4. Muslims with Chinese Characteristics: The Sinicization of Ningxia after 2017

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Abstract: In order to establish trade connections with Central Asia and the Middle East, Ningxia was promoted as a bridge connecting China, through its Muslim minorities, with the international Muslim community. Abrupt change came when the accent on nation-building overshadowed aims of cultural diplomacy and strategies for economic development. In the new context, the visualization and development of specific "unchinese" minority cultural features started to be understood as an obstacle to the nation-building efforts introduced by Xi Jinping. The capital city of Yinchuan changed from a "Muslim" city to a pure "Chinese" one within only one year. Ningxia is an example not only of the extreme inconsistency and waste of China's policy but also of the diverse mechanisms of (re) inventing cultural identity.

Keywords: Ningxia, Hui, Muslim China, cultural diplomacy, China-Arab connection

The city of Yinchuan, as well as the whole Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, used to be promoted by the local as well as the central government as China's center of Muslim culture. Hui culture and Muslim identity were made the fulcrum of local development. This narrative was made official in 2010, when the first China-Arab Economic and Trade Forum (later the China-Arab States Expo) was held in Yinchuan. To support the new "Muslim image" of the autonomous region, Arab architecture—or, at least, added ornaments—dominated the city. Even the street signs were equipped with captions in Arabic (which, according to my informants, were not always grammatically correct). This was intended to attract Arabs and other Muslims to invest in the development of Ningxia and solve its problematic economic situation

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(Ma et al. 2009). The plan was adopted as part of general state strategies such as the domestic Great Opening of the West (*xibu da kaifa*) development strategy or the international Belt and Road (*yidai yilu*) initiative. Ningxia also became an important part of China's public diplomacy targeting Arab and other Muslim countries (see also Silverman and Blumenfield 2013). The international promotion of Hui Muslims in Ningxia also aimed at countering China's negative image caused by the repressive treatment of the Uyghur community in Xinjiang.

The visual "Muslimization" of Yinchuan was at its peak during my first visit in 2016. However, only a year later the elaborate transformation of Yinchuan had been reversed and the state- or province-funded public decorations that were supposed to evoke associations with global "Muslim culture" had been replaced with new "Chinese" symbols, such as red lanterns or carving-like ornaments. Arabic letters were removed from public spaces. And Islam in Ningxia and the Hui population became objects of re-sinicization. During my second visit only three years later, in 2019, Yinchuan thus appeared to be just another Chinese city hit by the most recent wave of development. Nothing was left of the "Muslim image."

The abrupt change recalls concerns already raised during the identification of nationalities (*minzu*) after the establishment of the PRC that "attributing too much importance to Islam would prevent the adaptation of the Hui to a modern Chinese nation" (Eroglu Sager 2021, 850). The growing influence of the international Muslim community on Muslim groups in China in the twenty-first century and the resulting increase in radicalization among Muslims in China (see Hacer Gonul and Julius Rogenhofer's chapter) caused worries for the CCP that the planned strengthening of Hui Muslim identity in Ningxia could lead to waves of unrest based on ethno-religious differences even from the Hui community (see, for example, Tobin 2015), which had so far been understood by the state as a group more compatible with the Han majority (see Friedrichs 2017) and more loyal to the Chinese state than other Muslims living in China, such as the Uyghurs (Bhalla and Luo 2013, 5).

The change started in 2017 (Stroup 2019), and the decisive moment leading to a rethink of Ningxia's development plan was the meeting of the 19th National Congress of the CCP, where president Xi Jinping (2017) called for the development of a "socialist culture with Chinese characteristics" and launched the final stage to unify all citizens as one Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu*), which was planned to be accomplished by the 100th anniversary of the founding of the PRC in 2049. As a result, the long-promoted multicultural image of China (Silverman and Blumenfield 2013, 6) was replaced by a

"unicultural Chinese" concept. Although some parts of the non-Han cultural heritage, such as the heroic legacy of Central Asian personalities or religions, have been reimagined as parts of the shared "Chinese culture" (Bulag 2020; Clark 2018), other aspects which clearly differentiate groups and support the establishment of different identities, such as language, are being removed as "obstacles to progress" (Bulag 2020). The second-generation ethnic policy forging a common culture, consciousness, and identity (Roche and Leibold 2020) shifted the accent from the fifty-six recognized ethnic groups as children of the mother China to one undistinguishable mass of the "Chinese nation" loving their country and loyal to the ruling CCP.

