

# A New Wave of Muslim Revivalism in Mainland China\*

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*Since Deng Xiaoping adopted the reform and opening-up policy, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) policies toward minority nationals in general and the Muslims in particular have had a tremendous effect on changing their attitudes and patterns of behavior. On the one hand, relaxation of policies has seen a growth in Islamic rituals and a movement toward Islamic roots; on the other, the new opportunities may have eroded the fringes of the Muslim community. The rising tide of Muslim fundamentalism around the globe and the increasing interest of the Muslim core in the Muslim communities on the periphery have brought closer links between the two parts of Islam and a growing awareness of the unity of the universal Umma of Islam. This has given rise to fundamentalist groups among Chinese Muslims, some of them violent. In Yunnan, where Muslims have confronted the authorities dating back to the Cultural Revolution, during which time Muslims were attacked and decimated, opposition has been persistent and deeply rooted.*

**Keywords:** fundamentalism; Yunnan; Xinjiang; Cultural Revolution; Rushdie Affair

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## The Problem

A flurry of reports about Muslim unrest in the People's Republic of China (PRC) have emerged since the end of the 1980s, at which time the Chinese regime, under the supreme guidance of Deng Xiaoping, seemed to be relaxing its minority policy so as to make any social

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unrest unwarranted. Here is a sample of the major outbursts of violence among Chinese Muslims since that time:

1. In 1989, running concurrently with the trauma of Tiananmen Square, another much less noticed and talked-about drama unfolded in Beijing and other Chinese cities involving mass demonstrations of Muslims in what came to be known as the "Chinese Rushdie Affair."<sup>1</sup>

2. In the spring of 1990, press reports leaked out of China to the effect that a "Free East Turkestan" movement had claimed the lives of twenty-three people.<sup>2</sup>

3. Pingyuanjie, an otherwise peaceful Muslim community in Yunnan, was thrown into chaos and violence in 1992, when a fierce eighty-two-day battle erupted between Chinese law enforcement officers and local Muslim "bandits."<sup>3</sup>

4. In November 1993, major acts of violence occurred in some twelve counties and cities in Xinjiang.<sup>4</sup>

5. In June-November 1993, sporadic unrest occurred across north-west China. Some ten thousand Muslims marched in Lanzhou, and in July 1993, passenger and mail services west of Xian were suspended to prevent trouble from reaching Beijing. The protests were caused by a Sichuan comic which allegedly depicted Muslims worshipping a pig. Both Uighurs and Hui were involved, according to unconfirmed reports, and protests seemed more fervent in Xining, Qinghai. A Western traveler reported to this source that he had seen banners in a Xining mosque bearing the character "*sha*" (kill), but could not specify the context. In October or November, Muslims barricaded themselves inside the Xining Qingzhen Dasi (The Great Muslim Mosque of Xining) believing that troops and police would not dare violate the prayer hall. The armed forces broke their way into the mosque, resulting in a few Muslims being killed. Rumors put the number of casualties as two hundred, but this is considered to be exaggerated. In October 1993, the Bank of China in Kashgar was destroyed by a "suicide bomber" who drove a truck full of explosives through the

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<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Dru Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 1-7.

<sup>2</sup>*Newsweek*, December 9, 1991, 29.

<sup>3</sup>*Liaowang* (Outlook Weekly) (Beijing), 1993, no. 13:20-24.

<sup>4</sup>Li Zijing, "The Rebellions in Twelve Counties and Cities of Xinjiang," *Dongxiang* (The Trend) (Hong Kong), no. 100 (December 1993): 18-19.

doors. The incident occurred at night and no one was injured. There was reason to believe that the November violence used arms smuggled in from Kyrgyzstan.<sup>5</sup>

This series of troubles begs many questions: (1) Are they all interrelated, and have they fed on each other? (2) Have they all been generated by the same underlying malaise, or are they merely examples of local outbursts, the like of which have always occurred in Chinese history? (3) Are these events indicative of a new assertion of Muslim identity, or are the Chinese vs. Muslim clashes merely expressions of socioeconomic or sociocultural friction? (4) Do these manifestations of unrest also indicate the total breakdown of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) nationality policy, and are they pointing toward a more viable, all-national umbrella organization of the ten Muslim ethnic groups which will supersede the traditional Chinese *divide et impera* policy of separating the various Muslims into their ethnic components? (5) Are these Muslim upheavals in China yet another expression of the current ethnic resurgence around the world and have they been influenced by these trends? (6) With the recurrence of Muslim vs. Muslim violence, is this turbulence also due to infighting between various groups of Muslims? Indeed, in south Ningxia, east Gansu, and east Qinghai, there were reports of Menhuan (traditional Sufi lineages) pitted against adherents of the Ikhwan (a new radical Muslim group). (7) Are these religious outbursts part of the recent general religious revival in China? Indeed, side by side with these Muslim eruptions, one can also cite the emergence of Christian denominations such as Catholics loyal to Rome, the Protestant Pentecostal and Charismatic groups, and other distinctively Chinese denominations such as the Audible Voice, the Queen of the South, Salvation through Knowledge, and the Little Flock of Jesus.

### **Historical and Contemporary Antecedents**

Muslim unrest threw northwest and southwest China into chaos in the latter half of the nineteenth century and culminated in Muslim attempts to secede from the Middle Empire and constitute independent

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<sup>5</sup>Information based on fieldwork and observation of Mr. Adam Rush, my research assistant, who recently spent three years in northwest China.

