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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Introduction: redrawing and straddling borders: rethinking Hui experiences

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Abstract

This special issue focuses on the Hui, Chinese-speaking Muslims in China, including those who identify themselves with the Hui, regardless of whether they conform to Muslim identities or practices, across space, ethnicity, language, religion, and culture. It investigates how the conventional "borders" for these categories, temporally or contextually defining the Hui, have been redrawn by their transboundary activities, such as migration experiences, the construction of transregional networks, negotiations over ethnic or religious identity, the translations of texts, and interreligious, interdenominational, or intercultural dialog. Thus, the special issue explores how the Hui people have straddled the institutionalized borders of classification to preserve a distinct space for their lives in China and, by doing so, have secured long-term survival through different political and cultural contexts. We regard the label of "Hui" not as an immutable entity but simply as a heuristic framework. We discuss how conceptual boundaries between "us" and "them" have been flexibly re-interpreted and re-expressed by the Hui people themselves.

Keywords: Chineseness; Hui; identity; Muslim; others

Introduction

This special issue[1] focuses on the Hui, Chinese-speaking Muslims in China, including those who identify themselves with the Hui, regardless of whether they conform to Muslim identities or practices, across space, ethnicity, language, religion, and culture. It investigates how the conventional "borders" for these categories, temporally or contextually defining the Hui, have been redrawn by their transboundary activities, such as migration experiences, the construction of transregional networks, negotiations over ethnic or religious identity, the translations of texts, and interreligious, interdenominational, or intercultural dialog. Thus, the special issue explores how the Hui people have

[1]This special issue is a result of the international workshop "Redrawing and Straddling Borders: Chinese Muslims in Transnational Fields and Multilingual Literatures" held under the joint auspices of Institute for Research in Humanities, Kyoto University, and Faculty of Global and Regional Studies, Doshisha University (Coordinated by Tatsuya Nakanishi from Kyoto University, and Liulan Wang-Kanda from Doshisha University) at the former institute on December 1–2, 2018. This workshop was financially supported by The Kyoto University Foundation, Hashimoto Jun Memorial Foundation, and Joint Usage/Research Program of Center for Information Resources of Area Studies (CIRAS), Kyoto University. Additionally, it was officially supported by Kenan Rifai Center for Sufi Studies at Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University, Center for Islamic Area Studies at Kyoto University (KIAS), and Graduate School of Asian and African Area Studies, Kyoto University.

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straddled the institutionalized borders of classification to preserve a distinct space for their lives in China and, by doing so, have secured long-term survival through different political and cultural contexts. We regard the label of "Hui" not as an immutable entity but simply as a heuristic framework. We discuss how conceptual boundaries between "us" and "them" have been flexibly re-interpreted and re-expressed by the Hui people themselves.[2]

By analyzing the skills of the Hui people to make their own place and establish dialogs with people whom they consider cultural others in some contexts, our overlapping studies attempt to identify clues that could account for the coexistence of those who deem each other as cultural others. In addition, by looking at variable self-positioning and inter-categorical belonging, this research challenges essentializing labels of "Islamic" and "Chinese," and provides a better understanding of the different ways to be "Hui," including forms of Islam that are often overlooked in the eastern "hubs" of the Muslim world.[3]

One reason why we pay attention to the Hui is that they have a long history and wide distribution. Indeed, not everybody who we conveniently label as Hui have identified themselves as such. Moreover, even those who have identified themselves as Hui have neither kept the same stable self-awareness as their sole one, nor always prioritized it over other ones. However, it is a fact that those who we identify as the Hui have formed a distinct group since the sixteenth century at the latest, when they attained a substantial population number and spread across China. Passing through different periods and spreading across various regions, they have accumulated many cross-boundary experiences of coping with "others" under various situations, from which we can draw important conclusions.

