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Historical Ethnic Conflicts and the Rise of Islamophobia in Modern China

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ABSTRACT In this paper, I show that narratives of historical conflicts between the Han Chinese and Muslims have been deployed to justify anti-Muslim sentiment and practices in modern and contemporary Northwest China. My study analyses Han Chinese narratives during and after the Northwest Muslim Rebellion—the largest ethnic conflict in nineteenth-century China. The historical narratives about the rebellion have been passed down inter-generationally and have been reiterated and reconstructed to fuel contemporary bias against Muslims in the twentieth century and beyond. My study contributes to the debate of Chinese Islamophobia by revealing how narratives of ethnic conflicts could help legitimize hostility against Muslims in modern-day China.

1. Introduction

Anti-Muslim sentiment in China has drawn increasing attention among scholars in recent years. Studies have shown that hostility against Muslims has become widespread in multiple dimensions of Chinese social life: it ranges from a more explicit form of hate speech toward Muslims and prejudice against Islamic culture and practices (Shih, 2017), to more implicit expressions such as the opposition to new mosque construction or the criticism of alleged 'preferential treatment' of Muslim minorities (Palmer, 2019). A recent survey shows that a majority of Muslim respondents in China have experienced negative portrayal of their religion through media and have encountered some form of discrimination in their daily lives (Luqiu & Yang, 2018). The negative stereotypes of Muslims have fuelled the discrimination against Muslim minorities in both education and employment, and also provided support for the surveillance and control of Muslim minority groups in the name of anti-terrorism and national security by the authorities (Samuel, 2018).

In this paper, I will analyse the role of *historical memories and discourses* in the formation of anti-Muslim sentiment in modern China. Most scholars and journalists tend to treat Islamophobia in China as a contemporary phenomenon having arisen in the twentieth century, rather than a long-standing discourse that has been consistently evolving throughout history. In fact, Muslims have a long and visible presence in Chinese society. The

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Chinese-speaking Muslims—a group commonly referred to as the *Hui* in the modern era—have been living alongside the Han Chinese for over 1,000 years. Despite the Hui's efforts to accommodate Han norms and assimilate into the Chinese society, their religious and cultural difference had subjected them to various racial stereotype and prejudice. Since the seventeenth century, the ethnic relationship between the Hui and the Han has been marked by frequent skirmishes and hostile conflicts. In particular, between 1862 and 1877 a series of violent ethnic conflicts occurred between Han and Muslim residents in Northwest China, which resulted in mass casualties and large-scale destruction of farmland. Those events, collectively known as the Northwest Muslim Rebellion, marked the most violent episode of ethnic relations in nineteenth century China.

The major questions addressed in this paper are: what kind of anti-Muslim narratives has been developed and reiterated during the Northwest Muslim Rebellion? Furthermore, how has those narratives reinforced contemporary anti-Muslim sentiment in China, especially among Han citizens in the rebellion-torn regions in the Northwest? During and after the conflict, a large number of folk narratives, historical accounts, and artistic works were produced to restore and reproduce the collective memories and feelings of ethnic violence during this episode. Those sources provide valuable evidence to analyse the extent to which discourses of historical ethnic conflicts had fuelled anti-Muslim sentiment in early modern China.

To better understand this question, I have conducted an archival research of vernacular and written accounts of the Northwest Muslim Rebellion produced by Han Chinese narrators during and after the conflict, which was collected from my field work in the spring and summer of 2018 and 2019. By analysing those materials, my research aims to clarify the following questions—what role did these narratives play in interpreting the outbreak of Han-Muslim violence? What pre-existing ethnic and religious stereotypes were they intended to reinforce? Most importantly, how have those narratives been passed down inter-generationally, and how have they impacted the contemporary Chinese discourse on ethnic relations? My analysis finds that many anti-Muslim narratives developed during the rebellion were simply *reiterations* of negative stereotypes and caricatures of Muslims that had long existed in the racial discourse of the Chinese history. Furthermore, I will show that the historical narratives of nineteenth-century ethnic violence have been deployed repeatedly to reinforce anti-Muslim sentiments in the next two centuries and to provide justification for anti-Muslim practices in contemporary China.

Before I proceed with my analysis, it is important to clarify that I use the ethnonym *Hui* to specifically refer to the Chinese-speaking Muslims in this paper. Throughout history, the definition of *Hui* has always been ambiguous, and its meaning has been evolving over time —for example, it can be used as a broad term for all Muslims, or can narrowly mean the Chinese-speaking practitioners of Islam who reside in the China proper (e.g. Gladney, 1996). In fact, who counts as a 'Hui' had always been a subject of scholarly and political debates among Chinese Muslims throughout the twentieth century (Eroglu Sager, 2020). To avoid repetition, I will use 'Hui', 'Chinese-speaking Muslims', and 'Sinophone Muslims' interchangeably in my paper.

My essay proceeds as follows. First, I will overview the current state of scholarly and journalistic debate on the emergence of Islamophobia in contemporary China. Then, through qualitative research, I will show how the Northwest Muslim Rebellion gave rise to a large number of narratives which contributed to an anti-Muslim social norms in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Finally, with evidence from recent ethnographic

accounts, I will show how the historical narratives of the Muslim Rebellion have been passed down generationally, and how they have been used to justify and strengthen anti-Muslim attitudes and practices in the contemporary era.

2. Current Approaches to Understanding Islamophobia in China

Islamophobia, according to a widely accepted definition by the Runnymede Trust in 1997, is the 'hostility towards Islam and discrimination against Muslims and their communities' (Runnymede Trust, 1997). Although the concept of Islamophobia has been thoroughly studied and contested by scholars in the West, its emergence in China has not drawn equal scholarly attention until recently. Since the mid-2000s, the growing ethnic unrest in Xinjiang and the Chinese authority's controversial 'counter-terror' measures targeting ethnic minorities have triggered an intense debate on the rise of anti-Muslim backlash in Chinese society and its role in the government's handling of minorities issues. In general, current research on Chinese Islamophobia has taken three major approaches to analyse and explain the origins of the rising Islamophobia in Chinese society. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, but are often simultaneously applied in the scholarly discourse of Chinese islamophobia.

The first approach tends to see Islamophobia in China as an extension of the Western anti-Muslim backlash which arose in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attack. According to this theory, Islamophobia in China is an ideology intensified by the anti-Muslim backlash in the West, rather than emanating from the daily experience of the lives of ordinary Chinese people. The various views of Islam as a backward culture, an abnormality, or the source of extremism have proliferated in the West long before it found its ideal audience in China (Tazamal, 2019). The West's war on terror since the early twenty-first century strengthened the stereotypical link between Islam and terrorism and instigated the perception of Muslims as a public security threat. More recently, the anti-immigrant and anti-refugee rhetoric fuelled by right-wing populist politicians in the US and Europe has also impacted Chinese citizens' perception of the Muslim community (S. Zhou, 2017). Recent studies find that China's online community appropriated many popular conspiracy theories and negative portrayal of Muslims directly from Western far-right commentaries (Huang, 2018).

The second approach examines the Chinese media's role in influencing the public's perception of Islam and Muslims. According to this theory, the rise of anti-Muslim attitudes in Chinese society is constructed by news stories that present an overwhelmingly negative image of the Muslim community to shape public opinion (Ma, 2019). Through an analysis of ten years of news reports by two major Chinese media outlets, scholars found there was an overall negative portrayal of Muslims and Islam (Luqiu & Yang, 2018). In addition to the negative portrayal of Muslims by traditional media, the authorities' failure to control the spread of hate speech in online social media platforms has further contributed to the rising hostility against Muslims. Researchers have found that, although China maintains strict control over news outlets and online contents, government censors largely tolerate anti-Muslim speech (Lin, 2019). Evidence shows that unfettered anti-Muslim rhetoric has shaped ordinary citizens' hostile attitudes towards Muslims in real life, resulting in violence toward imams and vandalism of mosques (Shih, 2017).

