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## The Hui Muslims in China

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### Abstract

The Hui Muslim is the largest Muslim minority ethnic group in China. While global attention has largely focused on China's Uyghur Muslims, the Hui Muslims have remained relatively marginalized, resulting in prevalent misconceptions about their identity as native Chinese converts to Islam. This article seeks to correct these misconceptions by exploring the deep historical roots of the Hui Muslims. In doing so, the article aims to shed light on the development and evolution of this unique Muslim minority, emphasizing its distinctive ethnic identity within a prominently non-Muslim Chinese society.

**Keywords:** Hui, Muslim, China, ethnic identity

## Muslim Hui di China

### Abstrak

Orang Muslim Hui adalah kelompok etnis minoritas Muslim terbesar di China. Sementara perhatian global sebagian besar difokuskan pada Muslim Uighur di China, orang Muslim Hui tetap relatif terpinggirkan, yang menimbulkan miskonsepsi yang meluas tentang identitas mereka sebagai penduduk asli China yang memeluk Islam. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk memperbaiki miskonsepsi tersebut dengan mengeksplorasi akar sejarah yang mendalam dari orang Muslim Hui. Melalui eksplorasi tersebut, artikel ini dapat menjelaskan perkembangan dan evolusi dari minoritas Muslim yang unik ini, dengan menekankan identitas etnisnya yang khas dalam masyarakat China yang secara dominan bukan Muslim.

**Kata kunci:** Hui, Muslim, China, identitas etnis

### Introduction

There are officially 56 ethnic groups or nationalities recognized in China, with the Han constituting the largest, representing over 90% of the country's total population. With only a small fraction having converted to Islam, the Han are predominantly non-Muslim. Among these 56 groups, 10 are identified as Muslim ethnic groups: the Hui, Uyghur, Kazakh, Dongxiang, Kyrgyz, Uzbek, Salar, Tajik, Bao'an, and Tatar. According to data from China's National Bureau of Statistics, the collective population of these 10 Muslim ethnic groups exceeded 23 million by 2010. Notably, the Hui Muslims stand as the largest Muslim minority, with a population of approximately 10.58 million, constituting nearly 46% of the total Muslim population in China.

In recent years, global attention has increasingly focused on the Uyghur Muslims in China. However, the Hui Muslims, the largest ethnic Muslim group in China, have unfortunately remained marginalized or overlooked on the world stage. Despite occasional references in historical texts consulted by academics, there remains a conspicuous lack of accessible articles offering a comprehensive portrayal of the Hui Muslims in China. Consequently, the Hui Muslims, often labelled as Chinese Muslims by scholars, frequently encounter misperceptions, especially among the general populace, with many erroneously presuming them to be native Chinese converts to Islam.

This article aims to address this misperception by exploring the historical background of the Hui Muslims, thereby offering insight into the rise and development of this Muslim minority group and its distinctive ethnic identity in a predominantly non-Muslim Chinese society.

### The Origin of the Hui Muslims

Regarding the origin of the Hui Muslims in China, the tradition of the Hui Muslim community diverges significantly from accounts found in Chinese historical records.

According to *Huihui Yuanlai* (Origin of Hui Muslims) – a book written by a Hui Muslim in the early eighteenth century, the Hui Muslims in China were descendants of companions of Prophet (P.B.U.H) whose arrival to China was inspired by a dream that the second Chinese Tang emperor, Taizong (reigned from 626 – 649AD), had one evening:

One night, Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty dreamed that a roof beam of his golden palace was collapsing. The roof beam nearly smashed his head, but it was intercepted and pushed back by a man standing on the right-hand side of the bed. The man wore a green robe, and a white turban was wound around his head. He had a towel draped over his shoulder and a water kettle in his left hand. He had deep eye sockets, a high nose bridge, and a brown face. Alarmed, the emperor upon waking immediately summoned his counsellors. One of them, Xu Mao, knew at once what the problem was: the empire was in danger; this was the meaning of the falling roof beam. The strange man was a Hui, a Muslim from the western regions. The Great Tang Empire needed the Hui people for its

defence, he concluded (Broomhall 1910, Benite 2005).<sup>1</sup>

According to the story, the emperor sent a diplomatic mission to the western regions and in response a three-thousand-men delegation of the companions of the Prophet, led by Sayyid Sa'd Ibn Abi Waqqāṣ (r.a), the Prophet's maternal uncle, was sent to China in order to restore harmony and deliver the message of the Qur'an (Benite 2005).

