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Rooted in turbulence: arguing ethnicity in folk narratives about violence*

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Abstract

This article begins with a folk idea, or stereotype, attached to the Hui Muslim minority in China: that of being violent. The analysis focuses on how ideas of ethnicity are contextualized in folk or popular narratives about violence. Specifically, cases presented in this article are narratives where different aspects of violence feature either positively or negatively: as a collective ethnic mark of being unreasonable, as martial spirit, as fighting prowess and so forth. This article argues that differently contextualized ideas of being violent or narratives about violent events enable Hui and non-Hui to not only establish ethnic turfs, but also to co-exist and merge ethnic boundaries, rendering ethnic borders open to redrawing and straddling.

"In Chinese writing about Muslims over the past three hundred years, one theme overrides all others – that of violence" (Lipman 1997, p. xxx).

Although violence should not be considered as the main definer of Hui identity, and the cited statement from Johnathon Lipman should be perceived against a specific historical background, it does spell out the stereotypical idea of being violent attached regardless of context to one of the ethnic groups officially recognized and labeled as Muslims: the Hui people (回民 or 回族). In this essay I study how ideas about violence differently instantiated in folk and popular narratives help contextualize their ethnicity and (re-)draw ethnic boundaries. I argue that narratives about Hui's violence do not always represent ethnic divisions between Hui and other ethnic groups, but can also create a more inclusive groupness to, for instance, integrate the Hui into the Chinese people or "Chinese Nation" (*Zhonghua Minzu* 中华民族). This article therefore further suggests a "contextual nature" (Harrell 2001, p. 15) of Hui people's ways of being ethnic, and the fact that the Hui's ethnicity could both emerge and disappear from the interactions between the Hui, the state, and the also socially constructed ethnic majority: the Han. By doing so, this article also engages with the general discussion against a primordialist perception of ethnic identity (Chandra 2012, pp. 135–40).

Some caveats should be made here before initiating the discussion. First, this research does not intend to provide an explanation of ethnic violence (for such discussion see Varshney 2002), but only read ethnic identity in the discussion of ethnic violence. Second, although this article engages with the discussion of Hui uprisings (see Atwill 2005; Schluessel 2020, and Kim 2004 for instances),

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it exempts itself from the study of large scale violent conflicts *per se*. Instead, the focus will be more on folk or popular narratives. And finally, this article does not have any practical suggestion on interethnic relationships in China.

Groupness and violence

It has been well argued that communities are "only occasionally and accidentally 'culture-bearing units'" (Moerman 1965, p. 1215) that just "emerge in performance" of what they do as a group (Noyes 1995, p. 452). This means that a group's boundaries could be drawn and only contemporarily drawn when some people participate in the same practices under certain contextualized circumstances, or are depicted as doing so. Ethnic groups are no exception. As Roger Brubaker reminds us, scholars should think of ethnicity in terms of "groupness as a contextually fluctuating conceptual variable" (2004, p. 11). Any groupness, we should note, when suggesting a temporary performance of difference, may also form a "contact zone" (Pratt 1991) that inevitably invites communication and interaction between in and out of the group in question. In other words, groupness offers a space for social relationships to take place, so that certain form of identity is expressed and perceived. Previous researches on Hui identity have analyzed how the Hui groupness in different social and historical contexts is expressed, therefore ethnic boundaries are constantly re-drawn. For instance Ha (2022) discusses a specific Hui community, namely the Chinese Jahirryya Sufis' sense of community based on an epistemology of ambivalence and self-doubt by detailedly presenting the sect's daily and gendered participation in their soundscape. Erie (2016) studies Linxia Prefecture where the Hui population is dense, to see how the Islamic law which bears unofficial, folk, or in Chinese "*minjian*," attributes negotiates with the official legal principles to find a place for Huiness in the local communities. Both Zhao (2018) and Chang (2015) study how different aspects of Hui identity are prioritized or downplayed, encouraged or suppressed through the lenses of material culture, foodways, as well as language and ethnic-classification policy. Gillette (2000) studies how Hui highlight their ethnicity in consumer choices to propose a way of modernization different from their Han neighbors. Gladney (1991) analyzes contemporary Hui's identification strategies and concerns behind them including food taboo, imagined genealogy, ethnic endogamy and so forth.

