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“Why don’t you go to the mosque?”: epistemic deference and everyday religious practices in Hui Muslim communities

Abstract:

The study of everyday ethnicity emphasizes the importance of seeking the perspectives of the masses regarding processes of ethnic identity formation and ethnic boundary maintenance. In contrast to elite-centered approaches, everyday ethnicity attempts to understand how ethnicity is constructed from the bottom-up. However, seeking the everyday presents researchers with a number of distinct challenges. Prevalent among these obstacles is a tendency of non-elite respondents to direct scholars to elite authorities when responding to questions about ethnic identity, claiming they lack expertise or qualifications to speak on the subject. This epistemic deference toward elite sources may be particularly acute in ethno-religious communities, where the hierarchies of religious orders may reinforce the gulf of “knowledge” between clergy and lay believers. This paper examines the problem of epistemic deference through a case study of everyday ethnicity in urban Hui Muslim communities in China. Drawing on data collected over the course of 152 interviews and numerous ethnographic observations conducted in 4 cities in China (Beijing, Jinan, Yinchuan, and Xining) between July 2015 and July 2016, the paper will illustrate the challenges posed by epistemic deference to field researchers in religious communities.

When I arrived at the Shulin Xiang Salafiyya Mosque in the city of Xining in northwestern China, it was late on a bright afternoon in early May. Walking through the dust and gravel of the still unfinished courtyard surrounding the glistening, new mosque I looked around for someone to speak with. For the last month of doing interviews in Xining, respondents spoke of the city’s small, but growing ultra-conservative Salafiyya community, insisting that to truly understand the local ethnic Hui (Chinese Muslim) community, I needed to visit Shulin Xiang. Now, having arrived at the mosque, securing an interview was proving more difficult than anticipated. Finding one of the mosque’s many *manla* (students studying to enter the clergy) I introduced myself as a foreign researcher, and asked if might conduct an interview. The student insisted that I would want to speak to the mosque’s imam, and suggested I return the next day.

The following evening, I made my way back, just after the conclusion of evening prayer

ceremonies. Following the service, I approached the man who had been leading the students and the small congregation. To my surprise, the man explained he was, in fact, not the imam, but one of the main *mudarris* (teacher) at the mosque's madrassa. "Come back tomorrow," he assured me, "the imam will be here." This search for the imam continued fruitlessly for the next two days. Upon each return visit, each person I attempted to speak to redirected me to another, different source of authority. After four days of this run-around, still unable to pin down the proper authority for an interview, I gave up.

By that time, in May 2016, nearly a year into my fieldwork in the Hui Muslim communities in urban China, the experience of Shulin Xiang Mosque had become all too familiar. Throughout my research, across multiple fieldsites, when attempting to speak about the daily practices that maintained Hui identity, I found respondents tended to defer to spiritual authorities (clergy, scholars, etc.). Again and again, interviewees prefaced their responses to my questions about Hui culture with "I really don't know much about Islam," or suggested I would be better served by seeking the perspectives of an imam, who better understood theology.

Challenges like these frequently beset scholars studying everyday identity. In prizing the daily, lived experiences of the masses rather than the official or elite responses to questions about identity, these studies seek to understand how identity is built and maintained from the ground up. Constructivist scholarship observes that the boundary markers of ethnic identity change in response to group contestation. Frederik Barth (1969) argued that the process of boundary setting occurs through comparison that distinguishes a group from an ethnic other, and frequently maintains stable social relations between groups based on "dichotomized ethnic statuses" of "us" and "them" (11). Everyday ethnicity seeks to explore the ways in which these boundaries are maintained in moments outside of active, noisy ethnic politics. Rather than assuming that ethnic

identity coheres around elite-driven mobilizing frames, or in response to institutionalized elite perspectives, everyday ethnicity posits that ordinary people construct and maintain ethnic boundaries through the routine practices and actions of their daily lives (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). Everyday ethnicity seeks to “put the masses back into the picture,” by identifying the practices enacted in informal settings which sustain the boundaries of identity in moments of relative quiet (Goode and Stroup 2015).

As such, everyday ethnicity looks for ethnic significance in areas normally neglected by elite-focused or institutionally-focused studies. Matters of dress, diet, speech, and other seemingly anodyne behaviors carry ethnic significance that is not captured by those approaches which only observe official displays of identity. Religious rituals and spiritual practices frequently play a prominent role in marking the boundaries of ethnic identity. Recent constructivist scholarship assesses the ways in which ethnic and religious identities overlap and intertwine. However, these studies frequently treat religion as an attribute which ethnic groups possess, which denotes ethnic membership, or which provides the foundation for a specifically ethnoreligious identity (Enloe 1996; Chandra 2009; Brubaker 2012). By comparison, the importance of religious practices in constructing and maintaining a sense of collective ethnic belonging remains relatively understudied (Stroup 2017).

In contrast, the anthropological study of everyday religion provides a large body of scholarship rooted in contextually rich observations of the role that ritual and religious practice play in producing, and reproducing the boundaries of identity (Orsi 1992; Tweed 1999; Sciorra 1999; Jacobson 1997). In observing informal acts of faith and describing how religion is lived outside of high ritual, the field explores how the practices of lay believers denote bonds of common belonging. These insights illustrate how believers come to view religions as carriers of

cultural identity, and as defining groups by separating religious practices in terms “ours” and “theirs” (Smith 1998).

However, observing and cataloguing these everyday practices presents researchers with several challenges. Scholars studying the everyday often find their respondents professing insufficient knowledge to answer researchers’ questions. In ethnoreligious communities where spiritual authority designates clergy as outstanding examples of moral behavior and correct practice of faith, the tendency of lay respondents to profess insufficient knowledge and defer to elites may only increase. Compared with the formal high ritual practiced by clergy, lay members of the community may feel their personal daily practice deviate from the ‘proper’ or ‘correct’ way to engage with their faith.

