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Reaffirming Loyalty and Legitimacy: Representations of Hui Multi-Layered Identity in Bai Lian's "Mountain Pass"

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Abstract: In the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) left many writers severed from their cultural roots. Starting in the 1980s, literary authors sought to address this disconnection by turning their attention to rural communities. This tendency is exemplified by the emergence of two significant trends: root-seeking literature and new fiction from Tibet. Root-seeking authors focused on local customs, marginalized cultures, and minority groups to reinvigorate Chinese literature and fill the perceived cultural void. Around the same time, new fiction from Tibet featured diverse responses to post-Mao changes, with some idealizing Tibet as a repository of "authentic" traditions, while others criticized its perceived backwardness. Both trends have been interpreted in scholarship as responses, often critical, to state policies. The short story "Mountain Pass" (1985) by Hui writer Bai Lian intersects with these movements temporally and thematically. However, unlike them, Bai Lian's portrayal of rural communities emphasizes the Hui's historical role in resisting the Qing empire, pivotal to the emergence of the PRC, while also highlighting the group's Arab and Persian origins. This three-layered identification with the local, national, and transnational enriches our understanding of the 1980s literary landscape, challenging the notion that this era was solely characterized by resistance to the central state.

Keywords: Hui literature; ethnic minority literature; *shaoshu minzu wenxue*



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1. Introduction

Works of literature set in remote areas occupy a central position in PRC-era Chinese literature. During the Mao era, rural settings were portrayed, in opposition to urban areas, as "a progressive space" to validate the party's leadership legitimacy (Visser 2003, p. 570). Departing from the official canon of the Mao era since the early 1980s, the significance of non-urban, remote settings has become the locus around which state policies have been allegorically assessed and, often, indirectly criticized. "Mountain Pass" 隘口 (L. Bai 1985, 2015),¹ the story analyzed in this essay, was published during this historical period. Not surprisingly, "Mountain Pass" exhibits thematic features that align with the two dominant, contemporaneous literary trends: root-seeking literature 寻根文学 and new fiction from Tibet 西藏新小说. Despite sharing core themes with these literary trends, "Mountain Pass" notably omits any critique of state policies. This story, I argue, exemplifies how an ethnic minority author can participate in contemporary literary debates without embracing the critique of the central authorities that characterizes other works of the time, thereby challenging the notion that this era was solely defined by resistance to the central state.

Since this story is not widely known, a succinct summary will help orient the reader. "Mountain Pass" is set against the backdrop of the "Muslim rebellions", a series of clashes in the late nineteenth century between the Muslims of northwestern China and the Qing Empire.² The story elaborates, in fictional form, on the tumultuous journey of a military contingent of Hui Muslims from a Shaanxi village, led by the historical figure Bai Yanhu 白彦虎 and by two of his high officials, Guanggun Dama and Ma Lao.

A brief background about root-seeking literature and new fiction from Tibet provides the necessary context to understand how "Mountain Pass" participates in, yet distinguishes

itself from, contemporaneous literary trends. Root-seeking was a prominent literary current in China between 1985 and 1988 (Berry 2008, p. 255).³ Writing fiction in the root-seeking mode, authors stressed the importance of local cultural identities as a way of injecting new life into Chinese literature (Leenhouts 2016, p. 299). An attachment to “authentic” modes of life was often conveyed in root-seeking literature with a profound sense of nostalgia. Scholars have interpreted this nostalgia as a response to the disruptive movements of the twentieth century, particularly the Cultural Revolution.

Like root-seeking literature, the amorphous group of writings referred to as new fiction from Tibet also emerged in response to national politics, though more explicitly to the reforms introduced in the early 1980s (Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani 2008). In these scattered texts about Tibet, some authors sought refuge against the radical social, economic, and cultural transformations of the post-Mao era by exploring Tibet’s “uncontaminated” and “authentic” local traditions. Other authors, instead, harshly criticized Tibet and its society for being backward and primitive. Regardless of their dissonant attitudes toward rural Tibet, these writings have led—to borrow from Louisa Schein (2000, p. 1)—to an “internal-orientalist” twist to Chinese literature, wherein writers either mystify rural Tibetan communities as the ultimate custodians of disappearing religious wisdoms, or chastise them for being backward, while concurrently providing a voyeuristic depiction of scenes of violence, sex, and depravation.⁴ Notwithstanding their shared exploration of rural places, the root-seeking literature and new fiction from Tibet ultimately carry a nationalist agenda, in terms of attempting to revamp national culture through the local and decrying the loss of authenticity caused by state-directed reforms, on the one hand, and in terms of arguing for the pressing need for the development of peripheral areas, on the other.

“Mountain Pass” (L. Bai 2015) can be productively related to the aforementioned literary currents because it also centers on the themes of nostalgia and identity crisis. The story’s focus on a Hui community resonates with the emphasis on minority cultures and their environments found in the root-seeking literature and new fiction from Tibet. Moreover, the story was first published in 1985, the same year as Han Shaogong’s 韩少功 “Literary Roots” 文学的根 (Han 1985), a seminal essay a posteriori rationalized as the manifesto of the movement.⁵ In light of both its temporal and thematic resonance with the root-seeking literature and new fiction from Tibet, “Mountain Pass” exemplifies the active involvement of an ethnic minority author in the contemporaneous landscape of Chinese literature.

