

**THE LOCATION OF MEMORY: DIACHRONIC AND SYNCHRONIC ALIBISM AND  
HUI IDENTITY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Among China's various Muslim groups, the Hui stand out on the basis of their ethnicity, history and location, and are considered unlike the Turkic groups in Western territories. The Hui are not confined to a definite region but are present throughout China, and exist in continuous juxtaposition with other groups. For this reason, they determine their identity by simultaneous associations to an exogenous tradition that differentiates them from other Chinese groups, and to endogenous elements that situate them as inherently Chinese.

This position of the Hui at the intersection of two presumably mutually-exclusive cultural spheres, namely Muslim and Chinese, results in mode of identity-formation, which I call Alibism, and in which identity is founded on the basis of perpetual deferment to an alternative location.

**KEYWORDS**

Hui, Islam in China, Identity formation, Alibism

Among China's various Muslim groups, the Hui stand out on the basis of their ethnicity, history and location, and are considered unlike the Turkic groups in Western territories who are frequently accused of terrorism and connected to separatist movements by the Chinese government. The Hui are not confined to a definite region but are present throughout China, and exist in continuous juxtaposition with other groups. For this reason, they determine their identity by simultaneous associations to an exogenous tradition that differentiates them from other Chinese groups, and to endogenous elements that situate them as inherently Chinese.

Yet, although Hui identity is intimately tied to its Chinese context, it is simultaneously connected to a broader Islam in the way it is expressed. As Jonathan Lipman points out in his statement before the Congressional-Executive Commission on China on May 17, 2004:

However much they might identify with Muslims elsewhere, even unto donning Arab clothing and headgear for photo opportunities, Hui are not members of Malay, Turkish, Persian, or Arab, or any other obviously Muslim culture in which Islam is a natural component of identity. On the contrary, they must distinguish themselves constantly from the overwhelming majority of Chinese speakers who are not Muslims, while still remaining part of the only culture in which their identify [sic] makes sense, namely China.

According to Lipman, the Hui are socially imbedded in their social environments, where at the same time they nurture distinctive characteristics vis-à-vis local non-Muslim communities. Their complex epistemological categorization as neither just Chinese nor just Muslim but both concurrently, allows the Hui to escape an 'either-or' paradigm and be uniformly Chinese *and* Muslim by definition. An analysis of a way in which Hui identity is formed in these circumstances can not only further our insights into Islam in China, both in the case of the Hui specifically as well as in that of the religion in Chinese society in general, but it can also help increase our understanding of the modes of identification of Islamic minorities in non-Islamic surroundings from a broader perspective.

The position of the Hui distinctively at the intersection of two presumably mutually-exclusive cultural spheres is particularly interesting in that it interfuses two methods of classification that merge into one mode of identification that I shall call Alibism. The term Alibism, in my usage, refers to the Latin etymology of the word *alibi*, meaning elsewhere, and signifies an epistemological device whereby some significant element from another location is systematically restored palpably into the perception of an identity in its present location. The structural scope of Alibism in terms of self-identification is twofold: While it is always topographical in that identity is invariably linked to a tangible place, it can either be diachronic by referring to an alter-locus in the past, or synchronic and concerned with geography only. Diachronic Alibism is characteristically atavistic in that it always involves a link between location and ancestry, while synchronic Alibism entails a link between location and identity on the basis of other things, such as but not limited to, race, language or religion. In both instances, the significance of identity is deferred to an alternative location. In any case, Alibism is concerned with completing rather than resolving debates around the extent of

the influence of the present location on identity and the presence of such an influence in the first place, or in the case of the Hui, whether in their broad diversity they are Chinese Muslims, Muslim Chinese or Chinese and Muslim.