Violent events also provide important milieux for scholars to study Hui's groupness. For instance, both Hammond (2020) and Nakanishi (2018) present how Hui individuals and groups during World War II chose to identify themselves with different powers inside and outside of China to survive the war. Schluessel (2020) studies how the Xiang Army's interactions with Muslim others, such as Chinese speaking Hui and Turkic Musulmans helped to establish common identity among Chinese speaking non-Muslims in the late Qing Dynasty. He also uses Hui uprisings as a historical context to demonstrate the strategies applied by different Muslim groups in order to make differences or claim commonality. Similarly, Atwill (2005) points out that in the Panthay Rebellion in the Qing Dynasty, rebels such as Ma Rulong, who was tagged ethnically as Hui, actually positioned their religiosity over ethnicity in order to rally more allies. Lipman (1997) explores the complex self-identification processes and conflicts between different Hui Sufi sects against the background of Hui uprisings in the Qing Dynasty, and how Hui following different Islamic teachings in China's Republican era embraced Chinese nationalism. And both Lipman (2004, p. 19) and Gladney (1991, p. 137) mention violence committed against Hui, and its implications to Hui's self and imposed identifications.

However, one should note that although interethnic conflicts are rare, violence is still linked to the Hui as an attribute, a form of identity or a way of understanding them by some in contemporary China. Therefore, contemporary folk or popular narratives that try to address the relationship between Hui's groupness and violence still deserve discussion, especially when one looks from a comparative perspective, as such narratives are used by both Hui and non-Hui, and the tones could be both negative and positive. Therefore, below I analyze five sets of narratives pertaining to conflicts where one side or the other finds it convenient to invoke or demonstrate "good" or "bad" violence of Hui people, and Hui ethnicity is either emphasized or understated, to (re)draw their boundaries either as an ethnic group, or as part of a "Chinese Nation." Specifically, the first set is an online discussion, the purported

violent behavior of a Hui man is brought in as a kind of red herring by a non-Hui poster seemingly looking for validation for his/her uncle's role in a common street tussle; in the second set, Hui's own appropriation of their violence redefines it as a power-enhancing ethnic boundary; in the third one, traumatic experiences of interethnic violence ironically force ethnic inclusion; in the forth set of narratives, one finds Huis' fighting prowess praised in combats against the Collaborationist Chinese Army[1], leading to overlapped scopes of "nation" and "ethnicity;" the last one is a migration legend in which the Hui's ancestors as mercenaries settled down in China, with the reward of Han wives for helping the Emperor pacify a rebellion. These narratives are all contemporary, either newly emerged, or new representations of pre-existing themes. Resources are diverse, including online resources, news report, television drama, and oral traditions. Yet these narratives are interrelated, as all of them present how the three important social actors in Hui's everyday life: the Han, the state and the Hui themselves interact around ideas and narratives about violence, to negotiate changing ideas about a proper locus for Hui people vis-à-vis non-Hui.

The narratives being discussed cannot be oversimplified as a prescriptive point for arbitrarily assuming any Hui individual's role in interethnic relations, nor do they homogeneously suggest that interethnic conflicts sharpen ethnic boundaries. Rather, they facilitate different descriptions of Hui, and their complex interethnic interactions and social relations. Moreover, to discuss Hui's ethnicity in the context of violence is not to assume that all Hui share the same experiences or ideas about violence. The discussion only provides a possible way to understand the formation and changes of Hui's ethnic groupness under some circumstances, without claiming a general and absolute explanatory power on a Hui identity.

Crash of ethnicity

In this section I will illuminate how particular events are gathered to become evidence for reinforcing a collective characteristic or cultural trait of a people, thus a legitimizing rhetoric for ethnic division and boundary-making.[2]

I shall first share a response to a post (Fig. 1) found online, with the caveat that similar posts are no longer seen as the Chinese internet environment has become intolerant of ethnic discrimination:

> … just search on Baidu for (the response provides a list of nominal conflicts here) and you'll have deeper understanding about Hui, this sinful ethnic group, … while facing Hui's bullying and provoking, if you won't lose too much, just take it, because you are not facing a single Hui person, but a huge Hui group… coming from all around the country to fight against you, an individual …[3]

This paragraph is in response to a question: "What can we do when encountering unreasonable (*bu jiangli* 不讲理) Hui people?" posted on a website called "Baidu," one of the most used Chinese search engines. The question was not about an ethnic conflict *per se*; rather, it began when the original

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[1]The military forces of the puppet governments founded by Imperial Japan in China during the Second Sino-Japanese War.

[2]As aforementioned, the Hui people are actually a diverse group and their understandings of their "identity" differ, and some scholars have suggested that the term "Hui" is too ambiguous and offered alternatives as "Sino-phone Muslims" (Lipman 1997) or "Muslim Chinese" (Gladney 1991), however, I will stay with the term Hui in this article, as it is now accepted by both the people inside this group and outside of it. More importantly, people in China, celebrating Hui or not, have endowed this term with rich layers of meaning so that the mere mention of it inspires multiple powerful sentiments both positive and negative which other terms cannot. Similarly, when the group of Han is mentioned in this article, we should also be aware that the intention is not to over generalize. After all, "what is problematic is not that a particular term is used, but how it is used" (Cooper and Brubaker 2005, p. 63).

