dramatically different from that which prevails in a liberal democracy.<sup>9</sup> Villagers look for the man of virtue in their village; and this search is not random: it is always assumed that candidates who have the support of the Party, the family and the elderly are men of virtue. The process of producing candidates involves most villagers, and in this sense it is a collective operation. Collectivism is a general characteristic of village life. Villagers are equal in their share of collective property and obligatory work. To varying extents, villages own collective businesses and land. The inhabitants of many villages still cherish the growth of collective property rather than seeking individual profit-making opportunities. Mechanisms of political mobilisation along kinship lines dominate electoral politics in villages. Village enterprise managers place their trust in their own social networking rather than in market mechanisms for realising business opportunities. All these features are characteristic not only for Han villages but for Litong Muslim villages as well.

### *The Local Strongman*

The envisaged system of 'village autonomy' has yet to change villagers' reliance on the Party to determine the direction of local development; and typically the Party as well as the villagers want to have a capable director who knows how to make money for everyone. This quest for capable directors is nicknamed the 'strongman complex' in China. The rise of a strongman can always be traced back to the Party, which selects potential leaders at a young age and prepares them progressively in a series of positions. Secretary Yang of Gucheng Township concludes that 'the Party is critical in many respects', including the drafting of the village contract and preparing the list of candidates for village council members. His colleague Ms He, Director of Civil Affairs in Gucheng Township, adds that if the mass organisations (such as women's associations, youth corps and political consultative conferences) have no candidate of their own, then there will be only one candidate. However, Deputy Director Yang of Gucheng Township estimates that 30 per cent of those elected last time did not even appear on the ballot paper.<sup>10</sup> This implies that the Party's choice is not always the result of widespread consultation. Both Secretary You and Director He, however, stress that the norm of thorough consultation is the essence of 'democratic centralism'. Promotion of an individual should start only after the process of consultation indicates universal support.

Case-studies show that the Party puts great efforts into preparing its own candidates. Candidates do not show up randomly, but are those who have done well in previous posts and have been spotted by the Party. Secretary Yang of Gucheng Township was previously the deputy secretary and before that the head of militia and divisional secretary of the Communist Youth Corps. Secretary Li of Jiefang Village was earlier a village director, after serving as the head of the militia for 19 years. Secretary You of Zaoyuan Village, who came from the township party division, was appointed by the township government to take over the village when the previous director was ousted. Director Mai of Wuxing Village was the head of the militia. Secretary Yu was the first head of the Communist Youth Corps, then deputy secretary. The most competitive recent election occurred in Jiefang Village in spring 1998 with the Party's candidate winning by only 22 votes. Township People's

Deputy Ma expresses relief: if the opponent had won, 'we would have had a big problem in executing government policy'. Deputy Director Ma of Litong Civil Affairs concludes:

Villagers all showed up during the election. They would feel bad if they didn't. ... In a rich village, people want to find a fair leader, and the election is difficult. People get intensely involved during an election. We cannot allow a bad person to win. We cannot allow an incompetent person to win, either. Village cadres must consult superior cadres about the election. Everybody participates. It is a time when village affairs are opened up. We went round a number of villages one night during the last election, and were not back until midnight. We must let people know our expectations.

### *Collectivism*

The strength of collectivism in the political culture in a given village is partially determined by the strength of its economy. A fragile economy may mean that the village experiences difficulties in executing government policy.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, a weak collective culture hinders the development of village economy. This is because a wide range of activities – from road building and bridge maintenance to school education – depend on collective effort. The social esteem of leading cadres is tied in with their ability to develop the collective economy. A village leadership enjoying high esteem will be able to mobilise villagers for collective work. A weak village leadership will have more to do with lack of esteem for the village director and the party secretary than with party organisation. In brief, collectivism and the success of village economy are two sides of the same coin.