A unique feature of this issue is the interdisciplinary scholarly discussion of the Hui in transregional fields and multilingual literature by historians and anthropologists. As the diverse socio-religious spaces of the Hui have historically been located in many places, the target regions of this issue cover not only the Hui communities in a Chinese cultural context, but also a space that includes non-Han people, that is, the Tibetan cultural sphere where interethnic relations have been forged and multicultural coexistence has emerged. The special issue also utilizes materials in a diversity of languages, including Chinese, Arabic, Persian, and Uyghur. This kind of interdisciplinary approach will help redefine the traditional concepts and categories of "Muslim-ness" and "Chinese-ness," and contributes to a broader understanding of the dynamics of being Hui in various spatiotemporal contexts.

The Hui people are composed of descendants of Muslim immigrants to China from various Asian regions who have been "sinicized" to some extent in their physical, linguistic, and cultural aspects, as well as converts from indigenous people. They have maintained, elaborated, and/or reinterpreted their Islamic beliefs and practices through education, writings, rituals, and their travels, where they encountered other Muslims. Although Muslims had come to China around the second half of the eighth century at the latest, it is only between the second half of the fifteenth century and the first half of

[2]Gladney (1991) discusses various interpretations by the Hui people in contemporary China regarding the concept of "Pure and True (*qingzhen*)," by which they often distinguish themselves from "others." Lipman (1997) demonstrates that the Hui people have flexibly redrawn various boundaries between "us" and "them" in Northwestern China, throughout the Qing-Republican periods. Developing these arguments, Unno-Yamazaki (2017) elucidates how Chinese-speaking Muslims fluidly chose positions in various debates dividing their society, straddling categories of reformists and traditionalists, in North China around the 1910s. This special issue expands upon such studies of the diverse and often malleable self-identification of the Hui people in time and space, thereby aiming to achieve a better understanding of how the Hui people have survived in China, as well as who they were and are.

[3]Frankel and Lee assert that Liu Zhi (d. after 1724), a famous Hui Muslim scholar, in his Chinese explanation of Islam, maintained something like "the core praxis of Islam" (Frankel 2011: 152) and "the basic tenets of Islam" (Lee 2015: 195), while harmonizing it with Confucianism, or contextualizing it within the Chinese milieu. In this argument, they appear to assume a similar "core" of Islam, based on creeds and laws that are generally counted among the teachings of this religion, yet which are typical in the present Middle East. However, from the same perspective, we may say that Liu Zhi failed to maintain such a "base" of Islam, because he excluded the concept of the collective obligation from his explanation of the funeral prayer, as Nakanishi's article discusses in this special issue. However, rather than judging whether Liu Zhi preserved such an alleged essence of Islam, we aim to deconstruct this Middle-East-centric understanding of "Islamic," which can encourage the perception of Islam being essentially non-Chinese, and thereby lead to demands for it to be sinicized or prohibited in China.

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the sixteenth century that Hui communities started to appear around mosques across China. Subsequently, the Hui people began to grapple with non-Islamic environments within China.

While the Han Chinese assimilated various religious groups that emerged in mainland China, such as the Nestorians and the Jews, the Hui people have continued to be recognized as a distinct group by their non-Muslim neighbors. As a result, it is important to investigate the factors that account for such a singular situation, particularly, how the Hui people have managed their relationships with "others." The definition of "other" changes depending on various contexts, and can include groups of Muslims and even, occasionally, a part of the Hui.

New considerations on blurred boundaries between the Hui people and "others"

In the process of accommodating themselves in China proper and its "peripheral" regions, the Hui people have negotiated their religious culture and ethnic identity not only with Han people, the ethnic majority in China, but also with non-Han people, including non-Hui Muslims, inside or outside the Chinese cultural sphere. In response to changing historical contexts, the Hui populations have not only adjusted their relationships with "others" in their theoretical considerations, but have also redressed the implications entailed by "borders" in their daily lives, by reacting to stereotypes, utilizing social skills, moving translocally, building networks, and so on.