The third approach focuses on the state's role in provoking the anti-Muslim sentiment. This theory attributes the rise of Islamophobia in China primarily to the authorities'

framing of the Muslim minority as a national threat. Since the twenty-first century, the Chinese authorities have gradually downplayed its official policy of ethnic pluralism and moved toward a more assimilationist agenda. Guided by this new principle, Islamic faith and non-Han ethnic culture have been increasingly viewed as detrimental to a homogeneous Chinese identity (Millward, 2019). Scholars argue that the authorities' promotion of a certain image of Muslim minorities—as potential separatists that have threatened China's unity and territorial integrity—has encouraged and legitimized hostility toward Islam (Zenz, 2019). Scholars point out that the term 'religious extremism' has become nearly indistinguishable from the Islamic faith itself in certain official propaganda, which implicitly delegitimizes Islamic religious practices (Ma, 2019). According to this perspective, the rise of Islamophobia in China was inspired by a state-sponsored campaign which frames the ongoing ethnic unrest as a religiously-motivated terrorist movement that threatened national security.

3. Historical Ethnic Conflicts in Shaping Islamophobia in China

Although the three perspectives on the rise of anti-Muslim attitudes in China have great intellectual merits, they do not adequately explain how Islamophobia has taken root and grown in the Chinese society. First of all, they all treat Islamophobia essentially a construction of the present day, shaped by *current* social and political trends in China and abroad. By limiting the scope of analysis to the contemporary era, those views ignore the important role of historical accounts and narratives in shaping the behaviours and attitudes of Chinese society. Additionally, those arguments essentially view the rise of islamophobia as the result of manipulation by *the elite*, rather than an outcome arisen from the inter-group dynamic between Han and Muslim populations. Although the political agenda of powerful stakeholders (e.g. government officials, media practitioners, opinion leaders) has always played an important role in intensifying existing anti-Muslim hatred, how the long-term interaction between the two social groups has cumulatively fostered ethnic prejudice deserves more in-depth discussion.

My study aims to fill a gap in the debate about Islamophobia in China. In this paper, I hope to explore *how Han Chinese narratives of historical Han-Muslim conflicts have been leveraged and interpreted in modern times to justify contemporary anti-Muslim discourses and practices in northwest China*. How do historical accounts and collective memories of Han-Muslim conflicts impact the framing of contemporary anti-Muslim discourse, especially in rebellion-torn regions in China's northwest frontier? To understand these questions, we first need to examine the Chinese view of race that had long existed in Chinese history, and why the massive conflicts have occurred between Han Chinese and Muslims in the nineteenth century. In this context, we are able to understand how those ethnic conflicts have been portrayed and interpreted in the narratives later to be circulated in the Han Chinese society.

3.1. Ethnic Perception and Prejudice in Premodern China

What was the traditional Chinese view of race, and how did the historical racial discourse shape the treatment of non-Han peoples in premodern China? Racial prejudice, according to historian Frank Dikötter, has 'existed in an embryonic form well before the nineteenth century' (Dikotter, 1992, p. 2). Western scholarship often describes the

traditional Chinese view of ethnicity as a distinction between a superior Chinese race (*huaxia*) and an inferior barbarian race (*yidi*), known as the 'Sino-barbarian dichotomy' (Pines, 2005, p. 59). However, the border between 'Chinese' and 'barbarians' was ambiguous and self-contradictory in premodern Chinese political thoughts. On the one hand, Confucian classics suggest that one's ethnic identity was mainly determined by one's proximity to the Chinese civilization, rather than one's ancestral lineage. *Spring and Autumn*, one of the earliest Confucian chronology, argues that 'barbarians who learn and practice Chinese culture would become Chinese; Chinese who conform to the barbaric habits should be viewed as barbarians' (Confucius, 2014). According to this view, one's ethnic identity is fluid and can be acquired through acculturation. For many Confucian scholars and dynastic rulers, the Chinese cultural supremacy over 'barbarians' implied a moral obligation to assimilate and 'enlighten' non-Chinese groups. As early as the third century BCE, Zhou Dynasty philosopher Mencius claimed that 'I've heard of our ways of converting barbarians into Chinese, but I've never heard of Chinese reverting into barbarians' (Mencius & Hinton, 2015, p. 97). Attempts to assimilate non-Han ethnic groups occurred in various eras of Chinese history. During the Song Dynasty, the imperial court established special schools for the children of foreign merchants in the port city of Guangzhou aiming to change 'their heart at best and their languages at least' (Cai & Feng, 1983). In Ming and Qing Dynasties, imperial rulers also made several attempts to assimilate Hmong and Mien peoples in Yunnan and Guizhou by coercive means. Members of those ethnic groups were forced to adopt Han names, abandon their traditional hairstyle and apparel, and follow Chinese wedding and funeral rituals (Li, 2006).

On the other hand, race and ethnicity were not always viewed as fluid and culturally determined in premodern Chinese thought. In fact, a large number of Confucian texts suggested that the barbarian nature of non-Chinese peoples was impossible to change by acculturation. In Confucian classics, non-Chinese groups were frequently compared to 'birds and beasts' and were viewed as physically closer to animals than human beings (Dikotter, 1992, pp. 2–4). A famous quotation in Confucian classic *Zuozhuan,* which was frequently employed by later rulers to justify violence against non-Han peoples, argues that 'those who are not of our race will always bear a different mind.' According to this view, being 'barbarian' was a fixed, predetermined status, and efforts to expose non-Chinese peoples to Chinese civilization were not only futile but were also dangerous to the wellbeing of the Central Kingdom (Yang, 2014). Throughout Chinese history, the dehumanized depiction of 'barbarians' inspired cruel and discriminatory treatment of ethnic minorities. Scholars and officials in various dynasties proposed to exclude or banish non-Han peoples from Chinese territories to protect the society from the alleged barbarian threat (Park, 2012). Furthermore, massacre and deliberate violence against non-Han groups occurred several times in Chinese history. Ran Min (350–352), the Han ruler of a feudal kingdom in Northern China, ordered the mass killing of all non-Han nomadic tribes to 'purify' his domain (Corradini, 2006). Another major massacre of non-Han inhabitants occurred in late Tang dynasty, when a large number of Persian, Arab, and Christian merchants were murdered in the port city of Guangzhou (Rossabi, 2015). Clearly, prejudice and hostility towards non-Han peoples had a deep historical root that long predated the nineteenth century Han-Muslim conflicts.

3.2. The Historical Hui-Han Encounter: From Coexistence to Rebellion

The Chinese-speaking Muslims, commonly referred to as the *Hui* in modern Chinese language, have occupied an ambiguous position in the racial order of premodern China. It is impossible to explore the complexities of the Chinese Muslim identity without understanding their long encounter with the Han society over the past 1,000 years. Members of today's Hui nationality do not share a common racial or ethnic lineage, but have diverse and heterogeneous ancestral origins (Lipman, 1998, pp. 24–29). Genealogically, many Hui are associated with Arab, Persian, or Mongol migrants who came to China over various eras of Chinese history, while others were descendants of Han who converted to Islam (Lipman, 1998, pp.29–35; p.45). The first Muslim migrants reportedly arrived in China as merchants and envoys as early as the seventh century (Bai, 2003, p. 170), but in the following six centuries the Muslims remained few in numbers and primarily resided in separate districts designated for foreigners (*fanfang*) (Li, 2010). As historian Jonathan Lipman pointed out, for a long period 'neither they nor the Chinese state desired their acculturation and assimilation' (Lipman, 1987).