Muslim states. The ideologies and mechanics underlying those revolts have been extensively dealt with in many works<sup>6</sup> and this is not the place to recapitulate those momentous events. Suffice it to say that even in the PRC's early years, especially in relaxed eras such as the Hundred Flowers period, many rebellions with secessionist tendencies took place,<sup>7</sup> eventually leading to some of the most abominable acts of repression under the excessive strictures of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s.

The "Shadian Incident," which began unfolding in 1967, is the most instructive in illustrating the background behind the new eruptions of Islam in Deng's China and their relationship to the past. The most widely accepted account of the incident has been published by Ma Shaomei,<sup>8</sup> although it is evident that due to censorship, many critical facts have been omitted. Ma, himself a Hui leader in the incident, escaped death when he evacuated the old, women, and children outside the villages in question before they were destroyed by the Chinese authorities. He was later arrested and tortured, but was restored and promoted to the secretariat of the Shadian district Party branch, Gujiu city of southern Yunnan.

According to Ma's account, many of the Hui had initially responded to Mao's appeal during the Cultural Revolution and joined the Red Guards against Liu Shaoqi and his followers. They closed down mosques and burned religious books in their drive to wipe out the "four olds."<sup>9</sup> These trends were countered by other Muslims, who set up their own factions to preserve their rights as guaranteed by the PRC Constitution.

Shadian has played an important part in the history of Chinese Islam, insofar as the area is located on the trade route to South Asia and has maintained a thriving center of Muslim learning which pro-

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<sup>6</sup>See especially Raphael Israeli, *Muslims in China: A Study of Cultural Confrontation* (London: Curzon Press, 1978; Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979); Marshall Broomhall, *Islam in China: A Neglected Problem* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1910); Wang Shu-huai, *Xiantong Yunnan Huimin shibian* (The Mohammedan rebellion in Yunnan) (Taipei: Academia Sinica, 1968); and Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*.

<sup>7</sup>See Raphael Israeli, "The Muslim Minority in the People's Republic of China," *Asian Survey* 21, no. 8 (August 1981): 901-19.

<sup>8</sup>Ma Shaomei, *Shadian Huizu shiliao* (Historical material of the Hui people in Shadian) (Kaiyuan, Yunnan: 1989). See also Gladney's reference to this in *Muslim Chinese*, 137-46; and Wang Jianping's unpublished translation of this source.

<sup>9</sup>The slogan at the initial stages of the Cultural Revolution was to eradicate the "four olds": old ideas, old culture, cold customs, and old habits.

duced, inter alia, the first Chinese translation of the “Qur’an.”<sup>10</sup> Shadian also played a major role in the Muslim rebellion of the mid-nineteenth century, which purported to create a Muslim state around Dali in western Yunnan, under the leadership of Du Wenxiu. Hence, it had experience as a vanguard of Muslim ethnic self-assertion, but also as the confrontation ground for Muslims of various political persuasions.<sup>11</sup>

During the Cultural Revolution, when all religious activities were prohibited by the authorities and mosques were closed down all over China proper, Yunnan Muslims, like Marrano Jews under the Spanish Inquisition, prayed in secret at home. Their children pursued their studies of the Qur’an with their Imams (Akhonds) in the evenings. Even the fast of Ramadan was observed, while during daytime the Muslims engaged in their full-time work. However, the conflict escalated when leftists criticized the conservative Muslims and compelled them to eat pork as a sign of identification with their critics. According to some reports, abominable acts of antireligious coercion were perpetrated when pork bones were thrown into wells in order to irretrievably pollute the drinking water.<sup>12</sup> The string of incidents culminated in a massacre perpetrated by Chinese troops against the Muslims in July 1975, resulting in the razing of the entire village and the spread of confrontations to neighboring villages. It took seven days of sustained fighting before the total damage became evident: 1,000 Hui were massacred (half of them from Shadian), and 4,400 houses were destroyed. In the process, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) used not only guns and cannons, but also air bombings.<sup>13</sup> This is how Ma described the final steps of the Hui’s demise in the Shadian district:

Within the first and second days of August, the fight for the control of the strongholds in Jinji and Chuanfang villages continued. One side [the government] had the advantage of modern weapons and equipment, the other [the Muslims] was only sustained by its religious spirit. The one possessed well-trained troops, the other only ordinary citizens. What sort of combat was it between these two [uneven] sides? The Shadian and Chuanfang villages had almost no strength to resist following the intense

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<sup>10</sup>Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, 137.

<sup>11</sup>See Wang Jianping, “Islam in Yunnan,” *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs* (London) 13, no. 2:364-74, n. 11.