An Adjustable Hui Identity?

Islam was introduced to China by Arab and Persian merchants and soldiers who came via the ancient Silk Road or across the sea during the Tang dynasty (Na 2001, 177). The term *hui* as a consistent term for Muslims first started to be used in the thirteenth century (Gladney 1996, 17), and Islam was officially recognized as the fourth national teaching after Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism in the late Ming dynasty (Cheng 2018, 43). During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Islam underwent a decisive process of sinicization, which materialized through *Han Kitab*, a canon of Islamic literature written in Chinese language (see Bhatt 2023, 5). Islam adapted to Confucian principles through the "concept of dual loyalties"—claiming faith both to Allah and to the emperor, who was later replaced by the state and the party (Masumi 2006; see also Lipman 1998; Theaker 2022).

The Hui, who are not attached to one particular territory and in general consider China their home, who use Chinese as their own language (see also Na 2001; Ha 2020) and whose religion is adapted to Chinese circumstances, were not perceived as a foreign element in Chinese society (Lipman 1998). Their mosques were constructed with the same techniques as other temples and, from the outside, did not differ significantly from other Chinese religious sites, besides the crescent moon on the roof. This lack of clear visual attributes that would distinguish areas dominated by the Hui population from regions dominated by the Han was one reason why, during the second decade of the twenty-first century, the local government in Ningxia started to invest in building a more "Muslim" image for the Hui Autonomous Region that would be more consistent with claims about a shared cultural heritage and religious background of the Hui and other Muslims around the world.

Nevertheless, the Hui differed from the majority due to the social customs associated with their religion, which did not allow them to mingle with the majority population and gave them the status of a minority—an inferior status from the perspective of the Han (Bhalla and Luo 2013, 41). It is this "otherness" that has led to several waves of persecution against them throughout history (see for example Ouksel 2008). Their minority status later determined their identification as a nationality when the PRC was attempting to fulfil its "commitment to recognizing the existence of ethnonational diversity" (Mullaney 2010, 2–3). Seeking a "distinction between them and non-Muslim Chinese (Han), and between them and non-Chinese Muslims" (Benite cited in Gillette 2008, 1015), the Hui were one of the groups who proposed that they should obtain an official identity as a nationality. The confirmation of the ethno-cultural otherness of the Hui through their identification as a nationality had an "ideological, political and practical meaning" (Anttonen 2005, 79) for themselves as well as for the state. Together with the Mongols, Tibetans, Uyghurs, Miao, Yi, Koreans, Manchus, and Li, the Hui were considered a "generally accepted minority" or "existing group" with no need for further investigation and were recognized as a nationality in 1954, during the first wave of the identification of nationalities.[1]

For the Hui nationality, the religion plays an important role in marking the boundaries between them and the rest of the Chinese population. However, especially when dealing with other populations who believe in Islam, the nationality label appears to be equally important in defining one's identity. Eroglu Sager (2021, 852) suggests that "ethnicization of Muslim identity was the safest way to guarantee integration into a non-Muslim majority nation-state without jeopardizing their distinct Muslim identity." The contemporary Hui community thus defines itself in terms of both religion and ethnicity (Gladney 1996; Malzer 2020; Kang and Sutton 2016, 10). It is a group of multiple identities (Stroup 2016, 2) embodying the identity of the Hui nationality and the Chinese national identity as well as the supranational Muslim identity (Eroglu Sager 2021, 834; see also Bian Simei's chapter).