At the same time, however, the focus on a Sinophone Muslim community and, by extension, their ethno-Islamic heritage, introduces to the local–national dyad a third dimension: the Islamic world perceived as the fatherland. Thus, the local in “Mountain Pass” becomes the site on which national and transnational ties are asserted and negotiated, foregrounding the triple-layered identification of the Hui with rural communities, with the state of China, and with the Islamic world to which they trace their ancestry.⁶

This triple-layered identification, which is generally absent from the works of root-seeking literature and new fiction from Tibet, complicates the value of the local vis-à-vis the national. As previously observed, in the root-seeking literature and new fiction from Tibet, isolated communities are often depicted as strongholds of cultures believed to have remained unchanged amidst the forces of modernization, Westernization, and the Chinese revolution, on the one side, and the influence of Confucian or mainstream Han Chinese cultural elements on the other. In this sense, the local is in a dialogical relation with the national dimension, as it can either provide a guide to the national or, less frequently, necessitates improvements from the center. In contrast, I argue that the narrative portrayal of the rural parts of Shaanxi and Xinjiang, as presented in “Mountain Pass”, functions as a rhetorical strategy to reaffirm and validate the Hui’s position in China during the immediate post-Mao era, a period when expressions of ethnic identity were once again encouraged by central authorities.⁷ Overall, I suggest that the narrative of layered Hui identities in “Mountain Pass” aims at casting a positive light on the Hui community.

To substantiate this claim, first I look at the theme of nostalgia, which is central to the short story under analysis and also prominent in the writings considered part of the root-seeking literature and in certain works of the new fiction from Tibet. While nostalgia in these two literary trends functions as a tool to evoke an era betrayed by political illusions, in “Mountain Pass” it serves to tether the Hui community to their hometown in Shaanxi and, by extension, to the emerging nation of China. Next, I explore how nostalgic recollections act as a means by which to delve into the facets of identity struggles. What distinguishes “Mountain Pass” is that the quest for identity is not solely a response to Mao and post-Mao-era politics, but rather it is inherent to the Hui group’s hybrid origin. Expanding on this point, I then delve into the Hui contingent’s struggle with a dual sense of identity linked to two homelands: one in China and the other in the Middle East. As the characters contemplate whether to stay in China or depart, the narrative of “Mountain Pass” increasingly leans towards the former, highlighting the Hui community’s allegiance to China. Throughout the story, this loyalty is reinforced by the meticulous use of linguistically precise terminology for locations within China, and by the positive portrayal of the Hui contingent to a national audience. These two narrative strategies are, respectively, explored in the concluding two sections of the essay.

2. Nostalgic Reverie

Numerous authors whose contributions were integral to the root-seeking movement underwent the transformative experience of being sent-down youth (*zhìqīng* 知青).⁸ The phenomenon of the sent-down youth, beginning in the 1950s and lasting until the end of the Cultural Revolution, involved relocating young urbanites from large urban centers to rural areas. From the perspective of the PRC’s public administration, this relocation would rid young intellectuals of their bourgeois mentality through labor and interaction with rural communities.⁹ These experiences fostered a profound connection between young intellectuals and rural life. Upon their return to urban environments, many of those who pursued or continued careers as literary authors brought with them a newfound affinity for rural places and often experienced nostalgia for their youth, a sentiment that also percolates through their works (M. Wang 2016, p. 33).

The sentiment of nostalgia finds resonance in Tibetan literature, particularly in authors’ fixation on the expansive grasslands, as pointed out by Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani (2008, p. xxxiii).¹⁰ The nostalgic portrayal of vast grasslands, juxtaposed with the less favorable depiction of Sinicized towns, exists prominently in Tibetophone works by Dhondup Gyal 顿珠坚赞, Tenpa Yargyé 丹巴·雅尔杰, Anyön Trashi Döndrup 阿彭扎西顿珠, and Pema Tseten 班玛才旦 (Virtanen 2008), reflecting—as noted by Kamila Hladíková (2013, p. 127)—a longing for a pristine Tibetan environment that symbolizes the loss of cultural roots and identity. To zoom in on a specific author, Tenpa Yargyé articulated, in an interview, his dedication to commemorating the diminishing Tibetan way of life, by integrating into his works ethnographically detailed portrayals of folk customs and beliefs (Virtanen 2008, p. 245).

Other Tibetan authors demonstrate a nuanced approach to nostalgia, as exemplified by Tashi Dawa’s 扎西达娃 “A Soul in Bondage” 西藏，系在皮绳扣上的魂 (Zhaxi Dawa 2013).¹¹ Through vivid depictions of Tibet’s majestic landscapes, and references to religious icons and the mythical realm of Shambhala, Tashi Dawa imbues the story with a mystical sense of wonder. However, the encroaching forces of modernization threaten Tibet’s traditional way of life, even as they are viewed as essential for liberating Tibet from societal shackles, such as male chauvinism (as portrayed by the male main character, Tabei) and ignorance (as symbolized by the woman’s inability to count). This tension between nostalgia for the past and the imperative of modernization underscores the complex dynamics shaping Tibet’s cultural evolution.

