

Hui as Religious over Ethnic Identity: A Case Study of Muslim Ethnic Interaction in Central Northwest China

Authors : Hugh Battye

Abstract : In recent years, Muslim identity in China has strengthened against the backdrop of a worldwide Islamic revival. One discussion arising from this has been focused around the Hui, an ethnicity created by the Communist government in the 1950s covering the Chinese speaking 'Sino-Muslims' as opposed to those with their own language. While the term Hui in Chinese has traditionally meant 'Muslim', the strengthening of Hui identity in recent decades has led to a debate among scholars as to whether this identity is primarily ethnically or religiously driven. This article looks at the case of a mixed ethnic community in rural Gansu Province, Central Northwest China, which not only contains the official Hui ethnicity but also members of the smaller Muslim Salar and Bonan minority groups. In analyzing the close interaction between these groups, the paper will argue that, despite government attempts to promote the Hui as an ethnicity within its modern ethnic paradigm, in rural Gansu and the general region, Hui is still essentially seen as a religious identity. Having provided an overview of the historical evolution of the Hui ethnonym in China and presented the views of some of the important scholars involved in the discussion, the paper will then offer its findings based on participant observation and survey work in Gansu. The results will show that, firstly, for the local Muslims, religious identity clearly dominates ethnic identity. On the ground, the term Hui continues to be used as a catch-all term for Muslims, whether they belong to the official 'Hui' nationality or not, and against this backdrop, the ethnic importance of being 'Hui', 'Bonan' or 'Salar' within the Muslim community itself is by contrast minimal. Secondly, however, this local Muslim solidarity is not at present pointing towards some kind of national pan-ethnic Islamic movement that could potentially set itself up in opposition to the Chinese government; rather it is better seen as part of an ongoing negotiation by local Muslims with the state in the context of its ascribed ethnic categories. The findings of this study in a region where many of the Muslims are more conservative in their beliefs is not necessarily replicated in other contexts, such as in urban areas and in eastern and southern China, and hence reification of the term Hui as one idea extending all across China should be avoided, whether in terms of a united religious 'ummah' or of a real or imagined 'ethnic group.' Rather, this localized case study seeks to demonstrate ways in which Muslims of rural Central Northwest China are 'being Hui,' as a contribution to the broader discussion on what it means to be Muslim and Chinese in the reform era.

Keywords : China, ethnicity, Hui, identity, Muslims

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