

TRACING MUSLIM ROOTS

A Brief History of the Hui

By Sandra Aili Green

In November of 2004 an account of ethnic fighting in rural Henan, China, appeared in newspapers in the United States. Seven people were reported killed and dozens injured after a traffic accident involving a Han Chinese driver and a Hui Chinese driver erupted into violence. The inference that ethnic tensions are ongoing between Han and the Hui, however, is inflated. Muslims have resided in China for over 1,300 years. Some twenty million Muslims live in China, and nearly half of them are Hui, Chinese-speaking Muslims who live throughout China. China's Muslim Belt, where large percentages of the population are Hui, extends across Qinghai, Ningxia, Gansu, and into Shaanxi. Sizable Hui communities are found in Xinjiang, Yunnan, Henan, Hebei, and Shandong. All major cities have Muslim districts and mosques.

The news report stated that Hui are Chinese who converted to Islam generations ago, but this, too, is inaccurate. Although Muhammed (570?–632 CE) did tell his followers to carry the message of Islam to China, the first Muslims in China were not missionaries. They were merchants and soldiers. They were allowed to practice their faith freely and there is no notable history of Muslims proselytizing. Historically the term Hui meant Muslim and was applied to all Muslims in China. Today Hui refers only to those Han Chinese who are distinguished from other Han due to an ethno-religious heritage that links them to Muslims who settled in China centuries ago. Although their foreign ancestry is no longer physically apparent, many Hui trace their roots centuries back to Middle Eastern and Inner Asian forefathers.

Intermarriage with Han Chinese reduced distinctive, non-Chinese physical traits. Hui appearance today is more like that of their Han neighbors. The Hui, like the Han, speak the Chinese dialects of their respective regions. Among themselves, however, some Hui still speak a patois that is a mixture of Persian, Arabic, and Chinese. In addition to their Chinese names, Hui, like Muslims worldwide, also take Arabic names. A distinctive Hui identity is not a newly-perceived phenomenon. To be Hui is to be imbued with a sense of a unique cultural heritage, one that does not simply mean to embrace Islam.

The official court history of the Tang dynasty (620–906 CE) gives an account of a Muslim mission sent to the court in 651 CE by 'Uthman, the third caliph. The emperor deemed Islam to be compatible with the teachings of Confucius. He gave the delegation members permission to practice their faith and ordered the construction of a mosque. Many Hui mark the date as the introduction of Islam into China. A stele in Xi'an dating from 742 CE describes the building of the first mosque. Many Hui believe the ambassador of the mission was an uncle of Muhammed's, and that he was buried at a mosque in Guangzhou.

Persians and Arabs had long been trading along the coast of China, and once they embraced Islam they carried it eastward with them. In the cosmopolitan climate of Tang China, commerce flour-

ished and foreign merchants prospered. Middle Eastern Muslims gained prominent positions in the import-export business that thrived in coastal ports. Foreign merchants were allowed to reside in enclaves where they were granted autonomy. They policed themselves, and Muslims were able to abide by Islamic codes. They were allowed to build mosques and to marry local women. As a result, a subculture emerged, and today many Hui trace their roots to these distant traders.

During the seventh century the fledgling Islamic empire overran the crumbling Byzantine and Persian empires. Islamic forces made up of Arabs and Turks followed the caravan routes further into Inner Asia, reaching Tang China's sphere of influence along the ancient network. In 713 CE the Muslim army encountered Tang forces at the Talas River, which flows between present-day Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The Chinese suffered defeat when Turkish troops under their command defected. One tale suggests that the Chinese ward off invasion by sending princes and gifts and a wagon loaded with dirt from China's heartland to the victors. The Muslim general Qutaiba was supposedly satisfied to dance on the soil while the Chinese bowed to him. If the Islamic army had continued into China, it is unlikely it would have conquered the powerful Tang. Instead the death of Caliph Waqlid I required the general to withdraw to Baghdad, and the battle proved to be of no great military consequence. Nevertheless, the encounter had far-reaching repercussions. Tang expansion was curbed, and Islam continued to spread into the region. The Muslims did not return empty-handed. Moreover, among the prisoners taken were skilled Chinese artisans who knew how to make paper and had knowledge of printing, which would transform the Islamic world (and Europe in turn) in the centuries that followed.

Although no Muslim armies invaded China, it doesn't mean war played no part in the advent of Islam into China. Muslim soldiers entered China as friend, not foe. In 755 CE the Emperor Su Zong appealed to the Caliph Abu Ja'ar to help suppress the An Lushan Uprising. The caliph sent some 4,000 troops to reinforce the Tang army. Barracks and mosques were built for the Muslim troops, and they stayed on in China. Inner Asian Muslims also helped the Tang in clashes against Tibetans in the Southwest. The soldiers, like Muslims residing in coastal cities, were allowed to marry local women. Today Hui in northwestern and southwestern regions regard the Muslim soldiers as their ancestors.

