

Old Stories, New Needs: The Multiple Appropriations of the Chinese-speaking Muslims' Origin Narratives[†]

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Abstract

The arrival of Islam in China is recounted in numerous narratives, both oral and written. Three of these narratives trace it back to Muslim worthies that reached China during the early Tang dynasty. These narrative are recounted in He Qiaoyuan's *Book of Min* (閩書), in *The Origin of the Huihui* (回回原來), and in "The Story of Wan Gars" (宛尕斯的故事). Some scholars have referred to the latter two as a timeless "collective memory of Chinese Muslims" or as the "Chinese Muslims' self-consciousness". Such interpretations register the wide circulation of these origin narratives in China, yet omit where and when these narratives have circulated, thus obscuring the social dimensions of memory. Taking into account the agents involved in the transmission, selection, and crystallization of particular versions of the Chinese Muslims' imagined past, I select three sites of memory—physical or textual—where individuals, groups, and institutions engage in the acts of remembering the arrival of Islam in China. These sites are the tombs of legendary Muslim ancestors, a pre-modern origin myth transmitted through manuscripts and wood block prints ranging from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, and a myth in post-Mao collectanea of folk literature. Situating these case studies in their respective historical context, I argue that the same origin narratives have been transmitted by distinct yet overlapping communities for remarkably different reasons.

Keywords: Chinese ethnic minorities; Chinese Muslims; Islam in China; origin myths; folk literature

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Introduction

Narratives about the arrival of Islam in China have circulated among the Chinese-speaking Muslims¹ since at least the sixteenth century.² This essay focuses on three of these narratives. The first is the origin narrative in *Book of Min* (閩書), a local history attributed to Ming historiographer He Qiaoyuan (何喬遠, 1558-1631). The second is *The Origin Of The Hui* (回回原來), an anonymous origin myth textualized in the sixteenth or the seventeenth century.³ The core narrative in this latter source appears also in “The Story of Wan Gars” (宛朶斯的故事), an origin myth collected through fieldwork and textualized in the late 1970s. These narratives are all well known within the Chinese Muslim community and beyond, as proved by ethnographic accounts. In summers 2015 and 2016, I visited Muslim-inhabited areas in China’s South and in the North-east, where I heard recounted variants of these origin narratives from various members of the Hui and the Dongxiang communities, two Chinese ethnic minorities characterized by an ethno-Islamic heritage.⁴ As one might expect, opinions about these narratives range far and wide within the Chinese Islamic community. Some of my informants dismissed these narratives as just “stories” (*gushi*). Others, instead, took them seriously, claiming that they are “rooted in the history of our group”. Many others had opinions falling in between these two extremes. Conversations and insights gained through direct contact with Muslims in China reassert that these origin narratives are part of the Chinese Islamic communities’ common knowledge.⁵

Three studies ascribe these origin myths under the category of Chinese Muslims’ collective memory. Yang Xiaochun equated *The Origin of the Huihui* to the Chinese Muslims’ self-consciousness.⁶ Similarly, Raphael Israeli has interpreted a variety of Chinese Muslims’ origin narratives as the “collective memory” of the group and he has posited a “Chinese Muslim mind”.⁷ Considering an even broader set of folk narratives attributed to the Hui—including those related to the Chinese Muslims’ origins—Karl Luckert claimed that they are “a conglomerate of existential pebbles and splinters of people’s memory”.⁸ Such interpretations implicitly endorse—to use James Wertsch’s term—a “strong version” of collective memory; the assumption “that some sort of collective mind or consciousness exists above and beyond the minds of the individuals in a collective”.⁹

¹ I use the term the “Chinese-speaking Muslims”, or simply “Chinese Muslims”, in opposition to other Chinese groups of Islamic heritage who speak Turkic languages (e.g., Uyghurs). When referring to all the groups of Islamic heritage in China, I adopt the term the “Chinese Islamic community”.

² Marshall Broomhall, *Islam in China* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1910), 61-62.

³ In this essay, I distinguish between the terms “origin myth” (or simply “myth”) and “local history” (地方志). In my use, the former refers specifically to *The Origin of the Huihui* and to “The Story of Wan Gars”, the latter refers to the *Book of Min*. When considering these three sources together, I adopt instead the umbrella term “origin narratives”.

⁴ The expression “ethno-Islamic heritage” attempts to capture the fundamental ambiguity of the Chinese Muslim minorities, groups for which religious and ethnic identity are closely entwined. For some background, see Włodzimierz Cieciora, “Ethnicity or Religion?”, in *Islamic Thought in China*, ed. by Jonathan Lipman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 107-46.

⁵ These narratives of origin have circulated among Muslim communities in China at least since the immediate post-Mao years and, most likely, even earlier. Prior to my own fieldwork, the circulation of these origin narratives has also been documented by Dru Gladney, *Dislocating China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 103-19.

⁶ Yang Xiaochun, “Huihui yuanlai yu Zhongguo wenhua beijing xia de Huizu zuyuan jiangou”, *Minzu yanjiu*, no. 3 (2018): 103-26.

⁷ Raphael Israeli, “Myth as Memory”, *The Muslim World* 91, no. 1-2 (2001): 185.

⁸ Karl W. Luckert, “Introduction”, in *Mythology and Folklore of the Hui, a Muslim Chinese People*, eds. Karl W. Luckert and Li Shujiang (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 31-32.

⁹ James Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21. For a succinct critique of the term “collective memory”, see James Wertsch, “Collective Memory”, in *Memory in Mind and Culture*, eds. Pascal Boyer and James V Wertsch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 117-37.

