

From Religion to Revolution...and Nationalism: Hui Identity and Historical Materialism in the Work of Jamāl al-Dīn Bai Shouyi and Beyond

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Abstract

The work of the Marxist historian Jamāl al-Dīn Bai Shouyi (1909–2000), a member of the Chinese Muslim Hui ethnic group, offers a window into the close and complex relation between the contested categories of politics, religion, and ethnicity in modern Chinese intellectual history, particularly with respect to the historical development of Chinese Muslim identity in its encounter with Marxist historical materialism. In this article, I provide a limited case study of this broader problematic by analysing Bai's writings on Hui identity. In doing so, I attempt to contextualise his arguments with reference to the changing status of religion in contemporary Chinese Marxist discourse, and reflect on the entanglement of nationalism, religion, and ethnopolitics in modern China.

Keywords: Islam in modern China, historical materialism, Bai Shouyi, ethnicity, religion, nationalism

Od religije k revoluciji ... in nacionalizmu: Sino-muslimanska identiteta in historični materializem v delih Džamala al-Dina, znanega kot Bai Shouyi, in druge

Izvleček

Delo marksističnega zgodovinarja Bai Shouyija (1909–2000), člana kitajske muslimanske etnične skupnosti Hui, ponuja vpogled v tesne in kompleksne odnose med spornimi kategorijami politike, religije in etičnosti v moderni kitajski intelektualni zgodovini, še posebej glede na zgodovinski razvoj muslimanske identitete na Kitajskem, na katerega je med drugim vplival marksistični historični materializem. V tem članku ponujam del študije širše problematike z analizo Baijevih spisov o sino-muslimanski identiteti. S tem želim kontekstualizirati njegove argumente s sklicevanjem na spreminjajoč se status religije v sodobnem kitajskem marksističnem diskurzu in razmisliti o prepletu nacionalizma, religije in etnopolitike v moderni Kitajski.

Ključne besede: islam v moderni Kitajski, zgodovinski materializem, Bai Shouyi, etničnost, religija, nacionalizem

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I suppose you have a new slogan now, that “There is no God but Allah, but both Mohammed and Marx are his prophets” I suggested. But none of them would commit himself on such a ticklish question. They were prepared to march under the Red Star and the Crescent, but had not yet embroidered the name “Karl Marx” on their prayer rugs. (Nym Wales 1939, 163)

The Contested Meaning of Religion: Self-Reference and Substitution

It is probably no longer controversial to claim that terms such as “religion,” “ethnicity,” “philosophy,” “science,” “politics,” “society,” and “culture” do not simply denote natural or unproblematic categories which can straightforwardly serve to organise our academic knowledge of the world. Rather, they can be taken as referring to fluid, culturally variable, and thus highly contestable domains of knowledge and action used to describe, locate, and renegotiate human experiences, behaviour, beliefs, expectations, and identities within the field of social existence. Even if this is arrived at *via negationis* (e.g. “I am not a religious person,” “Chinese thought is not philosophy”), it seems unlikely that our self-understanding on a more everyday level can remain immune to these basic coordinates of an epistemological and institutional order which spread across the globe in a process we usually refer to as “modernisation” (which is in fact another of those terms).

The history of how a society such as China came to absorb and reinterpret this order under the direct impact of far-reaching socio-political transformations has already given rise to an immense scholarly literature.¹ Crucially, none of the terms I listed above had a direct semantic equivalent in traditional Chinese taxonomies of knowledge or imaginaries of everyday experience. The forced entry of China into the colonial horizon of modernity, usually taken as occurring with the outbreak of the First Opium War in 1839, gave rise to an increasingly extensive application of what would later become known as the “Needham question,” which famously asked why China had failed to develop modern science despite its considerable technological know-how. In a sense, starting from the late Qing period, this question came to be applied to nearly every one of the familiar, but at the same time highly indeterminate, terms which serve as coordinates in our current epistemological landscape. Where was religion, where was philosophy, where was (democratic) politics in traditional China? What does it mean to say, for example, that Confucianism was a form of philosophy and not a religion? Were these fields of learning and action insufficiently differentiated or did they rather form of more organic and integrated

1 To get a sense of the scope of this transformation, good places to start are Lackner and Vittinghoff (2004) and Jin and Liu (2009).

whole in the past?² And how, as Hu Shi 胡适 (1891–1962) put it, “can we best assimilate modern civilisation in such a manner as to make it congenial and congruous and continuous with the civilisation of our own making?” (Sela 2017, 336).

The broader stakes behind the overall question as to how retroactively applying these categories to different historical and cultural contexts affects and possibly distorts our understanding are well-known, and are often presented as very high indeed. The word “Eurocentrism,” while hardly explanatory or helpful in itself, is frequently used as a stand-in for the whole range of problems which this question entails. The close link between colonialism and the emergence of the discipline of religious studies, for instance, has been well documented and closely analysed (see Masuzawa 2005; Chidester 2014).³ As such, it is not hard to see why such categories, when imposed on the non-Western “Other,” are assumed to behave not like positive conditions of the possibility for the experience of historical or cultural alterity, but rather as rendering the latter inaccessible, or, conversely, reducing it to an imperfect adumbration of “Western” modernity. Efforts to retrieve the dawning of modernity or certain features of modernity in, for example, the work of thinkers from the Warring States Period (481–221 BCE) may succeed in restoring their normative validity or at least potential, but at the same time remain open to the accusation that they have failed to displace the standards of normativity used in the process by confining these “masters” (*zi* 子) to the domain of “philosophy.” Consequently, the much sought-after cultural particularity of Chinese thought risks being ignored or even effaced, thereby revealing, to quote the subtitle of Tomoko Masuzawa’s (2005) study on the invention of the notion of world religions, “how Western universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism.”

In a more general sense, it is worth pointing out that while individual identity is assumed to be a basic concern of people and communities in modern society, the latter are forced to make do with established (or to put it in stronger terms, “hegemonic”) and communicatively recognizable means of identification and individualisation.⁴ None of this means that the epistemological and identitary coordinates I listed above can be treated as known quantities, quite the opposite. While everyday communication does

2 For Liang Qichao 梁启超 (1873–1929), even the very category of “history” and “historiography,” as a mode of social analysis conducive to simultaneously constructing and “saving” the nation, had to be invented by breaking with “old history,” the twenty-four traditional dynastic histories in his view not being histories at all, but rather “genealogies of twenty-four clans” (Sela 2017, 328).

3 On the introduction of the category of “religion” and the discipline of religious studies in modern China, see Kuo (2010) and Meyer (2015).

4 This explains the increasing ineptitude of claims to individual “authenticity,” and instead strengthens the appeal of enacting one’s social roles through what Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul J. D’Ambrosio have analysed as “genuine pretending” (see Moeller and D’Ambrosio 2017).

not require (and often shuns) exact definitions, the coordinating or orienting function of a term such as “religion” may not be immediately apparent on this level, seeing how religion is increasingly presented as a source of social conflict or even the dominant factor behind a veritable “clash of civilisations.” Arguably, the word “religion” in particular often serves to interrupt, complicate, or even preclude communication in the self-proclaimed secular societies of Western Europe and North America.