Whereas Alibism designates mechanisms whereby the Hui also create ties to a broader global community of Islam, it is however unrelated to any potentially problematic limitation of Hui identity to religious practice. Indeed, from a Chinese perspective, being Muslim is not simply a matter of religion (*zongjiao*) only, but can be one of State-categorized ethnicity (*minzu*) as well. Lesley Turnbull, for example, has shown in her 2014 article “In Pursuit of Islamic ‘Authenticity:’ Localizing Muslim Identity on China’s Peripheries,” that while the Hui in the Yunnan province considered themselves authentically Muslims, some did so on the mere basis of their being Hui (without necessarily practicing the religion actively), while others considered their *minzu* to be incidental, and that only their practice of religion made them Muslim.

Significantly, Michael Black’s article “A Genome-Based Study of the Muslim Hui Community and the Han Population of Liaoning Province, PR China,” compares the origins of the Hui and Han residents of the Liaoning province on the basis of DNA samples to examine their presumed separate genetic histories. While Black does conclude that the biological data does not support the political categorization of the Han and Hui populations in Liaoning, thereby challenging the PRC’s teleological discourses in terms of standards of Chinese culture, his essentialist project may seem preposterous from the perspectives of disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences, because it conveys outrageously racist connotations on various levels. Nevertheless, the very premise of Black’s study, and especially its axiomatic foundation that Hui populations are the result of miscegenation between Han women and merchants of Arab, Persian or Central-Asian origin, is interesting beyond the particulars of a given province. It is symptomatic of a diachronic Alibism that categorizes the Hui in terms of a pedigree traceable to an alter-locus outside of China’s political borders.

The same Alibism is also present among the Hui themselves. One adequate example lies in the significant role of tombs in the Hui’s recognition of their own identity. Dru Gladney points out to the fact that many Hui claim the tombs of foreign ancestors—namely Arab and Persian—to establish their lineage:

Tombs vividly encapsulate Hui ancestral tradition and ethnic identity. As charters for identity, they provide a sense of continuity

with the past and assist adaptation to the changing social present. (1987, p.497)

Gladney insists on the Chinese government's Historic Artifacts Bureau's preservation of Hui tombs as historic monuments in Southern China. To him:

Of central importance is the acknowledgment by the Chinese government of the contribution Muslims made to Chinese history. Many Hui look to these historic figures as foreign Muslim ancestors who provide proof of distinguished descent and who link them with a larger Muslim world. (1987, p.497)

Here, the identification of the Hui self is accomplished historically in terms of ancestry and lineage by means of a connection to a foreign ancestor. It is Alibistic in that the ancestor in question is a foreigner coming from the west, and that the recognition is not dissociated from spatiality, but explicitly related to the region where the tomb is located. As Elisabeth Allès points out:

We know all the importance of the *gongbei* [Chinese transcription] Sufi tombs in the Northwest, or of simpler graves elsewhere, for the recognizance of Hui identity. Their mention is an affirmation of the original link with Islam, and, therefore, of the place of the Hui in the *'Umma*. Every grave, every tombstone of somebody from Arabia, Persia, or Central Asia is immediately considered that of an "authentic" Muslim, and highlighted as such; as if the effectiveness of the non-Chinese sounding name extended *to the entire Hui community of the location in question*, thereby demonstrating its attachment to Islam. [My translation, emphasis added. See appendix A.]

Concerning this relation between tombs and geography, Maris Boyd Gillette notes the importance of the Hongqing graveyard for the Xi'an Hui. Hongqing is located—according to Gillette—about an hour outside of Xi'an, and became the Hui cemetery when in the early 1970's the graveyards located in the Xi'an Muslim district became unusable. As she comments on their attachment to their quarter, Gillette remarks that the Hui started indicating their address in Xi'an on their tombstones in order to emphasize their tie to the place:

The street addresses that Hui carved on their tombstones located them socially and geographically. The emergence of this practice was no doubt linked to the government's removal of the Hui cemetery to a location far outside the city amid Han farmers: Hui began writing the addresses of the dead on the back of their tombstones to link them to their homes and their proper contexts. The act of making public the deceased's address suggests that residents believed that a person's identity was related not only to who their kin were, but also to where he or she was from. The inscriptions demonstrate their attachment to the quarter, their home. (52)