Studying the everyday religious practices that mark the boundaries of a group’s ethnic identity requires researchers to work around these challenges. In the remainder of this paper, I will offer insights about the potential challenges researchers may face in trying to study the everyday practices that sustain identity in ethnoreligious communities. I will first offer a brief overview of studies of religious practices and their influence on boundary formation. While the role of religion remains comparatively unexplored in studies of everyday ethnicity, the scholars in anthropology and religious studies working on everyday religion offer insights about how acts of spiritual practice by lay believers sustain a sense of belonging to an ethnoreligious community. Rather than focusing on the formal rituals and practices of high religion, scholars of everyday, lived religion seek the spiritual significance of informal or lay practices that maintain a believer’s sense of belonging to a community of faith in daily life. In particular, I will focus on how such belonging is maintained in Islamic communities. Following this overview, drawing insight from those studies, I will evaluate the challenges researchers may face in attempting to

study lay perspectives on religion. In particular, researchers may encounter a tendency in lay believers to defer to spiritual authorities on matters of faith, and regard lay practices as imperfect or flawed as compared to official religious doctrine. I will argue that this “epistemic deference” to elite religious figures often stems from a perceived lack of knowledge in spiritual affairs, which are assumed to be concerned with theology rather than quotidian practice.

After laying out this theoretical background I will provide a case study which examines how religious practice establishes and maintains the boundaries of ethnic identity. I will also discuss how researchers conducting research on everyday religious practice may encounter issues related to epistemic deference while in the field. I will draw evidence from fieldwork conducted in urban China’s Hui Muslim communities in four cities (Beijing, Jinan, Yinchuan, and Xining) between July 2015 and July 2016. In total, I conducted 152 interviews with respondents from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds: Islamic clergy, entrepreneurs, scholars, service workers, artists, students, retirees, etc. By providing an overview of the challenges posed while speaking with these various respondents, I hope to develop a set of strategies for better studying everyday identity in ethnoreligious communities.

Practicing identity: Religious ritual and building a sense of belonging

A substantial body of scholarship acknowledges the ties between religious and ethnic, national, or other identities. Much of the research that examines the role played by religion in social identification processes assesses the degree to which these identities overlap or diverge. (Brubaker 2012; Enloe 1996; van der Veer and Lehmann 1999). Religious practices may serve as a unifying bridge between different ethnic and racial identities, or it may serve as a distinguishing boundary marker that sets an identity apart from others (Orsi 1985; Sciorra 1999;

Stroup 2017). Aldridge's overview of religion as a force of social division observes that processes of ethnic identification are frequently "overlaid with religious significance." Noting that observers of conflict frequently cite differences in faiths between groups as cause for hostility, Aldridge cautions, "religion rarely stands on its own as a cause of conflict or division, but is usually bound up with other dimensions, in particular ethnicity, 'race', language, and nationality" (Aldridge 2013, 224, 239).

Such studies frequently cite formal religious ritual and mass participation in worship as essential for cementing the bonds of belonging among believers. For example, Sciorra (1999) examines how Brooklyn's Italian-American Catholics trace the geographic boundaries of the Italian-American community by marching in the festival parade to commemorate the feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel. Orsi's (1985, 1992) study of the same community observes that these parades distinguish the Italian Catholic enclaves from their neighboring, rival Puerto Rican Catholic enclaves. Fox and Miller-Idriss contend taking part in a mass ritual is a constitutive act which forges a sense of collective identity. They claim, "bonds don't simply become transparent through their ritual performance; they are constituted through the collective act of performance" (Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008a, 546). Rituals may be rote, and the spiritual or culture significance of the actions may be obscure to those who take part in them, but nonetheless may create a powerful sense of community, through articulating a shared meaning system (Woods and Tsang 2013, 7).

However, as Woods and Tsang (2013, 4) observe, rituals need not be such large-scale, formal affairs. Instead, they contend that rituals "encompass a spectrum ranging from highly ceremonial occasions set off from the rhythms of daily life... to everyday mundane activities." A fuller understanding of the role of religious ritual in identity maintenance requires an

examination of small-scale, everyday religious practice.

Everyday religion: finding the sacred in the “profane”

While large scale acts of mass ritual may create important bonds which allow for feelings of belonging to emerge, it is smaller acts of devotion, observed in private, also play a pivotal role in maintaining a sense of membership in the community of faith. These acts of everyday religious practice often go overlooked in scholarship from the field of nationalism studies, which instead focuses on official displays of ritual, and the interpretations of elites about which practices mark the boundaries for membership in the community. Studies of everyday religion remind us that the practices of lay believers also hold deep significance for building the bonds of community. Overlooking these informal practices leaves an incomplete understanding of how religious ritual constitutes and maintains common bonds of ethnic belonging. Here, the field of everyday religion offers valuable insights.

In imploring scholars to consider daily ritual, Orsi argues that religion “cannot be nearly separated from the practices of everyday life.” (Orsi 1997). As Ammerman explains, “religion is bigger than the theological ideas and religious institutions about which typical surveys have inquired” (Ammerman 2007a, 4–6). Similarly, McGuire reasons that, instead of the large and dramatic spectacles of official religion, everyday religious practices often take the form of small, rote gestures (McGuire 2007, 187). These private or informal moments of devotion, which may fall outside of the prescribed forms and standards for observation imposed by religious officials, nonetheless may reveal deeply ingrained cultural markers for belonging to the community of faith, and may reflect localized—if unorthodox—practices that signify a great deal about the content of religious identity in a particular place (Ammerman 2007b, 221).

Studies of Islam, in particular, offer great insight both into the daily practice of religious faith, and as to how religious practices delineate ethnic boundary markers. As a faith centered around praxis,¹ Islam provides a number of rituals and lifestyle habits through which to observe everyday religious and ethnic practices. Much of the scholarship on Islamic ritual focuses on the tensions between Islamic theology and scholasticism, and the daily practice of Islam. Much past scholarship presents Islamic faith as split dichotomously between these official and informal poles. Gellner (1981) differentiates between “folk” and “scholarly” variants of Islamic practice. The former, he suggests, may be cast as culturally backwards, especially as compared to the scholarly “great” tradition, which Gellner describes as central, official, and “pure.”