Large-scale encounters between the Han and Muslims started during the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368), when a large inflow of Muslims from the Middle East and Central Asia changed China's social landscape (Lipman, 1998, pp. 35–38). Originally brought in by Mongol conquerors as soldiers and artisans, the Muslim migrants started to establish themselves as permanent members of the Chinese society, engaged in trade with the Han, and served as officials in the imperial government (Leslie, 1986, pp. 87–88). By the time China returned to Han rule under the Ming Dynasty in 1368, the descendants of Muslim migrants had adopted Mandarin as their dominant language and developed a high degree of conformity to Chinese cultural norms (Lipman, 1998, p. 45). Although the Ming Empire actively pursued assimilation of non-Han peoples and encouraged interethnic marriage to eliminate the Mongol influence, the government was generally tolerant of Muslims and respected their rights to practice Islam (Ma, 2019). During Ming and early Qing era, Muslim communities generally coexisted peacefully with the Han majority within the Chinese Empire (Brown, 2019).

Throughout Ming and Qing dynasties, the gradual assimilation of Chinese-speaking Muslims into the social and political fabric of the empire was well documented by historical accounts. A growing number of Muslims from wealthy families spent years learning Confucian classics, passed various levels of imperial civil service exams, and served as officials in the imperial bureaucracy (Benite, 2005, pp. 37–40). Their credentials as scholar-bureaucrats granted them access to the privileges and social standings reserved for Han cultural elites (Benite, 2005, pp.6–8). For Muslim children whose families cannot afford a Confucian education, a common way to gain upward mobility was to participate in imperial exams for military officer selection (*wǔjǔ*). Those exams mainly assessed one's physical strength and martial arts skills, in addition to basic knowledge in Confucian texts and military tactics. Records show that Chinese-speaking Muslims were overrepresented in imperial military exams, and a significant number of Muslims joined the imperial army as junior and intermediate military officers through this channel (Ma, 2001).

Beginning in the sixteenth century, a group of Chinese Muslim intellectuals who were well-versed in both Confucian and Islamic texts also made great efforts to integrate Islamic practices and rituals into the mainstream Confucian culture. Chinese Muslim literati

established a synthetic curriculum known as 'scripture hall education' (*jingtang jiaoyu*). Muslim students enrolled in this curriculum were not only required to learn both Confucian and Islamic classics, but were also trained to use the Chinese language to understand and interpret Islamic theological concepts (Petersen, 2017, pp. 5–6). The intellectual tendency to synthesize Chinese and Muslim cultures was also evident in the extensive use of Confucian terms by Sino-Muslim scholars to translate Islamic texts. For example, Liu Zhi, a Qing Muslim intellectual, skilfully borrowed the Chinese concept 'Heaven' (*tiān*) to describe God (*Allāh*) and referred to the ancient prophets in Qur'an as 'sages' (*shèngrén*) (Benite, 2005, pp. 175–176; Frankel, 2011, pp. 155–157). Philosophically, Chinese Muslim intellectuals also went great lengths to draw a parallel between Islam and Confucianism. Wang Daiyu, a prominent Muslim scholar in Ming Dynasty, claimed that 'our emphasis on loyalty, trustworthiness, filial piety, and fraternity are the same with Confucians' (Wang, 1550/1987a, p.16). In his book *Tianfang Xingli*, Liu Zhi also made strong efforts to demonstrate Islam's affinity with Chinese culture: 'the Qur'anic verses are no different from Confucian teachings, and following the Islamic way is equivalent to obeying the teachings of [China's] ancient sages and kings' (Z. Liu, 1710). By showing that Islam was compatible with Confucianism, Sino-Muslim scholars were eager to legitimize their different cultural practices and defend the status of the Hui as equally civilized subjects of the empire.

Despite the Hui's multi-dimensional efforts to assimilate themselves into the Han society, the relationship between the Muslims and the Chinese state have gradually worsened since the Manchu takeover of China in the seventeenth century. Although the Qing emperors generally showed little interest in restricting the Hui's religious practices, the Han elite in the imperial court increasingly viewed the Muslims' refusal to fully embrace Han cultural norms as a gesture of disloyalty to the state (Gosselin, 2020, pp. 17–19). During Emperor Yongzheng's reign (1722–1735), several provincial governors petitioned the imperial court to ban the Hui's non-Chinese customs, such as wearing white caps, attending mosques, and using the Islamic calendar. Although the Emperor dismissed the proposed ban as 'unreasonable', he noted in his comments that many officials were offended by the Muslims' refusal to completely abandon their 'uncivilized habits.' Some scholars proposed harsher solutions to the perceived Muslim threat. During Emperor Qianlong's reign (1735–1799), a scholar-bureaucrat named Wei Shu suggested sending all Muslims into exile. Wei criticized the court officials for turning a blind eye to Hui's population growth, and lamented that China would again fall under barbaric rule if no actions were taken (Qi, 2005, p. 206).

In northwest China, a region with the highest concentration of Muslim population, the attitudes of local Han residents towards the Hui had also grown increasingly hostile since the seventeenth century. In addition to pre-existing racial prejudice, economic conflicts frequently played a key role in triggering ethnic hostility between two ethnic groups. Litigation records show that a large number of Han-Hui conflicts were caused by the Hui's free-roaming goats. As Hui villagers traditionally raised goats as a milk source and staple meat, their animals often crossed the border and damaged the crops of neighbouring Han households. In several cases, angry Han villagers killed the Hui's goats and triggered further retaliation from the Hui community. A number of historical accounts also show that the Hui were often treated unfairly by Han dealers in the marketplace. Their livestock was deliberately undervalued, and they were often paid with defected or counterfeit silver (Lu, 2010). Furthermore, in settling Han-Hui disputes, local magistrates were strongly

biased against the Hui in their verdicts. In some regions, a Han's life was even considered to be worth ten Hui lives during litigations (Ma, 1993, p. 103).

The long-term hostility between the Hui and the Han in northwest China culminated in the late nineteenth century. In 1862, a brawl between Han and Muslim villagers in southern Shaanxi Province rapidly evolved into a massive ethnic conflict. Historical accounts about the initial outbreak of the rebellion remained highly disputed; the only known fact was that both Hui and Han inhabitants were quickly mobilized following the first attack due to fear of retaliation from the other side, causing the conflict to quickly escalate into a full-scale, province-wide riot.[1] The riot soon spread to the neighbouring province of Gansu, where the local Muslims joined by Hui refugees from Shaanxi took up arms and revolted against Han villagers and local bureaucrats. The conflicts lasted for over fifteen years and was finally cracked down by imperial forces under Generals Dorongga and Zuo Zongtang in 1871. The series of conflicts, known in the West as the Northwest Muslim Rebellion,[2] was one of the deadliest unrests in nineteenth-century China (Hu, 2015). The total population of Shaanxi and Gansu provinces—places where a majority of violence occurred—had decreased by 44.6 and 74.5% due to the rebellion (Cao, 2001, p. 635; Lu, 2008). In particular, the conflict had decimated a vast majority of Muslim residents in the two northwest provinces. Following the defeat of the rebellion, the Qing army and local militia carried out a series of mass-scale retaliatory genocide against local Hui residents, resulting in the mass killing and banishment of Muslim residents in the region (Lu, 2003). The total number of Hui inhabitants before the rebellion was estimated to be 1.7 million in Shaanxi and 5.7 million in Gansu. After the conflict ended in 1871, the Hui population in the two provinces had sharply declined to 150,000 and less than 1 million respectively—a population loss of over 80% (Lu, 2003, 2008).

Although the devastating consequence of the Northwest Muslim Rebellion is widely known, its effect on the Han attitudes towards Muslims is not fully discussed. How is the ethnic violence represented in oral and written narratives, and how have these historical accounts shaped the Han's perception of Muslims in Chinese society? Unfortunately, existing research does not sufficiently address the role of historical narratives in the construction of anti-Muslim sentiment in China. Filling this gap requires an in-depth analysis of historical narratives and discourses involving Han-Hui ethnic relations.