For some of today's Hui, their ethnic affiliation, i.e., their ability to trace their lineage to Arab or Persian ancestors, predominates as a major identity marker and is understood as a prerequisite for membership of the Hui community (Turnbull 2016; Lipman 2014, 144–45). For the majority, however, including those who converted, it is Islam that serves as the source of their collective identity (Gillette 2008, 1015–16; see also Eroglu Sager 2021),

1 Groups repeatedly mentioned in imperial or republican texts (Zhongguode minzu shibie 106, cited in Wang 2015, 9; see also Gillette 2008, 1015; Bhatt 2023, 6).

distinguishing them from their neighbors of various ethnicities, whose language and some of whose cultural markers the Hui were able to adapt (see also Ding 2001) or to which they belonged before converting to Islam (see Chang 2015). The ability of the Hui to adapt to local circumstances, which allows them to integrate effectively into Chinese society, simultaneously distances them from the transnational Muslim identity (Holder 2016, 35). The Hui are thus people particular to China (Gillette 2008, 1017), to whom the distinctiveness of being a Muslim is as important as their Chineseness (Eroglu Sager 2021, 827). Perhaps more precisely than Islam, it is the term "*qingzhen*" that is characteristic of Hui Muslim identity in China (Gladney 1996). Meaning purity and truth, "*qingzhen*" not only refers to Islam and to the interpretation of its principles in accordance with Confucianism but is also symbolic of the entire Hui lifestyle and indigenousness (Zhang 2016, 157; Stroup 2022, 97–99; Bhatt 2023, 41).

In the period of Reform and Opening of the 1980s, the Chinese government decided to restore the Muslim identity of the Hui and other Muslim minorities in China as they were selected to boost economic development by helping to establish economic ties with the Middle East (Dillon 1999, 179). In a form of reciprocity, the Hui Muslims developed flexible strategies in response to the changing ruling policies that could be described as "practical rationality," which accentuated political and economic interests while preserving culture (Gui 2016b, 80).

The improvement in the economic situation of local Muslim communities as well as the revived contact with the global Muslim population which resulted from China's Islamic diplomacy helped to "renew interest in traditional Islamic values amongst Hui" (Holder 2016, 41). In this period (in 1981 in particular) the Nanguan Mosque was rebuilt after being destroyed during the 1960s and became the first mosque in Yinchuan to use Arabic architectural elements (Malzer 2020, 155). The visibility of Hui communities further increased following the launch of the Great Opening of the West development strategy and Islamic diplomacy has continued throughout the very recent Belt and Road initiative (Ptáčková 2020). The renewed economic prosperity of the Hui can be seen, for example, in the growing number of newly constructed mosques sponsored by local Hui communities. The preference for Arab-style mosque construction in recent decades reflects the aim to re-establish the transnational connections of the Hui with the global Muslim community along China's paths of economic and cultural diplomacy. According to my informants in Ningxia, the preference for Arab-style concrete mosques was also motivated by lower construction costs compared to the elaborate Chinese-style wooden roofs.

The large number of newly built mosques in the Arab style, however, suddenly made the landscape appear very Muslim. Even in regions perceived as culturally rather Tibetan, such as Qinghai Province, the new mosques gave the area a clear Muslim look. They manifested not only the overall presence of Hui communities—even outside the Hui autonomous areas—but also the continuous presence of Islam as a parallel authority to the party-state. This change in the landscape, which demonstrated a possible increase in the identification of China's Muslims with the global Muslim community to the detriment of their patriotic feeling towards the Chinese state, might have alerted the central government to a potential threat to its authority and led to the extension of restrictive and assimilatory policies to target not only undesirable expressions of ethnic identity but also unduly overt expressions of religious identity (see also Gonul and Rogenhofer 2019, 32; CECC 2021).