The narratives from the Hui Muslim tradition, such as those found in *Hui Hui Yuan Lai*, have been widely disseminated and embraced by the Hui Muslim community in China for many centuries. Personal experiences of the author further substantiate this claim. From childhood, my father, a Chinese illiterate imam, recounted various stories from *Hui Hui Yuan Lai*, which I can vividly recall even prior to formal education on Chinese historical texts. However, such narratives which are widely spread and known among the Hui Muslim communities for centuries have been dismissed by historians as lacking factual basis and deemed purely imaginative.

Differing from the Hui Muslim's tradition, Chinese historical records indicate that the Hui people are descendants of ancient Arab and Persian Muslim merchants who traversed the overland and maritime Silk Road during the Tang-Song dynasties (618-1279 AD). Additionally, they include individuals who were war captives from Central Asia and the Middle East, transported to China by the Mongol army in the 13th century (Zhengui 2012).

### Maritime Muslims During the Tang-Song Era

Official Chinese records do not specify the exact time when the earliest Muslims arrived in China. However, the *Jiu Tang Shu*, or the annals of the Old Tang dynasty,

in some details but the substances are the same (Broomhall 1910).

<sup>1</sup> Marshall Broomhall mentioned in his book that *Huihui yuanlai* has several editions which differ

documented the initial visit of diplomats dispatched by Caliph Othman in 651 AD (Zhengui 2012). This date is widely regarded by the majority of Chinese historians as the most credible evidence of Islam's official introduction to China (Zhengui 2012). Nonetheless, Jin Jitang contends that Islam was potentially introduced to China as early as 628 AD, based on his analysis of historical documents (Jitang 2000).

Ma Tianying, in his brief booklet, recounts the tale of Saad Lebid (may Allah be pleased with him), a companion of the Prophet Muhammad, who purportedly arrived in China and spread the message among Arab and Persian traders in Quanzhou during the years between the Hijra year 9-14 (631 AD – 636 AD) (Tianying 1991). Unfortunately, the source for this account was not cited by the author.

Despite the lack of consensus regarding the exact entry of Islam into China, historians speculate that Arab and Persian Muslims likely arrived earlier than the documented historical records suggest (Zhengui 2012). This supposition is reasonable, given that early Arab Muslims were primarily traders who could conduct business travel even during the lifetime of the Prophet and before the establishment of the Islamic state.

Early Muslims came to China through two routes: one from the north via land and the other from the south by sea.

The commercial intercourse between China and Arabia dates back several centuries prior to the rise of Islam (Broomhall 1910). During the Tang dynasty (617- 907 AD) the ancient overland Silk Road connecting China, Central Asia and Europe was reopened again by the Tang government. Foreign diplomats and merchants from Arabia, Persian, Central Asia, and other countries came to Chang An (today Xi'an China), the capital of the Tang to pay tribute and do business. Many Arab and Persian Muslim merchants chose to settle down in Chang An, some emissaries didn't go back to their countries either after their