The Muslim villages in Litong show the same intriguing relationship between collectivism and economic development which is generally found in Han villages. In all the visited villages, for example, the collective economy helps to pay the head count fees imposed upon villages by the township government: for water supply, road maintenance, exemption from obligatory work and so on.<sup>12</sup> Villagers use profits from collective property to buy machinery, dig wells and repair roads. They also invest in hotels and restaurants. Village councils are especially attentive to issues involving the exploitation of raw materials and the sale of businesses in their villages, collective or private. Village councils help local schools with repair and maintenance. The budget and accounts of the village councils must be made public on the wall of the village office. Spending over a certain amount requires the approval of the village assembly. Secretary Yang believes that it is the collective economy that resolves the problem of uneven income distribution:

After 1978 collectivised agricultural land was redistributed. Everything then belonged to individual peasant households. They cultivated their own land and made their own money separately. The income gap between the poor and the rich was getting wider. To resolve this problem, we decided to reform the system of giving loans to develop the collective economy. We have been growing at the speed of twenty per cent annually. Our collective assets now include real estate, various enterprises and office buildings.

In a private business like Saicheng Drinks, collectivism is still evident. For example,

although each salesperson is responsible for a specific region and his or her pay depends on the level of the sales record, the method of payment is changed whenever sales in a particular region drop. Anticipating calls for fairer treatment, the company will rearrange the payment schedule or redivide the sales regions. Market performance is thus not the only factor determining payment levels. In Minle Muslim Milk, family collectivism operates: children and in-laws occupy all major positions in the company. The general manager was a construction worker when he first started up a private business. At that time, all his workers were his relatives. He trusts no outsider. His business style reveals an interesting conception of the market. He always pays people he is doing business with the first time promptly, but once a friendship is established, he never pays them on time.

Another manifestation of collectivism, also typical of most Han villages, is the maintenance of a village dossier. Secretary You explains that these dossiers 'record family situations'. Villagers generally consider the keeping of these dossiers essential to effective village autonomy and democracy. Each household is evaluated at the season or year end according to the records in the dossiers. Villagers are required to evaluate themselves as well as one another, and those receiving a positive evaluation can expect material reward. Party cadres are evaluated too. The dossiers are a written record not just for the villagers themselves but for future generations as well.

Collectivism is most clearly revealed in the assignment of obligatory work. Public security is one of the most important criteria for the township investigation teams and each village has its militia. Today's Party cadres are often yesterday's militia leaders. Township Director Qiao explains that to serve in a militia and to receive a fortnight's training a year is 'an obligation' for every adult male. Another criterion for the township investigation teams is the 'level of civilisation', referring to the number of school-age children actually enrolled in school. In Litong, all children are obliged to receive at least nine years of education. If parents refuse to send children to school, village cadres must bring constant pressure to bear on them.

Productive agricultural work and the level of food supply to the government are also on the agenda of the investigation teams. Team leader Ha of Jiefang Village explains how before the beginning of each season he calls all the team members together to decide which crops they should be cultivating. If they choose rice, this will be grown on individual plots. If they decide that the season's crop should be wheat, they will pool their money and grow the crop collectively. The township investigation team does its work village by village. This system of investigation reinforces collectivisation within each village as no village council wants to see its own village lag behind.

## **Conclusion**

We have seen that there are differences and similarities between the Litong Muslims and the Hans, and that these manifest themselves both within the area of the state and market and outside that area. Within that area, Muslims are distinguished from Hans in that they are accorded privileges as a matter of policy. In this respect, Muslims are different from Hans, but not from other minorities in the country. Outside the area of the state and market, what distinguishes Muslims from Hans, and helps them retain their identity, is their religious faith.

