

*The Making of China's "Good Muslims": From Middleman Minority to Cultural Ambassadors**

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Abstract

Driven by the need to survive in a predominately non-Muslim society, Chinese Muslims, or the Chinese-speaking Hui people, have traditionally played the role of a middleman minority. During the last few decades, benefiting from the strengthening economic ties between China and the Arab world, especially the Arabian Gulf countries, Hui Muslims have gained greater visibility and relevance in Sino-Arab relations. Enabled by their dual identity, Hui Muslims have evolved from a middleman minority that exists on the margin to cultural brokers who are increasingly central in China's Belt and Road Initiative. Drawing on a multiyear ethnographic study of overseas Chinese in Dubai—the most important trade hub and a rising global city in the Arab world, this article shows that through actively utilizing religious and cultural capital, Hui Muslims in Dubai play the role of trusted mediators between diverse Chinese interests and the Arab Muslim elites and have

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* This study was supported by the Office of Research and Graduate Studies at the American University of Sharjah. Earlier versions of this article were presented at various academic conferences. The author would like to express her gratitude to audiences at these events for their valuable feedback. Any mistakes are of the author alone.

become “cultural ambassadors” in a region of growing strategic importance to China, cultivating an image of “good Muslims” in the eyes of Chinese authorities.

Throughout its history of more than five thousand years, Chinese civilization has absorbed a long list of “strangers” into the Confucian mainstream, including the followers of Islam—an unbendable monotheistic tradition that often finds itself at odds with the dominant Chinese cosmology. The earliest Muslim presence in the Middle Kingdom can be traced back to the mid-seventh century with the arrival of Arab and Persian merchants, traders, diplomats, and intellectuals who settled down in the ancient capital Chang’an and a number of port cities along the Southeast Coast, including Guangzhou, Quanzhou, Yangzhou, Hangzhou, and Mingzhou. Residing in urban communities known as *fanfang* (蕃坊), these foreigners were granted extraterritorial rights despite their distinctive ways of life that made them nothing short of exotic in a largely Confucian society heavily influenced by a combination of Buddhism, Taoism, and various folk traditions.¹ Nevertheless, the flourishing trade and commercial activities along the ancient Silk Road over land and across the Indian Ocean in the following centuries have not only consolidated the presence of Islam in China but also created a unique ethno-religious minority—the Chinese-speaking Muslims, or the Hui—a racially/ethnically mixed people bonded by a shared system of beliefs and rituals. Largely indistinguishable from the Han majority as the result of centuries of assimilation, Chinese Muslims are a living testament to the global diffusion and reterritorialization of Islam.

1. The Double Marginality of Chinese Hui Muslims

Living in the midst of an overwhelmingly large Han majority, however, Chinese Muslims have long struggled to survive in a state of in-betweenness.² Small pockets of Chinese Muslim communities are scattered in both urban centers and rural villages across the country. On the one hand, in addition to speaking the Chinese language and using Chinese names, Chinese Muslims are also frequently involved in intermarriages with the Han people. On the other hand, despite their isolation from the rest of the Muslim *ummah* as the result of geography and persecution, Chinese Muslims continue to maintain a diet free of pork,³ a common