Because they adhere to a strong version of collective memory, the above three studies imply that memory is an abstract entity that can be analyzed in isolation. The alleged disembodiment of origin myths leads to two major pitfalls. First, it obscures the agents involved in the transmission, selection, and crystallization of particular versions of the Chinese Muslims' *imagined* past.¹⁰ On this respect, Maurice Halbwachs was the first in claiming that recollections of the past do not exist in a vacuum; rather they are always altered and transmitted through social interactions.¹¹ Second, the decontextualized study of origin narratives assumes that they maintained a roughly similar function across time. Yang's, Israeli's, and Luckert's studies on the Chinese Muslims' origin myths, in fact, draw from premodern and modern textual sources without differentiating among the agents, the media, and the historical periods in which specific acts of remembrance have occurred. To obviate to these issues, in this essay I focus on three specific "sites of memory".¹² Each of the following three sections focuses on a specific site and on the community that fuels acts of remembrance in that particular space at a given historical time.

The first site is a group of Islamic tombs attributed to the four legendary missionaries who reached China during the Tang dynasty. Accounts of fieldwork at these sites, commentaries by Christian missionaries, and documented commemorative ceremonies attest the prominence of these Islamic tombs for Muslims from China and from other foreign states over the course of the last two centuries. The following two sections examine sites that are purely textual, respectively a myth circulating in pre-modern manuscripts and woodblock prints ranging from the early seventeenth to the early twentieth century, and a myth in collectanea of folk literature published in the post-Mao period. Whereas the master narrative conveyed in all these written versions is roughly consistent, the motivations to recount these same narratives differ greatly. Specifically, pre-modern versions of the origin myth were crafted by members of the Chinese Muslim elite (i.e., the Han Kitab scholars) who aimed at legitimating Islam by drawing on (Neo-)Confucian canonical texts and philosophical discourse, and in turn the Chinese Muslim community at large, during the late Ming and the early Qing periods. Post-Mao reiterations of the origin myth have instead been collected, organized, and edited under the aegis of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in a period of time when expressions of ethnic and regional identities were once again encouraged after the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution.¹³ In this latter instance, myths about the origin of the Chinese Muslims have been repackaged under the rubric Hui folk literature. The three sites of memory here selected are far from being comprehensive of the Chinese Muslims' origin narrative corpus. Nonetheless, the analysis of these sources illustrates that origin narratives—often uncritically referred to as part of collective memory—are continuously appropriated to advance the needs of particular individuals, groups, and institutions. Given that, I analyze textualized versions of the Chinese Muslims' origin narratives in terms of "cultural memory" and "communicative memory", analytical categories that as illustrated in this essay allow to foreground the agents, the communities, and the institutions that appropriate these narratives and employ them for various needs.

¹⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), *passim*.

¹¹ Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres Sociaux De La Mémoire* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1925).

¹² "Sites of memory" (*lieu de mémoire*) is a notion elaborated by French scholar Pierre Nora. In her own definition, "[a] lieu de mémoire is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community". "Preface to English Language Edition", in *Realms of Memory*, eds. Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), xvii.

¹³ For a succinct overview of ethnic reforms in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, see Gardner Bovingdon, "Hu Wants Something New", in *Social Difference and Constitutionalism in Pan-Asia*, ed. Susan Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 173-78.

The Tombs of the Four Foreign Ancestors: The Sites of Islamic Memory in China

Narratives about the origin of the Chinese Muslims have been propagated by both individuals and institutions for disparate reasons. This section focuses on the narratives surrounding the tombs of four mythical ancestors of the Chinese Muslims, a narrative conveyed in the local history, *Book of Min*.¹⁴ Such narrative is loosely echoed in the myth *The Origin of the Huihui*. Despite addressing the same issue—i.e. how Islam reached China—these two textual sources have yet to be analyzed in the same study. Scholarship about the origin of Islam in China, in fact, tend to focus either on or the other of these sources, de facto creating the dichotomy ‘history’ versus ‘myth’.¹⁵ In my fieldwork, however, I was recounted variants that merged elements from both the *Book of Min* and *The Origin of the Huihui*, a conflation that blurs the line between history and myth and thereby provide a rationale to analyze these two texts in conjunction. A brief analysis of the origin narrative in the *Book of Min* furthers my point about the fuzzy boundary between history and myth. In the *Book of Min*, historiographer He Qiaoyuan recounts that

Amongst the Prophet’s disciples were four great worthies. During the Tang dynasty, under the reign of Wude [618-626], they came to China to proselytize. One preached in Guangzhou. Another preached in Yangzhou. The remaining two preached in Quanzhou; they are buried on this mountain.¹⁶

門徒有大賢四人，唐武德中來朝，遂傳教中國。一賢傳教廣州，二賢傳教揚州，三賢、四賢傳教泉州，卒葬此山。

This passage traces the arrival of Islam in China to four legendary “great worthies” dispatched by Prophet Muhammed during the early Tang dynasty. As I explain in this section, recent studies have contested the historical factuality of this narrative. Nonetheless, the passage is reproduced on explanatory panels at Islamic sites and at museums in regions with a large Muslim concentration. During my fieldwork, I saw this passage on explanatory panels that welcome visitors at the entrance of the Lingshan Islamic Cemetery (靈山伊斯蘭教聖墓) in Quanzhou, Fujian province, and at two museums in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (i.e., the Wuzhong Museum (吳忠博物館) and the Ningxia Museum (宁夏博物館)). The recontextualization of this narrative on explanatory panels presents a mythical account as a fact, advancing a truth claim about the Chinese Muslims’ direct connection with the four legendary worthies and thus blurring the lines between myth and history.

¹⁴ According to T’ien-tse Chang, *Sino-Portuguese Trade from 1514 to 1644* (Leyden: E.J. Brill 1969), 7, the *Book of Min* was compiled toward the end of the sixteenth or the beginning of the seventeenth century. Katrien Hendrickx, *The Origins of Banana-Fibre Cloth in the Ryukyus, Japan* (Leuven: Leuven University Press 2007), 80n101, informs that the *Book of Min* “relates the history of the Empire of Min, a short-lived dynasty that set itself up on the southeast coast of China (present-day Fujian province) in the 10th century, and of the people that had lived there in previous times”.