mission was completed in China. Those settlers regarded themselves as *zhu tang*, (literally means residing in Tang), or "residents of Tang" (Sen 2009). However, the overland Silk Road was always disturbed by political instability in Central Asia. Especially after the devastating An Lushan Rebellion in 755, China had little overland contact with the Islamic world because this rebellion marked the end of Chinese control over Central Asia and the overland trade routes. The powerful nomadic states such as the kingdom of *Tubo* (modern-day Tibet) arose to power in Central Asia, as a result, blocking the Silk Road through Central Asia. Following this period, the Maritime Silk Road experienced a surge in activity, with maritime trade between China and the Islamic world witnessing a significant upswing. Along China's southern coast, several important port cities emerged, such as Guangzhou, Fuzhou, Quanzhou, and Hangzhou. A considerable influx of Arab and Persian merchants travelled to China via sea routes, establishing residences in these bustling port cities. Engaged in commerce, these merchants also invested in land and property, and often entered into marriages with Chinese women. As a result, many of them chose to settle permanently in China. The tragic massacre of 120,000 Muslims in Guangzhou during the Huang Chao rebellion in 879 serves as a poignant indication of the substantial Muslim population existing in China during the late Tang dynasty (Zhengui 2012). This rebellion, regarded by historians as one of the most devastating events to afflict China, effectively halted Arab interactions with China, particularly maritime trade from Arabia, under the Tang dynasty for a considerable period. It wasn't until the Song dynasty that trade relations between the two regions experienced a resurgence and flourished once more.

Following the downfall of the Tang dynasty, China entered a period of chaos and disunity which lasted more than a half century. In 961 Zhao Kuangying established the Song dynasty and set up its capital in

Kaifeng (today Kaifeng, Henan Province). However, the Song never controlled the whole China completely. The two nomadic powerful states Jurchen Jin and Qidan Liao controlled many lands in North China. In 1127, Jurchen Jin's forces invaded Kaifeng, the Song emperor fled to Hangzhou in South China. Under such circumstances, the trade through the overland Silk Road in the north was seriously affected. Soon the maritime trade surpassed the overland trade and became the major path between China and Islamic world.

During the Song period, maritime routes played a significantly amplified role in Chinese trade with the Islamic world compared to the Tang era. The Song government implemented many measures to enhance maritime trade with foreign entities, including setting up foreign trade administration offices in key port cities, dispatching envoys to Arabia, etc. (Zhengui 2012). Consequently, maritime trade emerged as one of the principal revenue streams for the Song administration, with tax revenue from maritime activities surging to 20 percent of the total government income (Zhengui 2012). An imperial edict by Song Emperor Gaozong in 1137 stated that "the profit from merchant shipping is the richest. If we take proper measures to manage it, the profits would amount to millions. Isn't it a better way than just taxing the people" (Zhengui 2012).

The favorable political and commercial atmosphere fostered a significant influx of Arab and Persian Muslim merchants into Song China. The number of Muslims settlers in China increased significantly evident by the large-scale cemeteries and the emergence of mosques. A Song writer Fang Xinru in his book *Nanhai Bai Yong* recorded the cemeteries in Guangzhou that "(the tombs of Muslims) more than several thousands, all heading west" (Zhengui 2012).

During the Tang-Song era several important mosques were built in Quanzhou and Guangzhou showcasing the vibrant

Muslim presence in these cities. Notably, the Huaisheng Si (Mosque of Commemorating the Prophet), believed to have its roots in the Tang period, stands as one of the earliest mosques in Guangzhou. In 1009 AD, Arab Muslims established the Ashab Si, also known as Shenyou Si (the Mosque of the Companions of the Prophet). Additionally, in 1131 AD, a Persian Muslim sponsored the construction of the Qinjin Si (the Mosque of Pure and Clean). Furthermore, the Yemen Mosque, thought to trace back to the 8th or 9th century, was attributed to an Arab Muslim from Yemen. Yusuf Chang estimates that the Muslim population during the Song dynasty might have reached 2 million although there is no sufficient historical data supporting his claim (Chang 1987).

The influx of Muslim immigrants from Arabia and Persia to China began during the Tang dynasty and persisted through the Song dynasty. Primarily comprised of Arab and Persian traders and merchants, these immigrants, commonly referred to by Chinese scholars as 'maritime Muslims,' predominantly arrived in China via sea routes (Jitang 2000). Integrating into Chinese society, they married local Chinese women, acquired land, and constructed homes. Embracing Chinese customs, they adopted the Chinese language and attire, with some even opting for Chinese names for themselves and their children (Zhengui 2012). Over time, these immigrants, along with their Chinese spouses, played a pivotal role in establishing the foundation for what eventually evolved into the Hui Muslim community in China.

