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*MUSLIM CHINESE*  
*Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic*

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*Dru C. Gladney*

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## *Preface*

The melting pot has erupted into a "cauldron" of ethnicities.<sup>1</sup> In China, the Soviet Union, and around the globe, ethnic and national movements have risen to the forefront of social and political action. Though both modernization and Marxist theories of nationalism have predicted the demise of national identities, the recent assertion of these identities in the political arena has cast doubt on, if not repudiated, these assimilationist assumptions. Russification, though accepted by many as an inexorable inevitability, has not occurred among the many strident nationalities of the Soviet Union. Sinicization, predicted as well for the minorities of China, is called into question in the face of rising nationalism and the persistence of ethnic identities.

While much has been written about the resurgence of national, often Muslim, ethnic movements in the Soviet Union, there has been little discussion of similar processes in China. This book will examine some of the reasons why. The minorities, and Muslims, of China have generally been marginalized on the geographic and social horizons of discourse and power in China, often confined to remote, officially closed communities difficult to research and often reluctant to admit outsiders. This study, based on field research in concentrated Muslim communities in China, represents an attempt to understand the identity of one of the Muslim minorities of China, as well as to reintroduce the problem of ethnic nationalism to the study and understanding of Chinese society and national identity.

Nearly 20 million of the peoples in the People's Republic are Muslim. Though they are a small percentage of China's entire population,



the reassertion of their identity on a national and transnational level calls into question many assumptions about the nature of Chinese society, ethnicity, and national identity. Relegated to the borders of territory and power in China, and to the periphery of scholarly interest, they are beginning to challenge this marginalization, forcing a reconsideration of the traditional categorization by which Chinese society is divided and analyzed. This is why, in the words of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, the "Others" who were "*socially* peripheral have become so *symbolically* central."<sup>2</sup> The internal Others of China are now beginning to challenge the conceptualization of the Chinese "Self."

The "Salman Rushdie in China" protest, a nationwide demonstration of Muslims that took place at the peak of the 1989 "Democracy Movement" in Beijing (pictured on the cover of this book and discussed in Chapter 1), illustrates many of the issues with which this study is concerned: the nationalization and transnationalization of Muslim identity in China, the challenge posed to the state by minority voices, and the rise in ethnic nationalism. Both of these last terms are key: *ethnicity*, in that the Muslims who took part in the protest see themselves as vibrant ethnic groups with a self-assurance and an identity that is very much their own; and *nationalism*, in that they are expressing their identities as nationalities, recognized by the state as belonging to the 55 official minority nationalities who have been given a voice and a right, guaranteed by the constitution, to speak out on their own affairs—a voice they are now using with considerable effect.

This book concerns itself primarily with one of the 10 Muslim nationalities in China, the Hui minority, who make up over half of all Muslims in China and live in every province and city across the nation. A vital part of the Chinese social landscape, they have rarely been studied by Westerners. The last book in English to be written about these Muslims that was based on field research in China was published in 1910, by the Protestant missionary Marshall Broomhall, entitled, *Islam in China: A Neglected Problem*. Despite Broomhall's monumental effort to highlight the importance of Muslims to Chinese society, they have remained a neglected and problematic minority.

The reasons behind this continued neglect are explored in the first two chapters, and the problem of Hui Muslim identity is a central con-



cern throughout the work. My thesis is that Hui Muslim identity in China has been inadequately understood in the past due to Western ethnicity theories that failed to take into account both cultural and political aspects of that identity, their dynamic dialectical interaction at local levels, and, most important, the role of the state in defining and, to some extent, objectifying that identity. Official Chinese portrayals of the Hui are also limited in understanding this dynamic identity by their overemphasis upon nationality identification programs, relying on, in Partha Chatterjee's terms, the "derivative discourses" of Marxist-Stalinist nationality theory,<sup>3</sup> Lewis Henry Morgan-style stage evolutionism, and traditional Chinese ideas of identity and nationhood, which are very much tied to the idea of country—China as "Zhong Guo," the central state.

This unique combination of nationality discourse and political rhetoric has resulted in a considerable blurring of genres, to use Clifford Geertz's phrase, unfortunately obfuscating much of Hui identity.<sup>4</sup> This confusion has led scholars in the past to take two diametrically opposed views of the Hui Muslims in China, either predicting that, since they are Muslims and similar to their brethren elsewhere, they would inevitably rise in an attempt to violently secede from the Chinese nation-state, or, by contrast, assuming that, if they have not risen up against the state, it is only because they have already, or soon will, become entirely assimilated to the dominant Han Chinese tradition—what in China scholarship is known as "Sinicization." Since the Hui are thought to be culturally "closer" to the Han majority than other minorities in China—they generally speak Chinese, wear Chinese dress, and lack many of the "colorful" cultural markers of identity that other minorities display—many have completely doubted their distinct ethnicity, seeing them as merely Han who may share a vestigial belief in Islam.