¹⁵ In analyzing the origin of Islam in China, scholars have tended to either consider folk literary narratives or the account in the *Book of Min*. For example, Yang Jiguo, *Zhongguo Huizu wenxue tongshi* (Yinchuan: Yangguang chubanshe and Huanghe chubanshe, 2014), 118-29, examines origin narratives expressed in folk literary texts. Fang Hao, *Zhong Xi jiaotong shi* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2015), 367-68 and Shen Fuwei, *Zhong Xi wenhua jiaoliu* (Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe, 2017), 160-61 have instead analyzed an excerpt from the *Book of Min*.

¹⁶ The passage is taken from the *Book of Min*, *juan 7*, “Ling shan”.

In my fieldwork interviews, I found that some Muslims in China have connected the four legendary worthies in He Qiaoyuan's *Book of Min* to specific Islamic cemeteries. The mountain referred to in the above passage—the Ling Mountain (靈山)—hosts the Lingshan Islamic Cemetery. At this site are the tombs of two mythical envoys of Prophet Mohammed—Waggas and Imam Sayid.¹⁷ The other two missionaries referenced by He Qiaoyuan have been associated with Puhading and Abu Waqqas, respectively buried according to folk beliefs at the Puhading Cemetery (普哈丁墓)¹⁸ in Yangzhou and at the Sage's Tomb (先賢古墓) in Guangzhou.¹⁹

Scholars have, however, contested the historical authenticity of the four tombs. Some studies have advanced evidence suggesting that Wan Gars' tomb is located in Medina, not in Guangzhou.²⁰ In addition, Donald Leslie has reported that the earliest source suggesting that Wan Gars is buried in Guangzhou dates to 1751,²¹ over a millennium after his alleged death. Similarly, the absence of any reference to Puhading in contemporaneous historical documents has also generated skepticism about the authenticity of the tomb in Yangzhou.²² Likewise, based on archeological records, Chen Dasheng has dated the missionary tombs in Quanzhou to the ninth century at the earliest,²³ thus indirectly questioning He Qiaoyuan's narrative.

Despite the tombs' dubious historical authenticity, the pivotal role they play within Muslim communities is a fact well established in the scholarship.²⁴ The Sage's Tomb is, arguably, the most prominent historical Islamic tomb in China.²⁵ One of the earliest references to the practice of visiting the Sage's Tomb is found in *The Chinese Repository*, a nineteenth-century periodical for Protestant missionaries operating in Asia. In an anonymous article published in this periodical in 1851, the author reports that

“Every clan annually resorted to the Echoing Tomb [the Sage's Tomb] to reverently worship and rehearse their canonical book, which custom has been handed down even to this day without change”.²⁶

¹⁷ Dru Gladney, *Muslim Chinese* (Cambridge, MA.: Council on East Asian Studies, Harvard University, 1991), 268.

¹⁸ The Puhading Cemetery is also referred as *Huihui tang* (回回堂).

¹⁹ Michael C. Howard, *Transnationalism in Ancient and Medieval Societies* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012), 79.

²⁰ See for example, Anthony Garnaut, “Hui Legends of the Companions of the Prophet”, 2006, available at: www.chinaheritagequarterly.org/articles.php?searchterm=005_legends.inc&issue=005 (accessed July 8, 2020); James D Frankel, “Islamisation and Sinicisation”, in *Islamisation*, ed. A. C. S. Peacock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 511-12n38; and Kristian Petersen, *Interpreting Islam in China* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 205n4.

²¹ Donald Leslie, *Islam in Traditional China* (Belconnen: Canberra College of Advanced Education, 1986), 74.

²² Wei Peichun, *Yisilanjiao zai Yangzhou* (Nanjing: Nanjing daxue chubanshe 1991), 2.

²³ Chen Dasheng, “Quanzhou Lingshan shengmu niandai chutan”, in *Fujian sheng Quanzhou haiwai jiaotong shi bowuguan, Quanzhou shi Quanzhou lishi yanjiuhui*, eds. Fujian sheng Quanzhou haiwai jiaotong shi bowuguan and Quanzhou shi Quanzhou lishi yanjiuhui (Fujian: Fujian renmin chubanshe, 1983), 167-76.

²⁴ See for example Ma Jianjun, *Xi'an Huizu minsu wenhua* (Xi'an: Sanqin chubanshe, 2008), 239.

²⁵ On the cultural centrality of the Sage's Tomb, see for example Lei Yutian, *Guangdong zongjiao jianzhi* (Shanghai: Baijia chubanshe, 2007), 241. In addition, Huang Decai, *Guangdong sheng zhi. Zongjiao zhi* (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2002), 241 has documented that The Sage's Tomb is located within the perimeter of the Xianxian Mosque 清真先賢古墓. This Islamic site and pilgrimages to it are referred in Chinese respectively as the “little Holy Land” 小聖地 and the “little haji” 小朝覲, terms that connect the Sage's Tomb Mecca, the holiest city in the Islamic world.

²⁶ “The Hiang Fan, Echoing Tomb, Mohammedan Mosque and burying Near Canton”, *The China Repository*, no. 2 (1851): 79.

Roughly half a century later, the Christian missionary Marshall Broomhall noted that the Sage's Tomb was "looked upon as a very sacred spot and is constantly visited by Moslem pilgrims from distant parts of the Empire".²⁷ To the best of my knowledge, there is no available information about tomb visitations during the Nationalist period and the Mao era. As for the post-Mao era, during my fieldwork in June 2015, I spent two hours observing men who had come to pray at the Sage's Tomb. Among them were several Middle Eastern Muslim visitors, kneeling down and chanting in front of the tomb.²⁸ While they were praying, I struck up a conversation with a Chinese family of Dongxiang. The father of the family told me that they had come from Linxia, Gansu province, to pay their homage at the tomb. Learning that I am not a Muslim, my interlocutor took the chance to narrate Wan Gars' arrival in Guangzhou during the Tang dynasty, acknowledging that "it might just be a story". This ethnographic vignette is important for two reasons. First, it reaffirms the centrality of the Sage's Tomb for Muslims of different national and ethnic backgrounds, a point already made by ethnographers and historians.²⁹ Second, the conversation with the Dongxiang visitor—one slightly skeptical about the tomb's historical authenticity—highlights that the propagation of origin narratives about a group is less concerned with factual accuracy than with the negotiation of social identifications.