[3]This post was available at: http://zhidao.baidu.com/question/144209525 [2011–11–12]. Part of the same post was found at: https://iask.sina.com.cn/b/iRcO5WLg30jr.html [2020–02–01]. Both posts however are no longer accessible.

Figure 1. "What can we do when encountering unreasonable Hui people?"

poster's uncle was involved in a traffic accident when the uncle crashed into a Hui person who happened to pass by. When the two parties attempted to negotiate a compensation, the uncle claimed a lower one. Consequently, he was beaten up by the Hui man's friends. What is interesting is that, although the ethnicity of people involved in the traffic accident does nothing to explain the situation, ethnicity is singled out right away in the cited post. The poster and responder following the post both tried to explain the conflict by referring to not the individuals involved, but a naturalized Hui trait as being "unreasonable" or violent.

The response to the post is but another reiteration of an old stereotype. Notice that the person who responded, rather than answering the question of the poster regarding the traffic accident tussle, vastly expanded his/her response into an occasion to list several "Hui Rebellions" or ethnic conflicts of unofficial and even suspicious resources. Hui people's violent struggles were arbitrarily labeled as "rebellions" or simplified as "conflicts" with no mention of profound societal and historical reasons of the violent events.[4] Although class struggle, social justice, financial well-being etc. are other issues that may dominate critical or celebratory narratives about specific rebellions as well, when ethnicity is involved, however, the events are suddenly all about ethnicity. Besides, whenever a conflict happens, the Hui are always the presumed bullies, without mentioning any Hui loss in these conflicts.

The all-about-ethnicity attitude, no matter in a street tussle or large scale conflict, "would claim the entire edifice of 'Our Culture' and 'Our Nation' for themselves" (Narayan 1997, p. 10), by an implication that no space is left at all for the minorities who also share the living space with the majority. Allan Pred's analysis on immigrants in Sweden is useful for understanding this response too:

> Through the metonymical magic of cultural racism, through its invisible logic, through the working of its common-sense discourses, individual transgression becomes collective guilt, becomes a confirmation of what the Other does and *what we do not do*, of who all of Them are and *who We are not.* (Pred 2000, p. 76, emphases original).

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[4]For instance, in his research on Panthay Rebellion in Qing Dynasty, David Atwill rightly points out that to attribute the conflict as purely ethnic would be "deceptive" and "the rebellion flowed out of a decade-long campaign of violence orchestrated by Han militias and Qing officials whose goal was to exterminate the Hui" (2005, p. 9). Excessive taxes is listed as a reason for the deteriorating relation between Tungan Hui and the Qing court in 1863 (Kim 2004, p. 40). Lipman's research (1997) focuses on the Hui uprisings during the same era. He presents reasons such as economic inequality and political manipulation for these uprisings.

In the traffic incident, violence as a stereotype is instrumentalized; it allows the responder to draw an ethnic boundary, which is at the same time a moral line between the imagined us and them. The act of generalization is the process of creating a "collective individual" (Handler and Linnekin 1984, p. 277) or rather, two collective individuals, one is named as Han, the other, Hui. No matter what the term Hui means in the mind of whoever is applying it, it is there. Violent becomes a tag, a naturalized identity shared by all Hui people.

In traffic accidents physical conflict between two sides are normally perceived as one on one interaction. Nonetheless, the one mentioned above between a Hui and a Han was no longer a normal accident involving just individuals, but became a contact zone of two imagined ethnic groups. Once the interaction in this particular contact zone is marked by violence, an individual's behavior will soon be absorbed into collective images of a whole people, to support self-reinforcing stereotypes.

Of course, the Han, China's ethnic majority, are not the only ones using narratives about interethnic physical conflicts to highlight ethnic boundaries. In the following section I shall share some modified versions of violence found in Hui people's own narratives, which, similar to the online post just shared, also comment on street fights between Hui and Han people. My data are obtained from both fieldwork and secondary resources.

Martial arts and solidarity

In this section the main focus will still be violence in daily interethnic interactions, with the narrators now switched to Hui. Although ethnic boundaries are still being highlighted, the ideas used to instantiate violence have changed, here to include more positive concepts such as martial spirit and ethnic solidarity.