4. Construction of Anti-Muslim Narratives During the Northwest Rebellion

To understand how the Northwest Muslim Rebellion shaped Han Chinese narratives of the Hui, I have compiled an archival collection of historical records related to the Northwest Muslim Rebellion ranging from 1850 to the early twentieth century. My archival research focuses on two types of sources: first, the vernacular narratives circulated among ordinary Han civilians, such as poems, slogans, folklore, and other types of oral accounts about the Muslim revolt; second, the written records by imperial bureaucrats, local gentry and scholars who witnessed or participated in the Rebellion. The elite writings include personal diaries, memoirs, and written complaints to the throne. The former category reflected the attitudes of Han commoners towards the Muslims, while the latter represented the view of elites. Below presents my analysis of these materials organized by topic.

4.1. The Foreign Origins of the Hui

One common theme of these Han narratives about the Hui during the rebellion era is their non-Chinese origin. In both vernacular accounts and scholarly writings, the Hui were disparaged as a foreign and even 'barbaric' people whose culture and lifestyle were different from, if not inferior to, the Han Chinese. In various written accounts, the Hui were described by local scholars and bureaucrats as a people 'from the western lands (*xīyù zhǒnglèi*)' (Wang, 1905/1987b, p. 5), whose culture was 'evolved from outside of China' (*zìwài shēngchéng*) (Zheng, 1895, pp. 15–16). The Hui's foreignness was frequently associated with their allegedly barbaric behaviour during the rebellion. One scholar named Wang Shengji argued that, 'as a species from western regions, the Hui's proneness to fighting is part of their nature' (Wang, 1905/1987b, p. 5). Those narratives, which echoed the traditional Chinese prejudice that the nature of 'barbarians' was hard to change, helped perpetuate the Chinese Muslims' status as an outgroup.

According to the Han Chinese narratives, the Hui's foreign-ness was not only highlighted by their ancestral origins, but also by their distinctive physical appearance from the Han Chinese. Certain stereotypes and caricatures about the Hui's physical features appeared repeatedly in the rebellion-era narratives, such as big foreheads, hooked nose, high cheekbones and thin lips. According to an ethnographic study by Ma Changshou in the 1950s, the following rhyme was widely used by the local Han militia in Shaanxi to distinguish a Hui from a Han—'if one has high nose and deep eye sockets, who else can he be other than a Hui?' (Ma, 1993, p. 75) The alleged physical difference of Hui people has even been used for racial profiling in mass violence. An elderly man interviewed by Ma recalled that a slogan circulated among Han villagers said 'if a person's facial appearance draws suspicion, he should be killed without hesitation' (Ma, 1993, p. 185). Clearly, the physical stereotypes constructed by those narratives not only reinforced the perception of Hui's foreignness, but also facilitated the violence and brutal treatment of the Hui during the conflict.

4.2. Ethnic Stereotypes of the Muslims

A large number of historical narratives about the Northwest Muslim Rebellion also criticized and ridiculed the Hui's distinctive lifestyles related to their Islamic faith. According to these accounts, the Hui's religious lifestyle and practice implied their disloyalty to the Empire, and the rebellion was the result of the state's failure to enforce assimilation.

One of the most ridiculed cultural traditions of Hui Muslims was their religious apparel. The Han society's prejudice of Islamic clothing patterns long predated the rebellion itself. In 1750, an official named Lu Guohua complained in a memorial to Emperor Yongzheng that 'the Muslims are always obsessed with the white colour. They wear a white cap from dawn to sunset, and one cannot understand which god they are worshipping' (Fu, 2000, p. 78). Lu then suggested that '[Muslims] should be required to observe the official dress code of our dynasty and be prohibited from wearing unconventional clothes' (Fu, 2000). Although the emperor eventually rejected the proposal, he admitted in his reply that many officials had expressed similar displeasure of the Hui's refusal to comply with Han customs.

During and after the revolt, Muslim religious apparel had become a common theme of caricature to reinforce the Hui's image as insubordinate barbarians. *The Story of Bamboo*

(*Zhúgān Jì*), a late nineteenth-century folk opera portraying the onset of the Northwest Muslim Rebellion, begins with a monologue recited by a stereotypical 'imam' played by a clown:

> 'I put a white turban on top of my head,
> Making myself look like the Little Goose Pagoda;[3]
> Working in the mosque, I learn to lead the Friday prayer,
> If you care to ask me, what is my name?
> My name is He Manla, disciple of Master Imam Zhou.'

According to local elders familiar with the rebellion, the Hui villagers were offended by this opera so much that they once destroyed the stage before the play started (Ma, 1993, p. 169). Interestingly, the Han's stigmatization of Islamic clothing prompted the Hui to appropriate the white colour to affirm their solidarity and identity. A Han bureaucrat recalled that every Muslim rebel wore 'a white headscarf with a black tiger drawn on it' to distinguish themselves from the Han during the conflict (Wei, 1873/1987, p. 75). Wearing religious apparel such as white caps was frequently viewed with disdain by Qing officials overseeing ethnic affairs in northwest China (Nayancheng, 1834); but for contemporary Hui, Islamic apparel helped solidify their identity as a distinctive group from the Han (Ma, 1828).

Another Muslim lifestyle that caused broad disdain among Han inhabitants was their abstinence from pork. As scholars have pointed out, pork taboo has been a key component of the Hui identity and a major vehicle for their self-expression (Gillette, 2008, p. 1016). Meanwhile, insults in reference to pigs have been a common theme of Han-Hui verbal exchange in the Qing era (Atwill, 2005, p. 42). Han folk narratives in the nineteenth century offered a variety of disparaging theories about Muslim's pork taboo. One of the most widespread myths was that the Hui considered pigs as their ancestors—which implicitly echoed the long-standing Confucian notion that compared 'barbarians' to 'birds and beasts.' This misconception was so prevalent among Han population that the Muslim neighbourhood in Kunming, Yunnan Province was even named by the Han as *Zhūjí Jīe*, 'Pig-Gathering Street' (Atwill, 2005).

At the beginning of the Muslim rebellion, several ethnic skirmishes were initially caused by the Han's prejudice regarding the Hui's pig taboo. Several narratives show that the Han could not understand the Hui's aversion to pork and even taunted the Hui's 'overreaction' after associating them with pigs. According to a story recorded by ethnographers, one day a Han Chinese teenager jokingly touched a Hui with a slice of pork, and the Hui immediately cut off the tainted part of his coat and complained to the local bureaucracy. Puzzled about the Hui's reaction, the magistrate taunted the Hui: 'when you are touched with a piece of pork, you cut off your sleeve. If someone ties the pig intestine around your neck, will you cut off your own head?' (Ma, 1993, p. 102). The authorities' insensitivity to the Muslim cultural taboo greatly offended the local Hui and escalated the long-standing tension between Han and Hui villagers.

4.3. Criticism of the Hui's Morality

Chinese narratives in the nineteenth century, across different social classes, made a variety of dehumanized generalization about the Hui's moral characters. By disparaging the Hui as

a group of uncivilized, untrustworthy 'barbarians', those accounts implicitly fuelled and legitimized the organized violence against Muslim captives and refugees during and after the rebellion.

Rebellion-era writings by local Han elites frequently portrayed the Hui as ruthless and brutal beings. Words used to depict the Hui's behaviour during the conflict include 'fierce and belligerent (*qiánghàn hǎodòu*)' (Wang, 1905/1987b, p. 5), 'treacherous like wild dogs and wolves (*cháiláng zhīxìng, jiǎojué bǎiduān*)' (He, 1875/2015), and 'rude and disobedient (*qiánghéng bùzūn*)' (Yi, 1887/1953, p. 248). Other writings accused the Hui of being overtly irritable and unable to control their anger. Wang Shengji, the militia organizer in charge of repressing the Hui, complained in his memoir that 'just some trivial disagreement can cause the Hui to stir up troubles'. The cause of the Muslims' inclination to violence, Wang reasoned, might be 'due to their inherent nature' (Wang, 1905/1987b, p. 5).