### **Muslim Immigration During the Yuan Mongol Empire**

Historians are of the opinion that maritime Muslims contributed only a small portion to the early Muslim population in China (Zhengui 2012). One of the reasons is not all maritime Muslims were permanent settlers. Some settled in China temporarily for business purposes. Once the business was completed or the profit was not

desirable, they left for other places. Another very important reason is during the time of war, many early Muslims in the south were killed or forced to escape from China.

Historians believe that the primary source of Muslim immigrants, who later become the major force in the formation of the Hui ethnic group, are war captives from Central Asia, Arabia and Persia. These captives were transported to China by the Mongol army during its extensive conquests, encompassing soldiers, artisans, scholars, women, and children (Zhengui 2012). Commencing in the 13th century, the Mongol army embarked on a series of conquests that spanned Central Asia, the Middle East, parts of Europe, and China. Whenever a city fell under Mongol control, the fate of its inhabitants varied: young men were conscripted into the Mongol army, artisans were coerced into forced labor, while women and children were subjected to slavery. Following the conquest of Urgench, the capital of Khwarazm, the largest Muslim nation in Central Asia during the 13th century, the Mongol army transported over 100,000 Muslim artisans to China (Juvaini 1958). Similarly, on another occasion, 30,000 artisans from Samarkand and Bukhara were relocated to Xunmalin in China (Juvaini 1958).

After the Mongols established the Yuan dynasty, the borders between China and Central Asian countries were effectively dissolved, allowing people to move freely within the expansive Mongol Empire. This facilitated the migration of numerous Muslim scholars and merchants from Central Asian and Middle Eastern regions to China, where they settled permanently.

Their integration into Chinese society, including intermarriage with Chinese women and within their own communities, gave rise to a substantial Muslim population in China. These Muslims, along with their descendants, combined with other Muslims who had already been residing in China since the Tang and Song dynasties, formed a

distinctive and significant ethnic group within the country.

Starting from the Yuan dynasty, they were named the *Hui*, or *Huihui* (Huaizhong and Zhenggui 1995). The Ming dynasty chronicle states that during the Yuan dynasty, the Hui people spread over the whole of China (*Yuan shi Huihui bian tianxia*) (Leslie 1986).

### **Evolution of the Hui Identity and Emergence of the Hui Ethnic Group**

For centuries, the Hui Muslims endured a status of outsider hood within China, existing as a diasporic community with transient roots. From the initial arrival of Muslims in China, their identity underwent a gradual transformation through integration into local Chinese society, alongside the proliferation of Muslim populations and the establishment of Muslim communities. Initially perceived as complete foreigners and guests during the Tang-Song era, their status shifted to that of subjects of China during the Yuan dynasty. The governmental policies towards Muslims in each historical period played a pivotal role in the evolution of the Hui Muslims' identity.

#### ***Hushang and Fanke in Tang-Song Era (618-1279 AD)***

The Tang dynasty (618-907 AD) was characterized as an open and cosmopolitan empire, which helped foster the development of a prosperous Muslim community within China. Although the Song dynasty was not as open as the Tang, the Muslim communities in China were already well established, and so the Song dynasty continued many of the policies that the Tang had implemented (Benite 2005). Thus, the Tang and Song dynasties had very similar policies that encouraged the initial growth of Muslim communities throughout China's major trading cities. The most important of the government policies is the open foreign trade policies which the Tang and Song dynasties adopted to attract foreign traders to their ports. The Tang dynasty, in 714,

established a dedicated office of foreign trade in Guangzhou to oversee and facilitate foreign commerce. This office played a crucial role in promoting trade with China by enforcing shipping regulations and trade protocols (Sen 2009). Similarly, during the Song dynasty, foreign trade offices were established in key port cities like Guangzhou, Quanzhou, and Hangzhou (Huaizhong and Zhenggui 1995). Notably, in 966, Song emperor dispatched envoys to Arab nations, and in 987, the Song government once again sent envoys abroad to invite foreign traders and bolster trade ties with China (Huaizhong and Zhenggui 1995).