The fear spreading among the wider Muslim community abroad is that the policy change will lead to general persecution of Muslims in China. The Arabs, the objects of the former China-Arab friendship policy, observe with discontent, for example, increasing difficulties regarding the *hajj*. Besides religion, the Arabs fear a negative impact on the economy, although according to the Ningxia China-Arab Trade Office, from an economic point of view, Arabs are still welcome in China.[2] China's anti-Muslim sentiment could, however, undermine its Middle Eastern interests in the Belt and Road initiative.

The inconsistency of China's ethnic governance of Muslims, which is also apparent in the contemporary ethno-religious policies of the PRC, could also make the Hui "feel less belonging to the Chinese state" (Turnbull 2016, 132) and support their cultural transnational belonging instead. The cultural security of the Hui community is shaped on the one hand by their local socio-religious context and on the other by their belonging to the international Muslim community. The latter was the key factor that helped the Hui survive and develop cultural continuity even during times of local persecution. In the context of the contemporary Chineseness-oriented policy promoted by Xi Jinping, both of these pillars of the Hui Muslim identity—local as well as transnational—are being systematically removed. Moreover, in contrast to what McCarthy (2009) was able to observe earlier, the sinicization policy now affects the ethnic part of the Hui identity as well. The idea of replacing it with a "new national identity" represents a serious threat to the cultural and social self-consciousness of the Hui.

2 Interview with an employee of the China-Arab Trade Office, Yinchuan, May 2019.

From Chinese MUSLIMS to CHINESE Muslims

In contrast to the previous aim to emphasize the "Muslim" side of the Hui, the so-called "Chinese Muslim" community, the current sinicization policy accentuates the term "Chinese" (see Madsen 2021). Through its increasing global economic influence, China's controversial regime has gained acceptance among the wider international political community. This may be interpreted by the CCP as an endorsement of its development model. After humiliation and subsequent condescension from many Western countries throughout the twentieth century (see also Kaufman 2011), China is eager to assert its economic, political, industrial, and technical independence or even superiority over the Western powers in Europe and the USA. Through concepts such as the Chinese Dream (*Zhongguo meng*) or strategic plans such as Made in China 2025 (*Zhongguo zhizao erlingerwu*), the Chinese government is thus calling for faith in China and promotion of "Chineseness." In this context, the Hui in Ningxia are not promoted as part of the global Muslim community, but rather as Chinese people who believe in Islam. As such, their belief is localized and still considered part of Chinese culture. The emphasis is placed on the unique "Chinese Islam" that developed in the Chinese environment (Zhongguo Yisilanjiao xiehui 2019). This premise led to a ban on all expressions of Hui culture influenced by Arab Islam, as this might indicate that the Hui belong to the transnational Muslim community as well. The changing attitude of the state towards Hui communities can also be interpreted as an expansion of the "Xinjiang Model" of severe restrictions on expressions of Muslim culture and Islam beyond the borders of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (*Sina* 2018; CECC 2021; see also Harris 2010; Hacer Gonul and Julius Rogenhofer's chapter). In particular, this changing policy approach is noticeable in areas with administrative autonomy, such as Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region or Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture in Gansu Province, which used to be called "the little Mecca of China." More recently these practices were observed also in Qinghai and Shaanxi (Bhatt 2023).

Restrictions on the religious and cultural expression of Muslims in China are part of the policy to sinicize the religion (*zongjiao Zhongguohua*), i.e., to make it "compatible with socialist society,"[3] which grew out of the fear

3 "Already in 2001, as a response to both the global discourse on Islamic terrorism and domestic interethnic violence involving the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, the CCP established the Educational Administration Guidance Committee (*Jiaowu zhidao weiyuanhui*)" (Erie 2014). In the same year, the "China Islamic Association (*Zhongguo Yisilanjiao xiehui*) conducted and published

that the love of God could challenge the love of the motherland and the party (see, for example, General Office of the Central Committee of the CCP 2017, 22–23). According to this policy, religious faith, practice and rituals in Chinese culture and society should be "indigenized" and the sinicization policy should build "a juridical framework to monitor and control the growth of religion and its influence in China" (Harvey, 2020).