Another racist stereotype associated with the Hui was their alleged opportunism. In both vernacular and elite narratives, the Hui were portrayed as a disingenuous people who should never be trusted. They were characterized as 'being good at various types of deception (*guǐzhà duōduān*)' (Wei, 1873/1987), 'extremely cunning (*jiǎozhà fēicháng*)' (Zhou, 1885, p. 6), and 'deceptive and distrustful of others (*duōzhà ér shànyí*)' (Bo, 1867a, 1867b, p.18). In a number of post-rebellion narratives, the Hui's accused untrustworthiness was often used to justify violence and cruel treatment of them. In a memorial to the imperial governor, an official named Bo Jingwei openly doubted the sincerity of a Hui leader's surrender, since '[he] made up these apologies and excuses just to preserve his life and hide his malicious intent' (Bo, 1867a, 1867b, pp. 16–19). Another bureaucrat vehemently warned against negotiating a truce with Muslim rebels, arguing that '[the Hui's] begging for peace is actually a strategy to bide their time' (Zhou, 1885, p. 7).

4.4. Demography and Social Organization of the Hui

Many written accounts during the Northwest Muslim Rebellion also expressed strong anxiety that Muslim population would eventually outnumber the Han in northwest China (i.e. Shaanxi and Gansu). The magnitude of the rebellion, as many nineteenth century Han scholars argued in their writings, showed that a rapidly growing Hui population could pose a grave threat to the Han majority.

The perceived threat of a Muslim takeover was often based on an exaggerated estimate of Hui population in the two Northwest provinces. Liu Rong, the military governor overseeing the repression of Muslims in Shaanxi province, warned one of his colleague that 'among all military and civilian population in Shaanxi, the Hui Muslims have already constituted three or four out of ten. They are restless wherever they are' (Liu, 1885, p. 19). The uneasiness of the Hui's expanding population was also shared by local rank-and-file gentry. An anonymous scholar, under the pseudonym 'Bibliophile of Youshan' (*Yǒushān Shūchī*), made an even more unrealistic claim about the Hui's population size: 'the Muslim population has now grown so large that the number of their households almost equalled the Han' ('Bibliophile of Youshan,' 1863/1987, p.111). He went on to lament the consequence of the Hui's population growth: 'instead of being benevolent citizens who should live harmoniously with the Han, they now dare to blatantly harbour an ill intent and engage in sinister activities' ('Bibliophile of Youshan,' 1863/1987). From the Han elite's perspective, this demographic change would eventually make the Han lose their dominant status.

For the local Han gentry, the real concern was not the Hui's expanding population, but the authorities' lack of control over Hui neighbourhoods. Unlike the Han society where citizens generally respected the authority of imperial officials, the Muslim community remained as self-governed enclaves largely independent from the existing social order. A local official named Gu Shouzhen wrote in his essay that 'all disputes among the Hui, from large criminal cases to small quarrels, are judged by their imams instead of officials' (Gu, 1866/1987, p. 150). Gu argued that, since the Hui were so accustomed to the traditional authority of the clergy rather than the government, 'the magistrates' laws and orders can never reach them' (Gu, 1866/1987). It is the absence of imperial power in the Muslim community, Gu asserted in his essay, that caused the Hui to 'gradually develop thoughts of disobedience' (Gu, 1866/1987).

Specifically, local Han elites often castigated the role of imams in alienating the Han-Hui relationship during the rebellion. In their writings, imams (*āhōng*) were viewed as religious zealots who misled the Hui community members with radical preaching and undermined the authority of the empire. For example, county magistrate Wei Bing described in his memoir: 'the Hui mob follow the order of their imam in everything. Once they rebel, they often name their imam as their leader and no one dares to disobey his command' (Wei, 1873/1987, p. 75). Similarly, militia leader Wang Shengji complained that 'imams can escalate a small quarrel into a large disaster' (Wang, 1905/1987b, p. 6). During the rebellion, the imams' customary power as community leaders was seen by the Han as a threat to state authority.

4.5. Economic Motivations Underlying the Anti-Muslim Rhetoric

The racist narratives emerged during the Northwest Muslim Rebellion should not be interpreted at face value. Instead, they played a *functional* role of protecting the economic privileges and interests of local Han elites and inhabitants. In several instances, ethnic discontent between Han and Muslim villagers were triggered by the latter's unwillingness to comply with their involuntary financial obligations. In a well-known incident near Xi'an, Han villagers asked nearby Muslim residents to help pay for a ceremony in honour of a Chinese deity. Muslim residents refused to donate because idolatry was forbidden in Islam, and they were consequently banned from attending the opera after the ceremony. In one night, three young Muslims secretly went to watch the performance, and they were beaten up and tied to a pig by Han villagers after they were caught (Gillette, 2008). Recent archaeological findings also show that several ethnic incidents during the rebellion arose from the Hui's disagreement over the funding of Han-sponsored community events (Su, 2018). In those cases, inciting and perpetuating anti-Muslim hatred was employed by local Han gentry as a strategy to protect their economic interests and enforce their arbitrary collection of dues and contributions.

In fact, as suggested by many rebellion-era narratives, the mass uprising of the Hui was driven by their long-term unfair treatment in their trade with Han business owners. In rural Shaanxi, livestock trade and distribution was dominated by Han merchants. Several written accounts show that Han meat traders deliberately undervalued the oxen and sheep raised by Muslim farmers, and demanded their livestock to be sold at an unreasonably low price. A popular rhyme circulated among Muslim villagers around the 1840s complained that 'black pigs can be sold for shiny silver, but white sheep can only be sold for bad silver' (Lu, 2010). During rising ethnic tensions, unfair trade practice was often the last straw

that triggered large-scale ethnic conflicts. In a landmark event that was often viewed as the beginning of the Northwest Muslim Rebellion, a group of Muslims in Huazhou County went to buy bamboo poles from a Han trader. The trader abruptly raised the price, and a quarrel quickly escalated into a brawl involving hundreds of participants (Chu, 1966, pp. 23–26). As an 83-year-old witness of the rebellion told a group of ethnographers in 1956: 'The Muslims revolted because so many trivial matters had been accumulating for so long' (Ma, 1993, p. 138). Clearly, the Hui's resistance to unfair business transactions dominated by Han merchants was a key factor in escalating the ethnic hostility in the mid-nineteenth century.

During and after the rebellion, the escalation of Han-Hui hostility actually produced enormous economic gains for local Han gentry and landowners. Soon after the Muslim rebellion broke out, all lands and properties owned by the Hui were declared by the imperial authorities as 'traitors' possessions' (*panchan*) and were confiscated and redistributed to nearby Han landowners, regardless of whether one actually participated in the rebellion. Ma Guangqi, a Hui survivor of the rebellion, lamented in his unpublished memoir that 'all of our farms, lands, mansions and tombs … everything now belong to non-Muslims, while over 800 mosques have been burned' (G. Ma, 1956). According to the calculation of ethnographer Ma Changshou in the late 1950s, the total amount of land previously owned by the Hui in Shaanxi, which was later redistributed to Han landowners and refugees after the rebellion, exceeded 20,000 *qin* (Ma, 1993, p. 2).[4] The anti-Muslim hostility of Han inhabitants, therefore, was associated with underlying economic motivations.

5. Rebellion Memories and Modern-Day Anti-Muslim Sentiments

5.1. The Continuation of Han-Muslim Hostility in the Twentieth Century

The anti-Muslim narratives formed in mid-nineteenth century have far outlived the Northwest Muslim Rebellion itself. Throughout generations, the traumatic memories of Han-Muslim conflicts have been repeatedly narrated and reconstructed to justify anti-Muslim sentiments and practices in modern and contemporary Chinese society. Multiple sources —personal accounts, surveys, field interviews, and official records—point to a close relationship between modern-day Islamophobia in China and nineteenth-century rebellion narratives.