Much of this distinction between “great” and “folk” tradition stems from the importance of the Qur’an as the authoritative text for proscribing proper Islamic behavior. Discussing the origins of this “great” tradition, Gellner remarks that Islamic tradition fuses law and theology to bestow authority on the literate (42). Eickelman (1992) attributes this designation of an orthodox, “great tradition” to Muslims’ status as “people of the book” (*ahl al kitab*). Often, Eickelman notes, understandings of how to correctly practice faith prioritize “mastery of form over understanding of content,” especially in communities where the language of the text (Arabic) is a foreign language.

The expansion of Qur’anic literacy throughout the Islamic world, however, allows for a more egalitarian understanding of proper maintenance of faith (Eickelman, 652). Simon makes similar claims, noting that prayer acts as an arena for multiple understandings of faith among the Islamic community. As such, observance of prayer become expressions of “moral

¹ For more on Islam’s orthopraxy see Denny’s (2006) introductory volume.

selfhood”(Simon 2009, 261). Thus, through prayer, enact their own individual understandings of faith and identity on a daily basis.

In their introduction on everyday religion Schielke and Debevec (2012) note that while these studies usually highlight differences between the normative doctrine of the faith, and everyday practice, the two are usually intertwined, often in contradiction. Schielke and Debevec eschew these binaries and suggest instead viewing religious ritual as a “modality of action characterized by an objective, external quality granted to it by those involved in the ritual.” In this way, they argue, Islam maintains “a discursive tradition” over what should be considered correct practice. Unsurprisingly, Eickelman remarks, in communities around the world Islamic ritual may borrow from and adapt to localized context (647).

Following Jonathan Z. Smith’s (1998) contention that religion is not a native category, but rather an item in an inventory of cultural practices particular to a given place or people, numerous examples illustrate how Islamic rituals fuse adapt local cultural contexts to produce distinctive markers of ethnic identity. For example, Marsden (2005) describes how local practices of Muslims in northwestern Pakistan’s Chitral establish a uniquely local form of Islam in the face of forces promoting a program of standardizing Islamicization from outside the region. While agents of standardization, like local Islamist parties, frown upon Chitral’s Muslim community for using song and dance, local traditions that orthodox believers regard as taboo, these practices distinguish Chitral from other neighboring communities. Marsden argues that, through their daily religious observances, “Chitral Muslims make choices between modes and forms of Islamic life, play an active role in making and defining these styles of being Muslim,” and promote a distinctive localized Muslim identity.

Likewise, Graw’s (2012) accounts of divination in Senegalese and Gambian Islamic

communities argue that divination—a personal, everyday practice— phrases pre-Islamic tradition in an Islamic framework and provides key evidence for understanding the development of Senegalese and Gambian identity. These rituals not only distinguish West African Islamic communities from their Middle Eastern counterparts, but also provide insight into the historical and institutional development of the communities, themselves.

These questions of Islam's adaptation to local context have long been present in the context of Chinese Islam. Zvi Ben-Dor Benite (2005) describes the efforts of Chinese Muslim scholars in the late Qing Dynasty (years 1644-1912) to establish themselves “as members of a specifically Muslim branch of Chinese knowledge” through the creation of a *Han Kitab*, a collection of Chinese texts that established a “basic curriculum of Chinese Muslim education.” The *Han Kitab*, Benite argues, allowed scholars to frame Islamic practice in a way that “encompassed” Islam within Chinese culture and allowed for Chinese Muslims to adopt “an identity not of accommodation, compromise, or syncretism but of simultaneity”(14).

Insights like these illustrate the contributions the study of everyday religion may contribute to understandings of ethnic boundary formation. Rather than simply treating religion as an attribute of ethnicity, Orsi's (1997) call to study “lived religion” by observing the private habits of lay believers allows scholars to gain further understanding of how practice of faith sustains the boundaries of ethnic identity. Incorporating the perspectives of lay believers and their private practices may offer a wealth of rich, contextual detail about how ethnic boundaries are formed and maintained. Doing so, however, requires that researchers consider the special challenges posed by hierarchies of knowledge and authority in ethnoreligious communities.

Epistemic deference: authority and uncertainty in ethnoreligious communities.

Despite the potential for advancement of theory that the study of everyday religious practices presents, scholars also face a number of potential pitfalls and obstacles. A focus on everyday processes may not align with a respondent's notion of the kinds of material that academics should be interested in. Often these different conceptions about what kinds of information is important to a researcher's project lead to a disjuncture between the researcher and the respondent. Respondents may feel that as non-academics or non-elites they lack the qualifications to provide any kind of useful information to the researcher. Instead, they may defer to more traditional sources of knowledge or authority: officials, scholars, texts, or institutions.

Deference to elites may be especially acute in religious communities, where the doctrine of the faith solidifies hierarchies of power and spiritual authority. Eickelman and Piscatori suggest that possessing control over spiritual knowledge enables authority to offer examples of moral behavior, and attract adherents (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996, 58). Macey and Carling (2011) note that debates on religious authority revolve around claiming the right to interpret and judge the doctrine of the faith (12). Knowledge of the faith legitimizes clerical authorities because of the ambiguities and uncertainties that many lay believers find in the dictates of religious law.

Fibiger's study of Shi'a clerical authorities suggests that many lay believers feel their own lack of religious knowledge renders their own practice of faith inadequate. He remarks, "the individual Muslim (lay or learned) is imperfect, and that true Islam is difficult to grasp and to live by." Such difficulties cause concern for lay believers that "the practices of Muslims are not necessarily in line with true Islam," and thus require an authority to provide an example of right

practice. Believers look to imams' example to parse abstract or difficult practices, and implement them in their daily lives (Fibiger 2015, 477–78).

