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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

The Case of the Disappearing Altar: Mysteries and Consequences of Revitalizing Chinese Muslims in Yunnan

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Abstract

This article takes the example of a disappeared altar in a Himalayan valley as revelatory of contradictions within the mechanics of a Hui Muslim revitalization project. The community example—a group of historically identifiable Muslims in China—centers on the disappearance of a gifted propitiation altar that once stood as an instantiation of community cohesion among ethnically varied populations in the valley. The investigation examines transformations of modernity and the erosion of the “social glue” that held valley communities together as the disappearance of this gift is revealed to be a telling instance of the large-scale productivities and corruptions effected by China’s contemporary renaissance of reemerging religious movements and community identifications, processes in which Chinese Muslims serve as a potential indicator for a long view of reform contemporary social transformation.

Keywords: China, ethnicity, minzu, Muslims, Yunnan, religion, frontier, revitalization

A Naxi¹ altar for animal sacrifices and ritual propitiation once occupied a space just up the mountain from a remote village in the northwest Yunnanese Himalaya that I call Dragon Village. The site is located directly behind a mosque built in 2001, and it is reported by local Naxi, Tibetan, Yi, Han, and Hui people to be sacred to the “spirits” of the mountain. This sacrality extends back to the region’s earliest populations, and local Naxi *dongba* (ritual specialists, literate in a unique pictographic script used to facilitate their rituals) maintain that this specific place was a ritual pilgrimage site before there were ever people living nearby. Even the well-known ethnobotanist who first introduced the Naxi to the West—Dr. Joseph Rock²—was associated with this remote altar location in that he used it as a campsite during his searches for new plant species. The importance placed on this site locally derives partly from its being the source of a freshwater spring crucial to the downslope villages, and also from its semiotic

identification as a location of great significance in the cosmography of the Naxi world. In local origin stories, the spring near the altar on Haba Mountain³ is identified as a Naxi cultural center by virtue of its connection to the natural spring at Baishuitai,⁴ the Black Dragon Pool, and Yulong Mountain.⁵

In the years prior to the altar's disappearance, the ashen remains of burnt incense, leftover sacrificial food items, and bloody chicken feathers gave evidence that area Naxi (and others) regularly used it. The structure itself was of relatively recent construction, consisting of a carved ritual urn for burning incense on a slightly raised platform used for sacrifices. A flat boulder had been employed for this purpose for centuries before a new altar was built, and both this original boulder and the new altar were present during my fieldwork stay. The local craftsman responsible for the new altar, a Hui fellow from Dragon Village who carved it in his free time during the early 1990s, said that he had built the altar out of a desire to do something nice for his Naxi neighbors.⁶ The altar was about thirty meters from the new mosque, for which some of the trees of the old grotto had been removed, and I expressed mild surprise to the craftsman that the two sacred sites were so close together. The existence of a mosque in this instance indicates the presence of a population of Muslim people known as Hui (alternately, huimin, hui minzu, huihui). With a national population of well over twenty million, they constitute the largest of China's ten Muslim groups. Since I had rarely seen other religious sites near mosques in Yunnan, I wondered aloud if this close proximity did not represent a potential crowding or unwelcome overlapping of Hui-Naxi sacred spaces. This quiet fellow pointed out that I was being "strange." He suggested that instead of thinking first about conflict between neighbors, I consider that the Naxi had been using the place "for centuries," and that they were the ones who had originally allowed the Dragon Villagers to settle there. He further told me that, as neighbors, the various ethnic communities of the area had a long tradition of shared use of space—ritual and otherwise. He explained that Dragon Villagers had long exchanged women in marriage with non-Hui villages nearby;⁷ that all the communities traditionally took part in each other's ceremonies, celebrations, and festivals; that the villagers reciprocated freely all invitations and hosting; and that they had even usually cooperated with their non-Hui neighbors in healing rituals. Still, the altar had disappeared by 2011 when I returned to the village. Thus the revelatory mystery I call "The Case of the Disappearing Altar."

Context

The families of Dragon Village make up a Hui community whose historical footprint must be traced back through local and transregional history in order to understand their place in this remote location. Luckily, the village mayor compiled a local history worth consulting in this regard, and a brief excerpt from it can help this analysis⁸:

In the 1920s in the northwest part of China's Yunnan Province, near the foot of Haba Mountain [5300m], a few weary families settled. The fierce high plateau sun beat down on them as their journey came to an end, a journey the footsteps of which led all the way back to the Shaanxi Bai You Fu uprising. After that uprising failed, a group of Muslim combatants was forced to give up their fertile lands and retreat. In 1856,⁹ they reached a Tibetan area near Zhongdian (now Xianggelila), where they used their mining experience and wisdom to establish a silver business called the Bao Xing Silver Factory.

Their bravery and industriousness were rewarded by prosperity and wealth, which eventually caused them to be preyed on by bandits. Under threat, they could only flee with their lives, retreating south again to settle in the small Annan Village among Tibetans. In this even more remote place, legend has it that Allah sent an ingenious guide to help them prosper. A man out hunting killed an eagle and found a large gold nugget inside its stomach. This gift from Allah led them to find a source of gold, on which they built a new gold processing factory. Their once again prosperous population soon grew to several thousand, but with this gift Allah was again testing them. This wealth again enticed bandits and local men of great influence to attack and kill members of the community. Many died in the violence, including their leader, a man known as Yang Keye.¹⁰ The surviving community members fled once more, ending up finally at the present site of Dragon Village.