Although the new Republican Government granted equal citizenship to the Hui in 1912, public schools in rebellion-torn regions continued to portray the Northwest Rebellion with a strong anti-Muslim bias in the 1920s. According to famous Hui intellectual Su Shenghua, the elementary school textbook in his day referred to the Rebellion as a 'Muslim riot' (*huíluàn*) and attributed the cause of the rebellion to Islam's violent nature. When explaining why Muslims were so violent, the textbook claimed that Muslims are a people 'with Qur'an on one hand and a sword on the other hand' whose ultimate goal was to 'eradicate anyone different from their own type' (Su, 1937, pp. 115–116). The anti-Muslim narratives promoted by textbooks inevitably translated into hostile ethnic attitudes of Han students in real life. As one of the three Muslim students at a public school in Gansu, Su recalled that his teachers routinely made derogative comments about the Hui's history, Han students loudly chewed pork in front of their Hui classmates, and someone wrote the Chinese character 'Hui' in the shape of a pig on the blackboard. This hostile atmosphere eventually forced two other Muslim students to drop out from school (Su, 1937, p. 116). In the

early twentieth century, anti-Hui bias was a common problem facing Muslim intellectuals like Su. In 1932, a prominent Muslim magazine *Yueh Hwa* dedicated an entire issue to refuting the prejudice about the Hui's religion and history (Yu & Yang, 1932/2004).

A number of diaries and memoirs written by military officers and travellers sent to Shaanxi and Gansu in the 1920 and 1930s also elaborated on the inter-ethnic tension in rebellion-torn regions. Records show that local communities were strictly divided along ethnic lines, and a high level of mutual distrust haunted Han and Hui residents in adjacent neighbourhoods (Wang, 2018, p. 65). For example, Su observed that in certain areas of Gansu 'a younger Hui did not dare to wear a white cap, and an elderly Hui did not dare to keep a long beard' (Su, 1937, p. 125). The fear that the Muslims would rebel again also dominated the ethnic attitudes of local Han officials. In 1928, a military officer named Men Zhizhong was appointed as the governor of Ningxia Province. During a mass rally on his first day of office, Men criticized the nineteenth-Century Muslim Rebellion and chastised the Hui for their alleged propensity for revolt. He brandished a gun and threatened the Hui audience that 'this (the gun) is not something you can beat if you want to make another naïve attempt to rebel' (Su, 1937, p. 122). Another Han military staff named Xuan Xiafu reported that Muslim households in Gansu sealed the wells in their backyard to prevent the Han from contaminating them (Xuan, 1930/2000, p. 51). When his troop asked for a bowl of water from local Muslim residents, Xuan recalled that 'although they did not dare to say no, they threw away the bowls that we [Han troops] used behind our back' (Xuan, 1930/2000, p. 91).

Although the Chinese Communist regime founded in 1949 vowed to end ethnic discrimination and promoted an official policy of 'equality among nationalities' (The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, 1952), it also attempted to downplay and revise the history of ethnic conflicts. Guided by Leninist historiography, post-1949 Chinese historians reinterpreted the Northwest Muslim Rebellion as a 'class struggle' between an oppressive feudal elite and an oppressed peasantry, rather than a clash between two hostile ethnic groups (e.g. Gao, 1958). The official narrative denied that ethnicity played a key role in the outbreak of the conflict; instead, the rebellion was described as one of many Chinese peasant uprisings against the landlord class in the late Qing era. To downplay the ethnic nature of the rebellion, Marxist-Leninist historians contended that the conflict was a conspiracy of the Qing court to 'divide the class unity' of Han and Hui peasants and viewed both groups as victims of an oppressive feudal order (Y. Yang & Zhang, 2001).

Ironically, in a certain sense, the Leninist ethnic policy adopted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) reinforced the pre-existing gap between the Han and the Hui. In the early 1950s, the Chinese authorities officially designated the Hui as one of the 56 nationalities (*minzu*) in China. Citing Lenin's definition of nationality, a CCP policy guideline argued that the Hui was not simply a 'religious group', but a unique ethnic group with 'common ancestral roots, social institutions, and … cultural customs' (Minzu Wenti Yanjiuhui, 1941). Unlike the preceding Qing and Republican regimes which viewed Chinese-speaking Muslims as a religious subgroup within the Han, the PRC's nationality (*minzu*) system created a clear *ethnic* distinction between the two peoples (Eroglu Sager, 2020). Starting in the mid-1950s, the Hui were eligible for a variety of preferential policies for ethnic minorities, including lower threshold in college admission, reserve quota in workplace, and proportional representation in local governments in multi-ethnic regions (Zhou & Hill, 2010, pp. 47–71). These preferential policies, however, resulted in certain backlash

from Han cadres and citizens. During the Anti-Rightist Purge in 1957, there were multiple instances where Hui public servants were accused by their Han colleagues and supervisors of 'seeking special treatment,' 'favouring cadres of [their] own group,' 'promoting parochial ethnic nationalism,' and 'provoking ethnic separatism' (Song, 2015a, pp. 241–247; Song, 2015b, p. 235; Song, 2015c, pp. 147–149).

More paradoxically, despite the regime's refusal to recognize the historical Han-Muslim conflicts as an *ethnic* problem, the PRC's nationality policy in the 1950s actually helped *preserve* the historical accounts of the Northwest Muslim Rebellion. Driven by the Leninist principle of emancipating disadvantaged nationalities, the PRC authorities actively supported the teaching and research of ethnic minority history. Bai Shouyi, a Marxist historian of Hui origin and a leading designer of the PRC's history curriculum, argued that 'in order to promote progressive views of nationalities … it is necessary to promote learning of historical and social conditions of ethnic minorities … in different institutions' (Zhang, 2020). Throughout the 1950s, Marxist historians published a series of guidance for teaching Chinese Muslim history in schools.[5] Major teacher's colleges, such as Beijing Normal University, also incorporated ethnic minority history as part of their Chinese history curriculum (Zhang, 2020). In 1952, the Association of Chinese Historians, the PRC's official history society, published a four-volume collection of historical documents related to the Muslim Rebellion in Qing Dynasty (Zhongguo Shixuehui, 1953). Moreover, in 1967, China's Ethnic Affairs Commission published *A Brief History of the Hui* as part of the government's effort to preserve the Hui's legacy. One-quarter of this book was dedicated to documenting the Muslims' 'anti-imperialist, anti-feudal struggle' against the 'reactionary rule of the Qing Dynasty' (Editorial Board of 'Huizu Jianshi,', 1967).

Despite the CCP's effort to re-frame the narratives of the Northwest Muslim Rebellion along its ideological line, the ethnic cleavage caused by the conflicts remained a latent source of social instability in post-1949 Northwest China. In regions affected by the rebellion, the Party's efforts to integrate the two groups were met with strong resistance from both sides. In the city of Linxia, one of the rebels' stronghold in Gansu during the conflict, the city wall had traditionally served as a boundary segregating the Han who lived within the city and the Hui who were descendants of former rebels.[6] In the late 1950s and 1960s, the authorities proposed to demolish the wall, but the plan faced vehement opposition from local residents because 'the historical conflicts had brought deep trauma and distrust to both the Hui and Han' (Gong, 2014). At the same time, although anti-Hui speech was formally banned in schools after 1949, the hostility between Han and Hui students still persisted. In his 1991 work *History of the Soul*, Muslim author Zhang Chengzhi recalled a song he overheard from local Han students in Jingyuan County, a Gansu town that had suffered greatly during the Muslim Rebellion. The song mourned the 'hundreds of thousands of lives' lost at the Hui's hands whose blood 'had dyed the flowers red', and pledged to remember this grievance for 'a thousand years.' Zhang recalled that 'this song was sung during school assemblies across Jingyuan county like an anthem. Whenever the song was sung, the Muslim students put their heads down like criminals' (Zhang, 1999, pp. 162–163).