<sup>12</sup>See Ma, *Shadian Huizu shiliao*; Wang, “Islam in Yunnan,” 371; and Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, 138-39.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*

cannon fire, howitzer shells, and indiscriminate killing. . . . On August 3, the troops controlled about half of Jinji village. Hand-to-hand fighting, shooting, and gunfire were ubiquitous. In areas controlled by the troops, brutal mop-up operations were pursued. Injured and maimed Hui were captured, their feet and hands were tied, and like slaughtered sheep, they were thrown on the dirt track for so-called "medical treatment." Some of them were summarily executed. . . . On August 4, 157 Hui, including the old, women, and children, surrendered to the troops, raising their heads and reciting Quranic verses. When they approached the troops at the edge of the rice paddies, automatic fire was opened on them, and within one minute, corpses littered the ground and the paddy waters were colored in red. After that, the soldiers checked the corpses one by one, and delivered the coup de grâce shot to whoever still survived. Of the 157 surrendering Hui, only 5 were still alive at the end of the operation. Three of them were later shot during the second mop-up, but they escaped unhurt. . . . At six o'clock in the afternoon, high explosive detonations blew up the few remaining houses. Ma Baohua and the rest of the comrades heroically gave their lives. By the evening, the last work of annihilation was achieved, the massacre reached its end.<sup>14</sup>

In February 1979, after the fall of the "Gang of Four," the Yunnan Provincial Party Committee and the Party Committee of the Kunming Military Region jointly issued document no. 7, entitled "Circular on Rehabilitation Regarding the Shadian Incident." It stated: "The Shadian Incident ought not to have been dealt with as a counterrevolutionary rebellion. It was wrong to solve the incident by military means . . . and the many leaders and the people of the Hui nationality who were involved in this incident should be rehabilitated."<sup>15</sup>

In another circular issued by the Provincial Minority Nationality Committee of the Party, orders were given to rebuild the villages and seven mosques, and relief funds and pensions were disbursed to the widows and widowers of the tragedy as well as solitary survivors and orphans of the killed. Some of them were provided state jobs and the Shadian area was designated for preferential economic treatment. However, it was not until 1987 that a final document of the Yunnan Provincial Party Committee rectified the previous records which had indicted some of the rebellion's leaders, including Ma Shaomei, the author of the cited report, and exonerated them from being treated as "counterrevolutionaries." Some interesting new data was released in these amendments: (1) what had been termed in the previous reports as an "illegal secret organization" was in fact "Hizb-Allah," a religious

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<sup>14</sup>See Wang's translation of Ma, *Shadian Huizu shiliao*, 12-13.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

group founded “under the abnormal circumstances of the Cultural Revolution” and thus should not be considered criminal; (2) the previous accusation that those formerly indicted had plotted to “betray their fatherland” was not substantiated; therefore, it had to be removed; and (3) the accusation of “beating, looting, and smashing property” attributed to those indicted was substantiated, but in view of the general circumstances of the Shadian Incident, they were forgiven.<sup>16</sup>

Rehabilitation notwithstanding, the scope of the massacre left deep scars on the Hui landscape in China, exactly like the slaughters in the 1870s which quelled the Dali rebellion in Yunnan. The great realizations that this incident brought still remain. First, like the 1950s, the greatest sin remains rebelling against the concept of the “fatherland” which the Chinese government has been taking so much pains to cultivate.<sup>17</sup> Second, a “party of God,” namely a Muslim religious party that takes a radical political path and borrows such a fundamentalist name, is no longer foreign to China.

### **Muslim Revivalism in the PRC**

A “party of God” formed in the dark depths of the Cultural Revolution’s persecutions is not of course proof or even an indication of a new wave of Muslim revivalism, the like of which swept through northwest and southwest China in the nineteenth century and occasioned many millenarian movements associated with revolt and secession.<sup>18</sup> However, taken together with other manifestations of fundamentalism such as those of the 1950s already cited above,<sup>19</sup> Dru Gladney’s references to the Na Homestead fundamentalist revival,<sup>20</sup> and to the “fourth tide” of Islam in China,<sup>21</sup> they may well constitute the first omens of an Islamic fundamentalist wave in China, probably akin to such movements that are currently sweeping the Islamic world. To be sure, this wave could manifest itself in a quietist return to Islam, and be interpreted as a “general return to . . . ethnoreligious roots”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 16.

<sup>17</sup>Israeli, “The Muslim Minority,” 904.

<sup>18</sup>Israeli, *Muslims in China*, chaps. 12-14.

<sup>19</sup>See note 6 above and Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, 55-56.

<sup>20</sup>Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, 118ff.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 62-63.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 133.



or as a “rerooting rather than a fanatic revival of Islam.”<sup>23</sup> However, they can also be violently expressed in rebellion, as they were in the nineteenth century and more recently in the Shadian Incident described above. It is precisely this lethal combination of religion and violence which renders these movements “fundamentalist” or “radical,” as compared with the “revivalist” trends that may be identified elsewhere. It is therefore essential to identify the distinguishing characteristics of the movements which recently erupted in violence, in order to attempt to lump them together into some coherent pattern.

### *The 1989 Rushdie Affair*

This incident has been described and analyzed in considerable detail and with remarkable insight in the opening of Gladney’s book.<sup>24</sup> In essence, it was a spontaneous reaction by a multitude of Muslims, first in Beijing and then elsewhere, to what they viewed as a blasphemous depiction of their faith in an otherwise insignificant book on “sexual customs” published by an even less significant author who vied for sensationalism. This incident became a cause célèbre due to the following:

First, not only did Hui Muslims who were directly hurt by the publication participate in the mass demonstration in Beijing in the days preceding the dramatic Tiananmen events, but representatives of all ten Muslim Hui nationalities, reinforced by some Han sympathizers, also took part.

Second, the demonstration, which was duly permitted by the authorities, took place in the capital of the nation, Beijing, where it would have the most exposure to world media. In addition, it passed through the Oxen Street (Niujie) neighborhood, where many of Beijing’s 200,000 Muslims live. In other words, it was a demonstration of strength and muscle, but under the conventional rules of procedure, in the heart of the capital and in view of the whole world. Indeed, it was an unparalleled display of self-confidence compared to similar past events.