In a way analogous to the Sage's Tomb, those in Quanzhou have also been a site of worship. One of the most well known episodes of tombs' visitation is associated to Zheng He, the renowned Chinese Muslim pioneer in geographical explorations of the fifteenth century.³⁰ A votive tablet next to the two missionaries' tombs commemorates the visit paid by Zheng He in 1417 when he was making preparations for his fifth voyage.³¹ The stone tablet located next to the two tombs reports that, during his visit, Zheng He burnt incense to receive "the protection of the Ling Mountain", a synecdoche for the two worthies buried on the mountain. Whereas information about other visitations at the Islamic tombs in Quanzhou is scanty for the entire pre-modern period, a recent publication suggests that celebrations have taken place at these sites during the twentieth century.³²

The remembrance of legendary ancestors does not only occur in form of individual visits but also during institutional commemorative celebrations. The Islamic Associations of China (中國伊斯蘭教協會)—the PRC's religious organization for Muslims of all ethnic groups—has organized through its local subdivisions celebrations to commemorate the four legendary worthies. The best documented of these are the commemorations at the Sage's Tomb in Guangzhou, the place where Wan Gars is allegedly buried. Ma Jianzhao informs that commemorative ceremonies have steadily been held at this specific tomb since 1984.³³ To

²⁷ Broomhall, *Islam in China*, 112.

²⁸ For an example of a man chanting at the Sage's Tomb see this video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVQbb6U1bpU> (accessed July 8, 2020).

²⁹ For an ethnographic study, see Dru Gladeny, "Muslim Tombs and Ethnic Folklore", *The Journal of Asian Studies* 46, no. 3 (1987): 497-500. For studies drawing from historical sources see Huang, *Guangdong sheng zhi*, 2002, 241-45; and Lei, *Guangdong zongjiao jianzhi*, 2007, 241-45.

³⁰ Tomb visitations are common practice within the Chinese Islamic community. For more information about this practice, see Zhongguo Yisilanjiao xiehui quanguo jingxueyuan tongbian jiaocai bianshen weiyuanhui bian, *Zhongguo yisilanjiao fazhan shi jianming jiaocheng: Shiyong ben* (Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, 2008), 106.

³¹ For information about Zheng He's tablet on the Ling Mountain, see Gary Paul Nabhan, *Cumin, Camels, and Caravans* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 230. The episode of Zheng He's tomb visitation at the Ling Mountain is also recounted in "Eunuch Sanbao at the Welcoming Pavilion", a folk story collected in Quanzhou, Fujian province, most likely in the post-Mao era. This story is collected in *Huizu minjian gushi xuan*, eds. Li Shujiang and Wang Zhengwei (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1985), 32-36.

³² Yuan Yifeng, *Zhongguo zongjiao mingsheng shidian* (Shanghai: Shanghai sanlian shudian, 2009), 199.

³³ For photographs of some of these celebrations see Ma Jianzhao et al., *Tushu Guangdong Huizu* (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2017), 26-27.

provide a few examples, roughly three hundred people attended the ceremony that took place on September 27, 2014.³⁴ On the same day, a celebration was held at the Puhading's tomb with roughly sixty participants.³⁵ On August 25, 2016 the Quanzhou Islamic Association hold a public ceremony to celebrate the historical and religious legacy of the Lingshan Islamic Cemetery.³⁶ These examples highlight how the historical memory of the Chinese Muslims' *imagined* past is fueled by institutional celebrations held at the tombs in Guangzhou, Yangzhou, and Yangzhou.

More broadly, the relevance of these historic sites is suggested in folk beliefs associated with the tombs. I provide one example for each of these three locations. In the above referred anonymous article in *The China Repository*, the author reported that when people enter the enclosed space of the Sage's Tomb—also referred to as the Echoing Tomb—

“their words reecho, moving for time and then stopping . . . From the time of the Tang dynasty to the present day, more than a thousand years, the villagers have feared and respected and had forbore to cut wood near it”.³⁷

This comment highlights the sacred aura surrounding the Sage's Tomb. The tombs of the two worthies in Quanzhou are said to emit bright light, a feature that echoes what Ma Huan³⁸—a Chinese Muslim who had traveled to Medina in the fifteenth century—has reported during his visit to the tomb of the Prophet.³⁹ Within the Puhading Cemetery, an undated stone tablet claims that Puhading is a descendant in Prophet Muhammed's lineage, a Sayyid. This purported lineage glorifies the Chinese Muslim community in virtue of its direct connection to the Prophet's genealogy. All these legendary narratives establish a sacred aura around the four Islamic tombs, sites at which individual and institutional narratives of the Chinese Muslims' origin continually intersect and are negotiated.

The heterogenous media analyzed in this section and the length of the historical period considered—roughly two centuries—shows the complex layering of significances attached to the four Islamic historic tombs as sites of ethno-religious identification. All these sources point to the role of Islamic tombs as memory sites that fuel the narrative of Chinese Muslims' origin. Many Chinese Muslims in fact trace their ancestry—even if only in the form of a legendary account—in patrilineal line to an expedition headed by the four legendary worthies purportedly buried in Guangzhou, Yangzhou, and Quanzhou. In this sense, the tombs become the sites to imagine the group's past, though the variety of interpretations cautions against the use of 'collective memory,' a term which adumbrates the agencies involved in the process of remembering. This is particularly clear when one focuses on the multiple significances stemming from the acts of remembering Wan Gars, the legendary worthy allegedly buried in Guangzhou. The following two sections focus on origin myths that have Wan Gars as

³⁴ Guangzhou shi Yisilanjiao xie hui, Guangzhou Musilin juxing “darenji” huodong jinian Wan Gesu, available at: http://www.gzislam.com/pd.jsp?id=112#skeyword=%E5%AE%9B%E8%91%9B%E7%B4%A0&pp=0_35 (accessed July 8, 2020).