5.2. Rebellion Narratives and Contemporary Ethnic Attitudes

The impact of historical memories and narratives on contemporary Chinese attitudes towards Muslims is multi-dimensional. A large number of studies highlight the strength

and resilience of anti-Muslim prejudice in Chinese society, especially in regions directly affected by the Northwest Rebellion. To provide additional evidence on how the Northwest Muslim Rebellion could impact contemporary anti-Muslim attitudes in rebellion-torn regions, I perform an exhaustive search of all ethnographic surveys conducted between 2007 and 2021 in the Chinese academic database CNKI, using the keyword 'Han-Hui relations.' I find a total of 13 academic articles which report survey results on Han attitudes towards the Hui in the past 15 years. As Table 1 shows, those surveys were conducted in different years and across a variety of provinces, and the survey sites display vastly different demographic and ethnic patterns. Among the five surveys conducted in regions affected by the Northwest Muslim Rebellion (shaded in grey), four studies find that a significant fraction of Han respondents held negative or hostile attitudes towards Muslims. Notably, even in Xi'an, the capital of Shaanxi which only suffered minimal damage during the rebellion, almost one thirds of Han respondents believe that getting along with Hui is difficult and over 40% of respondents cannot accept a Hui as their neighbour. In contrast, among the eight surveys conducted outside of the rebellion-torn region, seven of them show that Han respondents expressed a higher level of acceptance towards Hui's ethnic difference and generally hold positive to neutral views towards the Hui. The only exception was a survey conducted in Zhongmou, Henan, where a recent ethnic brawl between the Hui and the Han residents significantly worsened ethnic relations (Zhang, 2010). As shown by those surveys, Han respondents from regions torn by the Northwest Muslim Rebellion on average display more negative views towards the Hui or Muslims.

In-depth interviews accompanied with those surveys further reveal that Han respondents often attributed their negative views of Muslims to historical ethnic conflicts. During her field work in Yinchuan, Ningxia, ethnographer Ma Hongyan repeatedly heard a proverb circulated among Han residents, which claims that 'the Hui would incite a small rebellion every ten years and a large one every thirty years'. When Ma asked residents how they felt after they first heard of the Muslim Rebellion from their parents, one interviewee admitted that he 'was scared as a child' and another interviewee commented that '[such stories] could leave a deep impression in one's memory.' Although interviewees argued that such historical narratives may not necessarily lead to prejudice, some worried that such impression could shape the children's attitude towards Muslims before their first interethnic contact in real life (Ma, 2012, p. 25).

Also reflected in those in-depth interviews, contemporary Han attitudes toward Muslims is linked with historical stereotypes of Hui rebels related to the Northwest Muslim Rebellion. According to Gong (2011), a Han interviewee reported that 'my grandparents said that the Hui were fierce and cannot be trifled with'. Although the interviewee subsequently confessed that he knew little details about the Rebellion, he was taught by elder family members that 'the Hui did not get along with the Han in history'. Another female interviewee remarked that 'people say that Hui women look like sheep—they can deceive and seduce men' (Gong, 2011, p. 57). The Hui's propensity for violence and deceit is also a common stereotype among interviewees in Gansu. When asked by an ethnographer why the Han were not willing to interact with the Hui, a Han interviewee complained that 'one cannot feel safe when dealing with the Hui. They are cunning and are good at calculation, and you will suffer losses if you are unprepared.' The interviewee then emphasized the Hui's uncivility: 'the quality of that group is quite bad. When you have a disagreement with them, they would become quite unreasonable and keep assaulting you' (Shan, 2008).

Table 1. Meta-analysis of 13 ethnographic surveys on the Han's attitudes towards Muslims.

Survey	Location	Rebellion-torn region?	Ethnic composition at survey site	Perception of Han-Hui relationship	Attitude towards Hui/Muslims
Xu (2007)	Luoyang, Henan	No	86.78% Han 13.22% Hui	Hui-Han relations: 86.9% positive 11.1% neutral 2.0% negative	Whether one can get along with Hui: 49.2% Yes 18.2% No 32.6% No opinion
Yang (2007)	Zaozhuang, Shandong	No	99.0% Han, 1.0% Hui	Hui-Han relations: 76.2% positive 21.4% neutral 0.0% negative 2.4% other responses	Attitude towards the Hui: 69.1% overall positive 30.9% overall negative
Shan (2008)	Linxia, Gansu	Yes	46.15% Han 35.58% Hui 18.27% other	Willingness to get along with a Hui: 40.0% positive 60.0% negative	Willingness to befriend a Hui: 41% positive 59% negative Willingness to work with a Hui: 42% positive 58% negative
Ye (2010)	Xi'an, Shaanxi	Yes, but only some suburbs affected	67.6% Han 32.4% Hui	Acceptance of Hui/ Muslims as neighbour: 56.3% acceptable 43.7% unacceptable	Overall Impression of Hui 71.8% overall positive 21.5% overall negative 6.7% other answers Han and Hui neighbours can get along: 67.4% agree 31.1% disagree 1.5% refuse to answer

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued

Survey	Location	Rebellion-torn region?	Ethnic composition at survey site	Perception of Han-Hui relationship	Attitude towards Hui/Muslims
Zhang (2010)	Zhongmou, Henan	No	98.8% Han 1.2% Hui	*Not included in the survey*	'Muslims are prone to riot:' 52% Agree 48% Disagree 'Muslims tend to seek privileges' 91% Agree 9% Disagree 'Muslims tend to stick together' 98% Agree 2% Disagree
Li (2010)	Cao, Shandong	No	53.7% Han 46.3% Hui	Any contact with Hui villagers? 84.5% Yes 10.3% No 5.2% Refuse to answer	Willingness to befriend Hui villagers 40.6% Yes 12.0% No 37.9% Don't Care
Li (2011)	Shihezi, Xinjiang	No	95.9% Han; 2.4% Hui; 1.7% others (Uyghurs, Kazaks, etc.)	Hui-Han relations: 96% positive 2% negative 2% don't know	Positive: *(multiple choices)* 79% believe the Hui were 'diligent'; 81% agree 'most Hui were trustworthy;' 87% believe most Hui 'easy to get along' Negative: *(multiple choices)* 26% said the Hui 'rude and unreasonable'; 19% believe the Hui were 'hard to get along.'
Zhou (2011)	Haiyuan, Ningxia	Yes	69.15% Hui 30.85% Han	*Not included in the survey*	Attitude toward religion or Islam: 88% expect Islam to 'disappear' or 'be replaced by science'; 12% believe it 'will always exist'

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued

Survey	Location	Rebellion-torn region?	Ethnic composition at survey site	Perception of Han-Hui relationship	Attitude towards Hui/Muslims
Ma (2012)	Yinchuan, Ningxia	Yes	79.4% Han 18.59% Hui	Hui-Han relations: 39.2% positive 55.1% neutral 2.0% negative 3.7% don't know	Affirmative action for the Hui in education is beneficial: 26.1% agree 31.4% disagree 32.7% hard to say 9.8% refuse to answer Attitude towards Hui-Han marriage: 28.7% positive 16.8% negative 51.5% no opinion
Xu (2013)	Jinan, Shandong	No	80.6% Hui 19.4% Han	Description of Han-Hui relations: 82.2% 'stable' 17.8% 'chaotic'	Feelings towards the Hui 87.6% describe their feelings as 'warm' 12.4% describe their feelings as 'alienated'
Yuan (2014)	Yulin, Shaanxi	Yes	Students in a local college 59.2% Han 40.8% Hui	Frequency of tension with Hui students: 7% Frequent 36% Many times 50% Sometimes 7% Rarely 0% Never	Perceived causes of tension between Han and Hui students *(multiple choices)*: 51% Hui's religion/values 38% Hui's dietary restrictions 24% Hui's lifestyles 18.5% Hui's social habits, etc.
Long (2014)	Manas County, Xinjiang	No	73% Hui 23.5% Han 2.3% Uyghur 1.3% Other	Frequency of contact with Muslims 85.0% Regular contact 10.0% Some contact 5.0% No contact	Attitude towards a person of a different religion (e.g. Islam) 85.33% Acceptable 0.067% Unacceptable 14.0% Don't care
Jia (2016)	Changzhi, Shanxi	No	99.29% Han 0.66% Hui	Hui-Han relations: 79.96% Positive 15.75% Neutral 4.29% Negative	*Not included in survey*