As a part of this negotiation, Hui Muslim scholars have reinterpreted Islamic ideas from texts and discourses in tune with the social and cultural circumstances in China and other locations, as well as in response to intellectual trends in other Muslim societies. For example, they have sometimes described Islam as something "Chinese" to mitigate the prejudices of non-Muslim neighbors,[4] and, at other times, as "Western (i.e., something from regions further west than China, such as Middle East or Central Asia)," or even "anti-Chinese," to criticize their coreligionist opponents[5] and to confront the homogenizing pressures of Chinese society.[6]

In another instance, the Hui people have claimed their affiliation both with Chinese society and the Muslim world outside China by narrating their forefathers' documented or legendary contributions to the former and originations from the latter, while elaborating their ancestral genealogies (Chen 2020). In this way, the Hui people diluted their foreignness to China without losing their historical or mental links with the Muslim world. Thus, the Hui people have simultaneously attempted to secure their conformity with and distinctiveness from their neighbors.

Furthermore, in Hui negotiations of identity, the marks by which the Hui people have been conventionally differentiated from others, such as religious distinctiveness and ancestral foreignness, sometimes conversely strengthened ties, or blurred fault lines, between them. The stereotypes accompanying such marks change their meaning based on who is deciphering them in shifting

[4]One of the most prominent instances is the Chinese Islamic literature that Hui Muslim scholars have written since the 17th century. This literature was written in Chinese based on Arabic and Persian Islamic works. The authors embellished these works with terms and phrases cited from authoritative works of Chinese traditional religions, such as Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism. Thus, the authors tried to demonstrate the essential compatibility between Islam and Chinese traditional religions. As for the intellectual activities of Hui Muslim scholars in Chinese Islamic literatures, see for example Murata *et al.* (2009).

[5]Among the Hui people, there have sometimes appeared those who advocated a reformation of Islam in China based on an alleged authentic teaching from the West, including the Ikhwān school (See Glasserman's article in this issue). Especially during the modern period, some Hui Muslim scholars tried to Arabicize Islam in China by introducing new Islamic ideas from the Arabic-speaking world (Bendor-Benite 2008), although, as Eroğlu (2025) points out, they often selectively translated Arabic discourses into Chinese in tune with contexts of China. Some Hui intellectuals also tried to introduce Turkish or Indian Islamic ideas into China during the Republican period (Eroğlu 2025).

[6]For example, Hui Muslim scholar Ma Anyi (d.1940) legitimized the Yunnan Muslim rebellion against the Qing Dynasty as a lawful reaction against an oppressive Chinese rule based on an interpretation of the Islamic law by a Syrian Muslim scholar Ibn ʿĀbidīn (d.1836). In addition, some of the Hui during the Second Sino-Japanese War emphasized the Islamic doctrine of the solidarity of the Umma against the assimilation policy of Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi). On both points, see Nakanishi (2018).

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situations and how. From such contexts, the Hui people deliberately or contingently drew advantages to evade being unfavorably labeled and demarcated.

Yuanhao Zhao sheds new light on this aspect by raising historical accounts of "violence" for discussion, an alleged mark often recognized as a factor of non-Muslim Han people's discrimination against the Hui but ignored as a bond uniting both. By analyzing relevant folklore, Zhao points out that the Hui people have celebrated the violence in their history as evidence that they were compatriots with non-Muslim Chinese, while the latter value it in contexts where it helps them confront their enemies. Thus, he illustrates that ethnic stereotypes obtain different meanings in different contexts.

Beyond discussions of the simultaneity of "Muslim-ness" and "Chinese-ness"

Through such processes of challenging stereotypes, the Hui people have fostered their own multi-faceted sense of belonging, which they have differently expressed in word and deed. They have thrown light on different facets of their identity, depending on various situations, and have thereby succeeded in securing their continuity.