³⁵ Ma Dan, “Puhading yuan yu yunhe Yisilan wenhua yantaohui zai Yangzhou zhaokai”, *Zhongguo Musilin* 5 (2014): 5.

³⁶ Quanzhou shi renmin zhengfu. “Quanzhou shi Yisilanjiao xiehui zhaokai di'er ci daibiao huiyi”, available at: http://www.quanzhou.gov.cn/zfb/xxgk/zfxxgkzl/qzdt/bmdt/201608/t20160831_362406.htm (accessed July 8, 2020).

³⁷ “The Hiang Fan, Echoing Tomb, Mohammedan Mosque and Burying Near Canton”, 79.

³⁸ For more information on Ma Huan, see Clifford Edmund Bosworth et al., eds, *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1983): 54-55.

³⁹ Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*, 379n61.

protagonist of the arrival of Islam in China, showing how the same core narrative has been deployed by different groups for distinct reasons.

Han Kitab Scholars and the Textualization of Chinese Muslim Cultural Memory

Ethnographic accounts and institutionally propagated narratives show that roughly similar narratives about the arrival of Islam in China have circulated in the last two centuries or so. Rather than referring to such narratives as ‘collective memory’, it is more appropriate to distinguish between communicative memory and cultural memory.⁴⁰ Each individual has his/her own private recollections of the past, what constitutes “communicative memory”. Public recollections, on the other hand, are transmitted by specialized tradition bearers and are referred to as “cultural memory”. In composing the origin myth about the arrival of Islam in China, the Han Kitab scholars have de facto established a Chinese Muslim cultural memory.

This section analyzes the cultural memory constructed by *The Origin of the Huihui*. The earliest extant copy of this work has been dated around the year 1662,⁴¹ a historical period when Chinese-speaking Muslims had begun “to embrace their heritage’s Chinese characteristics”.⁴² The blending of Islamic and Chinese cultures manifests in the Han Kitab, the canonized corpus of Islamic texts written in Chinese, approximately between the seventeenth and the mid-eighteenth century. Broadly speaking, the Han Kitab consists of a collection of scholarly works on disparate subjects of the contemporaneous knowledge. A fraction of these works atypically includes origin myths concerned with explaining how, when, and why Muslims arrived in China.⁴³ The unusual inclusion of such materials in the Han Kitab points to a perceived need to legitimate Muslims’ presence in China.⁴⁴

The necessity of justifying Muslims’ presence in China is also evident in the plot of *The Origin of the Huihui*. The core plot in all extant versions of *The Origin of the Huihui* is consistent in all the extant manuscripts and wood block prints.⁴⁵ The story goes as follows:⁴⁶ Emperor Li Shimin of the Tang dynasty dreams that he is about to be killed by a collapsing roof beam. Providentially, an unknown man intercepts the roof beam, thus saving the emperor. The next morning, the emperor learns from his advisors that his dream is about the Huihui, a Muslim people living in the Western Regions. The advisor says that these people are needed to protect the empire. Hence, the emperor dispatches an expedition with the purpose of reaching out to

⁴⁰ For a concise comparison of the terms “collective memory” and “communicative memory”, see Roland Alexander Ißler, “Cultural Memory”, in *The Bonn Handbook of Globality*, eds. Kühnhardt Ludger and Tilman Mayer (Cham: Springer, 2019), 809-10.

⁴¹ This dating has been proposed by Yang Xiaochun, “*Huihui yuanlai de chengshu niandai ji xiangguan wenti lüetan*”, *Beifang minzu daxue xuebao* 116, no. 2 (2014). Nonetheless, scholars have not reached a consensus about the dating of *The Origin of the Huihui*. For instance, Zvi Ben-Dor Benite has claimed that the core narrative of *The Origin of the Huihui* was written down around the year 1712. “Even Unto China”, *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 4, no. 2 (Autumn/Winter 2002): 106.

⁴² Kristian Petersen, “Reconstructing Islam: Muslim Education and Literature in Ming-Qing China”, *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 23, no. 3-4 (2006): 25.

⁴³ Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005), 203.

⁴⁴ Other pre-modern texts dealing with the arrival of Muslims in China are the *Record of the Arrival from the West* (西來宗譜), *The Last Prophet of Islam* (天方至聖實錄), see John Chen, *Islamic Modernism in China* (PhD diss, Columbia University, 2018), 169n21, and Liu Zhi’s *Rituals of Islam* (天方典禮). The narratives in these texts are roughly consistent with that in *The Origin of the Huihui*.

⁴⁵ For detailed lists of various versions of *The Origin of The Huihui*, see Donald Leslie, *Islamic Literature in Chinese, Late Ming and Early Ch’ing* (Belconnen: Canberra College of Advanced Education, 1981), 55-56; and Yang Xiaochun, “*Huihui yuanlai de chengshu niandai ji xiangguan wenti lüetan*”, 6-7.

⁴⁶ The version on which I have based the myth’s summary is based on the copy (1875 ca.) preserved at the University of Michigan. *Huihui yuanlai* 回回原來. Available at: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015021947158&view=1up&seq=1> (accessed July 8, 2020).

the Huihui. In response, the Prophet Muhammed sends to China three thousand Muslim soldiers headed by three worthies. Two of them die along the way; only Wan Gars reaches Chang'an (present day Xi'an). The emperor finds delight in Wan Gars' company and erudition and invites him and his soldiers to dwell in China forever. Wan Gars and the soldiers, however, grow homesick and desire to return to Arabia. Both the emperor and the Prophet want these men to remain in China. For this reason, the emperor allows them to marry local women, and the Prophet orders Wan Gars and the soldiers to stay in China, protect the empire, and preserve their Islamic faith. The myth concludes by identifying the descendants of these early travelers with the Chinese Muslims.