Along the same lines, Gladney describes two tombs belonging to a Bukharan and an Afghan scholar who both died in the late thirteenth century. These tombs are located in the corner of a mosque on *Niujie* Street in Beijing, and represent the Alibism of the local Hui:

I never saw anyone praying in front of the graves, nor was there incense lit for them, but, on several occasions after prayer, an elderly Hui would take me back to the graves and repeat the legend about these two saints and the arrival of Islam in Beijing. (1996, p.183)

Furthermore, Gladney maintains that historic Hui tombs generally play an important role in the government's international relations because they attract Muslim governments' interest and investments, and are the object of tourism and pilgrimage. Thus, there is a clear link to the larger Muslim 'Umma, and an emphasis is put on an embedment within the religious community rather than the local or national ones.

However, the diachronic nature of this link implies the relevance of religion in the past, but not necessarily in the present. A noteworthy example is that of Sufis who relate to the tombs of deceased saints while simultaneously breaking from orthodox Islam. More significantly, Gladney reports that typical Hui responses to questions pertaining to ancestry in Quanzhou, Fujian indicate that the Hui understand themselves as such because of their genealogy; but more importantly, he notes that this is valid for Hui families who are not Muslims but practice traditional ancestral worship. "Although cognizant of their Islamic

heritage,” Gladney writes, “these Hui have not practiced Islam or attended a mosque for generations” (1987, p.497). He also reports a conversation he had with a Hui doctor in Shanghai who enforced the avoidance of pork consumption not for religious reasons but solely out of a “habit,” that is a customary practice that lost its original religious grounds, and only sustained (or perhaps validated) in the present by health reasons. This doctor told Gladney that her feeling of being Chinese is not questioned by her knowledge that her earliest ancestors were Muslims from Henan, and that she would transmit this knowledge to her children as it was transmitted to her by her parents ( 1996, p.183).

Accordingly, it appears that the link to one’s ancestry is not founded solely on Islam. Rather, it reaches beyond the strictly religious aspect of identity. This diachronic Alibism that classifies the Hui in terms of a lineage traceable to Islamic origins without the necessary continuation of religious practice is present in the way in which the Hui view themselves, as well as the way they are viewed, and results in the odd classification of people whose lifestyles bizarrely contradict Islamic teachings as Hui.

In this process, tombs function as anamnestic supports for a diachronic Alibism, by literally grounding memory in a particular location. They symbolize the reminiscence of a given other place, and equally serve as reminders of a bond to this other place’s distinct traditions. Conversely, synchronic Alibism in Hui identity can be exemplified by recent architectural trends concerning mosques.

The centrality of the mosque to the communal life of Muslims is not peculiar to the Hui, but has nonetheless been the subject of significant scholarship. Elisabeth Allès in particular has recorded their importance in terms of identity characterization; in fact, her book starts with the transcription of a fragment of conversation that indicates a westerner visitor’s surprise at the presence of Muslims in China outside of Xinjiang. What causes this Westerner to come to this realization is that a “*bâtiment à l’allure de pagode*” [pagoda looking building] in *Niujie* Street in Beijing is in fact a mosque. For Allès, that the tourist can be surprised by the traditional Chinese architecture of mosques (typically shaped as pagodas) in China in general and Henan in particular, incidentally serves as a reminder that Islam is not a religion exclusive to the Arab or Persian worlds but an integral part of Asia as well. Allès identifies a trend in mosques built since the 1980’s, with the support of the Chinese government through the “*Association islamique de Chine*,” and thanks to the financial contributions of many Muslim countries such as Saudi Arabia:

The Hui themselves have decided that these new buildings should reflect their foreign origins (Arab, Persian, and central-Asian), and their belonging to the Muslim World whose architectural representation was through the image that the Hui have of “Muslim architecture,” and which we call “international Islamic.” [My translation. See appendix B.]