5.3. Framing of Muslim Rebellion by Contemporary Policy Entrepreneurs

The historical narratives of Northwest Muslim Rebellion have also been deployed by nationalist policy entrepreneurs to promote a Han-centric, assimilationist policy agenda in modern-day China. A number of high-profile policy advocates frequently used the Northwest Muslim Rebellion to illustrate the danger that an unassimilated Muslim minority can pose to the Chinese society. One such example is Mei Xinyu, an economist affiliated with China's Commerce Ministry and an influential public intellectual known for his hawkish views on China's ethnic affairs. In various articles and comments, Mei repeatedly argues that Islamic values are 'extremely distorted' and were inconsistent with Chinese society (Mei, 2017, 2018). He alleged that 'unassimilated Muslims' have a history of betraying China in the past and have continued to pose a 'non-negligible' threat to current Chinese society (Mei, 2012a, 2018). To address those 'challenges from within,' Mei argues, China should abandon its so-called 'preferential treatment' of ethnic minorities and instead pursue a full-scale agenda of ethnic assimilation (Mei, 2012b). In a popular article published in *Renmin Luntan* (People's Forum), a theoretical journal under China's state newspaper *The People's Daily*, Mei openly questioned the political loyalty of Muslims:

> The problem with the Chinese Muslims is that they place their narrow religious identity above the law, the morality, and the nation's foreign policy priority. A trivial skirmish between the Han and Hui would drive Muslims from nearby regions to join the quarrel, which could lead to armed fights and escalations that eventually get out of control. (Mei, 2014, p. 61)

The cause of the Muslim's alleged 'religious fanaticism', Mei argues, is their insufficient assimilation into the mainstream Chinese culture. Mei then used the Northwest Rebellion as evidence to illustrate the consequence when the Chinese state failed to assimilate Muslims:

> [During the Qing] when extremist ideologies like Wahhabism set foot in Northwest China, the assimilation process of Chinese Muslims experienced a great backslide. In contrast, these ideologies had almost no impact on Muslim groups and communities in Southern China. As a result, [Southern] provinces along the Yangtze and Pearl Rivers had never experienced such mass-scale conflicts observed in Northwest China, North China, and Yunnan. (p. 60)

To prevent the tragedy from repeating itself, Mei recommends the authorities to restrict the channel of exchange between Chinese Muslims and Islamic population abroad, assimilate ethnic minorities into the 'mainstream culture' of China, and limit the inflow of non-Han foreign immigrants to minimize their challenge to the country's cultural homogeneity.

Mei is not the only policy advocate who cynically leverages the historical narrative of the Northwest Muslim Rebellion to advance a Han-centric agenda. Yao Xinyong, a Xinjiang-born literary critic and professor at Jinan University, is known for his strong advocacy for a single Chinese identity to restrain ethnic minority identities. In his policy commentaries, Yao considers non-Han religious and ethnic awareness as a threat to national unity and blames 'pan-Islamist thoughts' as a cause of current tension in

northwest China (Yao, 2014, p. 52). Yao then cites the Northwest Muslim Rebellion as an example:

> The introduction of new religious sects from the Middle East to China has not only caused the [current] conflict in Xinjiang, but has also been associated with the 'Muslim Riot' during the Tongzhi Period. Although we cannot simply attribute the cause of the conflict to external religious sects like what some politicians and novelists have done, [we need to realize that] conflicts and fights between the old and new sects indeed exist in Islam. In modern-day context, this clearly implies a conflict between religion and secularity. (Yao, 2014, p.53)

By drawing a parallel between the nineteenth-century Muslim Rebellion with the current conflict in Xinjiang, Yao argues that the lack of 'a unified Chinese national identity' is the root cause of conflict both in history and at present (Yao, 2014, p. 52). Yao criticizes China's past ethnic policy for emphasizing too much on ethnic pluralism and distinctiveness, because it prompted the ethnic minorities to place their ethno-religious identity above a Chinese national identity. To counter the trend of Islamic extremism and prevent history from repeating itself, the author weighs the idea of using formal legislation to 'clarify the definition and criteria of extremist religion for targeted crackdown' (p.53). Mei and Yao are just two examples of contemporary policy advocates who leverage historical narratives of Northwest Muslim Rebellion to justify their stances on contemporary ethnic issues. As Ma (2019) points out, their advocacy 'unmistakably resembles the Hui-phobia of the early Qing period'.

6. Conclusion

Political narrative is a product of 'meaning-making'—a process in which people 'actively create, deploy, reinforce, or transform meanings' (Scauso, 2020). In this sense, the historical narratives about the Northwest Muslim Rebellion have been reproduced and reconstructed over time in modern Chinese history. The escalation of Han-Hui conflicts in Northwest China in the mid-1850s produced a variety of local historical accounts. These narratives not only reinforced existing stereotypes against Muslims, but also produced new misconceptions about the Hui's ethnic characteristics, especially among the Han population in northwest China. The Hui were disparaged as a foreign-originated people whose culture was inherently incompatible with, if not inferior to, the dominant Han civilization. Their distinctive cultural practices were seen not only as evidence of their unwillingness to assimilate, but also as a sign of disobedience to the Han-dominated social order. The brutality of the Rebellion clearly reinforced and legitimized the existing stereotype about the Hui's cultural and moral inferiority.

My research fills an important gap in the study of contemporary ethnic relations in China. Through a meta-analysis of qualitative texts from the late Qing era to present, I have found certain evidence that the anti-Muslim narratives emerged from the mid-nineteenth century has passed down to the contemporary era and has been leveraged to fuel modern-day Islamophobia, especially in regions affected by the rebellion. The myths and memories of the rebellion have been carried on through generations, and they have been deployed to justify prejudice and discrimination against Muslims in the contemporary era.

My essay primarily focuses on how the historical narratives of ethnic conflicts invigorated anti-Muslim narratives in northwest China, especially in Shaanxi and Gansu. However, it is worth noting that the Han-Hui relationship has shown great variation across China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Besides the Northwest Muslim Rebellion, another mass ethnic conflict between the Han and the Hui occurred in the southwest province of Yunnan between 1857 and 1871, where recent Han immigrants from Central China, driven primarily by economic interests, committed large-scale violence against local Muslim inhabitants in order to acquire their farmlands and mining fields (Atwill, 2005, pp. 48–63). In other parts of China, although there have been sporadic instances of ethnic violence, there is no record of large-scale conflicts at the same level as the Northwest Muslim Rebellion. Due to the spatial variation of Han-Hui relations across China, Han Chinese discourse of Chinese Muslims is not monolithic on a nationwide scale, but can differ enormously across time, location, and context. Thus, it is my hope that subsequent scholars can expand the scope of this paper and explore the evolution of anti-Muslim narratives in a broader, nationwide context.

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Notes

1. The cause of the initial outbreak of the Northwest Muslim Rebellion remains contested. See Chu (1966) for detailed accounts from both sides.
2. The rebellion is known in the West by different names. Adopting Jonathan Lipman's terminology, I use the inclusive term 'Northwest Muslim Rebellion' to refer to this event.
3. Little Goose Pagoda, a famous pagoda in the Xi'an, capital of Shaanxi Province.
4. According to the measurement system of Qing Dynasty, one *qin* approximately equals 61,440 m^2.
5. Influential pieces in this series of articles include Bai Shouyi's *The Formation of the Hui Nationality* (1951) and *On the Combination of Ethnic Minority History with the Patriotic Education* (1951), and Lin Gan's *The Relationship between the Hui and Islam and the Role of Islam in the Formation of the Hui* (1953), etc. These articles were published in *Lishi Jiaoxue* (History Teaching), a supplement of Chinese government newspaper *Guangming Daily*.
6. Following the Northwest Muslim Rebellion, Hui inhabitants were prohibited from living inside the cities, leading to the residential segregation between the Hui and the Han. For a detailed study of this phenomenon, see Wu (2006).

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