Since the Tang dynasty, Arab and Persian Muslim merchants flocked to China to pursue trade, many of them chose to settle down in China. Moreover, some emissaries chose not to return to their homelands after their missions were completed in China. They regarded themselves as *zhutang*, (literally means residing in Tang), or “residents of Tang” (Huaizhong and Zhenggui 1995). However, the Tang as well as the Song government never considered them as their permanent residents. In official Tang and Song documents, the Muslims were referred to as “*hushang*” (foreign businessman) or “*fanke*” (foreign guest), their children were referred to as “*tushen fanke*,” (local-born foreign guest) (Sen 2009). This highlights that the Muslims were seen as temporary inhabitants.

During the eighth century, foreigners and Chinese lived together in China, the fast-growing number of *fanke* caused concerns from the Tang government. Under Emperor Tang Wenzong, who ruled in the years between 836 and 840, a law was implemented that prohibited Muslims from marrying local Chinese citizens, owning houses and rice fields. Furthermore, they had to live in designated foreign quarters, called *fanfang*. Although under the Song dynasty, the prohibition of marrying locals was lifted, the *fanfang* were very much kept in tact (Sen 2009).

*Fanfang* was both a residential and commercial area the Chinese government designated for foreigners. All foreigners were required to live and do business within *fanfang*. Due to a vast majority of these foreign traders were Muslims, so the majority of residents in *fanfang* were Muslims. However, the Chinese government gave great freedom to Muslims in *fanfang*. They were free to practice their own religion, customs, speak their own languages etc (Sen 2009). Muslims were allowed to build mosques in *fanfang*. Under the *fanfang* system, a *fanzhang* (headman or chief of *fanfang*) was first elected by the Muslim community and was then appointed by the government authorities to govern the *fanfang*. *Fanzhang* wore Chinese official robes and was given an office to conduct his official business. *Fanzhang's* responsibilities include managing daily affairs in *fanfang*, promoting trade and receiving foreign traders, taking charge of religious affairs and settling legal disputes within *fanfang* (Sen 2009).

During the Tang-Song era, *fanfang* was given full freedom of religion and a certain amount of judicial power by the government. When legal disputes occur within a religious or ethnic group the laws of that group should be followed. However, if disputes arise between different minorities they should be resolved by Chinese laws (Huaizhong and Zhenggui 1995). *Fanzhang* in Muslim community was entrusted to settle the dispute among the Muslims according to Islamic law.

A famous Arabic book “*Akhbar al-Sin wa al-Hind*” (Information about China and India) recorded an Arab merchant Sulaiman who came to China in 851:

The merchant Sulaimen al-Tajir relates that Khanfu (Guangzhou in Arabic) is the gathering place of the merchants. Due to the residency of many Muslim merchants in Khanfu (Guangzhou), there is a Muslim entrusted by the ruler of China with arbitration over the

Muslims who travels to and stay in this region. This is according to the instruction of the King of China. On festival days, he leads the Muslims in prayer; he delivers a sermon and prays for the Sultan. Indeed, the Iraqi merchants do not contest the authority of his judgment, his implementation of law, because his actions and the judgment he gives are just, and equitable, and conformable to Quran and Sunna (Broomhall 1910).

Early Muslims in China, as a small minority who believed in a foreign religion and lived side by side with the Han majority were inevitably faced with the acculturative pressure of the majority. *Fanfang* provided an ideal protection for Muslims as they lived separately, although forcibly, from idol worship and diets that were heavily pork-based. Such separation is very important and essential for keeping their Islamic faith, especially their young generation who could be much less influenced by their non-Muslim peers. As such early Muslims in *fanfang* remained un-acculturated.