Hui are famous for practicing martial arts, in Chinese *wushu* 武术. Gladney observed that Hui people "look up to famous *wushu* artists that took part in 'righteous uprisings' (*qiyi*) against oppressive regimes" (Gladney 1991, p. 198). Indeed, I have seen equipment for martial arts and bodybuilding in almost all the mosques I visited during my fieldwork in Shandong Province. However, unlike in Gladney's documentation, in everyday life martial arts are more practiced in gray areas but not for fighting upward: those who fought against oppressive regimes are not the only ones to be remembered, the one who skillfully employs martial arts in a not so decent street fight could likewise become a hero.

I am citing a narrative here: "With them [the Han] there was only one fight, twenty eight of them were thrown in the river. Huang Chengxi, a famous one, one of the 'Four Quick Wrestlers' …"[5] This is a piece of narrative collected from an old mosque member, the late Mr. Y in Jinan, Shandong Province in 2011. Apparently the wrestler Huang has become a legend in aged Hui people's memory about street life in Jinan, and his practicing of martial arts has been bonded with his fight. More accurately, opportunities for street fighting have become a reason for practicing martial arts. As Mr. Y later remarked: "Normally all the [Hui] kids should practice [wrestling], so they are prepared [for the street], and won't get bullied (*bu chi kui* 不吃亏) out there." We can clearly see the tension between Hui people and the world "out there" sensed by Mr. Y. The only way to avoid being bullied is to become good at practicing violence, to be "prepared."

Similarly celebrated in this kind of narratives is ethnic solidarity, or "*tuan jie* (团结)" in Chinese. Just as the online response shared in the previous section about how Hui from all over the country would come together to fight against Han, Hui themselves also refer to this sort of activities. This mobilization of co-ethnics is however positively re-instantiated as ethnic solidarity. During my fieldwork, I many times heard about the comment that the Hui were "tuan jie" in fighting against Han. In his analysis of "East Street Guo," a Hui family in Quanzhou, Fujian Province, Gladney also stated that the Guo took "solidarity" as their ethnic characteristic, and the very instance they highlighted as an

[5]This was from one conversation between me and Mr. Y, a then eighty-three years old mosque member in front of the in the Great South Mosque (*nan da si* 南大寺) of the City of Jinan, Shandong Province. After I mentioned the Hui-Han conflict, he paused for a while, then told this story.

evidence of this solidarity was to "hit people" together, to fight against threats from outside the community (1991, p. 313).

Unlike in the online post shared above, the Hui are no longer bullies in these narratives. Violence becomes a method to protect oneself from the bullies out there. Hui's violence is rendered positive, celebrated as martial spirit and ethnic solidarity. But not unlike in the online response, the positive renderings of violence still sharpen ethnic boundaries.

To briefly summarize these two sets of narratives, interethnic violence creates experiences that instantly mark ethnic boundaries, as well as facilitates further imaginations of ethnicity. However, as will be discussed in the following section, when a balance is broken, violence as a source of fear could ironically create a new groupness that hides ethnicity.

Relinquished ethnicity

Under this subtitle, it is easy for one to think of voluntary or forced conversion during ethnic violence. Of course there are such cases. Stories about how Hui people relinquish their Hui-ness during or after a mass ethnic conflict could be heard in many Hui communities, and traumatic feelings could linger for generations. For instance, certain villages are still remembered as having committed "*fan jiao*" 反教 in some places in Shandong Province, literally means that they "betrayed the religion" during ethnic conflicts. However, as noted at the beginning of this essay, to study large scale interethnic conflict is not the purpose. Focus of this part will therefore be folk or popular narratives about past violence, or traumatic experiences.

On this point, Schluessel rightly points out that traumatic experiences and mass conflicts between Muslim and non Muslim populations during late Qing Dynasty create imagined groupness among the Chinese speaking non Muslims in borderlands after the events ended (2020, pp. 174–75).

However, trauma brought by violence does not necessarily verify existing ethnic boundaries, it can also recreate different groupnesss where the powerless ironically identify with the powerful, as sometimes people choose to deny ethnicity to lower the risk of becoming victims. The famous Hui author Zhang Chengzhi documents oral history and folk narratives about Hui uprisings during the reign of Qianlong Emperor in the 1780s. In one story he recounts:

In another village that has been cleansed – Mizi Tan, a place located high on the Huanghe River highland, difficult to access, and its scenery is magnificent. Residents became basically Han people's descendants. I've heard that there are several Han families bearing the surname Ma. [Among them,] one old man, on the beam of his house, the villagers said that a Quran was found. So people said: your ancestors must be Hui. The old man Ma stamped with rage and cursed: "Who said that? Fuck his forefathers! How dare you say that I, your old man, am a Hui!" … (Zhang 1991, p. 65, translated by the author).