Following the 2015 United Front Work Conference, Xi Jinping advocated "fusing religious doctrines with Chinese culture and preventing the interference of religion in government affairs and education" (Leibold 2016, 12) and "to unite and organize the religious believers to strive for his Chinese Dream" (Shengtai baohubu 2021; Chang 2018, 37). Systematic changes intended to accomplish these goals began to be put in place in 2017, along with Xi's call to "fully implement the Party's basic policy on religious affairs, uphold the principle that religions in China must be sinicized (*Zhongguohua*) and provide active guidance to religions so that they can adapt themselves to socialist society" during the CCP's Nineteenth National Congress (Xi 2017).[4] Updated Regulations on Religious Affairs were passed by the State Council in September 2017 and took effect in February 2018. In March 2018, the National People's Congress and the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference approved the bureaucratic, ideological, and legal structure of sinicization that came into force in February 2020 (Haddad-Fonda 2019, 7).

With the premise that sinicization should lead to "more Chinese religious values, more Chinese religious symbols and more Chinese practice of the faith" (Vermander 2019, 136–37), the Five-Year Planning Outline for Persisting in the Sinicization of Islam in China (*Jianchi woguo Yisilanjiao Zhongguohua fangxiang wunian gongzuo guihua*; 2018–22), confirmed by the China Islamic Association, targeted the architectural style of mosques, which should "persist in frugality and practicality; and should be suited to China's characteristics, highlighting Chinese elements; and not chase after the big and exotic or use foreign architectural styles as the standard" (Zhongguo Yisilanjiao xiehui 2019). It also addressed the character of Muslim dress and religious ceremonies, which should "embody Chinese character and style, standardize Muslim attire for the *hajj*" and "not imitate foreign

interpretations of Islamic scripture, belief and law in accordance with state policy and Chinese socialism (*jiejing*)." It emphasized "justification for patriotism through Islamic rules, *aiguo aijiao* … the central component of Chinese Islam" (Glasserman 2016, 48).

4 Xi had already mentioned the need to make sure China's religions are "Chinese in orientation" (*Zhongguohua fangxiang*) in his speech a year earlier, during the National Religious Work Conference on April 24, 2016 (Xi 2016).

dress." In terms of language use, Chinese should prevail as the language of religion (see also General Office of the Central Committee of the CCP 2017).

Confucius and his teaching has been revived as one of the symbols of Chinese culture. Adjusted to the contemporary situation, a modern adaptation of the Confucian principle of faithfulness to the emperor should be demonstrated through public displays of the loyalty of religious institutions to the CCP through the "four entries to the mosques" (*sijin qingzhensi*), which require mosques to be equipped with a national flag, to display the constitution and laws and regulations regarding religion, to uphold "core socialist values," and to adjust to "Chinese excellent traditional culture" (Zhongguo Yisilanjiao xiehui 2019; see also Hacer Gonul and Julius Rogenhofer's chapter). In 2018 further regulations prohibiting the spreading and sharing of religious content online, including videos or photos from masses or incense burning, were drafted and significantly expanded the platform for state interventions in connection with daily religious services (Vermander 2019).