Additionally, the fact that I was personally unable to find a way around using the adjectives “culturally variable” and “social” immediately after having enumerated “culture” and “society” as examples of contested domains of knowledge and practice in the first paragraph of my paper, perhaps already indicates that it is hard to avoid a certain circularity in trying to pinpoint the historically specific semantic baggage of such terms. It would not be all that unusual to say, for instance, that the notion of culture is itself culturally variable (see for example Botz-Bornstein 2010), or more generally to see the *explanandum* recurring inside of the *explanans*. While such terms are obviously not devoid of more or less determinate extra-linguistic referents, there seems to be no other way but to gradually proceed by way of self-reference in using or reinterpreting them. From the perspective of Niklas Luhmann’s conception of meaning as an “autopoietic” medium of communication (for the case of “religion” as a form of meaning in particular, see Luhmann (2013, 1–35), this can hardly be accidental. The detour through self-reference seems unavoidable, even when the use of a term such as “religion” is deemed to be fundamentally unhelpful and even distorting in the study of premodern or non-Western societies, simply because any determinate negation of the category of “the religious” must specify how and why the meaning of “religion” has to be displaced or translated into something else altogether. Consequently, one has to proceed by dismantling “religion,” so to speak, from the inside out.

To give a specific example drawn from modern Chinese intellectual history, when the philosopher Xie Youwei 谢幼伟 (1903–1976) argued that there had never been such a thing as “religion” in traditional China, understood as a discrete form of ritual and spiritual practice concerned with a domain clearly marked off against “immanent” or “secular” social existence and interaction, he at the same time felt compelled to argue that the Confucian notion of “filial piety” (*xiao* 孝) could serve as a this-worldly and human-oriented “substitute” (代替品) for religion. In his view, filial piety could take over religion’s supposed socially integrating and emotionally comforting function, without reproducing the categorical divide between the domains of the human and the transcendent he associated with Christianity (see Xie 1946, 5–8).⁵ Xie’s negation of “religion” then was coupled to a certain anxiety over losing something seen as essential and crucial, specifically to modernising

5 As Goossaert and Palmer argue, Christianity often served as the institutional “model religion” in Republican China (see Goossaert and Palmer 2011, 67–89).

societies, in the process.⁶ In other words, from a historically sensitive perspective, the question for us becomes not so much what religion *is*, but rather what it is being *distinguished from*, what such a distinction is intended to effect, and which “substitutes” are introduced to occupy the discursive void left in its absence within a specific historical context.⁷ In turn, such a line of questioning can further inform and enrich our own efforts to gain a more precise understanding of a highly indeterminate category such as religion.

The Complexity of Religion and the End of the Revolution in Modern China

While the abovementioned considerations are admittedly abstract and formulaic, I believe they can be helpful for orienting ourselves within the more specific problematic I will attempt to address in the rest of my paper, namely the position of Islam as a religion within modern Chinese historical materialist discourse. I will do so mainly by means of a limited case study of the writings of the Marxist historian Jamāl al-Dīn Bai Shouyi 白寿彝 (1909–2000) on Hui identity. Additionally, I will try to show how Bai’s approach resonates with contemporary Chinese discourse on religion that is informed by a historical materialist perspective. The rather cheeky remark “Nym Wales,” a pseudonym of the famous journalist Helen Foster Snow (1907–1997),⁸ made in the course of a conversation with Chinese Muslim recruits to the Red Army during the Long March, according to which the unlikely figure of Marx might find his way into the Islamic declaration of faith (*shahādah*) made by every Muslim, serves as an epigraph to my paper for a reason: it can be seen as symbolising a complex social and discursive constellation in which the boundaries between the religious and the political are far from clear-cut.⁹

Arguably, one of the most striking features of the fate of religion in modern China in general, and specifically in the period between the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and the beginning of the spectacular though still closely monitored return of the religious in the reform era, is that the communist assault on

6 For a much more elaborate and metaphysically buttressed modern Confucian argument which runs in the same direction, see Tang (1958, 27–54, ch. 2): “family-consciousness and moral reason (家庭意识与道德理性).”

7 As the sociologist Andrew Abbott argues with reference to the evolution of the social sciences, a certain discourse must always try to find ways to accommodate the epistemic domain of their opponents or competitors once they have managed to discredit or simply outlive them. In his words, “any temporarily victorious pole of a dichotomy must comprehend subject matters that had been more comfortably comprehended by its erstwhile opponent [...] defeating one’s enemies means taking up their burdens.” (Abbott 2001, 18)

8 Wife of Edgar Snow (1905–1972), author of *Red Star over China*.

9 The most extensive and subtle historical analysis of the relation between Chinese Islam and communism to date is Cieciura (2014).

religion as ideology and “feudal superstition” still left the backdoor open for revolutionary politics to become a “substitute” for religion in its own right,¹⁰ albeit in a very un-Confucian and anti-Confucian manner probably not envisaged by Xie Youwei.¹¹ Paradoxically enough, the unmasking of ideology, which Marx saw as beginning with the criticism of religion, and as moving from “the criticism of Heaven” to a “criticism of the Earth” (Marx 1844), in turn became a means to legitimise the “organ of class domination” (Lenin 1917) known as the nation-state. In a classic case of the “return of the repressed,” the promise of liberation from religious illusions in itself became endowed with a quasi-eschatological potential. As Bourdieu famously observed, one of the main functions of the “religious field” is that its “theodicies” also serve as a form of “sociodicy” (Bourdieu 1991, 16), that is to say, as justifications for the preservation of a certain social order. “As above, so below,” one might be tempted say.

In contemporary socialist China, the envisaged emancipation of human beings from the shackles of religious and other “idealist” representations of social reality has given way to a discourse of deferred liberation that no longer opens onto a horizon beyond the party-state, with market dynamics now being expected to somehow usher in the advent of socialism in the nearby future.¹² In the reform era, a belief in the “scientific objectivity” and determining nature of economic laws came to replace a class-based conception of subjective revolutionary practice (see Misra 1998, 55–90).¹³ As such, the economy had to be allowed to work its magic, without any interference from

10 Gamsa (2009) provides an excellent discussion of this issue.

11 Like many other thinkers associated with “New Confucianism,” Xie was highly critical of communism and historical materialism (see Xie 1946, 33–53). A more complex and ambiguous case is that of Liang Shuming 梁漱溟 (1893–1988), who is often identified as one of the first representatives of the New Confucian current in modern Chinese thought and, in contrast to exiles such as Xie, stayed on the mainland after the establishment of the PRC and continued to develop his ideas through a dialog with Marxism and Maoism. For Liang’s argument that morality serves as a replacement for religion in Chinese culture, see Liang (1947, 95–121). Although this is not the place for a more extensive discussion, the following quote from a text Liang started writing one year after the founding of the PRC, in which he reflects on the historical role and accomplishments of the Chinese Communist Party, can serve as a vivid illustration of the entanglement of the religious and the political in modern (revolutionary) China: “In a nutshell, the Communist Party unintentionally [!] managed to accomplish the following two things: just like a great religion, it managed to fill in the empty space resulting from China’s lack of religiosity. This is the first point. Secondly, in doing so, it introduced a form of collective life to replace the old ethical order [...] *Filling in the empty space left by the lack of religion was a precondition for ushering in a new form of communal existence.*” (Liang 1951, 384, my italics)

12 The current president, Xi Jinping, has set the date for the realisation of the basis for “socialist modernisation” to somewhere between 2025 and 2035 (see Xinhua 2017).