A nostalgic undertone is also central “Mountain Pass”, particularly concerning the hometowns of the Hui military contingent members. In the story’s opening scene, as the

military contingent finds itself forcefully relocated to Xinjiang, Commander Bai Yanhu gazes upon the landscape. A sudden cold gust of wind stirs up memories from his past:

‘In the regions outside of the Great Wall [saiwai], the autumn is already cold. On the contrary, in the Shaanxi hometown, it is still the warm season of the harvest. Though the Qinling Mountains cannot match the towering Tian Mountains, they are nonetheless imposing and majestic. In this season, the [Qinling Mountains] are still green and luxuriant; the persimmons are ripe. Those glistening yellow fruits are like golden balls hanging from the branches. The bright red dates are also ripe. Oh, it has been six or seven years since he last tasted the persimmons and the dates of his hometown’ (L. Bai 2015, p. 21).¹²

This passage captures Bai Yanhu’s nostalgic reminiscence of his hometown, an unnamed village nestled somewhere in southern Shaanxi, as hinted at by mentions of the Qinling Mountains. The descriptions of Bai’s hometown evoke positive sensations: the comforting embrace of “the warmth”, the lushness of the green and luxuriant landscapes, and the allure of tantalizing fruits like persimmons and dates. In stark contrast, the Xinjiang region where the contingent now finds itself exiled is depicted with chilling imagery: the “biting chill of autumn”, the imposing presence of the “towering” Tian Mountains, and a notable absence of specific fruits, hinting at a barren landscape. Through the juxtaposition of climate, toponyms, landscape configurations, and the delicacies of the earth (or lack thereof), the narrative constructs a stark dichotomy between Bai Yanhu’s affection for his hometown and the harsh reality of his displacement to Xinjiang. This description serves to underline his deep-rooted connection to the Shaanxi village from the very outset of the story.

The significant disparity between the nostalgia depicted in “Mountain Pass” and that explored in the root-seeking literature by sent-down authors lies in its origins. While rural landscapes in the root-seeking literature are often recalled by the authors solely from their experiences as young adults—recounted retrospectively and frequently from the vantage point of an urban environment—the nostalgia in “Mountain Pass” stems from a profound sense of identity intertwined with the characters’ daily existence.¹³ This distinction becomes apparent in a reflective stream of consciousness, presented as a flashback, which portrays Bai Yanhu’s childhood experiences within the village:

‘[Bai Yanhu] remembered that when he was eight or nine years old, the old teacher at the mosque told the story of Wan Gars. At the time, however, Bai Yanhu’s thoughts were directed to the mud fish of the Wei river, and he soon lost interest in his teacher’s story. Class was not yet over when Bai Yanhu and his friends sneaked out and ran to the riverside. With their butts naked, they got busy catching fish. [...] That was fun! Much more so than listening to that story. In no time, he caught six or seven fish, overjoyed to the point that he forgot to go back to school. The next day, he got caned by his teacher. Only then did he realize that Wan Gars’ story was not like other stories. Otherwise, the teacher would not have punished him by beating his behind. At the time, however, he did not fully understand its importance. Only with time passing did he gradually begin to understand that Wan Gars is the root of the Huihui, and therefore must not be forgotten. Up to the present, when Wan Gars is mentioned, people get so excited and even Bai Yanhu cannot control his emotion’s. (L. Bai 2015, pp. 23–24)

This passage, consisting of Bai Yanhu’s recollections of a carefree childhood, filled with simple pleasures and innocence within a rural Muslim community, is tinged with nostalgia. Specifically, the anecdote revolves around youthful escapades of catching fish in the Wei River, absent from the historical accounts of Bai Yanhu, and are likely a creation of Bai Lian’s imagination. In this scene, Commander Bai morphs into his childhood self. Revisiting his past is a psychological reconnection to his hometown and to the essence of being a Hui person with deep roots in a local Shaanxi village.¹⁴

The examples provided in this section highlight that the nostalgic undertone of the root-seeking literature serves as a tool to revisit and contemplate the Mao era, as well as the subsequent political disillusionment of the early post-Mao era (D. Wang 2000, pp. xxviii–xxix). Similarly, within the new fiction from Tibet, nostalgia often functions as a cautionary signal against the rapid pace of modernization.¹⁵ Both these literary trends engage—though from different angles—in a critical examination of Mao-era and contemporaneous policies, striving to distillate alternative value systems from or in opposition to the life of these folks. Instead, the purpose of “Mountain Pass” is to forge emotional connections between a group of Hui Muslims and their rural Chinese homeland as they find themselves displaced by the tumultuous events of the anti-Qing rebellions.

3. Identity Struggles

In the bodies of literature under examination, rural landscapes evoke a profound sense of nostalgia originating from various sources: memories of youth lost amid political idealism, the encroachment of modernization disrupting traditional ways of life, and the tranquility preceding the upheaval of military conflicts. These nostalgic reminiscences of an idealized past, I posit, constitute fertile ground for delving into the intricate facets of identity struggles.

Nostalgic fictional representations of cultural Tibet are intricately intertwined with the pervasive mysticism that characterizes the region. This mystical aura emanates, in part, from the specific geographical features of Tibet: its towering mountains and rugged terrains, which historically served as natural deterrents to potential intruders, thereby rendering Tibet almost inaccessible and bestowing upon it an aura of mystery. Leveraging this mystical allure, avant-garde writers—Tibetan and non-Tibetan—such as Tashi Dawa and Ma Jian, sought to use the idea of a “traditional” Tibet to fill the perceived void of identity (Yue 2004, p. 75).¹⁶

The theme of identity loss is also prominently articulated in the literature exploring the quest for cultural roots. Han Shaogong’s “Homecoming?” (1985)—arguably the best known story associated with root-seeking literature—provides a poignant illustration of this thematic exploration. The protagonist, Huang Zhixian, embarks on a journey to a marginalized region, finding himself erroneously identified as another individual. Confronted with this mistaken identity, he reluctantly adopts it for the sake of convenience, a choice that ultimately leads him down a path where he progressively loses touch with his own sense of self. As noted by scholars (Feuerwerker 1998, p. 210; Lau 1993, p. 28), Huang Zhixian’s predicament serves as an allegorical representation of the profound consequences of cultural displacement experienced by the rusticated youth of his era or, more broadly, of the collective struggle endured by an entire generation contending with the challenges of cultural estrangement.