Third, in addition to the Muslims’ conformist shouts within the system—“Uphold the constitution,” “Respect China’s freedom of religion,” “Uphold the Party’s nationality and religious policies,”

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 169.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 1-7. The following discussion is based on this passage.



and “Love our country”—there were also clearly particular and radical slogans such as “Death of China’s Salman Rushdie,” “Love our religion,” and even “Allah Akbar!” the war cry of Muslims in general and Muslim fundamentalists in particular. These demonstrations also featured the emblems of Islam: white hats for men and female headgear (hijab), which was normally worn only in extremely conservative areas of China, for women.

Fourth, in addition to the 3,000 Muslims who marched in Beijing, some 20,000 marched in Lanzhou (the “Mecca” of China’s Islam) and perhaps as many as 100,000 in Xinjiang. Smaller groups were also spotted in Urumqi, Shanghai, Inner Mongolia, Wuhan, and Yunnan. In other words, there was a greater China-wide show of force and a higher pitch of protest than any similar offenses which had previously occurred in China.<sup>25</sup>

Fifth, the Chinese authorities displayed unusual support, as they allowed the demonstration; cooperated with and even assisted the demonstrators; banned the blasphemous book; confiscated the published copies from bookstores and set fire to many of them; and punished the publishers and editors.

Sixth, just prior to this outbreak of Muslim demonstrations, Iran’s President Ali Khamenei visited China and declared that he was in full solidarity with the Muslims’ demands and that Ayatollah Khomeini would continue to uphold the Rushdie death verdict in spite of world outrage.

Seventh, the Chinese government decided to act leniently with Muslims who were carried away during the demonstrations and broke laws and damaged property.<sup>26</sup>

Finally, the demonstrations, especially those of Beijing in May 1989, were covered in detail by the Chinese official media. Nevertheless, it should be noted that this kind of coverage is not without precedent.<sup>27</sup> However, despite similar cases in the past, the intensity of the Chinese Muslims’ reaction to Rushdie remains unique and constitutes a novelty, a precedent, and a significant turning point. The

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<sup>25</sup>See Raphael Israeli, “Islam’s Incompatibility with the Chinese Order,” in *Islam in Asia*, ed. Raphael Israeli and Anthony Johns, vol. 2 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984).

<sup>26</sup>Details of the Muslim rampages against government property in Gansu and elsewhere are given in Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, 3-4.

<sup>27</sup>Gladney recounts (*Muslim Chinese*, 4-5) details of similar cases of offensive publications against the Muslims in the 1930s which occasioned retractions by editors.

Chinese government's reply to Muslim demands was also never so forthcoming; both the Muslims' and Chinese authorities' responses call for an explanation. Perhaps part of the explanation lies in the fact that the Muslim demonstrations were overshadowed by the much more dramatic student unrest which drew the attention of the Beijing authorities and the world, and ended tragically in the Tiananmen massacre of June 1989.

*Troubles in East Turkestan (1990)*

In connection with the Afghan war and the revival of Islam in the former Soviet Muslim republics, at the end of the 1980s Islam was seen to be making great strides to its ultimate victory in establishing Muslim states across Central Asia, including Afghanistan, Kashmir, and the newly emerging Muslim republics just released from the Soviets' tight grip. It was at this time that reports abounded about "dozens of Baren<sup>28</sup> Muslims advocating a Free East Turkestan" staging a fierce five-day revolt in April 1990 in which twenty-three people were killed. According to these reports, the Chinese authorities later discovered that the Mujahideen of Afghanistan had supplied the Baren rebels with guns.<sup>29</sup> This outbreak of violence was characterized by the following:

First, it was an outright armed rebellion *against* the Chinese authorities, with apparently secessionist objectives. Although it had no chance to mark any gains, it was indicative of the determination (some would say fanaticism) in the Mujahideen tradition: fighting against all odds to achieve a political goal bound by a religious ideology.

Second, there is also evidence of aid from the *outside* to the rebels; that is to say, the rebels were not only seeking a local deliverance from their Chinese oppressors, but regarded themselves (and were regarded by their helpers) as part of a regional struggle for Muslim hegemony in which all Muslim forces, drawing from the successful experience of Afghanistan, could be brought to bear.

Third, these riots were generated in an atmosphere which viewed Islam as a victor, and godless communism as the routed enemy. Once

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<sup>28</sup>This refers to either the Baoan minority of Mongolian origin, which numbers just over 12,000 and is settled in northwest China, or the Tatars of Turkic origin, of whom there is only a handful in Xinjiang.

<sup>29</sup>See note 2 above.

the communist giant, the Soviet Union, had ceded, the other communist superpower, the PRC, was eyed as the next target.

Fourth, while the Rushdie riots were an internal Chinese affair, done within the constraints of law and order and in conformity with Chinese strictures, the East Turkestan incident was an attack on China from an outlying “barbarian” minority which did not know nor accept China’s rules of the game.