Thanks to Allah, they survived hardships and the harsh environment. Preparing new fields, renting land from neighbors, and tending animals, they again began to thrive through hard work. Although life was hard, they never gave up their beliefs. They managed to build a simple mosque and live a life of faith, but Allah always tests the faithful. Their grain, animals, and valuables again came to be targets for local bandits, but this great *minzu*¹¹ never succumbed. Their continued struggle only brought out the fierceness within them as they took up weapons to fight and protect their ethnic pride.

In 1949, the Chinese nation [*zhonghua minzu*] ended its semicolonial, semifeudal society and constructed a great socialist country in Asia. All brother nationality groups became joined as hands and feet are to a body, demonstrating an ever-progressing image. Even then the disastrous Cultural Revolution also reached this poor village, and many imams ended their lives during the "Smash the Four Olds" campaign, may Allah grant them the peace of heaven.¹² In this whirlwind of chaos, religious teachings were lost, and by the 1980s only a very basic knowledge of Islam remained. Yet through the eighty years of difficulty and disaster, they never lost their sense of *minzu* pride. Though they strayed from the strict practices of Islam, they still proudly counted themselves as Muslims and

continued to be concerned with the great community of Islam. The Persian Gulf War caused them great concern, and the trials and triumphs of world Islam have always had an impact on this wayward group of Muslims.

Happily, in the last year of the twentieth century they are looking forward to a future of guidance from Allah. With the help of the Shadian¹³ Muslims, they are able to take the road proper Muslims should walk—a path that will lead them to a deeper understanding of the teachings of Allah. It is on this road where they will find a stronger faith in Islam and be able to thrive on Haba Mountain. May Allah grant them lasting peace and prosperity.

As I translated the mayor's account, it occurred to me that I might be able to identify the original conflict in Shaanxi that caused the Dragon Villagers' original exodus. I had never heard of the Bai You Fu uprising, but the fact that it involved Muslims would make it easier to locate if there were any records at all. After noting the Shaanxi origin, the name, and the nature of the story, and with some help from historian Jonathan Lipman, I discovered that the hostilities identified in the narrative as the Bai You Fu conflict turn out to almost certainly refer to a Hui leader named Bai Yanhu¹⁴ He was the head of the losing side of a Hui-Hui conflict in late nineteenth-century Shaanxi that resulted in the defeated population fleeing into what was then imperial Russia. Why some part of that group ended up in Yunnan is unknown, but the Dragon Villagers are in all likelihood descendants of part of this migrant Shaanxi Hui population that fled China after their defeat only to return and hide out in the Himalayas. They eventually intermarried with and often became Tibetan or Naxi, with only a peculiar remembered history of being Hui from Shaanxi. This memory became particularly useful in 1999 when Dragon Village began to seek development funds from other Hui in the region, a strategy the villagers eventually understood to involve a creative effort to differentiate themselves from their neighbors. Remembered local history—never particularly detailed, but rich with potential—was thus recalled, reinstated, and re-energized at the turn of the twenty-first century in a revitalization project displaying both contemporary and historical dynamics.

Given that this remote group of migrants is demonstrated to be a historically identifiable Hui population that left traces of its passage elsewhere,¹⁵ an understanding of this migration, its causes, and its ramifications can also illuminate the arc of China's tumultuous modernity, the dynamics of internal struggle through the republican period, or any number of other, more specific types of transformations among frontier and marginal peoples in China. For the purposes of this article, it is enough to point out that the narrative foregrounds a process of becoming. It is

this focus on the *process* of continual (re)creation of people and their communities (even temporally distant historical ones) in the present course of living that is maintained here as an analytical strategy. Dragon Village's historical origin story is here told for present purposes, and thus renarrated according to the needs of present agents. The parts of it meant to satisfy both Shadian benefactors and the rhetorically socialist cum energetically market capitalist surveillance state are evident, but there are still other parts that inform this analysis.

A notable element in the origin story is the community's productive utilization of mining skills associated with the Shaanxi region.¹⁶ That this valuable technology is lost over time despite the wealth that it brings, resulting in a primarily agricultural community, is a story of transformation from relative pride and sophistication (and error) to relative humility and simplicity (but truth). This explanation is a powerful narrative of revitalization adapted to the brute realities of a radically changing world, where a community reshapes preexisting social ideals and practices in order to better accommodate different social and material parameters. Interestingly, this outlines a civilizing narrative quite apart from what one might expect, with ruralization and simplicity being "achieved" in this particular moral economy after a series of "tests" by Allah. According to one contemplative informant, the trials and tribulations of this small band of frontier Muslims can be seen as a moral tale of incremental education (by Allah) away from the desire for wealth—which is invariably accompanied by problems like bandits and violence—toward the desire for a Muslim lifestyle involving purity of heart and simplicity of life—which brings strength to resist the hardships of the world. Yet this theologically powerful moral tale was a motivating component of only a small percentage of the village population.