These positions are seriously challenged by resurgent Hui Muslim ethnic nationalism (as demonstrated by the "Salman Rushdie in China" case, in which protesters appealed to the Communist Party for protection and assistance), as well as the dramatic rise in those who (for whatever reason) identify themselves, and want to be recognized by the state, as minorities. Some Han now prefer to marry these minorities, giving themselves, or their children, access to the rights and privileges



accorded to minority nationalities in China, even as other Han are becoming increasingly disgruntled by the favoritism shown toward these minorities. These shifts in ethnic sentiments are matched by a growing seriousness with which the state has begun to address the national question in China.

These "social facts" of the modern Chinese world require a radical reassessment of former thinking about the assimilation and marginalization of minorities in China. Based on the case of the Hui, I propose a theory of ethnic national identity in the Chinese nation-state that takes into consideration the dynamic, even dialectical, interaction of culture, socioeconomics, and the state in fashioning the expression and identification of the Hui, and other minorities, in China today. In Benedict Anderson's terms, this study challenges the way Chinese national identity is "imagined" by both Chinese and Western China scholars, as well as exploring how the identity of one people has been shaped at local levels by these social imaginings, the derivative discourses of ethnicity and nationalism in China.<sup>5</sup>

This study of Muslim ethnic nationalism and identity in China is based on a total of 3 years' field research in the People's Republic, primarily among Hui Muslims, from 1982 to 1990. The bulk of the research was carried out during my dissertation fieldwork, from 1983 to 1985, when I spent 22 months in China. In addition, several follow-up trips were taken to Muslim areas every year following the completion of the dissertation research, with the most recent in January 1990. On every trip I was able to meet again with many of my Hui colleagues, informants, and villagers in China and to discuss with them my earlier conclusions. For those who have gone to the trouble to read the original dissertation, this study represents a significant revision, based on follow-up interviews, and provides new information and resolutions. The four case communities remain the same, however, with additional material added. Though many of my original ideas and questions have changed, my basic conclusion has remained the same: The wide diversity of local Hui ethnic identity, and their national unity under the state's minority policy, has led to the emergence of a new ethnoreligious identity in China, an identity that challenges many of the assumptions about ethnicity and national identity in Chinese society.



The 4 ethnographic chapters discuss how Hui ethnic identity is expressed with reference to cultural symbols and national policies at the local level. In the northwestern Sufi village of Na Homestead, located in the Ningxia Hui autonomous region, Islamic belief and ritual embody the most salient expressions of Hui identity. In the capital of Beijing city, the urban Hui of the Niujie "Oxen Street" community express their ethnicity in terms of occupational specializations and dietary restrictions. In the rural village of Changying, a Hui autonomous village on the Hebei North China plain outside of Beijing, Hui identity is often expressed in terms of ethnic marriage endogamy, that has led to the establishment of national networks. Finally, in the Chendai Ding lineage on the southeast coast of Fujian province, genealogical ideas of descent that reflect traditional Chinese constructions of ethnicity become the key marker of identity for these Hui who no longer practice Islam.

These divergent identities reflect a wide variety of Hui Muslims in China: from Sufi fundamentalists to urban workers, from northern wheat farmers to southeastern fishermen, from noodle-makers to Party leaders, from smartly dressed "Western" urbanites to veiled northwestern melon-sellers, from imam to cadre, *hajji* to atheist, these people all call themselves Hui, are identified by the state as such, and strongly resent all attempts to regard them otherwise as an insult to their heritage. That all of these different peoples could see themselves as one ethnic group wreaks havoc on modern ethnicity theory; that they have united together as one nationality with a growing population, connections to the Middle East, and political clout, makes Chinese Communist cadres give serious consideration to many of their demands and requestion Marxist dogma about the fading of national differences in socialist societies. It is in the particularities of their differences, and the shared imaginings of their similarities, that their identity is to be located—not in any reified notion of what a "Hui Muslim" is, or an assumed construction of "Chinese-ness."

As China finds itself once again at the center of a growing Asian sphere of economic and international dominance, situated between the Central Asian plain (commanded by the nation-states of the Muslim Middle East, South Asia, and the Soviet Union), and the vibrant polit-



ical economies of East Asia (led by Japan, Taiwan, and Korea), the Muslims of China may be very well positioned to resume their traditional role as the "middle men" of the Silk Road, somewhere in between East and West, and no longer marginal to our understanding of the complex nature of Chinese society.



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## MUSLIM CHINESE

Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic

Dru C. Gladney

China's ten million Hui are one of the ten Muslim national minorities officially recognized by the Chinese state. Dru Gladney's fieldwork among them, concentrating primarily on four divergent case communities—geographically dispersed, urban and rural, Sufi and secular—has led him to identify distinct patterns of interaction between their resurgent nationalism and state policy.

Through detailed descriptions and copious illustrations, Gladney presents an engaging picture of the Hui and the modern problem of national identity in China. He also presents an extended discussion of long-term fieldwork in the Chinese nation-state, its context and contradictions. Based on in-depth observations of this minority population, he considers the situation of China's minorities generally, their relationship to the Han majority, and the Chinese government's responses to rising nationalism within its multi-ethnic society.





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