13 This change is nicely symbolised by the title of an article by Hu Qiaomu 胡乔木 (1912–1992), who had previously served as secretary to Mao between 1941 and 1966: “Act According to Economic Laws: Speed up the Realization of the Four Modernizations” (*Anzhaohu jingji guilü banshi, jiaokuai shixian si ge xiandaihua* 按照经济规律办事, 加快实现四个现代化), *Renmin ribao*, 6 October 1978. (Misra 1998, 65)

political superstition in the ability of individual leaders. The reforms initiated under Deng Xiaoping also involved setting clear limits to the tenure of government leaders¹⁴ in order to avoid a recurrence of something like the Mao cult, which reached its peak during the Cultural Revolution. Perhaps this gesture can be read as an attempt to decouple revolutionary politics from its repressed “religious” dimension. At the same time, the overall loosening of ideological restraints and the depoliticisation of society allowed for a resurgence of “normal” religious activity among the populace and more unconstrained research on religion in the scholarly world. Notably, on the level of academic discourse as well as state policy (which in turn affect people’s everyday understanding), the ground for such a resurgence was prepared by positively redefining “religion” as an integral part of “culture,” the latter being approached as something inherently transcending class interests (see Mou 2003, 21; Tao 2010, 69–70).¹⁵

Still, the particular “complexity” (*fuzaxing* 复杂性), one of the “five natures” (*wuxing* 五性)¹⁶ ascribed to the religious question as early as the 1950s to account for the persistence of religion in socialist China, a notion rehabilitated under Deng Xiaoping in a new government directive issued in 1982 known as “Document Number 19,” has left plenty of room open for theoretical ambiguity. More precisely, if religion should still be conceived of as the “opium of the people,” while class antagonisms are supposed to have already been abolished and the class struggle has ceased to be a political imperative, the question becomes precisely which problem it is responding to, and who is being “anaesthetised” against what, even when the anaesthetising function of religion is reinterpreted positively (see Luo 1991, 151–53).¹⁷ Perhaps it could be argued that it is only now, with the rupture between religion and politics in the ideological shift from subjective revolutionary practice to a celebration of a “permanent revolution” on the level of the productive forces, that “secularisation” as the privatisation of belief comes

14 The term limits for the office of president were recently removed from the constitution by the National People’s Congress in March 2018, thus theoretically allowing the current president, Xi Jinping, to stay in power indefinitely.

15 As Fenggang Yang notes: “Culture is an all-encompassing and esteemed term in the Chinese context [...] when religion is studied as a cultural phenomenon, its ideological incorrectness becomes unimportant and its scientific incorrectness obscure, eliminating two key criticisms of religion by the militant and scientific atheisms respectively.” (Yang 2005, 27)

16 The other four being religion’s “mass nature” (*qunzhongxing* 群众性), “protracted nature” (*changqixing* 长期性), “ethnic nature” (*minzuxing* 民族性), and “international nature” (*guojixing* 国际性). The notion of the “five natures” of religion was first formulated by Li Weihan 李维汉 (1896–1984), the first director of the Central Party School. (see Tao 2010, 64)

17 On the historical reception of Marx’s famous “opium” quote, see Tao (2010). As Tao notes, the historical memory of the Opium Wars explains why “the metaphor of opium and religion, especially with respect to Christianity, had special implications for the Chinese people, for whom opium was viewed not only as a drug but as a source of national humiliation.” (ibid., 61)

into full swing.¹⁸ Needless to say, the full complexity of this problem cannot be done justice to in this short text. However, if people supposedly “no longer turn to religion for comfort because of suffering caused by class oppression and exploitation” (Luo 1991, 154), it seems logical to assume that the soothing function of religion has to be moved to the domain of individual subjective interiority. The so-called “mass nature” (*qunzhongxing* 群众性) of religion thus refers not so much to the importance of religion (and arguably, of ideology in general) for a social collective such as the working class, but rather to the sheer number of *individual* believers. Additionally, the desired overlap between religious convictions and the residual ideological requirements of Chinese socialism can now be defined in purely instrumental and pragmatic terms.¹⁹ This individualistic orientation could explain the emphasis placed on ambiguous and psychologistic terms such “perplexion” (困扰) (Dai and Peng 2000, 313) and the putative need for “psychological attunement” (心理调适) (ibid., 323) in Chinese Marxist discussions on the function of religion in the post-revolutionary era. Instead of counting as “the *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering” (Marx 1844), religion now appears as the concern of private individuals in relative abstraction from a social context which is supposed to no longer give rise to any need for the illusions and false comfort of the religious opioid.

At the same time however, it is clear that the “complexity” of the religious question in post-revolutionary in China, specifically in the case of Islam, is closely related to what is known as its “ethnic nature” (*minzuxing* 民族性), which in turn is tied up with international relations, the legitimacy of the party, territorial integrity, and domestic security.²⁰ In other words, lingering in the background there remains a sometimes almost paranoid awareness of the immense ideological power of religion and of the risks of allowing it to flourish, even within a well-defined institutional framework

18 José Casanova (2006, 7) distinguishes between secularization as 1) “the decline of beliefs and practices in modern societies,” 2) “the privatisation of religion,” and 3) “the differentiation of the secular spheres (state, economy, science), usually understood as the ‘emancipation’ from religious institutions and norms.”