This violent conflict in question started from a Salar/Hui Uprising in 1781. The reason was the Manchu government's unfair treatment of two conflicting Islamic Sufi sects in Xunhua, Qinghai. However, this did not hinder it from firstly developing into an uprising against the Qing sovereignty, and later a chaotic ethnic violence against all Hui population in the region. Similar cases were not rare in history, and some actually became interethnic violence between Hui and Han, while the original causes no longer matter (see for instance Lipman 1997, p. 145). I propose situating this cited narrative in this later development, deprived of complex political details and nuances of the real reasons for conflicts, with only interethnic violence sensed: only in this way could we really understand this story.

The story is interesting in that "Ma (马)" is one Chinese surname that is very common among Hui people. Folk etymology has it that this surname is transformed from the Prophet Muhammad's name. So it was quite possible that the old man's family was really Hui. The story is thus about a desperate self-ethnic identification formed in the trauma left by interethnic violence: Mr. Ma was so irritated as

to refuse any Hui-ness, it of course could be that he disliked Hui, but it is also very likely that he learned from his forefathers' experiences that it is, or at least was dangerous to be a Hui.

Through violence, Hui people can unite and fight, bond violence with solidarity and deliver a message that their space is un-transgressable; or they can separate and flee, re-identify or de-mark themselves by relinquishing Hui-ness. The Hui, who ironically bear the stereotype of being violent, may abandon their ethnic heritage fearing to become victims of violence. After which, however, violence will still be part of their memory of how they became what they are now for a long time.

Of course, violence does not always force the denial of ethnicity using fear. In some cases violence uses positive connotations to merge ethnic boundaries by creating a more inclusive groupness. The following set of narratives will focus on this aspect of violence, to see how Hui's prowess in combat is welcomed, and their violence is celebrated by both Hui and Han, with ethnic boundaries constantly being merged and negotiated.

The Hui infantry

In this section I look at instances where Hui's violence was celebrated in battles against the collaborationist army under Japanese control, and how some Hui people, for instance those in the Hui Infantry were assimilated into the Chinese Nation for the very sake of their violent deeds, where ethnic boundaries were replaced by political ones.

> More than sixty bestial soldiers (*shou jun* 兽军, here insulting the Chinese collaborationist soldiers) were arrogantly heading North in their vehicles, but before the beasts (soldiers) could be prepared for the fight, fierce gunfire besieged them. In that battle, only five or six collaborationist soldiers fled, the rest of them were all annihilated (*jian mie* 歼灭) in Heng'an Drive within half an hour… (Ma Benzhai Tongzhi Bu Si 1984, p. 622, translated and annotated by the author. For a similar report, see also Huihui minzu yingxiong, zhonghua minzu yingxiong Ma Benzhai tongzhi 1944, p. 38).

This paragraph is a record made by an anonymous author writing about a battle happened between the Chinese collaborationist soldiers who fought for Imperial Japan; and the Hui Infantry (*Huimin Zhidui* 回民支队) which was under the leadership of the Communist Party. The Hui Infantry was formed mainly of Hui people and whose founder and commander Ma Benzhai was also a Hui.[6]

This battle description is interesting because firstly, in this battle, more than forty Chinese, most possibly the Han were violently killed by Hui "within half an hour," but the description is very positive and even cheerful. Secondly, animalization of minority others is common (for instance see Fabre-Vassas 1997), in this record, however, the ones who were dehumanized as "bestial" or "beasts" were the Han soldiers instead of the Hui minority. How can we understand this?

The reason for this cheerful record is that the battle reflected a triumph over collaborationists – deputies of Japan in China. In the battlefield, the contact zone described was a firing line, so narrow and deathly that no one would ever think of whether the firing occurring in it was due to inter-ethnic conflict, political conflict, or other reasons. In the record, that contact zone could however be revisited and contoured as politically oriented. The Hui infantry's triumph is not simply a military one, but is also a piece of evidence supporting the communists' righteousness. An implicit message is delivered, that all people in China, including the minorities support the cause of the communist values. And once the meaning of the battle was elevated to power struggle, political concern took precedence over ethnic distinctions. That is why in this instance the collaborationist army replaced the Hui as an other that could be dehumanized/animalized. The two sides were still Hui and Han and the interaction between them was still violent; however, when narrative switched its focus, the social entity that

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[6]The Hui Infantry was originally organized by Ma Benzhai and some other Hui people voluntarily in 1938 as a self-defense force, it was later incorporated by Chinese Communist Party's army, to fight against Japan as well as the Nationalist Party (See Ma 1984).

the Hui stood for was no longer their ethnic group, but the Chinese Nation represented by the Communist Party. As Hammond summarizes when discussing Hui Muslims' educational reforms during the Second Sino-Japanese War, that "[b]y sticking together as a country and resisting the Japanese, assimilationists claimed, Sino-Muslims could defeat the Japanese Empire and integrate themselves into the dominant Han Chinese community" (2020, p. 90. For similar observations see also Lipman 1997, p. 210).