### **Hui and Huihui in Yuan Dynasty**

Mongol conquest brought a big Muslim population to China. In Yuan dynasty Muslims in China experienced great changes in both social and political life. Incidentally, the Muslim status as simple guests of China was finally eradicated with the Mongol conquest of China and the establishment of the Yuan dynasty.

The Yuan dynasty began by resettling Muslims from Arabia, Persia and Central Asia to various parts of China, thus created a huge influx of Muslims to supplement the merchants who were already present in China. These Muslim immigrants were encouraged to settle and farm the land that became depopulated after the war (Benite 2005). Now, there was a significant Muslim population in rural areas of China, not just port cities where trade took place. The *fanfang* system in Tang-Song era was

dismantled as Muslims were no more restricted to live in small *fanfang* in several port cities. In Yuan dynasty, Muslims were allowed to live anywhere, but they lived together, formed Muslim community in many big cities (Broomhall 1910). Ibn Battuta mentioned in his book "in all the Chinese provinces, there is a town for Muslims, and in this they reside (Broomhall 1910)."

The conquest of Genghis Khan opened afresh the highway between East and West. Country borders between China and Central Asia countries along the overland Silk Road disappeared. A flood of Muslims of all kinds, Arabs, Persians, Central Asian passed freely, and scattered themselves gradually over China itself in a way they had never done before. The famous historian Juvaini wrote in his book *The History of The World Conqueror* "whereas to-day so many believers in the one God have bent their steps thither wards and reached the farthest countries of the East, and settled, and made their homes there, that their numbers are beyond calculation or computation (Juvaini 1958)."

Starting from the Yuan dynasty, for the first time in Chinese history, the Hui Muslims were officially recorded in government household registration system (Shusen 2012). This is a mile stone and a turning point in the evolution of Hui's identity, and it is considered a historic event in the formation of the Hui ethnic group (Shusen 2012). Before the Yuan dynasty, the Hui Muslims were considered as foreign guests, now they have become true China's citizens. The Yuan government created a separate household category for the Hui Muslims called *HuihuiHu* (Huihui household) among all other household categories such as *MengguHu* (Mongol household), *HanrenHu* (Chinese household) etc (Shusen 2012). This indicates that the Yuan government has already considered the Hui Muslim a separate ethnic group which was different from Chinese. From the Yuan dynasty onwards, Chinese historical records referred

to Muslims in China as *huihui* or *hui* (Huaizhong and Zhenggui 1995). The official history of the Ming dynasty chronicling its predecessor noted that "in the Yuan period, the *huihui* spread over the whole of China. By the Yuan dynasty the Muslims had extended to the four corners (of the country), all preserving their religion without change (Leslie 1986)." The population of Muslims in the Yuan dynasty is estimated at more than four million (Chang 1987). During the Yuan period, Quanzhou, as one of the most crucial port cities, reached its zenith. The city gained renown during this era as "*hui ban cheng*," signifying that half of its population consisted of Hui Muslims (Huaizhong and Zhenggui 1995).

In Yuan dynasty, the Hui Muslims attained the highest political status in their history. Kublai Khan, the first emperor of the Yuan dynasty, created a caste system which categorized all subjects of the Mongol empire into four classes. The first class is Mongols. The second class is *Semuren* (literally means people with coloured eyes), this includes Arabs, Persians, Central Asians, and other foreigners. The third class is Hanren, includes Chinese and some minority tribes in north China. The fourth and the lowest class is Nanren, all Chinese in south China (Jitang 2000). The Hui Muslims were ranked above the Chinese, second in status only to the Mongol overlords themselves.