Some recent studies, among which Zvi Ben-Dor Benite (2005) can be viewed as a pioneer, have stressed the simultaneity of "Muslim-ness" and "Chinese-ness" in Hui self-perception, mainly based on their Chinese writings. However, its dynamic aspect – how they have altered their emphasis between "Chinese-ness" and "Muslim-ness" in response to different situations – needs further investigation, as Zhao suggests in his discussion of how the Hui ethnicity can be made either conspicuous or inconspicuous according to circumstances. For example, in most Arabic or Persian inscriptions, they have depicted themselves as Muslims, and do not highlight their Chinese-ness. Besides, Hui identity must include some things other than "Chinese-ness" and "Muslim-ness," as evidenced through their redrawing and straddling of boundaries other than those between the Hui and the Han.[7] Those facets of the Hui's self-categorization have also probably taken on different tints according to their interactions

[7]Ando (2002) argues that the ethnic fault line between the Hui and the Han in the Yunnan province, Southwest China, was obscured until the first half of the nineteenth century, when it was essentialized as a result of the intensification of religious identities which both camps adopted as a survival strategy amid escalating competition incited by the influx of immigrants from various regions of China. The main axis of conflicts in Yunnan before the nineteenth century existed between indigenous people including Muslims and non-Muslims, on the one hand, and the immigrants, on the other hand. Atwill (2005) also insists that, before the nineteenth century, indigenous Yunnanese people composed of the Hui, the Han, and the Yi (non-Muslim minorities) had strong economic ties with South East Asia rather than mainland China, and were bundled as a rebellious batch in the eyes of the Qing government, as well as recognized as a group called Haw by many of the highlands of South East Asia. Matsumoto (2010) discusses how activities of Protestant missionaries from China Inland Mission stimulated Hui people to construct their identity in contrast with Christians. Chen (2014) elucidates that Peng Shiqian, a modern Hui Muslim scholar, encouraged Hui Muslims to revive the Umma as a member of this global Muslim community with the same qualification as that of coreligionists in Egypt, and points out that his encouragement of participation in the global Muslim community did not implicate Arabization of Islam in China. Ando (2014) elucidates how Sino-phone Muslims responded to an institutional framework that All China Muslim League (Zhongguo huijiao zong lianhehui), a puppet organization of Japanese imperialists, created based on Hui Muslims intellectuals' ideal of the Hui ethnic unity. Shinbo (2018) argues how the Hui people fostered their identity through their negotiations with Japanese colonial government. Hammond (2020) discusses how some Hui people during the Second Sino-Japanese War participated in the Japanese Empire with a strong sense of belonging to the Chinese nation and sometimes even a consciousness of being Chinese in contrast with the Arab Muslims. Nara (2016) describes how a part of the Hui tried to be "pious" against "impious" ones in contemporary Yunnan and argues that the appearance of the "pious" Hui blurs the boundary between Muslims and non-Muslims. Ha (2022) pays attention to the gender division among the Jahriyya community, thus illuminating that the Sufi order Jahriyya's community is open to non-Muslims in the communal dining space where female Muslims converse with each other, in voices that are excluded from the androcentric ritual spaces. Stroup (2022) analyzes how migration and urbanization generate a multitude of understandings of Hui-ness, or internal identity cleavages among contemporary Hui people. Hai (2023) problematizes the pan-Hui identity, emphasizing historical differences between Hui in Northwest and East China. Nakanishi (2023) shed light on a fissure among Hui family members that the difference of their survival strategies generated during the Qing period. Eroğlu (2025) mentions that some Hui Muslim intellectuals gave importance to the unity of Muslims in China during the modern period and selectively introduced Arabic Islamic discourses to avoid escalation of antagonism between Chinese Muslim groups with different doctrinal standpoints.

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with "others." We aim to reconsider previous studies by examining the dynamic manifestations of the pluralistic affiliations of the Hui accompanying their various interpretations of who they are or their playing with "border" constraints in the various contexts where they face "others."