However, in the case of this battle, it is hard to say that the Hui was "integrated." Not only because that the Hui had to kill in order to be integrated, but also because of their complex relationship with the dominant community. The Hui agreed upon committing violence on the collaborationist soldiers, but they also agreed that Hui were still different: the Hui Infantry was always marked, starting from its name. The Hui Infantry became a social entity with a layered identity, its ethnicity disappeared and emerged, its violence was celebrated, but could still be a marker of Hui-ness.

After Ma Benzhai the Hui Infantry commander's death in 1944, Mr. Zhou Enlai who would become the first Chinese Prime Minister five years later, granted Ma a title: "National Hero (*Minzu Yingxiong* 民族英雄)." Note that the Chinese term "*minzu*" used in this title is ambiguous because it could refer to either "nation" thus "Chinese Nation (*Zhonghua Minzu*)," which is a multi-ethnic unity cultivated by the Chinese government; or "ethnic group" i.e., the "Hui ethnic group (*Hui Zu*)." I have no evidence to say that Prime Minster Zhou created the ambiguity intentionally; however, this term is versatile enough to embrace all the subtle meanings, and allow all the interpreters to choose their preferred one.

Specifically, in the title of "Minzu Yingxiong," if we believe that "minzu" stands for the "Chinese Nation," the title could be thought of as an acknowledgment of Ma and the Hui Infantry, to integrate their contribution into the Nation's endeavor to end the wars. This group of Hui people, i.e., Ma Benzhai and his men, are thus integrated into the nation-state. This interpretation could reflect "Nationalities Unite," which as Gladney notes, is "the state's preferred slogan… intended to encourage all minorities to unite together with the Han majority for the good of the country (Gladney 1991, p. 313)." Of course, as suggested earlier, the integration was not an unconditional one, and Ma Benzhai's Hui-ness is still highlighted, making a second reading possible:

> We can read the term "minzu" in the title as referring to "the Hui minzu" or "the Hui ethnic group." Ma Benzhai then became an "ethnic hero." This interpretation may be criticized as narrow ethnicism, but it may equally have appeal to the Hui people: as it can be an honor for an ethnic group to have a personality who could be nominated as a hero by the government.

This ambiguity has always played a role in official broadcast. A 1944 article "Hui Ethnic Hero, Chinese National Hero Ma Benzhai (*Huihui minzu yingxiong, zhonghua minzu yingxiong ma benzhai*)" (1944, p. 35) was already celebrating this ambiguity by using the term "minzu" twice in its title, the first time for Hui ethnic group, and the second time for the Chinese Nation. In the year of 2004, a TV show called "*Minzu Yingxiong Ma Benzhai* (National Hero Ma Benzhai)" was on the third channel of Chinese Central Television (CCTV 3).[7] What is extremely interesting is, in the opening scene of this show, when Ma appears in the screen brandishing a machete (violently), a line of Arabic script saying "*al-batal l-qaumī yūsuf mā ban tšay* (meaning, National Hero Yusuf Ma Benzhai)" appears and tells us the "National Hero" has an Arabic name "*yūsuf*,"[8] making the hero's ethnic and religious characteristics stand out (Fig. 2). As most Chinese people, even Chinese Muslims, cannot read Arabic, what is the Arabic script doing here? Is it to remind Hui people of their heterogeneous heritage? Does it underscore the state's toleration of an ethnic culture? Or is it simply adding some attractive

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[7]A full version of this show is available online at: https://tv.cctv.com/2009/12/17/VIDE1354535095975409.shtml?spm=C55853485115.Pbqb0ldQ5nlz.0.0 [2023–06–14].

[8]Normally, a Hui obtains an Arabic name that is mostly found in the Quran when s/he is born, as a "*jing ming*," meaning, "Quranic name" or "religious name" as a sign of initiation. Here one can infer that Ma Benzhai's religious name was *yūsuf*.

exoticism (or exotic attractiveness)? I do not intend to impose any meaning on this line of script, by these questions, I am only presenting some possibilities.

In any case, ethnicity gives way to the grand narrative of nation state. The integration of Hui, although still related to violent conflicts, provides an opportunity for both Han and Hui to reconsider their ethnic boundaries and their relations with the state. In a grand narrative that highlights the Nation, violence is tamed and ethnicity blurred. On the other hand, the Hui, at least those in the Hui Infantry also used their violence to serve the Nation in order to be incorporated.

This integration-using-violence scenario is also observed in different political contexts. Lipman provides a similar case about Ma Fuxiang, the Hui warlord served the Republican government during the 1920s with his military power and claimed nationalistic unity with the majority Chinese, although superficially (1997, p. 175).