*The Pingyuanjie Assault (1992)*

From the end of August to the end of November 1992, Chinese law enforcement authorities pitted three thousand of their troops, with tank support, against the Hui community in Pingyuanjie, southern Yunnan. According to Chinese claims, the battle was waged against a “gangster group” which had been smuggling drugs and weapons from adjoining Burma (Myanmar) and Vietnam. At the end of the battle, more than a ton of hard drugs (heroin and opium) had been seized, together with nine hundred guns and pistols, grenades, mines, and ammunition. Only two Hui were killed in the battle; a third was said to have committed suicide. However, out of the eight hundred Hui arrested, seven were executed and a few others jailed.<sup>30</sup> This event, unlike all others, was *initiated* by the government; it was not an armed revolt of the Muslims against the authorities. Therefore, it raises many questions:

First, smuggling along Chinese borders is rife. Why did the authorities see it fit to act on such a scale and with such violence against a Muslim community in Yunnan, not long after redressing the Shadian tragedy? Second, were the authorities insensitive to the fact that out of the recent domestic military interventions, two had been directed against Muslims? Or perhaps because they were sensitive to this fact, they acted, and with vengeance?

Third, Pingyuanjie, which lies some one hundred kilometers away from Shadian, had provided assistance to its brothers there seventeen

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<sup>30</sup>See note 3 above. The report was first circulated for inner consumption on December 3, 1992, reported in *Fazhi ribao* (Legal Daily) on December 23, and then in *Liaowang* three months later. On December 28, 1992, the *Chinese News Digest* (an e-mail bulletin) came up with the title: “Troops Shoot Their Way into Pingyuan in Yunnan,” commenting that it was the largest use of force since June 1989 and the third time in three years that the Chinese authorities had to quell a “rebellion” by force. The two former instances are obviously Tiananmen and the Turkish-Uighur-Baoan rebellion of 1990, as reported above.

years earlier; for instance, five hundred Hui of the Pingyuanjie community had perished in the battle (out of one thousand reported Hui casualties). Several mosques in the community had been destroyed in the process, so that a spirit of revenge may well have subsisted among the Hui in that village. Added to that the general spirit of combativeness among the Hui which in their eyes even justified any illegal activity, including arms and drug smuggling, as long as it helped them alleviate their burden under the Chinese,<sup>31</sup> and one has a recipe for rebellion.

Fourth, the involvement of Pingyuan's three villages in the tragedy of 1975 was only the culmination of a long history of alienation, and at times open hostility, between the villages and the Chinese authorities. During the Cultural Revolution, religious activities in the villages were banned and mosques were closed down. In the 1950s, the Hui were forced to raise pigs, considered a "national treasure" by Mao and the most common staple meat throughout China. During the Shadian massacre, hundreds of residential houses were destroyed by artillery fire in Pingyuanjie, and some people were reported to have perished due to chemical weapons used by the troops. After the massacre and the ensuing government attempts to redress the rampages against the Hui, memories of the dead relatives and destroyed houses and mosques remained, and a Martyr's Day is still observed every year to commemorate those events. Every such memorial event, remarks Wang Jianping, by necessity reunifies the Hui's hatred toward the authorities and heightens their spirit of revenge.<sup>32</sup>

Fifth, compared to Beijing, it is much more difficult for the Chinese authorities to maintain order in the border areas, but on the other hand it is also easier to crush any dissenting or troublesome movement without incurring media exposure and the wrath of world public opinion. Thus, Hui violations of the law by smuggling or leading their own enclaves of Muslim existence under the supportive guidance of their Imams, whose share of the booty benefitted their communal treasury and religious expenses, could be continued as long as the central authorities had reason to be patient. However, when Beijing decided to strike in order to avert greater menaces or present

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<sup>31</sup>I am indebted for these details to my colleague Wang Jianping, who conducted a field study of the event and filled me in during his stay at the Truman Institute of Hebrew University.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

a model of deterrence to others, it did not hesitate to go all the way.<sup>33</sup>

Sixth, as in previous rebellions in Chinese history, notably the 1856-73 Yunnan uprising, the Chinese again tried to win over some of the Muslim “criminals” by promising them amnesty and other material gains if they surrendered. Thus, the traditional differentiation between “*liang Hui*” (good Muslims) and “*huai Hui*” (Muslim bandits) was invoked, permitting the Chinese to divide the hard-core resistance of the Hui and even succeed in pitting them against the other. All this was in sharp contrast to the Shadian united stand of the Muslims which ended in disaster.

Finally, according to Wang Jianping’s findings,<sup>34</sup> soon after the military operation crushed the Hui force and disbanded its mafia-like activities, the Hui returned to their illegal activities, sensing that the days of the communist state were numbered and that they ultimately might live to constitute Muslim autonomous enclaves of their own. Incidentally, the Hui also tend to monopolize the drug trade in north-west China, with their networks putting them in a good position to profit from the country’s growing drug problem.

#### *The Rebellion in Xinjiang (1993)*<sup>35</sup>

Reports circulated within the CCP in November 1993 stated in effect that turmoil had broken out in twelve counties and cities of Xinjiang. In the interval of five days (November 8-12), according to the official history of the incident, riots were detected in all those twelve locations.<sup>36</sup> In all cases, there were attempts to take over government offices or rampage them; in some locations, homemade incendiary bombs were thrown. All this brought the authorities to the conclusion that some underground organization had coordinated the plotting of these simultaneous riots. In some instances, gunmen shot government soldiers who were attempting to thwart rebels’ attacks against government stores. Some six hundred Uighurs took over a train in Kuerle and demanded to be driven to Urumqi to present their grievances to the authorities; eighty were wounded and two died in the melee. In

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>See concluding remarks in Wang, “Islam in Yunnan.”