The narrative style in “Homecoming?” serves to accentuate the sense of identity crisis experienced by the story’s characters. In addition to the plot, the sense of crisis is exacerbated by “a unique blend of narrative realism and the improbable occurrences typical of magic realism” (Yau 2019, p. 113). The juxtaposition of realist and surreal elements raises questions regarding the reliability of the first-person narrator. In contrast, “Mountain Pass”, narrated through an omniscient third-person perspective (Yang 1990, p. 70), adopts a realistic narrative mode devoid of any elements of the uncanny. Within this narrative framework, the heated debate between two high officials, named Guanggun Dama and Ma Lao, revolves around whether to escape China and return to their Middle Eastern ancestral homeland, or stay to resist the Qing troops. This debate presents two plausible options instead of suggesting a loss of identity.

The contentious dispute between these two officials revolves around the origin of the Hui community, a crucial defining aspect of the group’s identity. Central to this debate is the detachment of the Hui from their ancestral territory, a consequence of historical dislocations and relocation processes (Y. Wang 2013, p. 124). The historical evidence suggests that the Hui’s roots can be traced back to multiple groups of Middle Eastern migrants who

arrived in various parts of China in successive waves, beginning as early as the eighth century (Gladney 1996, pp. 36–66). These migrants intermingled with the local populations, forming new settlements across China and integrating into the local social fabric. Consequently, for Hui communities, the question of their place of origin presents two distinct possibilities: one in the Middle East and the other within China's borders, depending on how far back in time one traces their beginnings.

As a community of migrant settlers, Chinese Muslim groups have long grappled with the challenge of assimilating their foreign identity into a new homeland. One way to address this challenge has manifested in the development of myths, such as “The Origins of the Huihui” 回回原来. According to a widespread version of this myth (e.g., Li and Wang 1985, pp. 400–401), the legendary progenitor of the group, Wan Gars 宛尔斯, was summoned by the Tang Emperor Li Shimin to safeguard the empire. Enduring an arduous journey from the Middle East, Wan Gars and his companions arrived in China and successfully defended the empire. Other versions of the myth (399–400) elaborate that during a colloquium between Wan Gars and the emperor, the former elucidated the similarities between Islamic teachings and Confucianism. Impressed by this deep understanding of Confucian principles and the harmony between Islamic and Chinese traditions, the emperor extended an invitation for Wan Gars and his followers to settle in China. This, the myth concludes, is the origin of the Hui group. Imperial patronage, as depicted in this version of the myth, aims to legitimize the group's presence in China (Benite 2010; Leslie 1981).

In “Mountain Pass”, Ma Lao presents an alternative perspective on Hui identity by asserting that “Our ancestors came from Persia, from Arabia. The native land of our old ancestor is indeed our native land” (L. Bai 2015, p. 26). By invoking the narrative of the mythical ancestor—Wan Gars—Ma Lao taps into what scholars (De Grandis 2020, p. 95; Gladney 2004, pp. 108–9) have singled out as one of the most widespread narratives concerning the origins of the Hui group. At the same time, however, Ma Lao introduces a shift into the mainstream narrative. In contrast to Guanggun Dama's emphasis on Wan Gars' descendants' long-term residency in China, which affirms the group's legitimacy in their adopted homeland, Ma Lao uses the same origin myth to argue for a return “to our native land [*laojia* 老家]” (p. 27).

The choice between the two options—both presented as valid—constitutes the central focus of the narrative. This is evident from three key elements. Firstly, the majority of the narrative centers around Commander Bai Yanhu's contemplations as he observes the verbal exchanges between his two officials. Secondly, all the reflections made by Bai Yanhu are filtered through an omniscient narrator who provides insights into the past and present events concerning the Hui contingent, thereby establishing narrative reliability. Lastly, both officials, Guanggun Dama and Ma Lao, are portrayed as courageous and loyal individuals. In the opening of the story, rather than seeking a respite following a demanding battle, they engage in a fervent debate over the course of the action to take, thus showcasing dedication to their people and China. The narrator explicitly underscores their valor, stating, “On the battlefield, they are both valiant officials who have focused on fighting the Qing troops” (L. Bai 2015, p. 22). The convergence of a reliable narrator and valiant characters, such as Commander Bai, Ma Lao, and Guanggun Dama, amplifies the ongoing contention surrounding which option warrants precedence.