Of course, again, not all Hui in China could share the same mindset or process of being integrated, even for those who served the state using their violence. But it would be reasonable to argue that violence could become Hui's bargaining chip to negotiate with the state into the Chinese society, although the terms Hui, Chinese-ness and nation all have multiple meanings that change over history. Actually, the relationship between violence and Hui's national identity is even articulated in Hui's oral tradition. In the final set of narratives, such folktales will be shared and discussed.

Hui mercenary soldiers and their Han wives

In this section I will analyze, in a Hui folktale recounting their ancestors' arrival in China, how the Hui ethnic group's boundary is initially clear and then blurred, but all because of their violent deeds.

> It has been said that during the reign of the emperor Tang Xuanzong, the general An Lushan rose up in rebellion. The emperor had to seek refuge in Lingzhou. At that time Guo Ziyi was the commander in chief who led the Tang army against the rebel forces. Because Guo Ziyi's army was not large enough, he had to go and borrow some soldiers from the Huihe people. … And so, three thousand Han people were given in exchange for three hundred Huihe soldiers.

> The battle lasted a long time. An Lushan was finally defeated and Chang'an (present-day Xian) was recaptured. The Huihe soldiers suffered heavy casualties during the battle. Only Wan Gars and the two others were left. …

> None of the three had brought wives or children with them. As time passed they became homesick, and they all wanted to leave Chang'an. The Tang emperor was worried when he became aware of this, and he discussed the matter with his ministers.

> One of the ministers said the Huihe soldiers would settle down only if they married some Han girls. But other ministers said that not a single Han father would agree to give his daughter in marriage to a Huihe Soldier. … The Tang Emperor thought this over and decided to let the Huihe soldiers take brides by force, during the Lantern Festival. …

> Each of the three Huihe soldiers was permitted to have nine beautiful girls as wives so long as he agreed to settle down in Chang'an" (Li and Luckert 1994, pp. 240–41).

This folktale is one of several versions of similar arrival legends about why the Hui's imagined ancestors left an also imagined homeland and decided to settle down in China. Almost all of these stories share a theme that Hui people's ancestors were in China "helping the Tang emperor pacify a rebellion,"[9] suggesting a violent beginning of Hui in China.

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[9]In some versions to exorcize a haunting devil. Such as in *The Origin of Hui People* (Hui hui yuan lai 1894), a collection of folktales explaining Hui's arrival in China. Tales in this collection are wide spread among the Hui people orally.

Figre 2. Screenshot of the opening theme of "National Hero Ma Benzhai."

According to historical records, the Hui people's imagined ancestors, Huihe and Dashi soldiers[10] did help the Tang Empire to fight against rebellions, but they also fought against the Tang in other battles (Wu 2002, p.119–22 and al-dahabī 1990, p. 347). As warfare was one of the main forces for sustained cultural interaction before the twentieth century (Appadurai 1996, p. 27), there sure is a possibility that some current Hui people's ancestors emerged in China as former soldiers. It is worth noting that, in the story we cannot find any negative connotation of Hui's violence, such as being former invaders or captives, but only that the Tang emperor *invited* the Hui people's ancestors to help him *pacify* a rebellion. Of course, even being mercenaries is not so friendly a presence, because after all, they practiced violence in a state not their own. Had the Hui ancestors just served as warriors to the royalty, their interaction with China (or more accurately, the Tang Empire) could have ended after the war, and the boundary between them and the local is still writ large.

However, they settled down and took local wives by force. The interaction suddenly became a violent exchange: one side offered military service and the other offered reluctant women who had to be taken by force. As Gladney observed in discussing this folktale, "Only through state sanctioned rape, the story suggests, can this community survive" and "the relations, even at the very beginning, between Hui and Han were not always peaceful" (Gladney 2004, p. 112).[11]

Hui people's position in China was thus tinged with violence in their own folktale. Hui ancestors' settling down in China was a displacement of a heterogeneous power (the rebels). If the rebellion that

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[10]Over-briefly, the Huihe was a Turkic group active in the Tang Dynasty. While Dashi is the name used by the Tang to address the Arab Empire. I will not discuss whether the historically existed groups were really the Hui's ancestors, but many Hui people do recognize their link with the Huihe and Dashi people.