Over the centuries, Muslims continued to be prominent in the military. At the same time, Muslims who migrated inland from coastal ports continued to be prominent in commerce. The Islamic prohibition against eating pork took on enormous significance in China where the major source of animal protein is pork. Adherence to Islamic dietary laws may well be the reason that many turned to farming. Hui established restaurants and inns, that insured *halal* (ritually permissible) conditions for fellow Muslims, and they gained a

reputation for operating clean and dependable establishments. At the same time, Islamic practices such as prayer and ablution were a source of ridicule and scorn. While the Han considered Muslims peculiar, contention between them was seldom serious, and then only in times of strife or political upheaval.

In the thirteenth century, Mongolian horsemen swept across the Islamic world. Great Islamic centers like Baghdad were sacked. In China the Mongols established the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368), where they invited prominent Muslims to their court. Yuan policy was to place non-Chinese in official positions, and newly arrived Muslims enjoyed great prestige. Some were assigned governorships of provinces. Some obtained high ranks in the military, and others gained advantage as tax collectors. Their sway in the Mongol court caused bitter resentment among the Chinese. Yet not all Muslims who arrived in Yuan China were privileged. Many were conquered people from far-reaching lands brought to China by force. The displaced foreigners' only common bond was Islam. They ended up in Muslim districts that centered around their mosques. These mosque communities adapted to China, and, in time, began to function like Chinese clan villages.

Hui numbers grew, but not due to proselytizing. When sons married Han women, the women converted to Islam. Daughters were forbidden to marry non-Muslims. The Hui also adopted orphaned Han children who were raised as Muslims. Han wives brought both Chinese language and customs into Hui homes, and by Ming times (1368–1644) families were wearing Chinese style clothes. Women's veils were no more than a hood that covered the hair but not the face, and customarily men still wore turbans or white skull caps. Muslims adopted Chinese cooking methods and the use of chopsticks; eating pork, however, remained taboo. After generations of intermarriage and interaction with the Han, outwardly the Hui had taken on the trappings of the Han Chinese environment.

Some Hui gained notoriety outside the Muslim community, and Admiral Zheng He is among the most illustrious. Between 1405 and 1433 the Ming court embarked on an age of exploration. Zheng He commanded vast fleets of what the Chinese called treasure ships. He led seven expeditions that sailed to Sumatra and Java, to India and the Arabian peninsula, and reached the east coast of Africa. Numerous ships laden with Chinese silks and porcelains carried thousands of people to distant ports, returning with spices and exotic animals. The scale of the enormous treasure ships remained unrivaled until the twentieth century. The Ming, with their technological capabilities coupled with the might of their navy and their vast wealth, easily could have expanded their empire. They would have presented a formidable challenge to the Europeans a century later. But instead of extending influence and power abroad, the great shipyards were closed down and the court turned inward.

In the aftermath of the Mongol reign, Ming China feared overland invasion. The court grew increasingly xenophobic, and finally expelled all foreign missions. Hui communities were still regarded as different, and in some places they were targeted in the purge of foreigners. But the court demanded their protection. Some believe it was because one of the wives of the first Ming emperor was Muslim. Others speculate that Zhenghe's influence at court had helped. In any event, an imperial edict proclaimed that Muslims were loyal subjects and anyone who harmed them or their mosques would be punished. The Hui were no longer defined as foreign guests and

were granted official citizenship of the empire. Like all citizens, the Hui would have no more contact with the greater Muslim world for hundreds of years.

In the mid-seventeenth century, Ming defenses failed to withstand invasion. The Manchus advanced into China and installed their own dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911). The Manchus extended the borders of the empire, and within a century the Qing decreed suzerainty over Tibet, Mongolia, and Xinjiang. The Manchu not only placed Manchus in powerful positions, they also continued to employ Chinese officials, unlike the Mongols. Non-Han Chinese, on the other hand, were suspect and suffered harsher treatment. Hui scholars wrote copious apologia about Islam's Confucian traits in effort to ward off discrimination.

Across China's Muslim Belt, however, violence became endemic. Some interpretations suggest that the fighting was in response to Qing subjugation and see it as a form of jihad. But in many cases conflicts were due to internal feuding among Hui groups, sometimes over local power control and sometimes over religious issues. Attempts to quell the discord only drew the government into the conflict. The first major uprisings occurred toward the end of the eighteenth century, but the worst bloodshed took place in the second half of the nineteenth century, centering in two regions. In the Southwest, the Great Panthay rebellion from 1855 to 1873 almost depopulated Yunnan. In the Northwest, from 1861 to 1877, what are called the Muslim Rebellions devastated Shaanxi, Gansu, Xinjiang, and parts of Mongolia. Millions are believed to have died.

The twentieth century saw the demise of imperial rule. In its place the fledgling Republic of China envisioned a new, modern Chinese nation state. Hui scholars enjoyed spirited examination of their history and identity, as well as Islam. Hui had contact with the greater Muslim world for the first time in generations. Hundreds went on *hajj* (the pilgrimage to Mecca) and traveled to the Middle East. With the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, Hui ethnicity was endorsed. Hui throughout China share a special understanding of what it is to be Hui. At the same time, the Hui and their Han neighbors share a common sense of being Chinese, and they seldom make the papers overseas. ■

SOURCES

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