Further notions of a “correct” form of practice stem from the hierarchy of *islam* (submission), *iman* (faith), and, finally, *ihsan* (doing what is beautiful). Murata and Chittick (1994) explain that, though the basis of faith is submission to God (*islam*), having faith (*iman*) implies a deeper commitment. Further, doing what is beautiful (*ihsan*) is to be like God, whose actions embody beauty. Thus, Muslims must do more than read the book, but they must embody it in what they do (*islam*), what they think (*iman*), and what they intend (*ihsan*). Striving to do what is beautiful, they contend, gives actions meaning that transcend everyday life, and reach back to divine reality. Human actions are measures against this divine standard of perfection. Simon (2009) contends this hierarchy causes many Muslims to consider their own worldly actions to be imperfect as compared to the “perfect” ideal of being Muslim.

Similarly, Kalmbach's introduction on female leadership in Islamic communities states that, unlike some faiths with concrete hierarchies, Islamic structures of authority are often more fluid. She argues, “while Islamic leaders provide crucial guidance and instruction, their presence is not necessary for the observance of many religious rituals, such as daily prayers, fasting, and the ḥajj pilgrimage” (Kalmbach 2012, 4). However, Kalmbach also observes of the Islamic faith has depended upon experts passing along religious wisdom to their followers (8).² By attaining this role as arbiters of what may be regarded as “correct” spiritual practice, religious authorities also gain a powerful role in shaping cultural practice. In deeming a certain set of practices to be appropriate expressions of faith while labeling others as profane, spiritual leaders influence

² Kalmbach writes that, “knowledge relating to the texts and traditions from the time of the Prophet Muḥammad and his Companions that have been transmitted—often in both oral and written form—by generations of specialist experts.”

which practices survive and which practices fade away.

This gatekeeping role gains extra importance in the context of diaspora or minority religious communities. When the community's faith is not widely practiced in the society at large, lay believers may rely upon clergy to provide a model for how to maintain proper practice of the faith in challenging circumstances. In the Islamic context, in communities outside the Middle East, the clergy's ability to speak and read Arabic—the language of the faith—marks them as expert in matters of Islamic doctrine, and giving them “a ‘direct’ access to ‘authentic’ Islamic knowledge” (Chagas 2012, 72–73).

In these situations, clergy assume a guiding role for lay believers, steering them toward “correct” paths for religious observance and everyday behavior. Many may do so out of a feeling of uncertainty about correct interpretations theology. Research in the field of intercultural communication describes the phenomenon of “epistemic denial,” where in the minds of some individuals, lived experience and lay expertise trumps formal training and education (Minei and Bisel 2013). However, in the case of religious authority, the converse situation arises as lay believers express a kind of epistemic deference.

As a result, researchers may experience a disconnect between their own interests and respondents' perceptions of what constitutes a subject worthy of academic research. Respondents may deem the daily practices at the core of a researcher's agenda as “profane,” or unrelated to the practice of faith. Further, respondents may claim to be inadequate to address questions about the theology or doctrine that are typically considered to be the core of academic studies of religion. Instead, they appeal to higher authorities in response to researchers' questions.

A focused case study will better illustrate the ways in which this “epistemic deference” challenges researchers conducting fieldwork on ethno-religious communities. A word, first, on context. My observations were conducted in ethnic Hui communities throughout China. Studies conducted in authoritarian contexts face additional, special challenges. As Guzel Yusupova (2019) contends, respondents in authoritarian regimes are more likely than others to engage in preference falsification, due to law, policies, or social environments that mandate patriotism or construe criticism of the regime as a breach of societal norms, if not a violation of the law. Looming threats from the regime, Yusupova reasons, may lead to self-censorship on the part of respondents, or incentivize them to choose politically safe answers when talking to researchers, especially those from abroad. Ethnic or religious minority communities may find themselves under particularly strong scrutiny, as authoritarian states usually consider the subjects to be “red lines” that must not be crossed (Glasius et al. 2018). Further, Ahram and Goode (2016) caution scholars working in authoritarian states to be aware of how the responses given to them may reflect partisan intention, and should be carefully placed in proper context. Though most of my questions asked respondents about ethnic and religious identity in an ostensibly non-political way, these constraints may certainly have influenced their replies.

However, even within the context of China’s authoritarian government, observations of communities in which ethnic and religious identities overlap provides an important chance to develop theoretical understandings of how members differentiated between daily lay practices and formal ritual. Examining the ways in which lay believers defer to clergy for comment on matters regarding religious practice—even those regarded as ‘quotidian’ or ‘profane’—in China’s ethnic Hui Muslim communities may yield a greater understanding of how the structures of religious authority may help or hinder field researchers in general.

An overview religion and ethnicity in Hui communities

As one of China's 56 recognized ethnic minorities, the Hui occupy a unique position in Chinese society. Though they are not China's only primarily Muslim ethnic minority group, they are the only one that is distinguished from the majority Han almost solely on the basis of their religion. While Hui communities are marked by heterogeneity in terms of linguistic, regional, and socioeconomic conditions, they share a common Islamic heritage. Though Hui from different backgrounds vary in their level of piety and devotion, Islam remains the most salient aspect of Hui identity, one that distinguishes them from China's other ethnic groups.³

Though officially recognized as a single ethnic group by the Chinese Communist Party's system of ethnic classification, Hui communities vary widely in terms of geographic location within China, language spoken, and degree of religiosity (Erie and Carlson 2014; Lipman 2015). Despite such heterogeneity, common Islamic heritage draws Hui communities together. As such, a number of rituals and religious practices help to establish the boundaries of Hui identity, particularly vis-à-vis the ethnic majority Han Chinese.

Some Hui insisted that their Islamic faith drew bright dividing lines between themselves and the majority Han. A respondent in Yinchuan illustrated how Islamic norms separated Han from Hui by describing the prohibitions the faith placed on observing the Lunar New Year. Observant Hui, he declared, should not take part in New Year festivities. Unlike their Han neighbors, he insisted, Hui did not hang *chun lian* (New Year's couplets) on their doors as

³ For additional background on the Hui, see; (Gladney 1991; Lipman 1998; Erie and Carlson 2014)

decoration. Nor did Hui burn paper money like the Han. These traditions, he contended, Under no circumstances, he insisted, should Hui mark the New Year by setting off fireworks, giving *hongbao* (“red envelopes” filled with money) to children, or engaging in other such Han activities. Those Hui who partook in these traditions, he argued, were “Hanified” (*Hanhua*).