Although the adherence to an “*islamique internationale*” [international Islamic] architectural style can be perceived as a diachronic form of Alibism insofar as it reflects the Hui’s foreign origins, they are in fact synchronic, or they would attempt at recreating the architectural style of their foreign ancestor’s historical context; that is to say the time when these ancestors arrived in China. This new cosmopolitan architectural style is not atavistic and does not work in the same anamnestic manner as the tombs, which are relics of the past; instead, it is a visual mnemonic device that triggers in the individual beholder the memory of the Hui connection to another location. It is also worth noting that being of a matter of style, this cosmopolitan or “*islamique internationale*” esthetic is subject to individual taste and does not provoke a unanimous opinion among the Hui. Allès rightfully compares its function to trends in domestic decoration and headgear fashion.

Making similar remarks in Xi’an, Gillette considers the shift in architectural canons indicative of what she calls “Arabization,” namely a development that she characterizes as “a return rather than a movement forward, the re-creation of an ‘authentic’ Islam” (76). As Gillette puts it:

[ . . . ] although proponents of Arabization used the language of authenticity and the “original” Islam to legitimate the changes that they proposed, Arabization also incorporated elements of modernization as exemplified by the oil-rich countries of the Middle East. Arabization provided residents with an alternative ideological scale on which to evaluate themselves and a model of development that excluded the CCP government and the Han *minzu*. (76)

Gillette’s “Arabization” is symptomatic of a trend in Islam that is indeed atavistic and diachronic if taken on a global level, but remains synchronic if considered in relation to Hui identity. In that respect, it is noticeably relevant since it indicates a

rhetorical and political Alibism that establishes distinctive Hui standards of judgment, structurally different from the Han's.

On the basis of the various examples hitherto explored, Alibism does not claim to cover the extensive variety that exists among the Hui. Islam, Arabic, the Middle East, the near or distant past, or reference to any other alternative locations is not the absolute system whereby the Hui define themselves, and does not imply that their links to elsewhere renders them insular or hermetic to non-Islamic Chinese elements. While some believe that being Hui is irreconcilable with 'proper' Chinese culture, and others think that it is dependent on contact—whether it is acculturation, assimilation, syncretism, or simple coexistence—with it, the Hui (as a large group and specific local communities) are not definable by only one distinctive feature. By recognizing Alibism as a system of identification, I merely attempted to chart one process whereby the Hui situate themselves locally and globally. At the intersection of two presumably mutually-exclusive identities, a singular identity in one place is constructed through perpetual deferment to an alternative location. However, the Hui's rootedness in Chinese society challenges this presumed mutual-exclusivity, and as deferment to an 'elsewhere' necessary implies the significant existence of a 'here,' Islam is decidedly in China as surely as it is elsewhere, and, accordingly, China is in the Islamic world.

## APPENDIX: TRANSLATED QUOTATIONS IN THEIR ORIGINAL LANGUAGE

- A. On sait toute l'importance que revêtent les *gongbei* [chinese transcription] (tombeaux) soufis dans le Nord-ouest, ou de plus simples sépultures ailleurs, pour la reconnaissance de l'identité Hui. Leur mention constitue une affirmation du lien originel avec l'islam et donc de la place des Hui dans la 'Umma. Toute tombe, toute stèle de personnage venu d'Arabie, de Perse ou d'Asie centrale est immédiatement considérée comme celle d'un musulman « authentique » et mise en valeur en tant que telle ; comme si l'efficace du nom aux sonorités non chinoises s'étendait à *toute la communauté Hui du lieu considéré*, démontrant ainsi son rattachement à l'islam. [emphasis added] (Allès 57)
- B. Les Hui eux-mêmes ont décidé que ces nouvelles constructions devaient refléter leurs origines étrangères (monde arabe, persan et centrasiatique) et leur appartenance au monde musulman, dont la représentation architecturale passait par l'image que les Hui se font de « l'architecture musulmane », que nous appellerons « islamique internationale ». (Allès 110)

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