Theoretically, Hui communities were not banned from practicing Islam; in reality, however, any semiotic expressions of faith or social differentiation through clothing or diet can be perceived negatively and at least as a lack of patriotic enthusiasm by the authorities (see also Grose 2020; Bhatt 2023). To comply with the rules of the Five-Year Planning Outline for Persisting in the Sinicization of Islam in China, mosques with Arab-style architecture were partly demolished as they had to undergo "height limitation" (see also Zhongguo Yisilanjiao xiehui 2019). The Arab decorations and inscriptions were dismantled, and the domes and minarets were removed and partly replaced by Chinese-style ornaments and roofs. The public call to prayer was stopped, so believers now have to keep track of prayer times by themselves. Prayers and rituals can only be performed in mosque complexes and nowhere else. Red national flags are displayed at each mosque, and all mosques are decorated with patriotic slogans as well as the new laws and regulations on religion. Children under eighteen are not allowed to visit mosques and participate in religious classes but are encouraged to attend school and vocational training instead. According to my informants in Ningxia, it is forbidden to speak Arabic at home, in mosques or with foreigners. Women are called upon to emancipate themselves through work in "poverty alleviation factories," to sew, or to embroider (Su 2020). In summary, the sinicization of Islam was interpreted by my Hui informants in the following way: "It is possible to believe inside, but on the surface you should appear like a Han."[5]

5 Interview with a Hui intellectual, Yinchuan, May 2019. See also Bhatt 2023.

For the Hui, Islam and its symbols constitute an important marker of their identity (Stroup 2016; Gladney 1996; Malzer 2020; Gui 2016a). As a group "dually peripheral: to the imagined center of the Islamic world and to the mainstream Chinese cultural and political spheres" (Turnbull 2016, 133), the Hui are fundamentally reliant on their local socio-religious community. The restrictions on the expression of their faith and affiliation to the cultural and religious community built around the mosques thus severely endanger their feeling of cultural security. For what remains of a Chinese Muslim deprived of his religion? A Chinese.

Rethinking the Image of Ningxia

The growing awakening of cultural awareness among the Hui and other minority nationalities started to be perceived by the contemporary regime as an element that could potentially endanger China's political and perhaps also geographic integrity. The government thus re-evaluated its support for multiculturalism and reverted to consolidating social control. Even though there was no ethnically or religiously motivated unrest in Ningxia, as a measure of prevention and in line with the new policy directive of the sinicization of Islam, the government of the autonomous region stopped promoting actions that could be perceived as encouraging the spread of Muslim influence through the "three -izations" (*sanhua*)—Arabization (*Ahua, Alabohua*), Saudization (*Shatehua, Shahua*), and halalization (*fanqingzhenhua*, *qingzhenfanhua*; see also Hacer Gonul and Julius Rogenhofer's chapter). The systematic elimination of anything that could be interpreted as a foreign element of Islam severely impacted not only the Hui cultural environment but also the entire economic development plan for Ningxia based on its Arab image and the international promotion of its Muslim community. The new policy directive, which is promoted as enhancing Chinese cultural unity, only permits cultural expressions that unmistakably represent Ningxia's relationship to Chinese culture, social organization, and history.

The new policy can be seen in the ban on Arabic script, which led to the removal of Arabic signs from public spaces, *qingzhen* or *halal* signs from restaurants, and Arabic descriptions on products (see also Bhatt 2023). Arab-style ornaments were removed from the facades of mosques and houses, the construction of new mosques was banned and standing Arab-style mosques were to be demolished or rebuilt in a "Chinese way" (RFA 2018).

In Yinchuan city, starting from 2017, the monuments celebrating Chinese-Arab friendship were removed or rebuilt. The brand new public promenade

China-Arab Axis (*Zhong A zhizhou*) was renamed Unity Lane (*tuanjielu*) and redecorated with red Chinese ornaments reminiscent of Chinese carvings and lanterns. Minor changes were made to the neighboring Ningxia International Hall, where the China-Arab Expo takes place, which was originally designed to resemble a Hui woman's head covering. Another marker of the city center, the China-Arab theatre, was renamed Ningxia People's Theatre.

The planned World Muslim City on the outskirts of Yinchuan is now simply called the International Trade City (*guoji shimaocheng*). The plans to focus on Islamic culture drawn up during city planning (Ptáčková 2020) and construction were abolished and the site became just another anonymous development area.