Throughout the story, Commander Bai Yanhu oscillates between the positions presented by Ma Lao and Guanggun Dama, struggling to reach a final decision. There are passages where the option of fleeing seems to gain prominence: “Commander Bai reflected [...] Ma Lao's proposition is worth considering. Bai Yanhu's eyes glistened, and in his heart, he thought, ‘Why not take the route of Xiama'erbatu, cross the Naryn River and go to Persia, to Arabia.’ Following these contemplations, he regarded Ma Lao with genuine admiration” (L. Bai 2015, pp. 24–25). However, despite these moments, certain narrative elements tilt the balance in favor of Guanggun Dama's argument. One such element is a flashback, filtered through Bai Yanhu's authoritative perspective, which explores the motivations behind Guanggun Dama's initial enlistment in the army:

‘Guanggun Dama used to sell dried mutton on the Wei River bend. At the time when Bai Yanhu stirred up the revolt against the Qing, the authorities falsely incriminated Guanggun Dama’s family for colluding with the bandits. Using this pretext, they dragged her husband outside of the North Gate and had him decapitated. In response, carrying a five *jin* broadsword, Guanggun Dama sought refuge in the volunteer army’. (L. Bai 2015, pp. 26–27)

This passage initially introduces Guanggun Dama as an ordinary Hui woman, a street vendor, who undergoes a swift transformation into a village protector in response to the oppressive actions of the treacherous Qing troops. Her voluntary enlistment in the Huihui army serves as a clear expression of her resistance to the violence inflicted by the Qing invaders. Guanggun Dama’s steadfast commitment to combat, highlighted by the statement, “In the past sixteen years, she has fought innumerable hard battles and put her life at risk. She has never shed a tear” (L. Bai 2015, p. 26), underscores her exceptional merit.

In the eyes of the reader, Guanggun Dama evokes sympathy as her struggles and sacrifices are intimately known and expressed with emotionally charged language. Contrarily, the story leaves Ma Lao’s motivation for joining the Huihui military contingent unexplained. As a result, while Guanggun Dama emerges as a rounded and humanized character, eliciting the reader’s sympathy, Ma Lao’s role appears incidental, existing primarily in opposition to Guanggun Dama.

A second element favoring Guanggun Dama’s position is that her argument receives considerably more elaboration:

‘Great Bai, my husband has been beheaded by those with the queue [the Qing army]. Still, on the bends of the Wei River are my children, my mom, my in-laws, all of whom are close relatives. Our old ancestors’ home was in Arabia, but my home place is in Chang’an. This has been for generations.’ Then, she turned toward Ma Lao and looking at him with disdain said: ‘Valiant man, aren’t our ancestors bones buried in the Central Plain? We are the people from the Central Plains. In our village are the sixty-four alleys of the Huihui. How are they doing? Don’t you care? And have you forgotten your poor wife who you left in Chang’an only three days after your wedding? There is no day in which she does not cherish you in her heart. She has been waiting for sixteen years. Are you without mercy?’ (p. 26)

This passage intertwines personal narrative with historical context. Initially, Guanggun Dama recounts the loss of her husband, who fell victim to the Qing army. Subsequently, she portrays her family as representative of typical Muslim migrants to China, detailing their gradual assimilation. This concept is symbolically encapsulated by the imagery of the “bones buried in the Central Plains”, which underscores the profound connection between the Hui community and their adopted homeland. Transitioning from the distant past of their ancestors’ arrival to the present, Guanggun Dama reflects on the well-being of her fellow villagers and articulates concerns about their future. The circular structure of the passage—beginning with a contemporary focus, delving into the past, and then returning to the present—serves to obscure the group’s foreign origins, emphasizing their longstanding residency within China. Leveraging her familial connections, Guanggun Dama underscores her profound attachment to the village and reiterates her determination to remain in China.

Ultimately, as already suggested, both Ma Lao and Guanggun Dama’s positions have argumentative validity. For this reason, Bai Lian expresses attachment to China not through rational reasoning but through Guanggun Dama’s emotional reaction at the possibility of leaving China forever: “Guanggun Dama sobbed for a moment, then suddenly looked up, wiped away her tears and with faltering voice said: ‘Great Bai. If you want to leave, do so. I won’t be able to leave’” (p. 26). These words struck the soldiers and Bai Yanhu like a “bucket of cold water” (p. 26), and dampened their initial enthusiasm for leaving. Even Ma Lao, who throughout the story has been steadfast in his position, all of a sudden

“lowered his head, sinking in thought” (p. 27). At this point in the story, the narrator describes the epiphany of all in the Huihui contingent with the following statement—“As a matter of fact our own roots have long been deeply planted in China’s land [*Zhonghua de guotu* 中华的骨头]”—asserting that the decision to remain in China has been collectively taken in spite of the prolonged hardships faced on the battleground and the uncertain outcome. The development of the plot, with its crescendo of tension, is a strategy by which to take a stand over the question of the Hui’s legitimacy in China. The spatial references in the story, explored in the next section, serve a similar purpose in upholding Guanggun Dama’s position.

4. Spatial References

The passage analyzed in the second section of this paper illustrates the distinctions between Xinjiang and Shaanxi concerning their climate, toponyms, landscape configurations, and local delicacies. These variations are depicted as regional nuances rather than fundamental divides. Instead, in “Mountain Pass”, the primary division is delineated between the interior and the exterior. To the former category belong the places within China that can be further categorized into four analytical subgroups: elements of the natural landscape, such as the Qinling Mountains (21), the Tian Mountains (21), the “Jijicao gorge” (20), a bend in the Wei River (23), and the Central Plains (26); locations of battles in Wuchen (20) and near Jijibao (27); references to human settlements, such as the “sixty-four alleys of the Huihui” village (25; 26); and administrative or conceptual subdivisions of the territory, including the Shaanxi region (21) and two references to Chang’an (both on p. 26). All the places within China’s current administrative borders are presented with toponymic accuracy.

