

During the final discussion session of the symposium, questions and discussions on all three sessions continued. Among them, organizer raised a question about the possibility and necessity to establish an academic tradition on Islamo-Sinology and/or Sino-Islamology to deepen our understanding of contemporary Asia and the world.

Middleman: The Integrated Function of Hui among Ethnic Groups in Yining City of Xinjiang

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Hui Muslim minority in China is one of the ethnic groups which presented with distinctive dual cultures, i.e. Islam and Chinese culture. Comparing with Uyghur Muslim Majority in Yining, Hui overprinted with Han Chinese characteristics on one hand, but on the other hand, Hui also inherited with Uyghur culture especially in religious rituals, dialects, and lifestyles. Such kind of cultural integrated phenomenon that exerted by Hui can be elaborated through studying of Hui's diversified culture in Yining, one of the frontier cities which locates in Ili Kazak Autonomous Prefecture of Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of Northwest China.

Yining is the capital city of Ili Kazak Autonomous Prefecture. Ili is one of the most important border areas of China in Northwest region. It is adjacent with Kazakhstan after disintegration of Soviet Union after 1991. It had been conquered and occupied by different ancient nomadic peoples in the history, and many ethnic groups like Mongolian, Russia, Uyghur, Kazak, Hui and other ethnic minorities had left their activities in the modern times. Yining has been the capital of Ili after Qing emperor set up Ili General in 1881. According to census of 2012, there are 35 ethnic groups in the city, and the total population is 515,299 whereas Uyghur (250,989), Han (182,494), Hui (37,783) and Kazak (24,802) are 4 top ethnic groups that account for 48.7%, 35.4%, 7.3% and 4.8% separately. Among the 35 ethnic groups in Yining, Uyghur, Han, Kazak, Mongolian, Hui, Xibo, Kirghiz, Manchu, Daur, Uzbek, Tajik, Tatar and Russia are formulated as the 13 native peoples by the local government. It is divided as 8 sub-district offices and 11 townships (8 Xiang, 1 Zhen, 2 Chang) which runs 54 administrative villages and 98 community committees. Based on the distribution and population of ethnic groups, I find the most important ethnic relations in this city can be generalized as five categories which are Uyghur-Han, Uyghur-Hui, Han-Hui, Uyghur-Kazak, Han-Kazak.

Since Yining can be looked as the most diversified city ethnically in northwest China, I select it as the ideal



Figure Interviewing in Hui's Household with Distinctive Uyghur Culture in Yining, 2009



Figure Uyghur Venders in front of Yining Hui's Great Mosque

site to study ethnic groups and religious issues through occasional fieldwork in summer vacation since 2012 after reviewing some of the fundamental literatures of Ili and Xinjiang. To my surprise, I find in my 3 times of fieldwork that Hui generally are bilingual and can acculturate with their neighbor ethnic groups easily than their counterpart ethnic Muslim minorities, particularly Uyghur. I concluded such phenomenon as Culture Broker and discussed this with Prof. Jonathan Lipman, who is a respected scholar on Chinese Muslim minorities study in an academic meeting in SOAS, University of London. He reminded me that Hui is not only Culture Broker, but also brokers in many aspects among different ethnic groups. When I re-consider his advice, I find in Yining, Hui actually plays a role of middleman socially, economically, culturally, and even to some extent politically which merely neglected or diminished in the contemporary political context.

If we move our observation to the other mixed ethnic group areas where Hui existed, it is also very easy to find that Hui plays such kind of roles in at least one aspect mentioned above. Considering the peripheral Hui phenomenon, namely Tibetan Hui, Mongolian Hui, Bai Hui, Dai Hui, Yi Hui, all of whom inherited with 2 or 3 cultures, we can conclude that Hui is a middleman in bridging different ethnic groups in China. It is also a bridge to communicate different religions, especially Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism and indigenous beliefs.

In this article, the writer will elaborate the different aspects of Hui in absorbing others culture and change it into his own, and share cultures with other ethnic groups in Yining city. This kind of observation and interpretation will be very helpful to understand the function of middleman in communicating different ethnic groups in many aspects, and which meanwhile may promote a new potential strength in improving the harmonious relations of ethnic groups and different beliefs.

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