Table 1 summarises the similarities and differences between Muslims and Hans both within and outside the area of the state and market. The left-hand column contains state policies and the right-hand column features which are not dependent

**Table 1**

	Inside the area of state and market	Outside the area of state and market
Similarities between Hans and Muslims	Party leadership Market economy	The 'strongman' complex Collectivism
Differences between Hans and Muslims	Policy privileges Legal ethnic status	Religious identities Customs

on state policies. The upper row contains macrostructures and the lower row micro-practices. Since policies are easier to change than non-policy elements and micro-practices are easier to change than macro-structures, the most rigid cell is the upper right-hand cell and the most flexible is the lower left-hand cell. In the long run, the features which are easier to change will adapt to those which are more rigid. Any attempt to change the latter by manipulating the former would provoke resistance. It is sensible, then, for the state authorities to allow party leadership and the market economy to adapt to the rule of the strongman and to the culture of collectivism instead of attempting to root them out. Similarly, if the authorities were to try to define 'Muslim' exclusively in terms of policy privileges or legal status, the result would not be fruitful. Meanwhile, in the long run the lower row in the table will adapt itself to the upper row. It would therefore be wrong to expect that the preservation of custom and religious identity will eventually override the strongman complex or the culture of collectivism, or that policy privileges and legal ethnic status will undermine party leadership or the operation of the market economy.

It is in the nature of all citizenship projects of the modern state to attempt to transform the right-hand column into the left-hand column. In the case of China this tendency is revealed most vividly in attempting to locate 'Muslim' identity in individualised, legalised policy privileges, and in the belief (affecting Hans and Muslims equally) that the market economy will change the collectivist culture and that the party leadership will create a style of village autonomy that will check the rule of the local strongman.

None of this is to say that the macro-structures and the non-policy elements will remain unchanged. They will alter, slowly, in adaptation to micro-practices and state policies, with the aim of keeping the state satisfied and of giving it no cause to interfere in the area outside the state and market. As we have seen, Muslims in the Litong region defer active pursuit of their Muslim identity until they are over 40, donating to mosque building and engaging in Mecca pilgrimages only after they have worked successfully within the local economy. As far as the state authorities are concerned, as long as Muslims perform adequately to meet state criteria of loyalty and citizenship in the state area, they are not inclined to probe overmuch into how the Muslims conduct their private affairs. Meanwhile Muslim strategies for preserving their identity will remain effective in resisting the seemingly inevitable arrival of modernity.

## Notes and References

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- <sup>2</sup> See Chih-yu Shih, 'A postcolonial reading of the state question in China', *The Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 17, no. 5, 1998, pp. 125–39.
- <sup>3</sup> See Lia Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1992).
- <sup>4</sup> Ding Guoyong (ed.), *Ningxia huizu (Muslims in Ningxia)* (Ningxia People's Press, Yinchuan, 1993), pp. 177–81.
- <sup>5</sup> See Feng Jinyuan, *Zhongguode yisilanjiao (Chinese Muslims)* (Ningxia People's Press, Yinchuan, 1994), pp. 73–84.
- <sup>6</sup> Yu Zhenggui, *Zhongguo lidai zhengquan yu yisilanjiao (Muslims and their Relationship with Various Regimes in Chinese History)* (Ningxia People's Press, Yinchuan, 1996), pp. 280–345.
- <sup>7</sup> See Li Dingren and Cai Guoying, *Zhongguo xibeide minzu jiaoyu (Ethnic Education in China's Northwest)* (Ningxia People's Press, Yinchuan, 1996), pp. 210–17.
- <sup>8</sup> See Zhang Houan, *Zhongguo tese de cunmin zizhi (Peasant Autonomy with Chinese Characteristics)* (Guiguan, Taipei, 1998).
- <sup>9</sup> Chih-yu Shih, *Collective Democracy* (Chinese University Press of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 1999).
- <sup>10</sup> Voters are allowed to write in a name of their choice if they dislike all the listed candidates.
- <sup>11</sup> Li Xueju, Wang Zhengyao and Tang Jinsu, *Zhongguo xiangzheng zhengquan de xianzhuang yu gaige (The Current Situation and Reform of Township Government in China)* (Chinese Social Press, Beijing, 1994).
- <sup>12</sup> The one exception is the fee for education: it is believed that if villagers pay this themselves they will develop a greater concern for education.