The Park of China's Hui Homeland Culture (*Zhonghua Huixiang wenhuayuan*), a former center to promote the Hui Muslim cultural image of Ningxia in Yinchuan, was never overcrowded with visitors. In 2019, however, it became a ghost park. The artists employed there to perform "Hui" dances to the visitors had already been fired in 2017. In May 2019, the Golden mosque that was conceived not as a religious building but as a museum was awaiting a reconstruction to appear more "Chinese."[6] The Silk Road Museum, which had previously focused on providing evidence of historical interconnections between Chinese Muslims and the Muslims of the Middle East and Central Asia, complied with the new policy directives by removing all the exhibition panels that had previously elaborated on the transnational affiliation of the Muslims of China. Only panels describing the Hui in China were left, and among them empty spaces and traces of glue on the museum walls were the only reminders of the rest of the exhibition (see also Malzer 2020). The change in policy is even noticeable before entering the cultural park. From its original name, Park of China's Hui Homeland Culture, which was depicted in golden characters on the impressive entrance redolent of the Taj Mahal, the word *Zhonghua* (China's) has been removed and only Park of Hui Homeland Culture (*Huixiang wenhuayuan*) remains. This might only be a matter of coincidence, or it might be a demonstration of the restrictions on the use of the term *Zhonghua* in certain religious or social contexts (see Central government of the PRC 2019). Moreover, it might be intended to underline the proposed aim of the central government that the contemporary society of the PRC cannot be divided into China's Hui, China's Tibetans, or China's Han, but is instead one homogenous society consisting of all China's nationalities, the Chinese nation. However, as we

6 Interview with a park keeper and former dancer in the Hui cultural park, Yinchuan, May 2019.

can still find the term *Zhonghua* in connection with a certain "*minzu*" (as in Jan Karlach's chapter[7]), the problem might actually be the term *xiang* ("homeland"), since evoking the designation of Ningxia as the "homeland" of the Hui might actually grant them the common territory they lack (for example, in contrast to the Uyghurs or the Tibetans). Within the *Zhonghua* concept, everyone shares one homeland and that is China.

Through the same solution of removing the term *Huizu* from the exhibition boards of the Ningxia handicrafts center, the traditional handicrafts earlier praised as a specific feature of the Hui community suddenly became a part of the common Chinese cultural heritage (*Zhonghua wenhua*) in Ningxia.

Although the Ningxia government did its best to comply with the new policy of sinicization of culture and religion, during his visit to Ningxia in June 2020, President Xi Jinping urged the local administration to be more thorough in implementing religious reform (Ma 2020). As a result of his visit, from the second half of 2020 more mosques lost their minarets and domes and were rebuilt to comply with the "Chinese style," meaning that all Islamic ornaments and instances of Arabic script were removed.

The negative impact of the systematic de-Islamization policies promoted through the Five-Year Planning Outline for Persisting in the Sinicization of Islam in China on local development can be seen, for example, in the reduction of targeted tourism from Arab countries. Plans for the expansion of *halal* food production were canceled and caused a large loss to Ningxia's economy (Zhongguo Yisilanjiao xiehui 2019; see also Erie 2014, 95). Although my informants said the central government had partially made up for the resulting local GDP deficit, the change in policy meant it was necessary to start yet again to create a new model for Ningxia's sustainable economic development. Instead of promoting Hui Muslims and their culture, the "Beautiful New Ningxia" policy emphasizes the rather neutral topic of environmentally sustainable solutions, environmental protection and tourism focusing on natural sites (Wang 2018; *CCP News* 2021; *Ningxia xinwenwang* 2020).