Another understanding of the origin narrative's significance diverged only slightly, suggesting again that the migration story was best seen as a lesson in the proper Muslim way of life, but in a different fashion. In this version, the original conflict in Shaanxi is remembered as that of a conflict between neighbors who could not agree on issues of religious practice or interpretation—an accurate suggestion given the Sufi-order (*menhuan*) differences that often engender intra-Muslim violence in Gansu and Shaanxi.¹⁷ The tortuous path of these wayward Shaanxi Hui demonstrates, according to this preferred narrative, how Muslims who fight among themselves, like those of the different *menhuan*, can eventually achieve unity. This ideal of Muslim unity is often expressed by the saying, "All Muslims under heaven are of one family" (*tianxia Huihui shi yijia*), and in this telling of the story all Muslims in China can succeed in this

goal if they persist in the journey, even though it is long, difficult, and without a certain destination.¹⁸ Still, this second moral narrative was also only rarely invoked in Dragon Villagers' attempts to understand their own past or their prospects for the future. Diverging dramatically from these interpretations were others that made up the majority opinion of the village population, and were instead motivated by more practical concerns, like access to material and symbolic resources. To most, the moral valence of the narrative is less important than the fact that it identified a specific kind of people—a kind that dovetailed with reform contemporary understandings of *minzu* as legitimate and socially valuable.¹⁹ In this respect, the narrative served as a politically meaningful and materially practical story of how the villagers were once Hui and how they could best become Hui “again,” in a powerful way that would give them access to development funds, tourist income, and social recognition.²⁰

Mystery and Revitalization

As previously mentioned, the altar had disappeared by 2011. To put it another way, the ethnically crosscutting gift from one neighbor to another had vanished. The exact circumstances of the disappearance remain unclear, yet certain trends that help to explain it could already be seen in 2002. For more than a decade now Dragon Village has undergone revitalization, the salient characteristics of which serve to demonstrate elements of an epistemological transformation that is either in its very late stages or has already ended, depending on whom you ask. I refer here to the empire-to-nation-form shift that began roughly around the first Chinese Republic and has now, in the fullness of the second Republic, become internalized and hegemonic. This modernity has many elements, but it is the iterative and thorough transformation of peoples and traditions into ethnic groups and religions that draw our attention here as epistemic changes the consequences of which cannot really be predicted.

The issue of community revitalization in the People's Republic of China (PRC) is important because it is an example of a phenomenon receiving much energy in China today, with Buddhists, Christians, Daoists, Muslims, and Confucians all said to be undergoing some kind of resurgence. This noted efflorescence of communities is, of course, not limited to religion. Indeed, I privilege the term “Hui revitalization” rather than “Muslim revitalization” because I find the Huiness of these Muslims to be a more precise analytical tool than their religious practices. Nonetheless, Islam is a key element in being Hui, so the fact that the Dragon Village Hui

revitalization represents a nexus where the two kinds of revitalization (Hui and Islamic) overlap offers an especially revealing example. The revival of “religiosity” in the process of reenergizing ethnic identification provides a contextual starting point from which to excavate the ethnological material. Why the Hui villagers began telling a new and different story to themselves about themselves—even if they were drawing on the same material as before—was the reason I had originally been drawn to Dragon Village. And the process of telling new stories fashioned out of old narrative material in the mountains of Yunnan also yields insights into the mechanisms and strategies used by most of China’s marginal and peripheral peoples, if not also those of its centers.

From the time of the Prophet until Muslim migrants to China had become recognized (by themselves and others) as unproblematically Chinese, and then from the time during the Ming dynasty when a Muslim was the poster boy for Chineseness to the outside world²¹ until they had become only very problematically Chinese, people now called Hui/Huizu/Huihui have told identifying stories about who they are and where they come from. The new genre of story—one emphasizing blood and religious practice—has emphasized their difference by kind rather than degree, a recently developed accent on the kind of difference that is embodied in the episteme of *minzu*.²² Scholars have noticed that the magic of *minzu*, despite its obvious efficiencies and enticing parsimony, has led to a few rather unexpected outcomes for the reform contemporary world. There have been arguments over whether certain peoples should be properly reclassified as *minzu*, and the brute realities of life have often revealed the ephemeral reasoning that has gone into the *minzu* paradigm in the first place. This fraying at the edges of an ultimately procrustean episteme continues to be seen in all manner of Chinese revitalization.

After Dragon Villagers first decided in the late 1990s to “return to teachings” [*hui fu jiaomen*], much of the village population looked forward to the benefits of such a move.²³ Yet while everyone had an interest in the future of the village, almost nobody agreed on those interests or what that future should be. Some set their sights on tourist income, figuring that something like the income of the nearby Tibetan Songzanlin Monastery cultural site, along with the Naxi ethnotourism sites of Baishuitai and Lijiang, might be reproducible on Haba Mountain.²⁴ Others had equally material but variously imagined dreams of improved opportunities for assistance, with everything from village infrastructure to healthcare access in mind. Some had rather simple hopes, reckoning that it would be worth the trouble of reinventing

themselves just to have reliable daily electricity in the village so they could watch television.²⁵ A few saw a Hui-themed revitalization as an opportunity to fulfill dreams of education once thought to be out of reach. Popular among young men was the notion that a new identification project would improve their reputation and, thus, their chances of finding wives. Young women reciprocated by imagining a future with energized potential for meeting young men, just not ones from the village. Others simply liked the adventurous sound of a renaissance project. Only two individuals out of about four hundred, one of them ninety-two years old, seemed to primarily think that an increased degree of piety and orthodox religious practice would benefit the village population by making them healthier and bringing them closer to Allah.

Consequences

In their haste to realize these assorted dreams, it is perhaps understandable that Dragon Village residents ignored the fact that nobody had the same goals in mind. Given the overpowering poverty in the area, forward movement of any kind was enough. In this, they were hardly different from many other revitalization movements. Without relying on his overly rigid analytical stages, we can see in anthropologist Anthony Wallace's classic work a usefulness in defining revitalization movements as "deliberate, conscious, organized efforts by members of a society to create a more satisfying culture" when their basic needs are not being met (Wallace 1956, 279). Directed though this effort was for Dragon Villagers, what occurred was cacophony rather than concert—something I suspect is often the norm with such movements initially. Pursuing each specific interest separately under flexible categories like *huifu jiaomen* ("return to teaching") or *Huimin wenhua fazhan* ("(re)develop Hui culture") eventually allowed for the emergence of unexpected new fractures between the hitherto friendly ethnic communities in the valley. The "social glue" of interrelationships between the Hui, Han, Naxi, Tibetan, and Yi had been characterized by kinship and other ties that cut across the various ethnic communities. Yet even in the earliest stages of revitalization, one could detect clues of future tensions, as previously existing lifeways and cross-ethnic relationships were eroded by future-oriented ambitions increasingly articulated in terms of religious propriety.