The choice of Wan Gars as the protagonist of the myth is not accidental. Wan Gars, in fact, is said to be a maternal cousin of the Prophet Muhammed and—as noted by James Frankel—is “counted among the great Companions of the Prophet, one of the ten to whom he gave the good news that they were destined for paradise”.⁴⁷ By extension, the direct tie established between Wan Gars and the Prophet glorifies the Chinese-speaking Muslims at large. As already pointed out in the discussion of the Sage's Tomb, according to the scholarship, Wan Gars is buried in Medina and, most likely, has never been to China. This, however, does not diminish the prestige associated with the Chinese Muslim group. Origin myths do not have value because they are historically accurate, but because they fulfill important social functions: they allow people to stake a claim to belonging to a place or community.

On the one hand, tracing the group's origin to the genealogy of the Prophet confers prestige to Chinese Muslims within the global Islamic community. On the other hand, the figure of Wan Gars also serves to legitimate Chinese Muslims' presence in China. Wan Gars, in fact, saves the emperor from the collapsing roof beam. The emperor's vision-dream symbolizes the role of the Huihui in China: to protect the empire, not to Islamise it.⁴⁸ The role of protectors assigned to Chinese Muslims is further conveyed in a variant of the myth that concludes claiming “Up to the present we [the Chinese Muslims] have defended the state, and won't leave China” (至今保國更無移).⁴⁹ By blending prestigious ancestry and claiming loyalty to the emperor, the author or the authorial community of the myth glorifies the Muslims' presence in China.⁵⁰

The glorification of the Chinese Muslims, however, is not a claim of Islam's superiority vis-à-vis the Chinese tradition. This is evident from the narrative in *The Origin of the Huihui*, in which Islamic heritage is framed as compatible with the Chinese tradition. Some of the variants of the myth draw an explicit parallel between these two traditions. This is clear from numerous textual variants. First, an excerpt taken from Reverend George Clarke's translation reports that “[t]he Emperor, during his first conversation with Wan Ko Si [Wan Gars], found that his teaching agreed in many points with the doctrine of Confucius and Mencius”.⁵¹ Islam

⁴⁷ Frankel, “Islamisation and Sinicisation”, 511-12n38.

⁴⁸ Frankel, “Islamisation and Sinicisation”, 496. Zhong Yajun, “Huizu minjian chuanshuo Huihui yuanlai yuanxing yanjiu”, *Ningxia daxue renwen xueyuan*, no. 5 (2009) has claimed that in an earlier variant of *The Origin of the Huihui*, Wan Gars reached China to preach Islam. This claim is, however, unverifiable beyond on Zhong's references.

⁴⁹ For this specific variant see the scholarly edition prepared by Ma Kuangyuan, “*Huihui yuanlai* (zhengli ben)”, in *Huizu wenhua lunji* (Kunming: Yunnan meishu, 1998), 53.

⁵⁰ A similar narrative is captured in “The Legend of Lingzhou's Huihui” (靈州回回的傳說), a regional variant textualized in the post-Mao era. For this version, see Li Shujiang and Wang Zhengwei, *Huizu minjian chuanshuo gushi* (Yinchun: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 2009), 46-47. In this version, the emperor Tang Xuanzong flees the rebellion led by general An Lushan to seek refuge in Lingzhou. In dire straits, the imperial army requests help from the Huihe people. Three thousand Han people were exchanged for three hundred Huihe soldiers. With their support the rebellion was suppressed. Out of gratitude, the emperor invited the surviving Huihe soldiers to settle down in China and take wives among the Han women. In this legend the numeric disproportion of the exchange—one Huihe soldier for ten Han—indicates the value of the Muslims. Protection of the empire and court's support grant a status of privilege to the Muslim community.

⁵¹ George W Clarke, “Mohametanism, *The Chinese Recorder* (1886): 271.

is thus framed as having equal status as Confucianism, a verdict reached by the emperor himself after a conversation one-to-one with Wan Gars. Attributing the observation of the underlying commonalities between Confucianism and Islam to the emperor himself is a strategic choice to warrant the claim authority.⁵² Second, the myth clearly connects Chinese Muslims both to the emperor and to Prophet Muhammed. It is upon the emperor's request that Wan Gars and his soldiers are dispatched from Arabia by Prophet Muhammed. Third, when Wan Gars and the soldiers grow homesick, the emperor and the Prophet collaboratively find ways to persuade them to stay in China. It is important to note that in the myth, the encounter between the emperor and the Prophet is mediated by Wan Gars. With this narrative choice, the myth artfully avoids setting up a hierarchy between the emperor and the Prophet who are positioned at the top of the hierarchy in their respective domain of influence, the Chinese empire and the Islamic world. Avoiding a comparison between the emperor and the Prophet allows the author/s to simultaneously assert Chinese Muslims' loyalty to their faith and to the political context in which they live.

Besides legitimating Islam in respect to Confucian values, *The Origin of the Huihui* echoes the narrative of how Buddhism was introduced in China. As James Frankel has noted, "The introduction of Buddhism to China features a dream of the Han emperor Mingdi (r. 58-75 CE), who was inspired by it to send an envoy to the West to procure scriptures containing the teachings of the mysterious spirit in the vision".⁵³ Using a similar plot line, *The Origin of the Huihui* provides readers with a familiar narrative that is more easily accepted. To recapitulate, *The Origin of the Huihui* balances elements from the Chinese and the Islamic traditions in order to assert the legitimacy of the Muslim community in China.

The question to be asked is who had the means to produce this origin myth? In the introduction to this essay, I have highlighted that *The Origin of the Huihui* has been understood as an expression of Chinese Muslims' collective memory. This interpretation is primarily motivated by two interrelated reasons. First of all, the myth is known by virtually all Chinese Muslims in contemporary China.⁵⁴ Some scholars have suggested that this narrative most likely had circulated orally by the early seventeenth century,⁵⁵ though this remains an hypothesis: no ethnographic account of any narrative similar to *The Origin of the Huihui People* was recorded before 1979.⁵⁶ Second, extant textual versions of the myth are anonymous. The anonymity of textualized versions—perhaps on purpose—gives the impression that this origin of Chinese Muslims is a plain fact, rather than a narrative apocryphally constructed to advance the group's legitimacy claims in China.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Chinese Muslim communities is that they are scattered around the Chinese territory and have had few if any contact among each

⁵² Frankel, "Islamisation and Sinicisation", 505.