The importation of the "Xinjiang Model" to Ningxia is evident in far more areas than religious-cultural restructuring. It is also apparent in a new level of technological surveillance, demonstrated through full face recognition at Yinchuan airport, which Beijing could only have dreamed of in 2019 (see also Zizhiqu gonganding 2020 nian du fazhi zhengfu jianshe gongzuo

7 At least in regard to certain events and groups, such as the Yi, the connection of *Zhonghua Yizu* (*Zhonghua Yizu jizujie*) still seems to be in use in 2023 (http://www.dlweishan.gov.cn/wsrmzf/c102087/202302/0fd2a894707644cdb27f1377a5d849bf.shtml).

qingkuang baogao). The widespread installation of facial recognition and other mechanisms of daily surveillance in other parts of China, including Beijing, was only possible as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which was used to justify many centralized control measures.

Muslims with Chinese Characteristics

The multifaceted and "simultaneous" (Bhatt 2023; 12) identity of the Hui has enabled them to adapt to new geographical, ethno-cultural and political environments, and they have been able to prosper in China under its various regimes. Their flexibility in this regard made them perfect candidates to assist with economically driven state policies targeting prosperous Muslim countries in Asia and the Middle East. Their ability to absorb external cultural influences has also allowed the government to shape Hui Muslim "identity markers" according to its needs. This is exemplified by the deliberate Arabization of the Hui identity in Ningxia during China's campaign to attract Arab investors (see Ptáčková 2020)—a development that might have strengthened or awakened a sense of common belonging to the global Muslim community among some members of the Hui community, while it would have left others almost untouched, as they no longer considered the Arab-Islamic cultural heritage their own. Many Hui did not understand the Arabic language that was displayed on public signs as the language of their daily practice; neither did they identify with the rather Central Asian clothing promoted by the state at the Hui cultural parks and museums.

By contrast, the Hui community was deeply impacted by the sinicization policy, which touched the core of a Hui Muslim ethno-religious identity built around the mosques as social spaces and places of faith, and which is systematically destroying an entire socio-cultural structure built around Islam and the *qingzhen* way of life. It could be argued that an elimination of religion-based behavior patterns that demarcated the Hui from non-Muslim Chinese society might increase their assimilation. On the other hand, depriving them of their sociocultural self-confidence, i.e., their cultural security, could reduce their willingness to adapt to the sociocultural landscape they share with other ethnic groups that still maintain the markers of their cultural identity. Moreover, the policy reversal might not prevent discontented Hui from venting their grievances against the CCP's authoritarian rule, but rather encourage them.

The "Chinese culture" Xi Jinping (2017) is calling for, which is intended to become the basis for China's future development, should not be understood in the context of art or as a specific historical heritage that developed within

an ethnic group and became its identity marker (see also Mohammed Alsudairi's chapter). Neither is there something that can be called "Chinese religion" (Vermander 2019). In the CCP's discourse, the term "culture" can be read as "socialism with Chinese characteristics"—as blind obedience to the CCP, which in China "permeates every aspect of the state and its functions" (Narayanan 2011). This "socialist culture with Chinese characteristics" is now supposed to replace all structures hidden in local ethno-religious contexts that could challenge the superiority of the CCP. The potential of religion to challenge and even undermine the hegemony of socialist thought in the country has been clear since the introduction of socialism as a social and political system. But only recently has the Chinese party-state felt strong enough, through its level of infrastructural development and technological advancement, to directly confront religious institutions and people's faith. China's leadership now feels it has the means to enforce society's break with religion. In this manner, the policy to sinicize religion aims to deprive all religious institutions of their autonomy and prevent them from acting as parallel sources of authority to the CCP and Xi Jinping as the ultimate ruler of China. The "Chinese religion" is merely a transmitter of the CCP ideology to the believer community.

As the Chinese party-state does not allow for cultural autonomy within the Chinese culture for the New Era, there is not enough space for Muslims within Islam with Chinese characteristics. Moreover, we see the realization of James Leibold's (2016, 15) prediction that China's policies to limit the expressions of cultural identity of its various ethnic communities will not help the assimilation process but "deepen the divide between the Han majority and China's 120 million ethnic minorities."

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