The Mongol ruler employed a vast number of foreigners especially the Hui Muslims to help them to rule over the Han Chinese. Great number of Muslims served in Mongol's army and government. Some of the Muslim troops were enlisted in the Mongol forces such as the multi-ethnic Tannaqi Army (*tanmachi jun*), the elite forward unit, which served Khubilai Khan in his campaigns to conquer China and undertook garrison duties in occupied territories (Dillon 1999). The Records of the Yuan (*Yuanshi*) give many biographies of distinguished Muslims who were employed in the services of the Mongols. Such were Sayid Adjal (*sai dian chi*), a native of

Bukhuara, a reputed descendant of the Prophet, and the subsequent conqueror and governor of Yunnan. His son Nasir Al Din, who distinguished himself in war against Cochin China and Burma. A He Ma (Ahmad), the head of imperial finance in charge of finance administration of the state. He raised state revenue and instituted monopolies on a variety of commodities that would profit the state. A-lao-wa-ting (Ali ad-Din) and I-ssu-ma-yin (Ismail), who were sent from Persia to China as expert makers of the catapult used in the war (Shouyi 1999).

In Yuan dynasty the Hui Muslims increased their integration with the Chinese society. This is due to, firstly, when Muslims young men were forced to join Mongol army to fight alongside the Mongols most of the men often came without their families, and as a result married local Chinese women. Therefore, drafting Muslims into an army caused Muslims to fuse into Chinese society: first via marriage, and, with their children, by genealogy. Secondly Muslims in the Yuan dynasty were no more restricted to live in isolated *fanfang* as they did under the Tang and Song dynasties. They could live side by side with the Han Chinese. This increased the interaction between the Muslims and the Han, which caused the Muslims to reorient themselves so as to fit into the larger Chinese society, thus beginning the process of gradual acculturation. Thirdly to hold positions in the government, the Muslims had to take the civil service exam, and therefore had to learn Chinese in order to do so. Now, instead of knowing just their mother tongues such as Arabic, Persian, and other Central Asian languages, the Muslims also knew Chinese to a much better degree than they had previously.

There were major differences between Muslims in Yuan dynasty and Muslims during the Tang and Song dynasties. Muslims who came from overseas in the Tang-Song era did not consider themselves to be Chinese, whereas Yuan dynasty Muslims, not long after they had settled in



China, were already considering themselves to be Chinese citizens.

However, the Chinese were not so open to accepting the Muslims. Although Muslims were much more integrated and began to feel more attached to China, they were still alienated from the Han, as the Hui Muslims were seen as their oppressors due to their alliance with Mongol rulers. To further the inequality between the Han and the Hui, the Hui and the Han were treated differently in criminal law in Yuan China (Dillon 1999). This preferential treatment of Muslims further encouraged their migration to China, thus elevating the tension between the Han and the Hui (Sen 2009). The tension proves to be significant after the fall of the Yuan dynasty, when the Han Chinese took back control of the state.

During the Yuan dynasty, the influence of Islam expanded rapidly, evidenced by the emergence of a significant number of mosques. By this period, mosques were already established in most major cities across China, spanning from the northern capital Yanjing (modern-day Beijing) to southern cities like Guangzhou and Quanzhou, from eastern Hangzhou to central Xi'an, and southwest to Kunming (Zhengui 2012). An inscription on a tablet in Dingzhou attests to this expansion, stating, "Today, as near as in the capital city, as far as in other provinces, there are more than ten thousands mosques, all facing west.... (Zhengui 2012)." In the Tang-Song era, Islam was referred to as "Dashi Fa" or "Dashi Jiaodu," meaning the customs of Arabs. However, during the Yuan period, Islam was officially recognized as a religion akin to Buddhism and Taoism. It was termed "Qinzheng Jiao" (the pure and true religion) or "Huihui Jiao" (the religion of the Hui) (Zhengui 2012).

### **Sinicization of the Hui Muslims in China**

In 1368, the Mongol Yuan dynasty was overthrown by ethnic Han Chinese who established Ming dynasty afterwards. Having being humiliated for nearly a

hundred years, the first Ming emperor Zhu Yuanzhang set to reassert Chinese supremacy and re-establish the Confucian concept of world order immediately after he ascended to the throne. Series of laws were implemented to sinicize all minority groups, especially Mongols and the Hui Muslims, and force them to integrate to Chinese society.