⁵³ James Frankel, "Making Manchus and Muslims", in *Cosmopolitanism in China*, eds. Minghui Hu and Johan Elverskog (New York: Cambria Press, 2016), 40. A number of scholars has also pointed out the parallel in the narratives about the introduction of Buddhism and Islam. See Gabriel Deveria, "Origine de l'Islamisme en Chine", in *Centenaire de l'École des Langues Orientales Vivantes 1795-1895*, ed. École des Langues Orientales Vivantes (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1895), 317; Israeli, "Myth as Memory", 204; and Ma Cibo, *Yisilanjiao zai Zhongguo* (Taipei: Tangshan, 2005), 32-33.

⁵⁴ Yang Jiguo, *Zhongguo Huizu wenxue tongshi*, 118n1.

⁵⁵ Ben-Dor Benite, "Hijra and Exile", in *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty*, eds. Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Nicole Jerr (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 287. Haiyun Ma has however speculated that narratives about "the Muslim mythology" were widely circulated among Chinese Muslims since the eighteenth century. "The Mythology of Prophet's Ambassadors in China", *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26, no. 3 (2006): 445.

⁵⁶ "The Story of Wan Gars", analyzed in the following section is, to the best of my knowledge, the earliest ethnographic account of a narrative resonant with that in *The Origin of the Huihui*.

other until the modern era.⁵⁷ Extant copies of *The Origin of the Huihui*, however, share a core narrative that differs mainly in terms of prefatory materials and linguistic style. Limited variations of the same narrative suggest a common textual origin. *The Origin of the Huihui* might indeed have drawn from narratives that circulated orally within the Chinese Muslim community. Nonetheless, the balancing of elements from the Islamic and Confucian tradition—especially in written form—requires a level of erudition that restricts the authorship of *The Origin of the Huihui* to the Chinese Muslim literati. Identifying with ancestors of non-Chinese origin, the Chinese Muslim literati faced the necessity of legitimating their position within the empire. This necessity resembles that faced by the Manchus who took control of the empire in the year 1636.⁵⁸ In addition, despite *The Origin of the Huihui*'s anonymity, some scholars have attributed its authorship to Liu Sanjie 劉三杰,⁵⁹ a Chinese Muslim scholar from Nanjing.⁶⁰ Without going so far as to pinpoint a specific author, scholars tend to agree that the core narrative in *The Origin of the Huihui* was textualized by “urban literate elite of the Yangzi delta, where some of the most sophisticated and acculturated Chinese Muslim communities of the period were found”.⁶¹

Through the narrative in *The Origin of the Huihui*, Han Kitab scholars suggest that their group's foreign ancestry does not eschew loyalty to the empire. Textual and contextual analysis of these sources indicate in fact that *The Origin of the Huihui* constitutes Han Kitab scholars' attempt to legitimate their position in imperial China on the basis of ancestry, Muslims' alleged support of the Chinese empire, and underlying principles shared by Islamic and Confucian doctrines. For these reasons, *The Origin of the Huihui* cannot simply be the verbatim textualization of pre-existing oral narratives. It was instead fashioned by a restricted number of erudite individuals. For this reason, I suggest that the myth should not be considered the product of the entire Chinese Muslim community (i.e., the collective memory of the Chinese Muslims). Given that the notion of ‘collective memory’ appears ill suited to interpret this origin myth, what Han Kitab scholars fashioned is best understood in terms of ‘cultural memory,’ a particular way of *imagining* the Chinese Muslims' past that is transmitted by an elite community. This cultural memory, as discussed in the next section, has been co-opted in the post-Mao era to advance the state's agenda of re-imagining China as a multi-ethnic country.

Multi-ethnic China: The Canonization of Hui's Origin Myth

This section analyzes the textualization of “The Story of Wan Gars”, an origin myth consistent in terms of plot with *The Origin of the Huihui*. “The Story of Wan Gars” was textualized in 1979 under the aegis of the CCP. Because of the institutional context in which this origin myth was textualized and because of its ubiquitous inclusion in collectanea of Hui literature, “The Story of Wan Gars” can be described as the Chinese Muslims' official cultural memory.

⁵⁷ For instance, see Alexander Blair Stewart, *Chinese Muslims and the Global Ummah* (London: Routledge, 2017), 12.

⁵⁸ Mark C Elliott has documented that the Manchus—a “alien presence” of quasi-steppe origin—had to legitimate their position as powerholders in part by embracing “Chinese literary culture and political norms”. *The Manchu Way* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2001), 13.

⁵⁹ For instance, see the modern reprint of the myth, Liu Sanjie, *Huihui yuanlai* (Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 2008).

⁶⁰ Some other scholars have been more cautious in assigning the paternity of *The Origin of the Huihui* to Liu Sanjie. Kristian Petersen has noted that the paternity of this work is generally attributed to Liu Sanjie. Similarly, Yee Lak Elliot Lee informs that “The earliest existing version of the text attributes its authorship to Liu Sanjie”. For these two sources see *Interpreting Islam in China*, 205n1; and “Muslims As ‘Hui’ in Late Imperial and Republican China”, *Historical Social Research* 44, no. 3 (169) (2019): 242n31.

⁶¹ Ben-Dor Benite, “Even Unto China”, 106.