<sup>35</sup>Most of the following is based on Li, “The Rebellions in Twelve Counties and Cities of Xinjiang” (cited in note 4 above).

<sup>36</sup>Akesu, Bole, Hetian, Kuerle, Chabuchaer, Gongliu, Weili, Shaya, Luopu, Wensu, Aketao, and Yining.

Bole, some two hundred demonstrators dashed into a military camp; fifty of the invaders were arrested, and another thirty wounded or killed.

If this is the government's reckoning, something more serious must have happened. In any case, the following characteristics can be noted:

First, these outbursts of violence and public outrage in the Uighur and other areas of Xinjiang constituted a coordinated and multi-pronged effort to impact the authorities simultaneously in many areas. For six days, no train tickets from Lanzhou to Urumqi were sold because all trains were being used for troop transport.

Second, although the demonstrations were depicted by the government as essentially protest movements against corruption, the usage of bombs and grand-scale violence suggests perhaps some hidden agenda of the demonstrators not publicly acknowledged by the government.

Third, all onslaughts of these demonstrators were directed against public institutions: an army camp, police forces, government offices, and government food stores. Namely, there was a message of protest against the authorities, not merely riots for immediate economic or political gain.

Fourth, although some of the demonstrators' slogans sounded like petitions to the CCP (as in the Rusdie case, i.e., "Reorganize the Communist Party," "Rebuild the Communist Party"), others were ambiguous (i.e., "All power to the workers!" What workers were being referred to? The local Uighur majority?).

Fifth, the riots did not end in dramatic events in which massacres ensued, but the government suspected that an "underground" of sorts initiated the troubles and kindled the fire. If this is added to the riots that occurred in Xinjiang three years later, one would be justified in seeking a pattern for these successive eruptions.

### Significance and Consequences

Valiant efforts have been made by Western and Chinese scholars to unravel the ebbs and flows of Muslim political ethnicism in China. Recently, Dru Gladney has made the most comprehensive and insightful attempt to date to analyze the ethnicity of Chinese Muslims in terms of "ethnic nationalism," even terming Muslim demonstrations in present-day China as "Muslim nationalist protests," and Chinese Muslim identification with other world Islamic concerns as the "new

transnationalism of Chinese Islam.”<sup>37</sup> Gladney further notes that:

Confusion in the literature on minority nationality or identity in China has arisen over the interchangeability of the terms “ethnicity” and “nationality.” Nationality is what the state in China has conferred upon the 56 nationalities who were identified mainly in the 1950s, and expressed in the Chinese term for nationality, *minzu*. Ethnicity, for which there is no separate term in Chinese, is something entirely different, but not unrelated, in that it is tied into one’s own self-perceived identity, which is often influenced by state policy. It is the interaction of self-perceived identity, its relation to state definition and nationality policy that is at the heart of the new rise in ethnic nationalism and the fourth tide of Islam in China.<sup>38</sup>

This sort of explanation suggests, in the traditional causal way of reasoning, that if only the “true” terms are applied, Chinese Islam will be understood and its recent resurgence can be explained away. Exactly as the therapist tries to solve a problem by finding its cause, the anthropologist purports to solve the question of Muslim identity by positing the “right” term to describe its condition. Lately, however, Western social science has been veering away from the idea that critical inquiry provides objective answers to questions of human behavior, and adopting the constructionalist approach that there is no “true” causal explanation; all causal explanations are arbitrary punctuation created in the mind of the observer, and these explanations should be judged not according to their presumed “truthfulness” but according to their usefulness.<sup>39</sup>

The Hui’s strong identity in China throughout history has been made abundantly clear in reports from missionaries since the last century, and in the major surveys and research works written since.<sup>40</sup> There is no need to struggle with new anthropological jargon in order to reinvent the wheel. Muslims in China have often expressed their inner cohesion within China as well as their outer identification with the rest of the Muslim community. Take a recent survey conducted

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<sup>37</sup>Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, 5.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 6-7.

<sup>39</sup>For this discussion, see Ben Furman and Tapani Ahola, “Return of the Question ‘Why’: Advantages of Exploring Preexisting Explanations,” *Family Process* 27 (December 1988): 395-97.

<sup>40</sup>See Israeli, *Muslims in China*; Barbara L. K. Pillsbury, “Cohesion and Cleavage in a Chinese Muslim Minority” (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1973), and “Factionalism Observed: Behind the ‘Face’ of Harmony in a Chinese Community,” *China Quarterly*, no. 74 (June 1978): 241-72; and Gladney’s comprehensive field work (*Muslim Chinese*), which corroborates what has been cited before. For a comprehensive bibliographical survey of all the above, see Raphael Israeli, *Islam in China: A Critical Bibliography* (New York: Greenwood, 1994).



by Wang Jianping which found that since 1985, more than a thousand Muslims have applied annually from the province of Yunnan alone to undertake the pilgrimage to Mecca, but due to restrictions, only about two hundred have performed the Hajj,<sup>41</sup> and that, too, at their own expense.<sup>42</sup> Without any official statements, the Chinese authorities prevented anyone under the age of forty from going to the Hajj, under the assumption that young people may more easily be swayed by fundamentalist ideas.