When I first arrived in Dragon Village in 1999 the villagers expressed great pride and satisfaction at the warmth of collegiality between communities. Rites of passage such as wedding ceremonies, healing rituals, and funerals had enjoyed cross-community participation.

Celebrations and holidays had seen attendance from multiple ethnic and religious communities linked by collegial work relationships, multigenerational friendships, and mutual exchange, highlighted in the quotidian sharing of food and drink. But almost from the beginning of the revitalization, things began to change. The embodied engines of this change were the few young *ahongs* (imams) who had been sent from Shadian, the wealthy Hui community in southern Yunnan that was providing the funding for the village renaissance efforts. Initially there were six new *ahongs*, each nineteen or twenty years old. These young men, all of whom came from poor regions of Sichuan and Yunnan, had been trained at the community's expense in one of Shadian's many Islamic schools. Though their explanations of their situations differed considerably, they seemed to agree that only the poorer of the new *ahongs* from Shadian would consider a posting of any kind to such an impoverished and remote location as Dragon Village. None had studied abroad, an option well beyond their means, and religious training had by their own accounting been their sole avenue of advancement and education. All were committed to the cause of Islam as they understood it, and all understood Huiness to be primarily a matter of Islam, regarding any ethnic or historical element it might have as secondary in importance.

Bringing a historically and theologically specific clarity of purpose, the *ahongs* had such activist zeal that a colleague took to informally calling them "born-again Muslims." While theologically problematic, the sentiment of this term is viscerally revealing. If one is predisposed to be charitable toward such people, then the phrase evokes a warm feeling of acceptance and understanding, whereas if one is predisposed to not be so charitable, then an equally visceral annoyance is felt. In Dragon Village, these new *ahongs* set out to immediately implement a series of interventions they believed would bring the villagers into the acceptable range of how Hui should best behave in the world. All village residents were encouraged to attend lectures and gatherings designed to teach them how to be Hui again. Basic Arabic classes were formed that any interested person could join. Teaching about Muslim propriety—including how to bathe properly, how to conduct oneself in prayer, and how to properly butcher animals—was carried out in a hands-on instructional manner as these matters arose. Sermons with practical religious content were given at least weekly. Young people were offered greater religious responsibilities, both in an attempt to order their lives vis-à-vis Islam and to curtail the usual labor flight that tended to draw them away from the village on adulthood. In each endeavor, the *ahongs* had

ample opportunity to impart their opinions on how things should be along with how things were among Muslims elsewhere.

Although the *ahongs*' early interventions took only the form of offerings or suggestions, in time they became increasingly reproachful. The incremental admonitions dispensed by the six orthodox elites regarding social propriety, improvements in ritual practice, and especially new avoidances had an impact on Dragon Village residents' interactions with other communities in the valley. What thus ensued was a tumultuous and extended dialogic event—perhaps not even now completed. Villagers' motivations, traditional expectations of neighbors, secondhand ideas about the relationship of Hui to Islam, and even the opinions of county officials were caught up in a contentious project wherein nearly all of the interested parties sought to assert themselves on the matter of who the Dragon Village Hui were in the past, who they are now, and who they should be in the future. The happy solidity of the altar behind the mosque instantiated an early period in the revitalization process, when the cement of crosscutting community relationships had yet to erode, but cracks were forming.

New separations between communities, especially those resulting from new avoidance practices, developed quickly after the arrival of the born-again *ahongs*. The *ahongs* new directives caused disagreement within the community, but their consistent message of Hui revitalization predicated on a strong Islamic practical adherence caused some people to begin to avoid attendance at celebrations, rituals, and interactions with their neighbors. This was done on the grounds that proper Hui do not attend Chinese New Year celebrations, burn incense, share *haram* food with non-Muslims, or take part in traditional healing rituals involving lamas reading sutras over ailing bodies. These new avoidances were incomprehensible to the Hui villagers' neighbors, who took mild offence at them precisely because nonavoidance and unrestricted cross-ethnic camaraderie had been a long-practiced and unproblematic norm. This atmosphere of awkward insult was compounded by a degree of resentment at the village's newfound and envied connections to outside sources of funding and prestige, in the form of a sudden influx of Shadian-supplied material and visitors. Estrangements arose where affinity had once predominated.

However, many within the Hui community resisted these changes, feeling that the teachings of the young *ahongs* were unnecessarily corrosive. To paraphrase social theorist Max Weber on the iron cage of rationalized religious tradition (1958, 181), where once the villagers

had chosen to be different in their memories of origins far away, now they were being forced to be different: from their neighbors and by type. The dangers and anxieties of this aspect of bureaucratic rationalization under the nation-form were not entirely lost on the villagers, and related topics fueled many an evening discussion and daytime argument. This represents, in fact, a pointed microcosmic example of a larger-order epistemological transformation, from difference organized (imperially) by degree of civilization (vis-à-vis the Son of Heaven) to difference organized by ethnic type as a subcategory of the nation-state. Although this transition had been under way in China for nearly a century, the full internalization of the shift from imperial system to nation-form had finally reached remote Yunnan.