19 As He Yanji bluntly states: “What does it matter if religious believers do not understand the norms of socialist morality from the Communist viewpoint, when their behaviour conforms with the requirements of socialist material and spiritual civilisation, even though it is based on Islamic teachings and tradition?” (He 1991, 231)

20 This does not mean that Islam is necessarily seen as more threatening than religions that are not approached in “ethnic” but rather universalist terms such as Christianity. As Maja Veselić (2013, 101) points out: “Although the global discourse of the war on terrorism is now regularly instrumentalised by the Chinese government to justify religious and political repression in Xinjiang, Islam is generally viewed with less suspicion than Christianity due to the anti-Western-imperialist rhetoric and sentiments China shares with many Muslim majority countries, as well as to the lack of Islam’s political influence in more recent historical periods.”

of loyalty to the party and the state. The current unprecedented crackdown on the predominantly Muslim Uyghur population in the Western border province of Xinjiang shows that the return of religion to postrevolutionary China has been all but unconditional, with an estimated 1 million Uyghurs being subjected to “transformation through education” (*jiaoyu zhuanhua* 教育转化) in extra-legal internment facilities (see Zenz 2018 for a detailed report). In a Marxist textbook on the sociology of religion dating back almost two decades, Dai Kangsheng 戴康生 (1937–2003) and Peng Yao 彭耀 (b. 1937) already cautioned that every single one of the positive functions associated with the *pharmakon* religion can at the same time be identified as a potential source of risk, the relatively harmless need for “religious identity” for example harbouring the potential to lead to “narrow nationalism,” extremism, and separatism (see Dai and Peng 2000, 320–28). As the Marxist scholar Jin Ze 金泽 (b. 1954) dramatically predicts, echoing Jiang Zemin’s observation that religion might outlast the existence of classes and nations (see Tao 2010, 59–60):

Religious questions—and in particular the emergencies and mass incidents (突发事件和群发事件) *caused by such questions*—will seriously undermine social development in most cases, and the people affected will far outnumber the believers [...] Inasmuch as religion can influence and interact with an entire society, *and such influence and interactions are even more powerful than regime change and social transformation*, religion should be given particular prominence when a society draws up its cultural blueprint. (Jin 2014, 85, my italics)

No wonder then that in contemporary China, social protest which draws on existing forms of religious organisation and association has to masquerade as what Marx called a “criticism of the Earth” which can be articulated in purely economic terms devoid of more “transcendent” political aspirations (see Luo and Andreas 2016, 479).

Bai Shouyi and Hui Identity: Revolution, Nationalism, and the Indeterminacy of the Religious

It is crucial at this point to emphasise that the categories of ethnicity and race substantially complicate any consideration of the relation between religion and politics in modern China, particularly in the case of Chinese Islam and Muslim identity. Maja Veselič aptly characterises the ethno-religious identity of Chinese Muslim minorities such as the Hui as a “labyrinth” (Veselič 2013, 104–6). If the in itself already highly fluid category of “religion” is approached as the defining characteristic of the ethnic identity of certain groups, its status becomes even more ambiguous

and unstable, as something divided between the ethereal sphere of “belief” and more tangible or material aspects such as language, ritual, custom, dress, and skin colour.²¹ In Marxist terms, this means that the domain of the religious cannot be easily dismissed as a transitory epiphenomenon exclusively located on the level of the “superstructure,” but remains suspended between “Heaven” and “Earth” for as long as it is still allowed to exist. This indeterminate position of religion quickly becomes apparent if we turn to the specific case of the Marxist historian Bai Shouyi.

Bai’s life spans almost the entire twentieth century. He was born in 1909 in Kaifeng (Henan Province) and passed away in Beijing in 2000 after a long and active career in which he held various academic positions, most notably as head of the History Department at Beijing Normal University. Bai also served in a number of official capacities, such as vice-president of the Islamic Association of China (*Zhongguo yisilanjiao xiehui* 中国伊斯兰教协会), the official representative body for Chinese Muslims founded in 1953. Bai was thus clearly an establishment intellectual, who combined academic aspirations with political responsibilities.²² As most readers probably already noticed in the above, Bai also had an Islamic name (*jiaoming* 教名, or *jingming* 经名, “scripture/ Quranic name”), Jamāl al-Dīn (*Zhemaluding* 哲玛鲁丁 in Chinese). To avoid any misunderstanding, by most accounts, most importantly his own, Bai was not a practicing Muslim and the fact that he bore this name was probably simply due to the fact that he was born into a Hui family. To the best of my knowledge at least, Bai never signed any of his writings as “Jamāl al-Dīn.” There is also a certain anachronism in the statement that Bai was born as a Hui, since the Hui, just like the other nine “ethnic minorities” (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) in present-day China who are classified as followers of Islam, were only officially recognised as a separate “nationality” (*minzu* 民族)²³ by the state following a massive government-orchestrated ethnic classification project during the 1950s, something for which the way had already been paved during the Yan’an

21 Notably, while party cadres are all assumed to be “scientific materialists and atheists,” that is to say, not to belong to any religious denomination, an exception is made for members of an ethnic minority (see Chan 2005, 90).

22 For more detailed biographical information, see Bartke (1997, 1: 10), Liu (2011), and Chérif-Chebby (2015).

23 This highly charged and ambiguous term can also be translated as “ethnic group” or even simply “people” or “nation,” as is the case in the common expression *Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族, “the Chinese people,” “the people(s) of China,” or “the Chinese nation.” The main problem with the term *minzu* is that it has ethnic, territorial, and political aspects, which are not always easy to separate analytically. Thus the Chinese “nation” (*minzu*) can be said to include a variety of different *minzu* 民族, ethnic groups, or “nationalities” in the more traditional Marxist phraseology. In what follows, I will use the term “nationality” with reference to Marxist discourse in particular, while employing the now more commonly used word “ethnic group” as a more neutral descriptive category. Since the secondary literature is not always consistent in this respect, the reader must allow for the appearance of variants such as “minority nationalities,” terms which are located in the same semantic sphere as *minzu*.

period (see Gladney 1998, 121; Cieciora 2014).²⁴ The complex history of how the term *hui* 回 (or more archaically, *huihui* 回回) changed from a designation for all Chinese Muslims that had been in use since the Yuan period (1279–1368) (see Bai 1943, 19) to a name for one of a number of Muslim minorities cannot be treated in the context of this short article.²⁵ In any case, by his own admission, it was only in 1937 with the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War and the attempts by Japan dating back to the early 1930s to win over Chinese Muslims through strategic promises of greater