Likewise, traditions concerning funeral arrangements mark Hui and Han as distinct. Whereas Han traditionally cremate bodies, Islam forbids such practices (Sachedina 2011, 173–83). As a result, Hui bury their dead, often in completely separate cemeteries from Han. Many respondents pointed to this fact as a major indicator of difference between Han and Hui. One, a woman from Xining, cited concern over this difference in funerary customs as indicative of why Hui and Han should not intermarry. She recounted the experience of her friend, a widower who had married a Han woman. Upon her death, the respondent explained, the woman’s parents cremated her despite her husband’s objections.

These differences pervade daily life as well. An interviewee in Xining proclaimed that, despite not speaking a separate, minority language, Hui were easily distinguishable because of their use of Arabic and Persian words in daily conversation. Indeed, many of the Hui respondents I spoke with in Xining peppered their speech with common Islamic expressions, declaring “God willing” (*inshallah*) to express hopefulness or greeting one another with “peace be with you” (*asalaam alaykum*). One of the Imams at Beijing’s Ma Dian mosque went even further, suggesting that in the past Hui residents developed a unique Hui dialect, or *Huihua*, built around the Qur’anic Arabic phrases that signified their common faith.

Perhaps the most prominent example of the impact of religious practice on the difference between Han and Hui comes maintaining a *qingzhen* (halal) diet. Though many Hui differ as to what observing *qingzhen* dietary restrictions entail, almost all agree that doing so is a necessary

demand for all Hui. Often, respondents discussed this in terms of eating a “clean” or “pure” diet. In Beijing, one Hui woman visiting Niu Jie from Shijiazhuang drew strong contrast with the Han, based on these notions of clean eating. “We Hui are clean, but the Han are so dirty!” she exclaimed, adding, “They'll eat anything!” A Hui professor of anthropology in Yinchuan reasoned that, in the minds of many Hui, religious cleanliness and sanitation were synonymous. He remarked, “People think that if it's *qingzhen* it's clean. For them they think these things mean the same thing.”

Keeping *qingzhen* in a majority non-Muslim cultural environment presents great challenges to many Hui. As such many respondents discussed the level of scrutiny Hui must pay to their dietary habits. A noodle shop owner from Gansu living in a suburban village on the outskirts of Yinchuan described what it meant to him for a restaurant to observe *qingzhen* standards. He explained that when he ate outside of his house, “I check in the kitchen to see who the chef is. Is he wearing a prayer hat? Does he say the *Bismillah* when making food? If not, I won't eat there because it's not *qingzhen*.”

Whether through differences in diet, funerary traditions, holiday observance, or speech patterns, these Islamic practices mark the boundary that distinguishes Hui identity from Han. However, the influence of Chinese traditional culture also distinguishes Hui practice of Islam from other communities. For example, many Hui, unable to read or pronounce Qur’anic Arabic, recite from the Qur’an using Chinese characters to approximate the sounds of the Arabic text. As such, many respondents professed being able to use this Chinese-Arabic pidgin to recite from the Qur’an despite not understanding the meaning.

These differences also include the observation of uniquely Hui rituals. For instance, In Linxia, a historically Hui enclave in Southern Gansu province often referred to as China’s “Little

Mecca,” a number of rituals fuse Islamic and Chinese traditional practices. On Friday afternoons mosques throughout the city sound *zansheng* (songs of praise to Islamic saints), in a style that locals respondents maintain is derived from Chinese Buddhist sutra recitations. Devotees of the community’s many Sufi lineages make pilgrimage to the *gongbei* (mausoleums) of former masters. Pilgrims often burn incense and perform prostrations in front of the *gongbei*. These traditions are heavily influenced by the rituals of Confucianism, Daoism, and other Chinese folk religions.

Rituals for remembrance of the dead also bear traces of these influences. In Linxia, Sufi Hui frequently commemorate the anniversaries of family members’ deaths by chanting a *dhikr* around the site of the grave, and eating a large community meal after. Similarly, in Jinan, a Hui man who owned a small tea shop in the city’s Hui Quarter (*Huimin Xiaoqu*), noted that families in the city commonly invited an imam to recite from the Qur’an and pray on the anniversary of loved ones’ deaths. Another Jinan respondent, a Hui woman who operated a small convenience store, complained that this practice called *jing li’er* was hardly Islamic, but instead merely copied from Confucianism. To her mind, it reflected poor understanding of the faith on the part of locals.

Others are less disparaging. An imam at a mosque in Beijing reasoned, “every place has its own local culture; so Islam mixes in with the local culture a little.” Continuing he argued, “Chinese culture is very deep, and its history is very long, right? Over 5,000 years. Of course Islam has blended with it a little.” One Imam at Xining’s Nanguan Mosque likened Chinese culture to a “mother culture.” He reflected that, “Our ancestors are Chinese. China is our homeland. So, of course, we love our homeland. We speak Chinese and our part of our culture comes from Chinese culture.” Another respondent, a tour guide at Xining’s Dongguan Mosque

explained, “When Islam first came to China it came from the overseas Silk Road, and it mixed in with certain Chinese traditions. So some Chinese sects use incense in rituals and have some older Chinese style customs.” Practices like these mark out the boundaries of a distinctly Hui ethnic and religious identity. The incorporation of rituals influenced by traditional Chinese culture differentiates the Hui from other Islamic communities.

Daily practices of religion play an important role in maintaining a sense of Hui ethnic identity. Adherence to Islamic faith distinguishes the Hui from the majority Han, while observation of rituals influenced by traditional Chinese culture provides contrast with other Muslims. Questioning how Islamic practices form and maintain the boundaries of Hui identity allows for greater insight about the content of Hui identity and its relationship to the majority Han. Merely focusing on whether or not Islam is an attribute of Hui ethnic identity might obscure these observations. By focusing on how practice of faith enacts establishes ethnic identity in the daily routines of Hui communities, a much clearer picture of how ethnicity is lived.