In this way, these revitalizing Hui came to actually embody anthropologist Raphael Israeli's structural antagonism between Hui and non-Hui (Israeli 1980)—not as a “model of” actual situations, as he erroneously claimed, but as a “model for” the way things should be, a model *wielded for a specific purpose by an interested Islam of a certain type*. This is an oversimplification, but the point is sufficiently made if we recognize how a specifically streamlined instance of Muslimness comes to reshape local Huiness—perhaps corrosively, but perhaps also creatively, and in any case in a manner unfortunate for preexisting community relationships. The entire twentieth-century epistemological transformation in the technology of Chinese social difference is here contracted into less than a decade. The result was an explosion and reshaping of preexisting forms of difference into nation-form ethnicity to the unintended discomfort of the people living these lives as the identifying categories change around them.

It is against this revealing backdrop that we can arrive at an understanding of and appreciation for the significance of the altar's disappearance. The first community fractures were starting to show just months after the idea of revitalization began gaining ground in Dragon Village back in 1999. Where once a craftsman had time on his hands to build and give a ritual altar to other friends in the valley, that gift has disappeared amid an uncomfortable shifting of the grounds on which those friendships had been made. Many effects of this once solid interethnic solidarity have either vanished or taken some other form amid the tumult of revitalization, and this new reality is potentially jarring. Where I had once been scolded for even suggesting that the new mosque might be just a bit too close to preexisting ritual sites, there are now signs that this proximity has become an issue of contention. Anthropologist Susan McCarthy, who briefly visited the village some years later, mentions in a recent article a Tibetan local who, while

expressing support for the Hui in their religious rediscovery, nonetheless voiced the following complaint:

A nationality must pay attention to and respect another nationality's religion and culture. Where the Hui built their new mosque is not good, it doesn't show respect. They could have built it just a little lower down the mountain, away from [other ritual] sites. (2005, 129)

Whether the altar is gone forever and the mortar of intervillage community is to be permanently weakened remains to be seen. McCarthy's article suggests that this diminished sociality is still a matter of grumbling rather than something more substantial, but I am less sanguine. The difference between the atmosphere of still-maintained intervillage collegiality in 2002 and the report McCarthy provides from several years later demonstrates a notable decline of exchange and interaction. After twelve or thirteen years, some of the flush has gone out of the rose of renaissance in Dragon Village. What continues is slow movement on several fronts, embodied by competing understandings of how and why the community should move forward as Hui. Over time, an increasing proportion of the village population, energized in this view by the activist *ahongs*, has come to see the legitimacy of Islam as both the means to other ends *and an end in itself*. Others, either paying lip service to Islamic revitalization or doing their best to ignore its more uncomfortable elements, continue to see it as only a means to an end. Also significant is the late-revitalization reaction of those who, having tired of the *ahongs*' apparent interference into and disruption of the more comfortable "way things were," have either melted away into previous networks of labor migration that had occupied most of their time anyway, or retreated into the segment of the village population who never attend mosque, smoke and drink among themselves, and maintained an attitude of bemused indifference to the entire proceedings.

The village is, relatively speaking, thriving. People do attend mosque, though despite optimistic reports such as McCarthy's it is not clear how many attend regularly. A few of the young boys have taken advantage of educational opportunities provided by the new access to Shadian funding and Muslim networks (McCarthy 2005, 128). Village infrastructure has improved dramatically, with electricity, a more readily available water supply, and paved paths easing the daily lives of its residents. The people are experiencing their modernity through a specifically Islamic revitalization of Huiness²⁶ that has brought them many things. But the altar is gone—a clue that points to a significant development in the process of being Hui in Dragon Village. Discrepancies between ideas of how "proper neighbors" should behave and notions of

how the Hui should behave, and who they are becoming, have generated discord between area communities. The two most visible ways of being Hui in this story—that remembered and that emerging—constitute two of many potentially viable ways of being and becoming that are available to Hui in Yunnan. From one primarily characterized by historical patterns of difference, but with fluid and flexible interaction, to another primarily organized by ethnoreligious type accompanied by a tendency toward separation and endogamy, each is a product of its prevailing sociocultural conditions.

The manner and degree to which the members of the Dragon Village community interact with their neighbors has changed, and the unexpected qualities of this change have involved surprises for everyone concerned. The processes of this development show us some of the range of potential ways of being Hui, but they also provide the investigator with a case through which to see religious revitalization in China in concrete terms. The starts and stumbles in this change—the reasons for it, steps taken, difficulties encountered, successes achieved, and unintended consequences—illuminate not only the situation of one revitalizing Hui community in remote Yunnan, but also similar elements in the quotidian ways of being Chinese in a revitalizing twenty-first century.

Conclusion

To be clear, there are no villains in this Case of the Disappearing Altar. There are only the best of intentions in this story, with hopefulness and unintended consequence assuming the title roles. Hopes for a better future, for electricity, for better spousal prospects, for nicer places to live, for their children's education, and even for greater piety might all reasonably be seen as benign aspirations. In examining this ethnographic case, I have drawn attention to the contradictions produced when Hui development prioritizes imaginations of improvement that privilege Islamic orthodoxy. Here, orthodoxy is defined by relatively conservative and fairly recent formulations of Muslim propriety. These formulations can be traced to prevailing understandings of Huiness in the Islamic center of Shadian that provided the zealous young educators who were dispatched to Dragon Village to “show them how to be Hui again” (*jiao tamen hui fu zuo Huimin*).²⁷ That this version of “Hui” should be understood to almost exclusively mean “practicing Muslim” is perhaps not surprising. And to a community of chronically impoverished people on the edge of China without recourse to other avenues for

improvement in their living conditions, a theological discourse of propriety and revitalization represents a viable possibility of achieving something that might constitute their slice of the Chinese development promise. Yet this leap of faith has an uncertain landing.