24 Numbering almost 11 million people and spread across the entire territory of the People's Republic (with substantial concentrations in Northwestern China) the Chinese-speaking Hui are the largest of the ten ethnic minority groups in present-day China identified as Muslim (of a total of 23 million). The other nine Muslim minorities (Uyghur, Dongxiang, Salar, Kazak, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Bonan, and Tatar) speak a variety of non-Sinitic languages and are mostly concentrated in specific geographic areas, the most well-known undoubtedly being the Uyghurs in the Western border province of Xinjiang. By contrast, vestimentary habits such as white skullcaps for men and veils for women aside, the only "visible" characteristic of the Hui which sets them apart from the Han majority is their assumed common faith in Islam and their observation of the ritual practices and religious obligations which come with being a Muslim (most notably abstaining from the consumption of pork and alcohol). This is why the Hui are sometimes inaccurately referred to as "Chinese Muslims," which is obviously a misnomer, since other Muslim minorities in the People's Republic are no less "Chinese" than their Hui fellow believers (Gladney 2008, 182). On the other hand, this shows to what extent perceived (physical, cultural) proximity to the Han majority is handled as a marker of "Chineseness." If one pushes this logic to the extreme, the "Chineseness" of the Hui becomes something like a "redemptive quality" for their being Muslim: "Hui culture is a combination of two great traditions: the Chinese and the Islamic. *The Chinese element of the Hui culture decided the Hui loyalty to China.* Examples of their loyalty were not only in the Republican era, but also in dynastic times. The Hui, scattering across China, are bound to the Chinese soil and to China's national fate. In fact, the Hui people have strong 'master-hood' consciousness as Chinese people, or as a group of people in China, in case the term 'Chinese' might lead to any misinterpretation. This characteristic seems outstanding in comparison with Islamic ethnic minorities in some other countries." (Lei 2012, 168, emphasis added). That the Hui are distinguished as an ethnicity on the basis of their faith alone is remarkable given the fact that religious affiliation is not recorded in the official census (Gladney 2008, 181), and is not used as a sole criterion for distinguishing one ethnic group from another. The Hui are thus something of a theoretical anomaly within the ethnopolitics of the Chinese Marxist universe (see Gong 2006, 43–44). The ensuing ambiguity of Hui identity in contemporary China is vividly illustrated by Lesley Turnbull (2016), who conducted anthropological fieldwork in the city of Kunming and rural Shadian (both in Yunnan Province) and describes a marked opposition between Hui women for whom only religious conviction and practice matters to their identity as Hui on the one hand, and those who argue that being Hui is a matter of descent and lineage and thus has little or nothing to do with Islam as a religion. As one of her interlocutors who falls into the latter category put it revealingly: "We *Huizu* have a genetic link to the *Qur'an*, so we are Muslims whether or not we practice the teachings of Islam" (Turnbull 2016, 129, my italics). Between these two extremes, it is of course possible to find a lot less clear-cut combinations of the ethnic and religious dimension of the term *hui* in everyday communication. (see Veselić 2013, 105)

25 See Gladney (1991, 65–98), Cieciora (2016), and Chen (2017) for detailed accounts. The semantic indeterminacy of the term *hui* becomes even more obvious if we consider the fact that one Republican-era author, Chen Jie 陈捷 (dates unknown), used the term *huijiao minzu* 回教民族 to refer to *all* followers of Islam across the globe. (see Chen 1933)

autonomy (along the lines of an “independent” Manchuria)²⁶ that Bai began to pay any real attention to the problem of the position of Islam in the Chinese Republic and, presumably, to his own identity as a Hui.²⁷ Bai’s concern for this problem was thus, at least initially, the direct result of what he saw as the enormous strategic and ideological importance of the Muslim peoples of China for safeguarding the territorial integrity of the Republic and resisting Japanese imperialism (see Bai 2001c, 81).²⁸

I have only found one somewhat obscure source which claims that Bai Shouyi was actually a devout believer in Islam and that his overt and consistent commitment to Marxism and historical materialism was simply a cover allowing him to quietly continue his scholarly work after the establishment of the PRC (Chang 1981, 36). However, like many other historians, a risky profession in a highly politicised society, Bai was subjected to harsh criticism during the Cultural Revolution, but somehow managed to survive these turbulent years relatively unscathed. That the author of the source in question, the scholar Haji Yusuf Chang (Chinese name Zhang Zhaoli 张兆理, dates unknown),²⁹ was a personal acquaintance of Bai arguably lends some credence to this claim. However, what is perhaps more interesting is the rhetorical strategy Chang uses to justify his portrayal of Bai Shouyi as a pious Muslim operating under the cover of the Marxist creed. More specifically, in Chang’s view, Bai’s adoption of the Marxist orthodoxy should be seen as part of an age-old defensive tactic used by Chinese Muslims to insulate themselves against external threats in times of danger (see *ibid.*, 34). As Chang writes in an earlier text:

All the Chinese Muslim scholars, whether of the past or the present, have contrived to defend Islam by using “syncretism” as a negative weapon in facing whatever ideology or influence threatened them under any

- 26 Promises were made for the creation of a “Muslim nation” (*huihuiguo* 回回国) within the Greater East-Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere” of the Japanese empire (see Lei 2012, 143–46). Cieciora (2016, 127) surmises that the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 probably coincided with the emergence of the idea that the Hui formed a separate nationality (distinct from the Han majority as well as other Muslim minorities, most notably the Uyghurs).
- 27 Bai had already devoted two empirically oriented articles to the history of Islam in China, namely “Zhongguo huijiao shiliao jilu 中国回教史料编辑录 (Compilation of Historical Materials on Islam in China)” from 1935 and “Cong Daluosi zhanyi shuodao Zhongguo Yisilan zui zao de wenhua jilu 从怛罗斯战役说到中国伊斯兰最早的记录 (An Account of the Earliest Records of Islam in China in the Context of the Battle of Talas)” from 1936.
- 28 Bai was a member of the ethnographic expedition into Northwest China launched by the historian Gu Jiegang 顾颉刚 (1893–1980), whose journal *Yugong* 禹贡 devoted two special issues to the topic of Islam in China. For a description of Bai’s impressions during this journey, see Bai (2001, 584–623).
- 29 Chang was one of the participants in a “goodwill mission” organised by the “Chinese Muslim National Salvation Association” (*Zhongguo huimin jiuguo xiehui* 中国回民救过协会) during the Second World War in an effort to counter similar diplomatic propaganda initiatives undertaken by the Japanese (see Lei 2012, 151).

circumstances. So far, it has proven a very successful weapon. Unlike Islam, Buddhism, once syncretised with Confucianism or Taoism, has its original doctrines fundamentally changed or supplanted. (Chang 1960, 21)

Within this line of reasoning, Bai Shouyi's "syncretistic" adoption of historical materialism can be placed on a par with the elaborate usage of (Neo-)Confucian concepts to expound and defend the Islamic doctrine proposed by Muslim thinkers from the late Ming and Qing period, who are generally referred to as *huiru* 回儒, or "Islamic Confucians." The extensive corpus of texts they produced is collectively called the *Han kitāb* (*Han ketabu* 汉克塔布 in Chinese), an expression combining the words "Chinese" (Han) and the Arabic word for "book" (see Benite (2005) for a detailed historical study). In very general terms, these Sino-Islamic philosophico-religious texts made strong normative claims for the status of Islam as a *jiao* 教 or "teaching" endowed with the potential for subjective self-cultivation as well as socio-political transformation. As such, a basic idea motivating the *huiru* was that the Islamic teaching and way of life could exist side by side with and even reinforce established Confucian ideals of spiritual self-improvement and political governance. Additionally, according to Chang, the ideas developed in the literature of the *Han kitāb* remained fundamentally unaffected by the Confucian terminology they adopted.