In 1368, a decree was issued to ban foreign dresses, foreign languages and foreign surnames (Sen 2009). During the Yuan period, many Hui Muslims had already started to change their ethnic names to Chinese names as a result of ethnic integration. After the Ming government officially banned foreign names, large scale of the Hui population adopted Chinese surnames.

In order to "curb the growth of [foreign] communities", in 1372, the Ming government enforced a law which prohibited marriages within the Hui ethnic group. "Since the people of Mongol and *Semu* (mainly Hui Muslims) have settled down in China, they are allowed to marry Han Chinese. (but) marriages within the (respective) ethnic group are not permitted. Those who violate the law will be sentenced to be state slaves" (Sen 2009).

The Ming's language policy was the most important assimilation measure with extremely wide-ranging impact on the Hui. During the Yuan dynasty, the Hui Muslims were multilingual, they spoke Arabic, Persian, Turkic, and Chinese language. The Arabic, Persian and Turkic were used in their families and among themselves, while Chinese language were spoken in public and with the Han Chinese. However, Arabic was the *lingua franca* of the Hui ethnic group (Shusen 2012). Banning the foreign language caused the Hui to lose their native tongues of Arabic or Persian, rendering them unable to understand the Qur'an and other religious books. By the mid-Ming dynasty, the Chinese language became the only language of communication in the Hui ethnic group. Most of the Hui switched completely from Arabic to Chinese language in all walks

of life, and only a handful of literati like Imams and Islamic scholars could understand the Arabic and Persian languages (Shusen 2012).

The Sinicization policy of the Ming government had a significant impact on the Hui Muslims in China. Since then, the Hui Muslims have become increasingly assimilated into Chinese culture. They speak the Chinese language, and their physical characteristics have undergone considerable changes due to generations of intermarriage with ethnic Han Chinese.

Despite the pervasive influence of Chinese culture over their extended presence in China, the Hui Muslims have steadfastly preserved their Islamic faith. throughout history Hui Islamic scholars-initiated waves of Islamic revival movements during the Ming, Qing, and Republic of China eras to strengthen and retain the Islamic faith among the Hui communities in China. Today the Hui Muslims' unwavering commitment to their Islamic faith and practices remains their defining characteristic, distinguishing them distinctly from the broader ethnic Chinese population. While many scholars categorize the Hui as Chinese Muslims, this classification has resulted in misconceptions, particularly among the general populace. Some mistakenly believe that the Hui are ethnic Han Chinese who have converted to Islam. It is crucial to understand that the Hui people have never identified themselves as ethnic Chinese, underscoring the complexity of their ethnic and cultural identity within the Chinese socio-cultural landscape.

## Conclusion

The origins of the Hui Muslims in China trace back to early Muslim immigrants from Arabia, Persia, and Central Asia, rather than being indigenous to China, as mistakenly believed by many people. Arab and Persian Muslim merchants began arriving in China by sea as early as the 7th century, while Muslim war captives from the Mongol army

in the 13th century also contributed significantly to the Muslim population during the Tang, Song, and Yuan dynasties. These Muslim immigrants often married Chinese women and settled permanently in China, giving rise to a new ethnic group united by their shared Islamic faith, known as the *Hui* or *Huihui*, particularly during the Yuan dynasty.

The ethnic identity of Hui Muslims in China underwent a transformation over time. Initially categorized as "*fanke*" or foreign guests confined to specific "*fanfang*" or foreign quarters during the Tang and Song eras, they gradually gained full citizenship rights during the Yuan dynasty, evolving from foreigners to fully recognized Chinese citizens.

The Sinicization policy enforced by the Ming government exerted a profound influence on the Hui ethnic group. Under this policy, Hui Muslims were forced to abandon their native language and compelled to intermarry with ethnic Han Chinese. Consequently, the Hui Muslims underwent significant acculturation to Chinese cultural norms. Despite this forced assimilation, they have steadfastly preserved their Islamic faith and Muslim identity. This religious adherence remains a distinguishing feature that sets them apart from the ethnic Han Chinese population.

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