Anthropologists are not, of course, in the business of assigning value to people's choices—in this case, to revitalize through enhancing Islamic piety of practice over other revitalization choices. Hidden or overt, such an error would preclude any serious investigation of most religious resurgence movements today. Nonetheless, anthropologists are predisposed in a deeply Weberian way²⁸ toward attending to the realities of unintended consequences. Privileging an Islamic orthodoxy conceived of as a new and more proper rejection of existing community affinities in ways that haphazardly supersede other governing mechanics of social cohesion, negotiation, and interaction cannot be without such consequences.

A final anecdote of lost collegiality shows in this a touching kind of loss. At the beginning of the Hui renaissance of Dragon Village, several men from nearby villages *who were not Hui* took to wearing the (usually white) skullcap most often associated with the Hui.²⁹ This was done, according to a few of the participants, to express solidarity with their neighbors who had decided—admirably, it was said—to collectively try to do something for their community since the state was failing to help them improve their lives. The five Naxi, Pumi, and Han men who had started wearing the caps either got them at the local market on their own, or were given them by Dragon Villagers as gifts. The Dragon Villagers either did not recognize this gesture as a problem, or actively recognized it in the positive, supportive, and friendly manner it was intended. In the rest of China, such a practice is unheard of. But here villagers greeted their cap-wearing neighbors in the garbled Arabic they had themselves learned just weeks or months before, and non-Hui (certainly non-Muslim) neighbors started trying their hand at using the “As-salamu alaykum” greeting.³⁰

At some point one of the young *ahongs* expressed dissatisfaction with this practice. I was not present for the comment, and he never admitted or explained it to me despite a general consensus that he was the original objector. Over time his stance came to be supported by certain villagers wanting to demonstrate their newfound propriety. They began to publically agree with the *ahongs* that non-Hui should not wear Muslim skullcaps, and after some months of growing disapproval from one contingent of the population, the collective playfulness of support and encouragement between neighbors on the issue melted slowly away...with one exception. One

older non-Hui gentlemen from a neighboring village who tended yaks on one of the high pastures refused to stop wearing his skullcap, and refused to stop trying to greet everyone in his version of Arabic. He refused, as he pointed out, to stop doing “the right thing” (meaning to be friendly and demonstrate his camaraderie with his neighbors) just because some man “younger than one of his shoes” did not approve. Besides, he liked how the cap covered his bald head without making him sweat too much.

I took this fellow to be a reminder that local sociality can be tenacious, and I believe his example is revealing precisely because it points to a possible optimism both for the future of the valley and for a revitalizing China wracked with religious identification growing pains. It is this obscured optimism inherent in the now-anxious revitalization scene that I believe needs to be highlighted. When it comes to investigating the everyday realities of revitalizing Hui in a revitalizing China, the fact that some imaginations of identification resonate most strongly with religious practices is not surprising. Nonetheless, there are also other ways of being Hui under the sun, just as historian Zvi Ben Dor Benite has reminded us that there were several ways of being Muslim under the Son (of Heaven, that is) (see Benite 2005). Perhaps, then, there are other ways of engaging postmodern, reform contemporary China as Hui. When considering other possible ways to hold up Hui as being a path toward the future, it is illustrative to note recent arguments in Chinese Islamic education. On the one hand, there are those who consider Hui lives to properly be Islamic to the exclusion of all else, while on the other, there are those who recognize Huiness as most properly an amalgam of Chinese tradition and Islam.

Ma Xiaoxiong,³¹ a founding principal of the Dali Muslim Culture College, one of the leading Hui intellectuals in western Yunnan and a thought leader on the issue of different approaches to Hui education in Yunnan, is known for questioning the assumption common among Hui that education and revitalization should be “Arabized” to the exclusion of Chinese traditions. He believes, rather, that Hui should be students of Islam and recognizably Chinese in their Hui tradition—by which he means that they should not ignore the impressive history of Hui engagement with tradition and achievement in society *as Chinese*. Rather than returning to an imagined past based on narrow thinking, where “there are those Muslims who wish to separate themselves from all non-Muslims and believe that the only suitable course of study is an Arabic and Islamic one,” Hui who wished to develop their communities might better remember their community’s past achievements. The great Hui scholars of the past, Ma reminds us, used the

classical learning of the Chinese world to explain and teach the truths of Islam. That tradition offered Islamic theology, philosophy, and history along with Chinese philosophy, history, language, and literature, and such schools produced many successful imperial examination candidates during the Ming and Qing periods. Again, Benite's recent work (2005) has examined in detail the formation of a historical network of scholars who demonstrably embodied this basic tradition, and historian Jacqueline Armijo-Hussein's earlier work (1999) addressed similar ideas relating to Islamic education in China. Susan McCarthy's reporting on this tradition of Chinese Islamic excellence from present-day Yunnan, which she shows to include several more scholars, elegantly presents the position thus:

The genius of the Hui of bygone eras...was their ability to meld Islamic and...Chinese cultural elements. This melding was more than useful—it was and is who the Hui are. In advocating reform and challenging the isolationist tendencies of much contemporary religious education these Hui scholars, writers and cadres are trying to counter what they see as a false tradition with one that is “authentically” Hui.³² (2005, 130–131)

McCarthy carefully points out that those involved in this argument about authenticity who are proponents of this synthesizing position on “real” Huiness also enjoy the support of the state. Nonetheless, and I think correctly, she relies on her rich ethnographic evidence to conclude that the reality of this situation is far from being a mere expression of hegemonic state policy.