Conversely, places outside of China are referred to with a plurality of fuzzy references: “beyond the Naryn river” (22), Persia (24), the Arab world (24), and the Middle East (24). Such geographic references cover a vast territory that, in the case of the last two terms, spans the North African continent and Central Asia. Their ancestors’ land is thus an *imagined* (Anderson 1983; *passim*) territory outside of China’s imperial borders, rather than a precise geographical location or a specific and circumscribed area. By maintaining such vagueness, Bai Lian traces the Hui’s origin to migrant groups from the Middle East who arrived in China starting in the eighth century, thus echoing the official discourse on the Hui’s origin.¹⁷

Numerous spatial references in “Mountain Pass” point at the divide between China’s interior and the outside. For instance, at Ma Lao’s proposition of continuing the march, Guanggun Dama responds: “Keep going? We have kept going forward for the past six or seven years. We fought from the *Central Plains* up to the *end of earth*. We ran out of ammunition and provisions. There are even no more roads. You want to keep going, where the heck do you want to go?” (L. Bai 2015, p. 21; emphasis added). Similarly, in a stream of consciousness, Commander Bai Yanhu sighs: “Oh, we have been fighting for sixteen years, from *the East* we ended up in *the West*, the horses have never stopped running, our people have never taken any rest, and in the end we will run to a *foreign territory* ...” (pp. 22–23; emphases added).

This spatially laden terminology, emphasized in the former two examples, deserves closer scrutiny. “East” (*dong* 东) and “Central Plains” (*Zhongyuan* 中原) identify the point of origin of the Hui contingent, and from which it has been forcefully chased away. “Central Plains” is a particularly loaded term because it points to the area that has been considered the cradle of Chinese civilization.¹⁸ “West” (*xi* 西) and “end of earth” (*tianbian* 天边) indicate the territories in Xinjiang where the Hui troops are stationed at the time the story is narrated. Finally, “foreign territory” (*renjia de guotu* 人家的骨头) refers to territories outside of imperial control. Collectively, these clusters of spatial words trace the movement of the Hui contingent within Chinese territory, highlighting a sense of progressive distancing from the perceived center toward alien lands.

One term used to delineate the boundaries of the nation has undergone a shift across two subsequent re-editions of the story. The first edition was published in 1985 by Bai

Lian, while the second, released posthumously in 2015, likely represents an editorial revision. The earlier edition describes Xinjiang with the periphrasis “the western border of the motherland” (*zuguo xibu bianchui* 祖国西部边陲) (L. Bai 1985, p. 12), whereas the latter substitutes the term *zuguo* with *Zhongguo* 中国 (China), making it explicit that the Hui contingent has been pushed to “China’s western border” (L. Bai 2015, p. 20; emphasis added). *Zuguo*, literally translating to “the country of one’s ancestors”, is typically used by Chinese citizens to refer to China, but can also be interpreted as “motherland”, “homeland”, or “native land”. Given that the story is about a Muslim Chinese contingent, the term can be ambiguously related to China, but also to the Hui’s homeland in the Middle East, though this potential “misreading” is mitigated by the modifier *xibu* (“Western”). While the available elements cannot provide a definite explanation, I suggest that the editorial’s shift in terminology was aimed at preventing any sort of potential alternative reading, thus further advancing an ultimately nationalist interpretation of the story.

The narrative focal point revolves around the mountain pass (*ai’kou* 隘口), the ultimate threshold between China’s interior and exterior. It is not coincidental that the title of the story—“Mountain Pass”—emphasizes this geographical location. Throughout the narrative, the verbal arguments between the officials revolve around the decision of whether to cross it. Additionally, the pass holds significance in Commander Bai’s contemplations: “He raised his eyes and looked at the faint mountain pass in the distance. The people from Xiama’erbatu had come and left from that pass” (L. Bai 2015, p. 22). As posited by James Millward (1998, p. 3), boundaries extend beyond their physical demarcations, serving not merely to separate inside from outside, but also to delineate the groups inhabiting these spaces, thereby establishing relations of belonging and exclusion. In the story, the act of crossing the “mountain pass” transcends mere geographical relocation; it functions as a hermeneutical tool employed in the assertion of the Hui’s positionality.

Overall, the precise toponymic accuracy and geographic specificity of the locations within China stand in stark contrast to the ambiguity surrounding the places beyond its borders. This disparity, coupled with the internal conflict regarding whether to depart or remain despite adverse circumstances—wherein rationality may dictate departure, yet the heart harbors a burning desire to stay—emphasizes the multifaceted identity of the Hui, and yet leans the narrative toward the Hui’s enduring attachment to China. This subtle declaration of loyalty seems to be intended for a wider national audience, as I will elaborate in the following section.

5. Addressing a National Audience

Published in 1985, amidst a historical era dominated by state policies fostering ethnic diversity (Bovingdon 2016), “Mountain Pass” strategically aligns with the official narrative of a multi-ethnic China. One notable feature of “Mountain Pass” consists of its frequent incorporation of terms from local topolects, as well as references to Hui Muslim historical figures and mythical Muslim characters. Aware of the potential unfamiliarity of these terms and individuals to an audience of Hui outsiders, Bai Lian includes explanations in the form of endnotes. The first one, for instance, provides background information on the figure of Nasr al-Din 纳苏拉丁, who “in the Yuan Dynasty ... inherited his position from his father, ... Sayyid Shams al-Din. For many years, Nasr al-Din oversaw the political affairs in Shaanxi. [Hence,] around the area of Shaanxi a group of Huihui call themselves after this forefather’s name” (L. Bai 1985, p. 15, fn. 1). In this way, the author bridges the assumed knowledge gap of the reader.

A similar function is fulfilled in the story through didactic dialogues and descriptions. A clear example is the debate between the two high officials, Guanggun Dama and Ma Lao:

[Ma Lao:] “Do you know who our forefather is?” [...]