It is certainly questionable whether any religious or philosophical doctrine can remain immune to the conceptual vocabulary and grammar it uses to articulate a certain worldview. The ideological encounter between Marxist materialism and Islam in modern Chinese history seems improbable enough in itself, although we would be mistaken to dismiss such an "unholy alliance" (Fowkes and Gökay 2009) purely on the basis of an abstract demand for conceptual consistency. In any case, if we turn our attention to Bai Shouyi's embrace of Marxism, we clearly find the exact opposite from the hermeneutical outlook Chang ascribes to the *Han kitāb* authors. Bai's historical materialist analysis of the doctrinal, social, and cultural development of Islam in China could no longer, either logically or on a practical level, claim to derive its normative validity from Islamic sources of authority such as the Qur'an and Hadith. Additionally, while it may have been tempting to buttress the "Chineseness" of Islam by drawing on the existence of a rich *huiru* tradition, such a strategy had to confront the fact that Confucianism had meanwhile become discredited as a "feudal" impediment to modernisation. Consequently, any transformation of the Islamic teachings into a vehicle for the national liberation and self-determination of China would have to be coupled with an effort to distance Sino-Islamic traditions from Confucianism as a marker of "Chineseness," or, alternatively, a radical redefinition of the status of Confucianism

as a “teaching.” In short, the “terms of agreement” and compatibility between China and Islam had changed drastically. In effect, Marxist inclusions of the *Han kitāb* authors into the historical tradition of Chinese Islam thus generally occur on a rather indeterminate level, in which abstraction is made from the specific content of their religious philosophy in order to turn the latter into intellectual expressions of exemplary “localisation” (i.e. “Sinicisation”) (see Jin 2017, 15) and precursors to the effective integration of Hui identity and nationalism.

In other words, Muslims and other “ethnic minorities” in modern China had to find a way of positioning themselves in relation to China as a new nation-state and to nationalism as the *sine qua non* of any performative political doctrine (see Aubin 2006), an effort that required much more than the ritual invocation of a (most likely apocryphal) saying attributed to the Prophet, according to which “love of the motherland is an article of faith” (*hubb al-watan min al-īmān*). The connection between religion and ethnicity became an unavoidable problem, one ultimately not “resolved” through academic discussion, but rather through the ethnopolitics of the Chinese communist state. Arguably, this connection was nowhere as complex as in the case of the nationality to which Bai belonged, the Hui, whose only defining characteristic vis-à-vis the Han, namely being Muslim, belongs to their religious “superstructure.”³⁰ Normally, Chinese Marxist theoreticians and anthropologists defined a nationality (*minzu*) by means of a whole set of material, cultural, linguistic, and psychological elements, which are assumed to converge in a certain nationality as a discrete carrier of historical experiences. In contemporary Chinese Marxist literature, the classical point of reference in this respect still seems to be Joseph Stalin’s “Marxism and the National Question” from 1913. In this influential tract, Stalin identified four criteria which define a nationality: common language, common territory, common economic life, and a common psychological makeup. That the Chinese-speaking Hui, who were and still are spread across the entire territory of the PRC and whose “economic life” can hardly be separated from that of the Han majority, only share a “common psychological makeup,” that is to say, all believe in Islam, makes their status as a separate nationality questionable, or at least highly unstable. However, as the Marxist scholar Gong Xuezheng 龚学增 (b. 1945)³¹ writes in

30 See footnote 25 above.

31 Gong served as president of the “Teaching and Research Office on Theories of Ethnicity and Religion” (中共中央党校民族与宗教理论教研室), one of the six offices which fall under the “Teaching and Research Department for Scientific Socialism” (*Kexue shehuizhuyi jiaoyanbu* 社会主义教研部) at the Central Party School in Beijing, between 1991 and 2004. The name of this research institute in itself points to the strong and historically rooted connection between religious identity and ethnicity in modern China, seeing how the party institutionally treats them as part of the same domain of knowledge.

a text discussing the nexus between ethnicity and religion, there are exceptions to the general rule described by the Stalinist criteria:

Within specific historical conditions, the spread and development of a certain type of communal religion can even exert a determining influence on the formation of a nationality (*minzu*). In this respect, the formation of the Hui nationality in our country is a typical example. Historically speaking, the Hui nationality is a nationality with many ethnic sources (回族是一个多族源的民族). But in their formation, the only commonality of the Hui was their belief in Islam. (Gong 2006, 40)

Bai Shouyi had already tried to argue from within the restrictive context of Stalin's scheme that the three "material" criteria (common language, territory, economic life) for nationality are subordinate to the fourth more subjective and "spiritual" dimension of a "common psychological makeup," which he described by means of the term "national/ethnic consciousness" (*minzu yishi* 民族意识); that is to say, a nationality's self-recognition and self-identification (see Bai 1991, 5–6). While he does not say so explicitly, Bai seems to assume that the normal relation of dominance between the material and mental is to some extent upset or even reversed in the case of the Hui, as an ethnic group officially only defined by its religion. He notes that "ideas and consciousness are reflections of social existence (*ibid.*, 6)," but adds that the reverse dynamic, of the impact of consciousness upon social existence, is often neglected, although it plays a crucial role in understanding the history of the nation-state and its different, but all equally Chinese, "nationalities."³²

32 Similarly, in a work from 1957 published a few years after Bai's *The Righteous Uprisings of the Hui People*, Lin Gan 林幹 (1916–2017), a scholar specialised in history of the Xiongnu, argued that the ethnic contradictions between Manchu and Hui, which he saw as having given rise to the rebellions of the 19th century, far surpassed those between classes in late Qing society (Lin 1957, 69). At the same time however, Lin analysed factional struggles between Chinese Muslims belonging to different Sufi orders (*menhuan* 门宦) as religious expressions of class conflict (cf. Bai 2001d, 150–56). He thus asserted the primacy of the socio-economic *within* one of the two opposing parties in a broader social antagonism where the ethnic dimension prevails. Additionally, Lin discerned the beginnings of stronger social divisions within the Hui as a people during this period, particularly a nascent division between the land-owning classes (consolidated in the *menhuan* system) on the one hand and the labouring peasant population on the other, germinal intra-ethnic class divisions which were covered over by the larger interethnic conflict between Hui and Manchu. (*ibid.*, 71) Within this line of reasoning caught between ethnic and "material," class-based poles of analysis, Lin ultimately defers to the primacy of the economy in arguing that the Hui uprisings remained unsuccessful because of the absence of a "new class representative of the advanced forces of production," i.e. the industrial proletariat, which still had to come into being.

In more general terms, the ethnic minorities of the current day PRC are still often assumed to be more heavily influenced and in a sense defined by their religious convictions and customs than the supposedly a-religious, secular, and thus more “modern” Han majority. This would seem to suggest that the historical materialist dictum according to which the “base determines the superstructure” only applies to those members of the nation with the most advanced “superstructure,” a curious and targeted inversion of the basic logic of dialectical materialism. Ethnic minorities such as the Hui on the other hand are not so much perceived and described in terms of their material or social conditions of existence, but are rather seen as being overdetermined by the religious component of their social “superstructure.” This strategic suspension of the primacy of the material in turn is crucial for maintaining national unity. As Luo Zhufeng 罗竹风 (1911–1996)³³ for example argued:

The proportion of religious believers among the national minorities ranges from fairly high to very high, while in some groups virtually every person is a religious believer—clearly a situation with a specific “mass nature.” Religious beliefs, minority group feelings, and customs are integrated into an organic whole among these national minorities. Religion sets the norms for their core culture and morality [...] We must respect and take seriously their religious beliefs, or else it will affect the unity of the national minorities [with the nation]. (Luo 1991, 10–11)³⁴

A very similar line of reasoning is put forward by another Marxist thinker, Zhuo Xinping 卓新平 (b. 1955), who makes the routine argument that this dominating influence of religion on the life and mentality of ethnic minorities corresponds to a more primitive stage of social development:

In primitive society, religion and culture were united seamlessly. Primitive culture is none other than a type of religious culture. Every cultural

33 Luo was the first Marxist theoretician to give a positive twist to the “opium” metaphor for religion and attempt to disentangle a “Marxist” conception of religion from the negative overtones of this metaphor (see Tao 2010, 66–69).