While I do not share McCarthy's acceptance of Raphael Israeli's predictable conclusions that Wahhabi influences dominate China's mass Islamic Association,³³ one need not posit a threat of Islamic radicalism to recognize that there is a struggle in Yunnan for the hearts and minds of Hui, that epistemologically conservative notions of Islam as modern religion predominate, and that the state has an interest in this struggle. The legitimacy and very future of Huiness is at stake, and how it plays out for China will likely have less to do with tensions between the state and the Hui populations as with disagreements within those populations. Moreover, the history of these tensions—dating back to the nineteenth century's so-called Muslim rebellions³⁴—and the present-day stigmatizing of Muslims within China are amplified by a simpleminded Global War on Terror that has facilitated a likewise cartoonish reassertion of anti-Muslim sentiment in the PRC.

This disappearing altar in a remote Muslim Chinese village reveals contradictions in the processes of self-creation found in Chinese communities put upon by the forces of social

transformation accompanying the PRC's rapid economic development—itsself a remaking of grand scope. In what I have called Dragon Village's revitalization project, visible expressions of re-production and re-presentation indicate a shift in community cohesion among ethnically varied populations in the valley. These local events are small examples of the much larger forces of reemerging religious movements and community identifications in China; in this analysis Chinese Muslims are serving as indicators for a long view of reform contemporary social transformation. Events like the Case of the Disappearing Altar, as anthropological mysteries worth "reading" for their significance to the study of China, should continue to engage us as we attend to the line-of-sight vantage between the concerns of remote Hui villagers and those of larger-order national arguments about Chinese questions of affinity or estrangement, engagement or isolation.

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Notes

- 1 The Naxi are an officially recognized *minzu* (nationality or ethnic group) prominent in northwest Yunnan and often associated with Tibetans.
- 2 For a recent introduction to Dr. Rock, see part 2 of Mueggler (2011). Many know of Rock by reputation—a problematic one—because he is said to have often sent his plant samples back along with grandiose claims about his contribution to knowledge, the stupendous height of the region's mountains (claiming some were taller than Everest), and other superlative assessments that proved inaccurate. All this eventually gained him a troublesome reputation in the West, and he was also thought very strange locally in that he usually ate alone; had a bad temper, which he often lost; and, though being of normal size (slightly over five feet tall), could eat an entire sheep in one sitting.
- 3 One of these stories has Haba Mountain (the village sits on a low shoulder of this mountain) as an anthropomorphized figure, along with the nearby Yulong Mountain as its brother and the Jinsha River as their sister who gets away from them (by running off between them) when they are supposed to be watching over her.
- 4 This nearby calcite terrace formation is another ritual center occasionally claimed to be the origin place of the Naxi.
- 5 These last two are geographic (and mythographically meaningful) features near or in Lijiang, which is a day's drive to the south of Dragon Village and the current center of the Naxi world.
- 6 This is the same man who reported that, as a child in the 1930s, his father caught one of Dr. Rock's pith helmets when it blew off while Rock was climbing up the mountain. He

- swore that his family still had this white or cream-colored artifact in a trunk somewhere, but I never got to see it.
- 7 This fact of common exogamy alone makes the Dragon Village Hui unusual among most of China's Muslims, who elsewhere tend very strongly toward endogamy.
- 8 Here it serves the ethnographic archival function, but originally the village mayor wanted to give this written history to the English-reading tourists whom he hoped would become interested in the natural beauty of the area. Being the first Westerner to live onsite for any length of time since Dr. Rock, I translated this history into English—at the mayor's request—in order to help the village with its self-presentation. The mayor also suggested that I include it in the “book” I was writing because it was from “the mouth of a real Hui” (*jen huizude zuiba*) and not something from the government.
- 9 This date is at best an approximation. Given the just-erupting Du Wenxiu uprising (Panthay Rebellion or southwest Muslim rebellion) that was to ravage Yunnan for seventeen years, the conditions in the decades after 1856 would have contributed to a need to stay up in the high mountains well away both from any potential retributive violence and from a provincial government predisposed to ill treatment of Hui.
- 10 This name—*keye* being a local title for a tax administration official—means “Tax Administrator Yang.” The implication is that these Hui were associated with the man who was a recognized tax collector for subprefectural officialdom.
- 11 *Minzu*, which was usually translated as “nationality” before about 2009, eventually came to be translated as “ethnic group” or “ethnicity” and its derivatives thereafter. Naturally, the translation is imprecise and the complexities are many, but the gloss remains in common use today. For an early engagement with the concept of *minzu* that has stood scrutiny, see Gladney (1991). For a more recent discussion of *minzu* as an episteme to be applied, see Mullaney (2011).
- 12 Imams (*ahong*) “taking their own life” is a rhetorical image often used among Yunnan's Hui in narratives of hardship during the political movement or Cultural Revolution periods to mean that religion was forced into submission. No *ahongs* from Dragon Village—or anywhere else in the Hui communities I have visited in Yunnan, for that matter—actually took their own lives during this time.
- 13 Shadian is a Hui town in southeastern Yunnan famous for having been destroyed in the Cultural Revolution by provincial authorities overreacting to an attempt to resist outside interference. Verifiable details of this event are scarce, but the eventual outcome was an admission of error by the government, the rebuilding of the town, the expansion of the mosques and Islamic schools, and a de facto “hands-off” approach by the government. The town has become wealthy and more Islamic than ever. While a Muslim center before, it has become one of the rare points of entry for Islamic development funds from wealthy countries in the rest of the Muslim world. Thus it was through Shadian funding that Dragon Village was able to undertake its Hui renaissance (rebuild its mosque, hire *ahongs*, etc.), as explained below.
- 14 I thank Professor Lipman for taking the time to reverse translate this oral history term twisted by (in hindsight, predictable) Yunnan dialect pronunciation and temporal distance from its original “Bai Yanhu” (see Lipman 1998, 129; Houtsma 1993, 720). Bai Yanhu's group, or the majority of it that stayed outside China, constitutes the third community of Chinese Muslims in the present-day Central Asian ethnic group known as Donggan.