Certainly, all elements of the Muslim identity that Gladney discusses at length, such as Qingzhen<sup>43</sup> and the very term "Hui,"<sup>44</sup> are valid, but without knowing that they were "talking prose," the Hui have always manifested their separate identity. "Nationality," "ethnicity," "ethnonyms," "identity," and such are unknown to the Hui; they have never used them and continue not to comprehend them. The history of Muslims in China is also a matter of history, not only of anthropology, and therefore it serves no purpose to hinge our very understanding of the Islamic existence in China on an anthropological approach to their plight, or to make the coherence of their history contingent upon this or that social science jargon.

Ernest Gellner has defined nationalism as "a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent," and nationalist sentiment as the "feeling of anger aroused by the violation of the principle or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfillment." A national movement is hence defined as one "actuated by a sentiment of this kind."<sup>45</sup>

This definition of nationalist sentiment is problematic inasmuch as it applies mainly to national groups who are actively seeking to make their "nation" congruent with their state. In a minority situation, as in the case of the Muslims in China, the ideas of nation and state are very fleeting ones, and they rather relate to the messianic realm, where the "rebirth" of the nation or its state is vaguely relegated to some remote indefinite future. The rise of Muslim "nationalism"

<sup>41</sup>See Wang, "Islam in Yunnan," 364.

<sup>42</sup>The PRC has made it customary since the 1950s to annually dispatch to the Hajj an "official" delegation of choice cadres, who stopped over on their way to and from Jeddah in various Islamic countries in order to recount the marvels of Islamic freedom in China.

<sup>43</sup>Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, 7-15.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 15-21.

<sup>45</sup>Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), 1.

in contemporary China is perhaps more relevant to the *ethnie*, like the Galicians in Spain, or the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, who aspire to form their own nation out of their ethnic group<sup>46</sup> and free themselves from the authority of their present state.

The difficulty of finding a niche for Chinese Muslims in this wide array of definitions is perhaps what drove Gladney to coin his “ethnic nationalism” construct, bringing together the Chinese-Muslim ethnic origin, true or imagined, and the modern concept of nationalism with which both Muslims at large and Chinese at large have been trying to come to terms. Gladney thus concludes that based on Joseph Fletcher’s “three tides of Muslim influence in China”<sup>47</sup> theory, which has never been solidly substantiated, he would add a “fourth tide” to explain the present Muslim resurgence. While this entire scheme needs serious revision, it is our concern here to refer only to the arguments advanced by Gladney regarding his “fourth tide,” which he indeed terms as “ethnic nationalism”:

First, since the Muslims in China have accepted their ethnic labels conferred upon them by the state, and have grown to make use of the organizations of the China Islamic Association, the Nationalities Institute, and the State Nationalities Affairs Commission, by which the state has sought to educate them, they have, as Hui, Kirghiz, Kazakh, and the like, been making their voice heard in their own affairs as *nationalities*, not only as Muslims.

Second, the visit of Iran’s president to China at the height of democracy protests which culminated in the Tiananmen tragedy in summer 1989 indicates that China can no longer isolate the Muslims from the Islamic world currents, nor its people from nationalist ferment.

Third, the new technologies of communications and travel have assisted this change, which involves the reflection of international Islamic politics in domestic situations in many Islamic communities. The mounting numbers of Muslim pilgrims to Mecca, which increased from 1,400 in 1984 to 2,000 in 1987, and the number of Chinese Muslim students in Arab and Muslim universities attest to this effect.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>See Anthony D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nations* (Oxford and New York: Blackwell, 1987), 130.

<sup>47</sup>According to Joseph Fletcher, as interpreted by Gladney, there was a “Gedimu” first tide comprised of the earliest Muslim communities in China; a second wave of Sufi missionaries who established local and national networks known as the “menhuan”; and the third tide concerned with modern reforms at the end of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911). See Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, 36-62.

<sup>48</sup>Gladney reports in detail the fascinating case of a Hui who traveled to the Hajj in

Finally, relations between the Muslims in China and the Middle East are growing stronger and more frequent. Add to that the frequent travels of prominent Muslim personalities and Muslim delegations to Islamic sites in China, which have often generated financial donations to restore Chinese Muslim shrines and educational institutions, and one has the recipe for the new resurgence of Islamic nationalism.

Eric J. Hobsbaum, while accepting Ernest Gellner's definition of nationalism, emphasizes that "it is a social entity only insofar as it relates to a certain kind of modern territorial state, the nation-state, and it is pointless to discuss nation and nationality except insofar as both relate to it. . . ." <sup>49</sup> Furthermore, adds Hobsbaum: "We cannot assume that for most people national identification . . . excludes or is always or even superior to, the remainder of the set of identifications which constitute the social being. In fact, it is always combined with identifications of another kind, even when it is felt to be superior to them."

The situation being composite as it is, we cannot simply dismiss it as "ethnic nationalism," reflecting an ethnic revival among the Hui (who have no territory to relate to), or other groups as the Kirghiz, Uighurs, and Kazakh (who do possess such territories). One must seek some underlying and unifying Muslim common denominator which brings together, under one roof (and at least on the messianic if not the immediate actual level), all these Muslim ethnic groups throughout China inwardly, and accounts for their link to the entire Muslim community (Umma) outwardly. <sup>50</sup> Lillian Craig-Harris points out that the Chinese authorities have been reminded by the recent Muslim unrest in China that:

The PRC policy of openness to the Islamic world may actually have contributed to Islamic separatist aspiration. Most members of the twelve major ethnic groups living in Xinjiang are Muslims who look to Turkey and the Middle East as their spiritual home, not to China, whose control over them has always been tenuous. <sup>51</sup>

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1987, but was escorted and pampered, financially and otherwise, by the entire Muslim community of Xian, on his way to and from Mecca. On his return, he lectured in the northwest about his experiences and the need to reform local Islam. See Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, 63.