[Guanggun Dama:] [...] “What kind of question is this? We are of the La clan, the descendants of the Nasr al-Din!”

[Ma Lao:] “I am asking you about our old ancestor”, said Ma Lao, emphasizing the world “old”.

[Guanggun Dama:] “Old... old ancestor?”

[Ma Lao:] “Have you forgotten about him? Our old ancestor is Wan Gars!” ...

“Right”,—someone in the crowd added—“Wan Gars had been invited by the Tang emperor”.

“He also brought artisans, and the trebuchet”, specified someone else.

[Ma Lao:] “Correct! He led the troops in the Central Plains, passed on skills to artisans, trained troops and horses, and helped the Tang emperor in consolidating the empire. The emperor treated Wan Gars as an honorable guest and held him in high esteem”. (L. Bai 2015, p. 23)

This passage succinctly presents the official narrative of Hui origins, tracing them to the legendary figure of Wan Gars. As already stated, ethnographic scholarship indicates that this myth is widely known among the Hui population. The didactic nature of the passage suggests that Bai Lian is addressing an audience outside the Hui community. Moreover, the exchange between the two officials is punctuated by observations from on-looker soldiers who elaborate on the expertise and technology introduced to China by their alleged ancestors, such as the trebuchet—a type of catapult—which are reported in the *Concise History of the Hui* (Huizu jianshi bianxie zu 2009, pp. 36–37). The inclusion of such information indicates that the story is aimed at a national audience largely unfamiliar with the history of the Hui and their contributions to China.

Beyond merely introducing Hui culture to a national audience, I suggest that the story serves as a means to shed a positive light on the Hui community. This intention is particularly evident in the story’s concluding segment. Just as Commander Bai Yanhu is about to deliver his final decision, the Qing troops unexpectedly appear on the horizon, leaving no time for further contemplation. The story abruptly concludes with the urgent declaration from the Hui contingent, “The Qing soldiers are attacking again!” (27), prompting readers to envision the impending battle and its uncertain outcome. With this deliberately ambiguous ending, Bai Lian refrains from offering a definitive resolution to the debate. However, readers familiar with the historical facts know that, eventually, Bai Yanhu and his troops fled China (Lipman 1997, p. 129). The story’s abrupt ending suggests Bai Lian’s intention to downplay the historical outcome of the battle, which led to the flight of the Hui contingent into Russia. Instead, it directs the reader’s attention to the psychological turmoil motivating Bai Yanhu’s decision to withdraw his troops.

Another method by which the story endeavors to depict the Hui community positively is apparent in its deliberate exclusion of specific elements. As documented by Jonathan Lipman (1997, pp. 129–30), Chinese historiography up to the mid-1990s tended to praise Bai Yanhu for his resistance against the Qing army in Shaanxi, while simultaneously denouncing his backing of the Xinjiang separatists and his eventual decision to lead his troops into Russia. Bai Lian, however, purges the story of these and other adverse elements, including the documented massacres of Han populations by Hui troops en route to Xinjiang (e.g., Ding 1999, p. 16). Consequently, the story can be interpreted as providing justification for Commander Bai Yanhu’s departure from China, attributing it to external pressures rather than any indication of disloyalty to the nation. The deliberate portrayal of the Hui contingent as loyal to China emerges as a strategic tactic aimed at legitimizing the Hui community’s presence within the broader contemporaneous politics of China.

6. Conclusions

“Mountain Pass” shares three fundamental elements with contemporaneous literary trends (root-seeking literature and new fiction from Tibet): depictions of rural landscapes, a nostalgic undertone, and an exploration of identity issues. However, the manner in which these elements are explored in the story differs from their treatment in contemporaneous literary trends. This difference is largely due to the story’s overarching goal. While the root-seeking literature and new fiction from Tibet draw inspiration from rural areas to rejuvenate the nation, “Mountain Pass” focuses on asserting the Hui’s position in

China both locally and nationally, while simultaneously marking the group's distinctiveness through its connection with the Islamic world.

The Islamic heritage of the Hui community takes center stage in "Mountain Pass" in two significant ways. Firstly, through the portrayal of key members of the Hui military contingent—particularly Bai Yanhu, Guanggun Dama, and Ma Lao—who are depicted as devout Muslims and valiant warriors, tirelessly combating the Qing army. Implicitly, the narrative suggests that the weakening of the Qing empire—partially facilitated by the efforts of the Hui military contingent—was a crucial step toward the establishment of the PRC. Secondly, the story intertwines recollections of Islamic origin myths and legends with allusions to Chinese Islamic material culture, highlighting the Hui's contributions to the Chinese empire. These contributions extend beyond military defense to encompass the introduction of new technologies. By weaving together the portrayal of revered Hui Muslim characters and their ancestral narratives, "Mountain Pass" underscores the loyalty and legitimacy of the Hui community within the Chinese nation.

The incorporation of ethno-identity into the promotion of national interests provides a framework for ethnic minority authors to establish a literary presence without necessarily aligning with the dominant literary trends of the era. This challenges the dominant framework in Chinese literary studies, which often portrays the immediate post-Mao era as a time of discursive resistance to the central state, serving as a pressure valve for societal tensions. As a result, "Mountain Pass" enhances our comprehension of the literary landscape of the mid-1980s, and prompts a reexamination of the varied ways in which ethnic minority authors have participated in Chinese literary discourse.