[11]Gladney implied that the story is to some extent about Hui and Han relations. I would like to clarify this implication, but in a brief way, as how to define Han and Hui in different historical periods will make a good but complex topic itself. First, the composition of either Hui or Han people and the understanding of these two terms in Tang Dynasty when the event in this folktale supposedly took place were different from what they are now; second, the founder of the Tang Dynasty Li Shimin had part of Altaic *Xianbei* parentage (Ouyang and Song 1975 vol. 1, p. 1), and the leader of the rebellion, An Lushan was a *Hu* (meaning foreigner in classic Chinese) of Turkish blood (Ouyang and Song 1975 vol. 225, p. 6411), so no matter the Hui's imagined ancestors fought against which side in this folktale, we cannot say that they were against "Han." However, the storytellers were not necessarily aware of all these historical details, and the main "different" people they deal with were (and still are) the people who are now labeled as "Han," so to imply that the relation being addressed in this folktale is mainly about Hui and Han is acceptable.

motivated the Emperor to seek help from the Hui was already a violation of existing order, the Hui's settling down after they helped pacify the rebellion is a further complication of the violation. They surpassed the rebels and replaced them, standing out as a more violent and fearful other.

However, their otherness was subtly blurred: the Hui's ancestors, although marked, expressed a willingness to be integrated into the host country by taking brides from them; while the local people, although were disadvantaged in terms of military competence, were tolerant enough to give a new home for a heterogeneous other. We could imagine, after the Hui soldiers settled down, the tension in the interaction between them and their Han neighbors, especially their in-laws, would be moderated by the kinship built on marriage, their contact zone might still be a place for cultures and identities to crash and negotiate, however, it would more become a place for getting along. And ironically, because of marriage, the mark of "being violent" would be inherited not only by Hui's descendants, but by Han's posterity as well. This intertwined relation, though suggested by a folktale, is real in many families of interethnic marriage.

Briefly, in the first part of the story, the Hui, or their ancestors as foreign mercenaries practiced violence *for* the local people, fighting against the rebels; while in the second part, the Hui practiced another kind of violence *on* the local people, taking wives by force. Violent deeds both cut out and merge spaces between the imagined Hui and Han in a folktale from the past, but with a very real implication in the Hui-Han relation in everyday life today.

Noteworthy are also the gender elements in this story about violence. In this folktale, the Hui's representatives, the soldiers or mercenaries, are males; while the representatives of the majority Han in this fictitious relationship are women. We may therefore suggest a possibility of the Han being feminized here. In an interethnic relation, scholars focus on the minority's being feminized in majority's discursive practices (see Gladney 2004, p. 64; Harrell 1995, pp. 10–13 and Fabre-Vassas 1997, pp. 145–46). Nonetheless, if we pay enough attention to the minority folktales like the one cited here, we find a reverse though similar inclination to feminize the majority.

In this and the previous sections, we could see both Hui and Han groupness has been constantly shaped and reshaped when the grand narrative of nation and state is dominant, or when the Hui narrators would explain their original arrival in their own homeland. Although the Hui are still linked to violence and may even have committed violence on the Han in either a real or imagined world, such violence ironically leads to a process of integration and blurred ethnicity. This again reiterates my argument that violence does not always sharpen ethnic boundaries.

Conclusion

All the encounters between Hui and Han shared in this article are related to a positive or negative rendering of one seemingly monotonous notion: Hui's violence. The Han, the state and the Hui themselves all use these different contextualizations of violence to perceive the Hui.

On the one hand, from each of them there emerges an ethnic group known as "Hui:" in the traffic incident it is the man who was crashed into, together with his "unreasonable" friends; in the uprisings or the street fights it is martial art practitioners or wrestlers; in the wartime narratives it is the Hui soldiers; and in the folktale it is the mercenaries. Violence in different guises bearing different meanings helps Hui and Han define and redefine Hui-ness in different interactions.

On the other hand, ethnic identity is always negotiable and could disappear or be hidden. In the traffic accident, ethnicity was employed only to excuse a common difficulty in reaching a consensus in conflicts. In the Hui's narratives about inter-ethnic violence, ethnic boundaries are indeed highlighted, but when being ethnic could bring danger, ethnicity could likewise disappear. In the case of Hui Infantry, ethnicity is blurred in front of the grand narrative of nation or state. In the arrival legend, although violence made the Hui's ancestors stand out as fearful other to the local people, it also brought an ambiguous kinship that made the line between two ethnic groups hard to draw.

Simone Weil said that "To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul" (Weil 2002, p. 40). If we map this generalizing argument onto the Hui's experiences,

we may say that the Hui's desire to express their rootedness is made even less recognized in a home-land where they are sometimes considered as strangers (i.e., the "familiar strangers," see Lipman 1997). By and only by understanding Hui's violence, could we understand the Hui's struggle of being rooted: by referring to violence as a heritage of their community, the Hui both create a space of their own with fuzzy boundaries in a multiethnic society; simultaneously, they are also integrated into the mainstream society to different degrees.

Competing interest. None.

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