The many-sided and often multiple identity of the Hui is reflected, for example, in the multi-layered structure of their religious practices in contemporary China, which Jianxin Wang analyzes in comparison with that of the Uyghurs. For both the Hui people and the Uyghurs, Wang enumerates the following three layers respectively: Officially admitted Islam, worship of saint mausoleums, and folk beliefs including magic or Shamanistic practices. Then, he argues that various social groups of the Hui and the Uyghur flexibly choose attitudes along these layers depending on their respective social realities, including their relationships with other social groups and the Chinese government.[8]

Marie-Paule Hille pays attention to narratives regarding historical exchanges between the Hui and "others." However, Hille turns her eyes not to the Han but to Tibetans as the "others."[9] She scrutinizes how past relations between the Hui and Tibetans are evoked and reinterpreted by her interlocutors such as Hui merchants affiliated with Xidaotang and Tibetans whom she met in her fieldwork in Gansu. Thus, she notices that some Hui narratives involved a kind of formation of "us" between them and Tibetans. Additionally, a historical memory enabled an informant to legitimize his belonging both to Xidaotang community and Tibetan society.

Tatsuya Nakanishi inquires into the Hui people's strategic expressions of their changeable self-categorization: Hui Muslim scholars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries imagined different categories of people with whom their coreligionists had to have comradeship through Islamic practices, such as religious education and funerals, which Islamic law required all Muslims to engage in collectively. Thus, Nakanishi describes how they flexibly reframed the contours of "us," in contrast with "other" Muslims outside or inside China, with whom they might have stood together depending on the situation. Additionally, he explores how the flexibility of Hui self-demarcation depended on over whom they tried to win an advantageous position in their struggle for legitimacy.

We further include discussions on the boundaries between two sections of the Hui. Dror Weil depicts how the introduction of Persian Sufi works, including Najm al-Daya's *Mirṣād al-ʿibād* by some Hui Muslim scholars into their curricula in the 17th century, shaped early modern Chinese Islamic scholarship. According to Weil, Hui Muslim scholars negotiated between positions of philologist and philosopher who respectively produced different reading practices and translation methods to understand the texts. Additionally, Hui Muslim scholars straddled the borders of Islamic theology, philosophy of nature, and history through their efforts to make sense of *Mirṣād al-ʿibād*.

Aaron Glasserman highlights that the sectarian division within the Hui during the modern period was not as absolute. Each Hui Muslim scholar in the modern era was and is often labeled either a conservative in Chinese Islamic traditions or a reformist claiming to purify "Chinese" Islam in accordance with the Qur'an and the *sunna*. Indeed, the conservatives and reformists often fiercely opposed each other. According to Glasserman, however, the two factions shared several ideas and references regarding Islamic law, although they reached different conclusions in their legal reasonings. In this aspect, the discrepancy of legal discussions between the conservative and the reformist seems to be less than that between modern and pre-modern Hui Muslim scholars.

These studies consider both the diverse social and cultural exchanges of the Hui with various "others," and their multiple efforts to fill cultural gaps in various times and spaces. This temporal and

[8]Wang suggests that some Hui people understand their Muslim-ness based on a syncretism of these three layers, whereas others regard the exclusive observance of the officially admitted Islam as an indispensable condition for being Chinese as well as a righteous Muslim. It is valuable to consider the difference between the current and early modern interpretations regarding the simultaneity of Muslim-ness and Chinese-ness. According to Ben-Dor Benite, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Hui Muslim scholars broadened a pre-existing range of who the Chinese literati were, understood it to include Islamic knowledge holders, and thereby overlapped Muslim-ness and Chinese-ness.

[9]Atwill 2018 focuses on situational and flexible identities of Tibetan Muslims (Kache) who had been recognized as Tibetans by themselves and other Tibetans, and explains that some of them identified themselves as Hui to survive after the PRC occupation.

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spatial overview not only helps in understanding the astoundingly long period of enduring coexistence with the "others," but also for relativizing conventional views of "Muslims" and "Chinese."

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