As a primarily Islamic minority in a majority non-Islamic society, the Hui have historically relied on clergy to provide lessons on proper observance of Islamic faith. Thus, Hui communities have been shaped by a strong scholastic tradition. Despite being adherents to foreign religion which entered China from diverse points of origin, Hui intellectuals produced a great deal of scholastic commentary on the Qur’an. Notably, scholarly translations of the Qur’an into Chinese (called the “*Han Kitab*”) marked an effort by these many Chinese Muslim intellectuals to foster an intellectual tradition in Chinese Islam akin to that of Confucian or Daoist scholasticism (Ben-Dor Benite 2005; Lipman 2016).

Unsurprisingly, mosques in Hui communities serve as centers of education and learning

about the faith. Lipman describes the historical importance of *madrassas*, or mosque schools, for educating Hui about how to observe Islamic ritual and maintain proper practice of Islam through a process of *jingtang jiaoyu* (mosque education) (Lipman 1998, 49–51). The importance of mosques as centers for Hui cultural learning continues today. Gladney observes that, since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the secularization of schools, and the lack of educational resources devoted to teaching Hui about their cultural and religious heritage reinforced the place of the mosque as a transmitter of Hui culture (Gladney 1999, 78). Mackerras echoes these claims, arguing that depictions of religious life that occur in the Chinese secular education system are almost entirely negative (Mackerras 1999, 38). Thus, as discussion of religious practice in the public sphere discourages—and perhaps even denigrates—religious belief, clerical authorities become the sole source of knowledge about the faith.

In matters of daily practice, clergy play an important role in providing guidance on living according to the dictates of Islamic doctrine. Citing a respondent who likened the role of China’s female *ahong* to the light within a lamp, Jaschok explains that the “authority of a female *ahong* rests in a nexus of social relationships.” Drawing attention to the importance of creating a familial relationship between the *ahong* and congregation, Jaschok maintains that female *ahong* must be seen as models of incorruptible spiritual purity, and exemplary faith (Jaschok 2012, 38).⁴

Erie notes that Hui clerics invoke this authority on matters of religious doctrine through use of the phrase *jiaofa* (religious law) to assert that dictates concerning observation of ritual practice are legal matters rather than matters of etiquette (Erie 2016, 38–39).⁵ The power held by

⁴Jaschok records the various roles and responsibilities designated to the *ahong*: “Duties assigned may include religious instruction and more specific training of future religious personnel, leading collective worship and giving sermons, presiding over rites and ceremonies, and sharing in the administrative and representational duties associated with the mosque.”

⁵ Erie remarks that “law” may be used in this case as “shorthand for what would otherwise be an

religious authorities in Hui communities is potent enough that, in many cases in Hui communities northwest China, the state actively enlists clerics to mediate disputes that involve religious as well as secular law, and oversee resolution processes (Erie 2016, 60; 2015).

Drawing examples from the responses of lay believers in the Hui community to inquiries about daily religious practice, I will elaborate on the kinds of challenges I faced while conducting my fieldwork. I will pay special attention to the ways in which structures of spiritual authority and respondents' perceptions of what kinds of behaviors could be considered "religious" shaped their answers.

Researcher interests and lay understandings of religious knowledge

During my time in the field researching everyday identity in Hui communities, I encountered a number of challenges in gathering data. Many of these challenges came as a result of my own identity. My status as a foreign, non-Muslim academic caused some respondents confusion in determining the intentions that drove my study. Often, I found it necessary to explain that my interest in Hui identity and Chinese Islam did not come from my intention to convert. After establishing that my interest was merely academic, some of my respondents assumed me to be a theologian attempting to study Islamic jurisprudence, history or doctrine. Such differences in understanding about the kind of information I sought made early stages of my research difficult.

Indeed, many respondents felt that my research agenda made little sense. One woman, a *qingzhen* restaurant owner who I interviewed over the course of several visits, plainly asked me,

enumeration (i.e., "law" plus "ethics" plus "morals" plus "customs")"

“this research of yours—what’s the use of it?” Later, she expressed doubts that residents of the local Hui community might possess any meaningful understanding of Islam. Pointing to the dumpling she was preparing to fill with a spoonful of minced meat, she proclaimed that local Hui were just like it. “They’ve just got the wrapping, but there’s no filling,” she explained. To her, questions about the influence of religion in residents’ daily lives was simply not relevant, as residents did not understand these topics themselves.

Similarly, another respondent, attempting to provide a bit of friendly advice, suggested that I switch my topic. “Only 1 in 10 Chinese people even understand contemporary China!” he remarked, suggesting I switch to studying literature, which would not be a waste of my time. Drawing to the end of his lecture, he remarked, “(China)’s impossible to understand; best not to worry about it!”

Comments like these suggest that respondents believed religious topics to be too complex to be dealt with in a single interview. One woman, an antique store owner in Xining who I spoke with while she minded her stall with her friend, began to explain the differences between local religious orders. Her friend immediately interjected “you know, the *jiaopai* (religious sects) system is really confusing,” effectively shutting down the conversation.

Others suggested a foreign scholar *ought* to be interested in theology or intellectual history rather than lay practice. One interviewee frequently scolded me during the course of our interview conversation by remarking that my questions about daily habits were not serious enough. When I explained that I was interested in examining lay practices rather than theological doctrine, he told me that these subjects were a waste of my time. Instead, he argued, “You ought to communicate with more scholars.” Later, when introducing me to another contact, a local Hui historian of some renown, he cautioned me before the interview began not to ask the historian

any of the questions about daily Hui identity. Instead, he insisted, I needed to ask “better questions.”

Others also expressed their skepticism about the value of seeking the perspectives of ordinary, non-clerical respondents. A contact who I had been working with to arrange interviews with locals in Yinchuan counseled, “If you want to understand Islam, then you ought to go the Nanguan Mosque and speak with the *ahong* there.” I thanked him for his advice and replied that, in addition to clergy, I would also, if possible, like to speak to lay believers. His response was dismissive. “Why don’t you start off by talking to scholars, and then if you have time you can talk to *laobaixing* (ordinary people).”