34 Cf. Luo 1991, 34: “Although the religions of the Han Chinese are a component of their traditional culture, they are not so closely combined with culture, customs, and psychology as among the minority nationalities. Third, religion plays a large social function. Religion, among the minority nationalities, always plays an integral role in traditional spiritual civilisation [...] The social function of religion among the Han Chinese is far less important than it is for people of ethnic minorities.”

activity in primitive society is a religious activity.³⁵ It is only during its later development that human society creates numerous relatively independent cultural fields that are not subordinated to religion but are free from religious domination. *Precisely because of this, religion is still preserved as both a way of ethnic life and a cultural characteristic among many nations or nationalities.* (Zhuo 2014, 61, emphasis added)

As I already indicated, the problem of the relation between ethnicity and religion, which is obviously tied up with concerns over national unity, occupied a central position in the work of Bai Shouyi. Bai is probably best known for his role as the leading editor of the monumental 22-volume volume *Comprehensive History of China* (*Zhongguo tongshi* 中国通史), which was completed in 1999 after a decade-long collective effort of almost 500 individual authors (including 28 different editors), and covers the entire period stretching from remote antiquity to the founding of the People's Republic. Apart from overseeing the entire project, Bai himself was in charge of the composition of the first volume, which serves as a more theoretical introduction to the *Comprehensive History* as a whole. Revealingly enough, the first chapter of this book focuses on the idea that China is a “unified multi-ethnic state” (*tongyi de duominzu guojia* 统一的多民族国家) (Bai 2004, 1–98), an idea which would seem to be indebted to Fei Xiaotong's 费孝通 (1910–2005) characterisation of the Chinese people as being defined by a “structure of unity within diversity” (*duoyuan yiti geju* 多元一体格局) (Fei 1989). In an earlier and more concise text in which he already outlined this concept (Bai 1991), Bai argued that a history of China should compromise the historical trajectory of all its minorities and guard itself against “Han chauvinism.” The unity of the Chinese people cannot be seen as a transhistorical and unchanging given, but rather required a long process of historical development before finally crystallising into a dialectical unity in which difference is preserved within the modern socialist nation-state. The latter is thus the historical form in which ethnic minority groups can come into their own as a people whose “hyphenated” (i.e., “Sino-Islamic,” see Lipman 1996) identity is not

35 In a similar vein, Qin Huibin 秦惠彬 (b. 1940) speaks of the “phenomenon of the consubstantiality of religion and ethnicity (教族一体现象)” with reference to Islam in China (Qin 1996, 18). Thus, for Qin, unlike Buddhism, which he sees as an integral part of Chinese intellectual history, the historical development of Islam in China is to be located entirely on the level of social history. In effect, for Qin, Chinese Islam constitutes an anomalous exception to the “normal” laws of religious development: “It was completely determined by kinship relations and regional geographical relations. Generally speaking, the internal development of a religion should determine the development of its vehicle (*zaiti* 载体) [of transmission, i.e. a certain ethnicity]. But in the case of Chinese Islam, we find the exact opposite, namely that the vehicle determined its religious content.” (Qin 1998, 84)

a sign of duplicity or ambiguity, but of dialectical reconciliation (Bai 2004, 98).³⁶ In what is clearly a tautological argument, Bai identifies the Chinese nation not as a strictly circumscribed geographical area, but rather as “comprising the sphere of activity of the various Chinese nationalities throughout history *within the boundaries* [of China]” (包含境内各民族在历史上活动的范围) (Bai 1981, 4; cf. Bai 2001a).

In affirming the historically constituted unity of the Chinese people and the role played by Muslim minorities in Chinese history, Bai had already started arguing in the 1950s that a clear distinction should be drawn and upheld between ethnicity and religion. More precisely, he criticised the then prevalent practice of referring to all Muslims in China as Hui and to Islam as *huijiao* 回教, a practice which conflates the Hui as a distinct nationality with the entire Muslim population of China. Bai maintained that Islam is a world religion which should be rendered as *yisilanjiao* 伊斯兰教 in Chinese, not as *huijiao*, since this gives the mistaken impression that Islam is the belief system of the Hui alone, or that all Chinese Muslims are ethnically Hui (see Bai 2001d, 100–5). In June 1956, the State Council officially ratified Bai’s line of reasoning by issuing a decision to officially abandon the usage of *huijiao* in favour of *yisilanjiao* to refer to Islam (Gladney 1998, 122; Gladney 2008, 180–81; Cieciura 2014, 16). Arguably, Bai’s insistence that the Muslim population of China historically consisted of different nationalities such as the Hui serves the purpose of minimising the impact of “religion” on the historical existence and development of China’s Muslim minorities. In the case of the Hui, this remains a paradoxical endeavour, since they are only defined by their common belief in Islam and are usually not seen as conforming to the other three Stalinist criteria. Bai’s somewhat makeshift solution consists in sublating the religious dimension of Hui identity into the more indeterminate criterion of what he calls “national consciousness,” a notion

36 By contrast, back in 1929, the philosopher Li Da 李达 (1890–1966), one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, still identified the nation-state as an *impediment* to the complete unfolding of the productive forces. He saw the existence of distinct nations and ethnic groups as being restricted to the historical horizon of capitalism (see Li 1929). Invoking the authority of Lenin and Stalin, another famous Marxist historian, Jian Bozan 翦伯赞 (1898–1968), himself of Uyghur descent, drew a distinction between “assimilation” (*tonghua* 同化) and “amalgamation” or “fusion” (*ronghe* 融合), the former referring to how smaller nationalities with less developed “productive forces” are assimilated into the more advanced majority (throughout Chinese history, the Han), a process conditioned by the existence of classes, while the latter designates a “fusion on equal terms and a unity of a higher level between all peoples arrived at on the basis of international communism,” ushering in the emergence of “a new people that never existed before.” (Jian 1962, 92) That being said, Jian insisted that the practical logistics of social redemption through class struggle require a certain degree of non-coercive and non-violent “assimilation” in order to lead “backwards” nationalities in the right direction of historical and civilizational development, thus allowing them to “set out for the Yellow River basin as the cradle of Han Culture.” (ibid., 96)