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Notes

- ¹ Bai Lian (1929–2008) was born in Yili, Xinjiang, into a modest family. In his youth, he supported himself through small business ventures with his family. In 1946, he moved to Tihua (now Urumqi) for high school and later earned a scholarship to a boarding school in Nanjing. In 1949, Bai returned to Xinjiang, where he held various administrative roles. His literary career began in 1958, when he helped establish a local newspaper in Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture, working as a journalist and editor. This sparked his interest in writing, leading to his first publication in 1964 at age thirty-five.
- ² For a scholarly analysis of these clashes, see Jonathan Lipman (1997).
- ³ Writers normally associated with the root-seeking mode have focused on a variety of communities. For instance, Han Shaogong on western Hunan, A. Cheng on Xishuangbanna in Yunnan, and Zheng Wanlong on Heilongjiang.
- ⁴ The most prominent case in this regard is that of Ma Jian, a Han author, whose literary representations of Tibet have garnered acclaim. Noteworthy among his works is *Stick out your Tongue* (Ma 1987), a collection of short stories that combines two recurring elements. First, the collection includes a nostalgic undertone for Tibet's fading traditions and barren landscapes. Second, *Stick out your Tongue* can be interpreted as a critique of Tibet's backwardness, particularly pronounced—as observed by Kamila Hladíková (2010, p. 82)—by deviant sexual practices, such as polyandry, incest, and ritual religious copulations.
- ⁵ Mark Leenhouts (2016, p. 299) persuasively argues that lacking systematicity, root-seeking literature was not properly a school, but rather a literary trend.
- ⁶ Huo Da's *Funeral of a Muslim* (Huo 1988) and Zhang Chengzhi's *History of the Soul* (Zhang 1991), arguably the most well-known novels by Hui authors, also weave the narratives of specific local Hui communities—one around Ox Street in Beijing and a Jahriyya community in Northwestern China—connecting them to the broader Hui community at the national level and tracing their lineage back to their forefathers in the Middle East.
- ⁷ For a thorough analysis of the revamping of ethnic policies in the early post-Mao era, see Gardner Bovingdon (2016).
- ⁸ Li Rui, Wang Anyi, Zhang Chengzhi, and Ye Xin are just a few examples of sent-down youth who have gained prominence in the literary field.
- ⁹ For an extensive study on this phenomenon, see Helena K. Rene's (2013) *China's Sent-Down Generation*.

- ¹⁰ In Tibetan literature, the theme of nostalgia also extends into the early twentieth century. For instance, in Tsering Woesser's *Tibet: A Crimson Map* (Weise 2003), the descriptions of monasteries, lamas, and pilgrims convey a deep sense of nostalgia for the fading Tibetan civilization.
- ¹¹ In her analysis, Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani (1999, pp. 123–24) highlights the contested classification of Tashi Dawa as a Tibetan author within mainland literary circles. The controversy stems from the author's hybrid ethnic background and the predominant use of Mandarin Chinese—rather than Tibetan—in his literary works.
- ¹² All translations are mine.
- ¹³ Although less common, some authors whose writings have been labeled under the “root-seeking” umbrella were not sent-down youth, but were born in the countryside. This is the case for Mo Yan 莫言, who grew up in Gaomi Township, northeast of Shandong Province. Passages in his *Red Sorghum* 红高粱家族 (e.g., Mo 2012, p. 2) carry a nostalgic tone, through its evocative reminiscence of Northeast Gaomi Township, portraying a complex blend of love and disdain for the place and its inhabitants.
- ¹⁴ For an authoritative biographical account of Bai Yanhu, see S. Bai (2000, pp. 1423–29).
- ¹⁵ As noted by Ray Cashman (2006), nostalgia for a falsely idealized past can be a powerful tool for critiquing the present.
- ¹⁶ The magical aura associated with Tibet participated—not necessarily consciously—in the larger cultural discourse of the time that branded cultural Tibetan areas, and Shangri La in particular, as an idyllic paradise on earth (cfr. Lopez 1998).
- ¹⁷ This discourse is almost ubiquitous in the scholarship and in popular discourse. For a recent reiteration of this narrative see, for instance, the *Concise History of the Hui* (Huizu jianshi bianxie zu 2009, pp. 36–37).
- ¹⁸ The discussion of the term Central Plains deserves a book-length study of its own. Here, I limit myself to few considerations. While Central Plains is normally associated with the starting point of Chinese culture, the extension of the territory indicated by the term is subject to controversy. Nianshen Song observed that the term “Central Plains” “ordinarily functions as a blanket term referring to the mid and lower Yellow River region, which exists in Chinese mythology as the core area of politics and civilization. The imprecise geopolitical and geocultural term contrasts with bianjiang: frontier or margin” (Song 2018, p. 34). The imprecision of the term is evident when one considers that when using it, scholars have tended to clarify what they mean exactly. For instance, Leo Shin wrote “I use the term ‘central plains’ ... to denote what was in general considered by Ming observers to be China's core territory” (Shin 2006, p. 17). Evelyn Rawski informed the reader that “[t]he earliest historical records locate Chinese states emerging in the Yellow River drainage as it flows south and turns eastward on the borders of present-day Shaanxi, the area that historians denote as the Central Plain” (Rawski 2015, p. 22). For Steven Sage, the term refers “to the entire area of present Henan province, the western part of Shandong, southern Hebei and Shanxi, and northern Hubei, Anhui, and Jiangsu provinces. Some of this ground includes parts of the loess plateau. Not all of the encompassed territory is perfectly flat” (Sage 1992, p. 219).

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