Researchers seeking to get respondents to describe the ways in which they maintain their ethnoreligious identities through ordinary means, on a daily basis, may find that respondents will instead point what they believe researchers *ought* to be studying. As a result, researchers may have to take extra care to work around this tendency of lay believers to redirect conversations about religious practice toward theology, intellectual history, or high religion.

Epistemic deference in Hui communities

While some respondents attempted to steer my research toward theology or scriptural discussions as means of guiding me toward what they thought a proper study of Hui identity should be, more frequently respondents deferred to clergy or other spiritual authorities out of a feeling of inadequacy in regard to their own knowledge of their faith. One respondent, a woman in her late twenties, when asked about differences between local religious orders, exclaimed, “Oh, it’s so confusing! It makes my head hurt! I just don’t talk about it!” Another interviewee, a Hui tea shop

owner in her early 30s, simply remarked “I’m not very well spoken on these issues,” before suggesting that I should instead speak to her friend, a member of a high-level institute for Islamic studies. Explaining why respondents might feel such a disconnect from matters of religious and cultural identity, a Hui scholar at a provincial-level academy of social sciences, remarked, “Many Hui just feel these matters are unimportant to their daily lives. It’s only really the imams who fully study (the Qur’an).”

As a remedy to their own perceived inadequacies, many respondents directed me toward community elders. Most often, respondents suggested that Hui culture is best displayed and understood at the mosque. The owner of a restaurant selling “Old Beijing style” *halal* dishes on Niu Jie near Beijing’s largest mosque, turned down my request for an interview, stating, “if you really want to understand Niu Jie, you need to go the mosque and find the imam.” One woman, who ran a small tea shop near the Hui Quarter in Xining explained, prefaced her answers by telling me she understood very little of Islam. Despite my assurances that we would not discuss theology, she suggested instead it would be better to talk to an “expert” who was a religious scholar.

Frequently respondents expressed assurances that the answers to all my questions would be best handled by the community’s imam. By contrast, these respondents usually cited their own ignorance regarding the laws of their faith. “What kinds of questions do you want to understand?” one elderly respondent asked me, adding “I don’t know if I can satisfy your requirements.” The respondent continued to ask, “If you want to understand the Hui, why don’t you go to the mosque?” The respondent assured me that the imams at the mosque would know best.

These repeated appeals to higher authority and professions of personal inadequacy in explaining “sacred” matters elucidate the degree to which many non-clerical believers view lay practice as degraded or inaccurate compared to official religious practice. Throughout my time in the field many respondents lamented that they simply could not understand the language or the Qur’an, or did not understand how to pray without the leadership of the imam. A woman who operated a small convenience store in Jinan’s Hui Quarter explained the community’s reliance upon the knowledge of the imam as borne out of basic necessity. Describing the practice of *jing li’er*, she remarked, “this practice exists because we don’t know how to pray on our own, so we go to the *ahong* with money and ask them to pray on our behalf.” Such spiritual dependence on the imam to properly conduct Islamic rites, she explained, was foundational to the imam’s social and spiritual authority in the community.

In part, such deference on the part of many lay believers may come from their lack of formal training in Qur’anic Arabic. Many respondents claimed that most of their knowledge regarding Islam came through lessons their parents taught them. Most regard this so-called “household education” (*jiating jiaoyu*), as rudimentary and insufficient for understanding how to be a Muslim. An Imam at Yinchuan’s Nanguan mosque contended that this homeschool education amounted to no more than simply making children aware of their status as Muslims, but not teaching them anything about what being Muslim entailed. He suggested, “*Jiating Jiaoyu* can’t really teach Islamic knowledge. For that you need an imam to teach you.”

A dearth of formal knowledge about the faith was common among respondents. Most respondents remarked that they were unable to read the Qur’an, except for through the use of Chinese characters to approximate the sounds of Arabic words. The Imam at Yinchuan’s Nanguan Mosque stated “Most people here can’t read Arabic. Some have memorized how to

recite the Qur'an using Arabic, but most people have to use Chinese characters to read." Others who could read the Arabic script mentioned that, while they could sound out the words from memory, they possessed no understanding of their meaning. As an imam at the Yangjiazhuang Mosque in Xining explained "(students) learn how to read one letter at a time, but they don't really ever understand the meaning."

Few respondents claimed to be able to both read and understand the text. An Imam at Beijing's Ma Dian Mosque bemoaned that few students came to the mosque to study the Qur'an. Mostly, he reported, these students were retirees. "Most students don't have the patience to learn to read the Qur'an," he explained. "Most people just study a few simple words. Very few children learn." Another, an author in his 70s in Beijing professed, "You'll go to the Niujie Mosque and you'll see a lot of people there praying, and they recite pretty fluently in Arabic, and have memorized the Quran, but none of them understand what it means." Imams, as some of the few members of the community who possess Qur'anic literacy thus become authority figures by default.

As a result Imams become intermediaries for those lay practitioners who need guidance about how to understand basic tenets of the faith. One imam, who led a mosque in Hui-majority suburban village outside of Jinan, remarked "the people here are very sincerely religious, but not very educated." As such, residents turn to imams for guidance on all manner of lifestyle issues, ranging from how to pray, what they should eat, and even how to interact with the local government. An imam at the Great Southern Mosque of Jinan explained that frequently members of the community, especially those who migrated from the countryside, came to him to serve as an intermediary for all manner of problems, including petty neighborhood disputes and dealing with local bureaucrats. The imam at the Nanguan Mosque in Xining expressed his belief that

being an imam placed him “at the center of the community.” He further explained that he felt his primary responsibility as an imam was to teach locals “how to be proper (*hege*) Muslims.”