asserted over and against the more tangible Stalinist criteria for what counts as a separate nationality. As such, Chinese Muslim minorities can only play their part in the grand narrative of the Chinese people as a historically developing dialectical unity *as nationalities*, not as believers in a distinct, non-Chinese religion, so that the question concerning the ultimate marker of their ethnic identity (from the perspective of the state, religion) is bracketed. Instead, attention is shifted to a sense of belonging which does not violate the historical materialist principle according to which social existence determines thought. Historical materialism thus leaves room open for the autonomy of consciousness, but only in its “national” and not its “religious” form. This allows Bai to argue for a more or less seamless continuity between “patriotic education” and the endeavour of gaining insight into the history of China’s ethnic minorities, a history in which “nationalities” are portrayed as always already committed to building and strengthening the nation (see Bai 2001b). In this sense, the Hui qualify as an integral part of Chinese history because they are one of its many ethnic groups, “contributing”³⁷ to the larger historical trajectory of the dialectical unity of the nation, not because their religion was somehow compatible with or even conducive to the Confucian normative and institutional order, as the *Han kitāb* authors had previously argued. Bai makes this abundantly clear with reference to the Hui in the following quote from *The Rebirth of the Hui People* (*Huihui minzu de xinsheng* 回回民族的新生), where the notion of the Hui’s “psychological makeup” becomes almost completely detached from the domain of the religious:

What determined the psychological makeup of the Hui people was *not their religious belief, but rather their history as a nationality and their conditions of existence*. [...] The most salient characteristic of the psychological makeup of the Hui people as a nationality is that they rally together to help each other and their courageous fighting spirit. While it cannot be denied that this characteristic was influenced by religion, it was primarily the result of a long [experience of] repression and slaughter and of particularly harsh conditions of existence. (Bai 2001d, 104)

Unlike some contemporary Chinese scholars, Bai does not see Hui identity as being overdetermined by religion. His insistence on the distinctive “fighting spirit” of the Hui and their experience of particular hardships throughout Chinese history also makes it clear where his narrative of the history of Islam in

37 For the telling case of how the famous Chinese Muslim explorer Zheng He 郑和 (1371–1433) became presented as an “ethnic hero,” see Aubin (2005).

China starts out from.³⁸ More specifically, Bai devoted a lot of scholarly attention to a series of uprisings of Muslim minorities which took place during the second half of 19th century in the wake of the Taiping Rebellion (see Bai 1962, 9). He oversaw the compilation of a four-volume series of historical documents related to these events entitled *The Righteous Uprisings of the Hui people* (*Huimin qiyi* 回民起义), published in 1952.³⁹ Rather unsurprisingly, Bai Shouyi's orthodox Marxist outlook leads him to read these uprisings as ultimately being grounded in class contradictions, which in turn gave rise to ethnic tensions. As such, he is adamant that they were not instances of religious war. Rather, these ethnic conflicts were a "form" (*xingshi* 形式) (Bai 2001d, 148–49; Bai 1952, 303) in which class struggle manifested itself in the specific context of the social conflicts besetting the border regions of late Qing China. In this sense, the Marxist rhetoric of class struggle allows the Hui to figure as protagonists in the history of the Chinese nation and the historical struggle of the Chinese people against feudal oppression: "the Hui are a people who were always controlled by more developed and governing ethnicities, they are a people who [belong to a phase in history where] the feudal system had not yet come to an end" (Bai 2001d, 116). Paradoxically enough, the "national consciousness" which Bai puts forward as being distinctive of the Hui as a nationality at the same time unites them with the Han majority, the latter qualifying as the "dominant nationality" (*zhuti minzu* 主体民族) or true "subject" (*zhuti* 主体) and "stabilising force" of Chinese history (see Bai 1981, 7–9). In the same manner that the proletariat qualifies as the "universal class" in Marxist thought, the Hui are presented as a people who embody the feudal class oppression assumed to be borne by the entire populace before the communist liberation of China and whose interests coincide with the revolutionary forces across different ethnic groups throughout Chinese history as a whole (see Bai 2001d, 162).

38 Bai described the history of the Hui as that of a "fighting people" (*zhandou de minzu* 战斗的民族) (see Bai 2001d, 118–45).

39 Bai's decision to devote so much importance to the collection and classification of historical data was enough to draw criticism from some of his colleagues, who argued that he did not pay enough attention to the fact that these uprisings were clear instances of class struggle (Ching 2010, 67, 80). The first of these uprisings was the so-called Panthay Rebellion, which took place in Yunnan between 1856 and 1873 and led to the temporary establishment of a sultanate with its capital located in Dali 大理. Another major uprising led by Yaqub Beg occurred in Northwest and West China between 1864 and 1877 is nowadays referred to as the Dungan Revolt. These uprisings elicited a violent backlash from the Qing court, resulting in an estimated 50 to 85% reduction of the Muslim population in certain areas, the result of the social suffering caused by war as well as active ethnic cleansing. The memory of the enormous loss human life during these events still persists to this day among certain Chinese Muslim communities (see Armijo-Hussein 2001).

Conclusion

In Bai Shouyi's writings, the Hui as a people can become a revolutionary subject of history through this strange overlap between their ethnic (Hui) and national (Chinese) identities, an overlap that occurs not because—, but in spite of—their religious identity as Muslims. The revolutionary tradition of Chinese Muslims such as the Hui is thus assumed to be perfectly compatible with, and in a sense to count as an expression of, historical loyalty to the ideals of the communist nation-state. In other words, the nexus between a form of revolutionary politics that is safely contained within the past on the one hand and multi-ethnic nationalism on the other made it possible for “religion” to be bracketed out and preserved in a state of relative indeterminacy where it would not endanger the political endeavour of building and maintaining a unified nation. There is thus a considerable continuity between Bai's investigations into Hui identity and the treatment of the institutionally buttressed relation between religion and ethnicity in contemporary Marxist discourse in China. While the religious aspect of Hui identity is never completely subsumed within the more “immanent” discourse of ethnic belonging in Bai's writings, his approach ultimately seems to favour the historical materialist primacy of the “conditions of existence” of the Hui as a revolutionary nationality *par excellence*. By contrast, as we saw above, the tendency to collapse the boundaries of the ethnic and religious with regard to Hui identity in more recent examples of the Chinese Marxist take on Hui identity arguably has the effect of theoretically blocking access to any consideration of the actual “conditions of existence” of Chinese Muslim minorities. Such considerations obviously exceed the boundaries of this article as well. One of the most important questions left unanswered here is how the historical constitution of Hui identity, as opposed to that of other Chinese Muslim minorities, left a minimal space open for renegotiating the boundaries between religious, ethnic, and national belonging, a freedom that has all but vanished in the case of the Uyghur population of China, even if there are signs that repressive measures against religious practice are also increasingly being extended to the Hui. Perhaps coming to an understanding of this process can provide us with a means to theoretically prepare for engaging with what lies outside of the confines of theory. For that is where the people who are the object of epistemological and institutional mechanisms of classification and control are hopefully still able to spend most of their lives.

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