<sup>49</sup>Eric J. Hobsbaum, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 9-10.

<sup>50</sup>This issue had been studied at length in Israeli, *Muslims in China*, chaps.1-3, back in the 1960s, well before the latest wave of Islamic unrest broke out.

<sup>51</sup>Lillian Craig-Harris, *China Considers the Middle East* (London: Tauris, 1993), 275.

In fact, the Chinese authorities have been so alarmed by these trends that Premier Li Peng himself delivered a warning against “foreigners and splittist forces which infiltrate by hoisting the nationality banner and donning religious garments.”<sup>52</sup> These warnings were generated by the series of violent incidents, including the Shadian Incident analyzed above, and others which were reported despite heavy censorship. Craig-Harris reports that since 1989, contacts between Chinese Muslims and their Middle Eastern coreligionists have been more carefully restricted, as have mosque construction and religious education. In 1991, religious personnel were examined and purged from state positions, and in some cases, only Muslims fifty years or older were allowed to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. Restrictions were also placed on Arab teachers permitted into China.<sup>53</sup>

On December 6, 1993, the *South China Morning Post*, a major Hong Kong newspaper, laid out in considerable detail eyewitness reports from Xining, Qinghai about violent riots by Muslims following a local paper’s article about a Muslim woman reading her Holy Book to the attentive ears of her dog, something that by necessity would offend a Muslim believer. This followed equally violent unrest in September 1993, when Muslims demonstrated against a Taiwan comic series which denigrated Islam, despite the resolute move of local police to confiscate copies of the publication. Concurrently with these reports, Chinese officials have been said to have been examining possible links between Uighur nationalists in Xinjiang and Qinghai and “foreign hostile powers,” possibly Kazakhstan and Afghani Majahideen, who have allegedly initiated those riots.

All the above leads to the following general conclusions which do not apply always and everywhere, but reflect the Chinese Muslims’ state of mind:

First, they continue, as they have always done, to live in a state of vague expectation which underlies their daily activities. Certainly, they go about their day-to-day business and pay lip service to the state when necessary, but this does not even slightly diminish their yearning to see their identity merging into that of the greater Islamic powers-to-be.

Second, “ethnic nationalism” does not provide the explanation for local Muslim upheavals in various parts of China. Rather, Islam

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<sup>52</sup>Xinhua, February 20, 1990.

<sup>53</sup>See note 51 above.

has to be taken as an organic body where every function, or dysfunction, of the part affects the whole. The Rushdie affair burst out in the alleys of Beijing, but came to its culmination in the vast expanses of Qinghai. The angry and painful call to protect Islam against its denigrators swept through all Muslim groups of China, regardless of their ethnic origin, as did later publications that were universally considered offensive to them.

Third, it is true that Muslim riots in various parts of China may have been triggered by different local causes, but underlying all of them were anger, revenge, and a personal and collective readiness on the part of individual Muslims to stand up to the authorities, confront them, and bring about their own solutions. This reflects Chinese Muslims' new awareness that they have the advantage of both the new Chinese openness in general, which does not allow reversion to the oppression of yesteryear, and the vigilance of the Muslim core, which has been taking a growing interest in the periphery: the Islamic conferences, Muslim instructors to China, financial and even military assistance by some outside Muslim extremists, and the like.

Fourth, the Muslims' appeal to the Chinese government to side with them, which it did wholeheartedly in the Rushdie affair, or in the case of the comic publication, does not necessarily signify that they have accepted the rules of the game and will act within the official regulations and under state sponsorship, but that they have learned to take advantage of the state machinery to their benefit. They know fully well what they can achieve by advancing legitimate claims via government channels could not be achieved if their claim were illegitimate or if they attempted to achieve it alone, by violent means.

Fifth, in cases where their claims have not been legitimate, such as smuggling drugs or weapons, or rebelling against the local state apparatus, Muslims have not hesitated to lay down their grievances and resort to violence to achieve their goals. Even in cases of pursuance of "illegitimate" objectives, they have usually not been censored by their coreligionists; on the contrary, their stand against all odds in their confrontation with the government has won them popularity and fame.

Finally, while the Hui, who lack a specific territory that they can claim as their own, have been rather wary in not demanding secession, Xinjiang and Qinghai, which are closer to the Islamic world and may have been drawing support from it, have made such demands, and violence has been resorted to in pursuance of this goal.

In sum, if both the lax policy of the Chinese government toward

the Muslims and the pressing interests of the Muslim world and the world at large continue to publicly impact each other, one can expect more and more outbursts of this sort, which may culminate, if the circumstances so permit, in demands for outright secession from China, not unlike the process which has brought the Soviet Union to its demise. These demands will arise first in China's outlying areas (Xinjiang and Qinghai), like the Baltic and the Caucasus republics of the former Soviet Union, and perhaps permeate later to the Hui in China proper, much as some ethnic elements of the Russian Federation have been fomenting separatist unrest today (Tatars, Chechenians, etc.).