Many Hui find themselves at the intersection⁶ of religious and cultural identities that reinforce notions of inadequacy vis-à-vis their daily observance of faith. While Islam prioritizes adherence to Qur’anic standards for practice of faith, and encourages adherents to cultivate *ihсан*, as Chinese speakers, most Hui lack literacy in the language necessary for pursuit of faith. Thus lay respondents may consider their daily practices as built upon insufficient foundations given their illiteracy in the language of faith. Further, while everyday practices influenced by Chinese folk religious traditions may mark out a distinctly Hui identity, the fact that such rituals do not find their origins in Qur’anic sources may lead respondents to see them as imperfect, or un-Islamic. Even though these daily, informal practices may distinguish the Hui, respondents may nonetheless defer to imams who are literate in Arabic and knowledgeable about the Qur’an out of a sense that they possess greater knowledge about the “correct” way to be Muslim.

Challenges like the ones described above may frustrate researchers, and limit their ability to get access to the kind of empirical data necessary for conducting research on everyday identity. To cope with these challenges and overcome the limitations they impose, researchers must make prudent methodological choices when designing their research.

Rethinking ethnography, authority, and everyday faith: concluding thoughts

⁶ Here I borrow from the literature on intersectionality particularly drawing on Cho, et al.’s (2013) discussion of how “single-axis thinking undermines legal thinking, disciplinary knowledge production, and struggles for social justice,” and how intersectionality urges more nuanced consideration of “the vexed dynamics of difference and the solidarities of sameness” in social movement politics. For further discussion, see also; (Crenshaw 1989; Cohen 1996; Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall 2013).

The problems of epistemic deference, and the tendency of lay believers to view daily practices as something separate from the “sacred” rituals of official religion make the study of everyday religious identities a difficult task. Challenges like these may render the data that researchers seek obscure or inaccessible. Further, they may complicate a researcher’s understandings of power hierarchies, or spiritual authority. The picture of everyday religious practices and their impact of identity that emerges from data like this may prove to be messy, ambiguous and difficult to interpret. However, this should not imply that this kind of evidence is worthless or unusable, or that the study of the role played by religious practices in daily identity formation processes is fruitless.

Determining how to handle the messy truths that fieldwork uncovers has been the subject of ongoing debate among researchers. Developing a set of best practices for navigating these challenges should start by asking researchers to consider rethinking even the most basic approaches. As such, one way to deal with the challenges presented by entrenched hierarchies and epistemic deference in religious communities begins with revising the way in which researchers ask questions about ethnic and religious identities.

Rather than commencing interviews with questions that address ethnoreligious matters on the surface, scholars might follow the approach of Brubaker, et al (2006) by deliberately avoiding these subjects altogether. Instead, when interviewing non-elite respondents, researchers might seek to ask questions about daily matters: routines, habits, schedules. By first asking basic questions, and following up with probing questions for more elaboration, the substance that

researchers seek may emerge naturally and organically in the flow of conversation.⁷ This tactic avoids priming respondents to think about a researcher's questions in terms of formal religious structures, and may avoid reinforcing the notion that religious practice implies theological or doctrinal understanding.

One way to achieve these results is to re-center questions on an interviewee's individual perspective. Instead of asking large scale questions about religion or ethnicity in general, asking a respondent to discuss their own lived experience also directs responses away from merely focusing on formal, institutionalized, or hierarchical concepts. Delving into matters that ask respondents to describe how practices have changed over the course of their lifetimes, or how their habits in the present differ from their youth allows respondents to speak about subjects they know rather than those they do not. Often when I was conducting interviews, this method of questioning allowed me to engage the subject of daily practices without suggesting hierarchy.

Beyond this, researchers might choose to re-evaluate what constitutes useful or successful answers from respondents. Schatz's overview of the status of political ethnography argues that in circumstances where data are ambiguous or observations are difficult to interpret, ethnographic sensibility demands scholars engage in "epistemologically fresh thinking," about such matters as truth, generalizability and authority (Schatz 2009, 11–12). However, Allina-Pisano remarks, "the ethnographer is equipped to contextualize and interpret her subjectivity: to be conscious of the ways that her position conditions the observations she makes," and, thus, is better prepared to make sense of the context of ambiguous or complicated social realities. Advocating for "realist ethnography" she notes that, rather than expecting sudden revelatory appearance of the truth in

⁷ On the subject of probing follow up questions, Rubin and Rubin (2011) provide excellent guidance on how to best phrase and structure questions to allow for natural responses.

any given social situation, researchers must use their embedded knowledge and contextual understanding to uncover truth in the same way one would peel back the layers of an onion (Allina-Pisano 2009).

Indeed, the way forward in dealing with these challenges to studying the everyday may be to embrace the findings that they reveal. Wolford contends that, too often, ethnographers edit out difficulties they experience in the field, treating them as dead ends, or as not yielding usable data. However, in so doing, she argues, researchers pave over rich and nuanced data. Wolford calls on researchers to embrace this evidence for its ability to provide “counter discourse” (Wolford 2006, 338–39). Looking at these moments where respondents hold different interpretations of what the researcher should examine, or downplay their own qualifications in deference to elite sources may indeed yield useful data in and of itself.

Wedeen reminds scholars that even observations that seem insignificant or failed may still yield important theoretical insights when examined more closely. Quoting Socrates, she reminds her readers, “there is never nothing going on.” Further, she implores scholars to embrace seemingly unruly or unworkable data, stating, “When an interview does not go as planned—when people lie, evade, brag, or turn the tables on the interviewer, or discuss seemingly irrelevant material—that is also important information.” Just because these observations eschew simple generalization, she argues, does not mean that scholars should discard them. Instead, she maintains that social scientists who value generalization should seek the overarching patterns that reside even in data that is difficult to interpret. Good ethnography, she reasons, is “an excellent way to gain traction on actions that at first glance might seem irrelevant or simply too ordinary for comment” (Wedeen 2010, 256, 261). Following this lead, researchers might be encouraged to find useful evidence in failure. Just as it is difficult to separate the sacred from the

daily, so too does vital insight lie in situations that on the surface appear to yield incomplete or unsuccessful observations.

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