- Called the Shaanxi community there, this group still speaks an older Shaanxi-accented Chinese and maintains strongly Chinese cultural practices.
- 15 Small numbers of local people in Zhongdian and Annan self-identify as Hui from Shaanxi and recognize themselves as being kin to the Dragon Village community.
- 16 These skills are said to have related to technological proficiency at constructing bracing and drainage structures for a deep mine.
- 17 Indeed, this seems to have been the case with the Bai Yanhu conflict (Lipman 1998).
- 18 The Dragon Villagers, like most of Yunnan's Muslims, refuse to entertain the notion that the divisive Sufi orders can be an entirely legitimate form of Islam. This continued to be the prevailing position throughout the time I was there, and the theme of unity in the province's Islamic centers (Weishan, Dali, Chuxiong, Jianshui, Najiaying, Shadian, and Zhaotong) remains a cornerstone of the stories Hui there tell about themselves. As far as I was able to find, in 2002 there was only one mosque identified with Sufism left in the province. Even that one (in Kunming) was said to be either in the process of being rebuilt, or in the process of being demolished since the community had disintegrated, depending on who one asked. Agreement on this matter is despite some historical differences between these communities (see Atwill 1997).
- 19 For a discussion of the legitimacy and value issues of *minzu* in terms of tourism and self-representation, see Schein (2000).
- 20 The emphasis on the *process* of becoming Yunnanese Hui that their origin narrative draws into focus is significant because it highlights the moving target process of becoming. In fact, many of the village families experienced this process of becoming local in a more complete fashion. Several family branches are said to have, by the strength of local conditions alone, "become" Naxi or Tibetan, and today there are Tibetan Buddhist lamas in Zhongdian County who are blood relatives. One such Tibetan lama from the Annan area often came to Dragon Village when asked to chant sutras over the sickbeds of his Hui relatives.
- 21 The great "Admiral of the Three Jewels," Zheng He, the most famous Chinese personage outside of China then, and unquestionably Chinese at that, was born of a Hui family near Kunming.
- 22 We live in something of a golden age of frontier studies, where inquiries into the historical veracity and logic of *minzu* abound and our knowledge of the "non-Chinese" Chinese people is developing dramatically. After Gladney's work on the Hui, a flood of excellent anthropological and historical work focusing directly on China's frontier areas has enriched scholarship. For the beginning, see Gladney (1991). For an interesting recent treatment by a historian, see Mullaney (2011).
- 23 Even the local manifestations of the state, by denying the village any other means of development and not dissuading the Hui revitalization, seemed to have some sort of goal in mind, though nobody was certain what this might have been.
- 24 The viewing of minority culture as a symbolic capital to be cashed in for economic development purposes has achieved a noble truth-like status in tourist areas of China (see Schein 2000).
- 25 In 2002, electricity was only available for a few hours every other evening.
- 26 This is, of course, not the only example of revitalization among the Hui of Yunnan. Dai-speaking Hui of Menghai in southwestern Yunnan are said to have successfully

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- undergone a *huifu jiaomen* process in the 1980s with the help of the wealthy and conservative Najiyang community. One of my thesis students who recently conducted research in the area gathered some anecdotal evidence to the effect that this achievement may have been a more relative success. Michael Brose has also written on modernity through globalization in several other Yunnanese Hui communities (see Brose 2011).
- 27 One of the Shadian *ahongs* proudly laid out the task he was given in this way, but this was also the way he answered most general questions about what he was doing.
- 28 See Weber's "Vocation Lectures" in Weber, Gerth, and Mills (1958, 77–129).
- 29 In nearly two decades of studying Hui populations in China, I have observed that the prevalence of wearing the skullcap has increased.
- 30 For a few months this was popular in the nearby villages as something novel and playful, with many in nearby villages trying to get in on the action by trying out versions of "*Ha-sa-la-mu-lei-gu, wo-e-lei-gu-mu-sa-la-mu*" on Hui, non-Hui, visiting tourists, county officials, and anthropologists.
- 31 Principal Ma is also a rare informant who, knowing that the topic of Muslims in Yunnan is an irrationally sensitive one, nonetheless specifically requested that I use his proper name should I ever write about or cite him.
- 32 I believe this to be Ma Xiaoxiong himself, though McCarthy does not name him.
- 33 There is a histrionic quality to Israeli's conclusions that, maddeningly, detracts from his earlier ethnological material. My experience with Muslims in China since 1992 has caused me to be suspicious of any suggestion that Islamic radicalism constitutes a threat in China simply because Muslims are somehow structurally incompatible with the Chinese (see Israeli and Gardner-Rush 2000).
- 34 Rigorous scholarship on these events has demonstrated that they (a) were not rebellions, and (b) were not (at least originally) about Muslims fighting against the state or non-Muslims (see Lipman 1998 and Atwill 2006).

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