Some background information is in order to shed light on modern textualizations of this origin myth. In the early 1950s, following the Communist takeover, the newly established PRC launched the Ethnic Classification Project.⁶² This project led to the current categorization of China's population in one majority group (i.e., the Han) and fifty-five ethnic minorities. In 1954, amidst the nation-wide ethnic reforms, geographically dispersed communities of Chinese-speaking Muslims were all classified as part of the Hui ethnic minority. Roughly in parallel to the Ethnic Classification Project, Chinese authorities also launched a nationwide collection of folk narratives,⁶³ with the envisioned goal of preserving endangered regional and ethnic traditions. The outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 led to the halt of these folk collection initiatives. However, folk collection projects were later revived in the immediate post-Mao years. Since Mao's death and the incrimination of the Gang of Four in 1976, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region took the lead in collecting and editing Hui folk narratives. These narratives have then been included in documents for internal circulation (内部), which served as preparatory materials for subsequent, publicly distributed volumes.

During this massive folklore collection projects, the narrative recounted in *The Origin of the Huihui* was recorded from the living voices of Hui elders. The earliest published version appears under the title "The Story of Wan Gars". Although many other narratives of Chinese Muslims' origin have also circulated in post-Mao China,⁶⁴ "The Story of Wan Gars" is the only one that has been reproduced in all the collectanea of Hui folk literature aimed at being representative of Hui folk literature on a national scale.⁶⁵ In "The Story of Wan Gars" as well as in *The Origin of the Huihui*, the emperor's dream in which he is about to be killed by a falling roof beam triggers the arrival of Muslims in China. However, other variants have been documented. Yang Jiguo informs of a variant, also recorded in Ningxia province, in which the threat to the emperor's life is a white tiger and a variant collected in Heilongjiang province in which the emperor is captured by a dragon.⁶⁶ None of these versions have been included in collectanea of Hui literature. The emergence of one among the many variants of the same narrative—in this case "The Story of Wan Gars"—is a highly selective process that has crystallized a particular variant of Chinese Muslims' mythical past into cultural memory. As Aleida Assmann has noted,

“[w]hatever has made it into the active cultural memory has passed rigorous processes of selection, which secure for certain artifacts a lasting place in the cultural working memory of a society. This process is called canonization”.⁶⁷

The canonization of the same master narrative under different titles and forms—*The Origin of the Huihui* and "The Story of Wan Gars"—might seem to lend support to the analytical category

⁶² For an in-depth study on the Ethnic Classification Project, see Thomas S. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

⁶³ Mark Bender, "Oral Narrative Studies in China", *Oral Tradition* 18, no. 2 (2003): 236.

⁶⁴ Folk narratives about the origin of the Hui are collected in Li Shujiang and Wang Zhengwei, *Huizu chuanguoshi shenhua gushi* (Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 2009). Additional narratives of origin attributed to the Hui are included in Yang, *Zhongguo Huizu wenxue tongshi*, especially 74-102.

⁶⁵ Regional folk collections of Hui literature are beyond the scope of this essay. For such publications see, for instance, Guizhou sheng minjian wenxue jicheng bangongshi zhubian, *Guizhou Yizu Huizu Baizu minjian gushi xuan* (Guiyang: Guizhou minzu chubanshe, 1993); Huang Jihong, *Xiji Huizu minjian gushi jing xuan* (Yinchuan Shi: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 2008); and Zhu Gang, *Qinghai Huizu minjian gushi* (Xining: Qinghai renmin chubanshe, 1985).

⁶⁶ Yang Jiguo, *Zhongguo Huizu wenxue tongshi*, 122.

⁶⁷ Aleida Assmann, "Canon and Archive", in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 100.

‘collective memory.’ After all, the myth is widespread across the Chinese Muslim community at least in post-Mao China. Nonetheless, I contend that the analytical category ‘collective memory’ has the drawback of eclipsing the agents that perpetuate the myth’s transmission. Whereas the canonization of this myth by the Han Kitab scholars aims at validating their own position within the state, in the post-Mao period the same myth is textualized in the context of folk collection projects directed by the state with the purpose of giving legitimacy to state-sanctioned ethnic categories. In more abstract terms, the impetus driving these canonizations is opposite. The canonization of *The Origin of the Huihui* originates from the needs of a literary enclave within a much larger state. Conversely, the canonization of “The Story of Wan Gars” stems from the need of the PRC to validate the state-implemented ethnic taxonomy. The top-down apparatus behind the canonization of “The Story of Wan Gars” lends support to my claim.

“The Story of Wan Gars” was collected and edited by He Jide (贺吉德), a cultural worker at Ningxia University.⁶⁸ Information about He is scanty; it is only known that he collected and edited two Hui folk literary texts⁶⁹ and that he was a member of the Hui Literary History Editorial Board (回族文學史編寫組).⁷⁰ The version of the myth collected by He was first published in May 1979 in *Selected Works of Chinese Hui Literature—Folk Stories to Be Selected* (中國回族文學作品選—民間故事待選作品), a document for internal publication edited by the Ethnic Folk Literature Research Office at the Department of Chinese Studies, Ningxia University (寧夏大學中文系民族民間文學研究室). This research office is a regional subdivision of the Beijing-based Institute of Ethnic Literature (IEL) Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) (中国社会科学院少数民族文学研究所).⁷¹ He Jide’s position attests to the top-down structure behind the textualization of folk narratives in post-Mao China.

Following the first publication, “The Story of Wan Gars” was republished in two other regional publications. In October of 1979, the story was included in *Series of Hui Literature* (回族文學叢刊),⁷² a periodical for internal circulation edited by the Ningxia University and created with the purpose of advancing the study of Hui literature in all its forms. Two years later, in 1981, the story appeared for the first time in a pamphlet for public circulation titled *Selected Works of Chinese Hui Literature—Folk Stories* (中國回族文學作品選—民間故事).⁷³ The purpose of these preliminary publications was the compilation of a volume collecting Hui folk narratives from all over China, an editorial project that materialized in 1985 in *Selected Folk Stories of the Hui Ethnic Group* (回族民間故事選).⁷⁴ The volume was part of the *China’s Ethnic Minority Folk Literature Series* (中國少數民族民間文學叢書), a multi-volume book series that aims at providing a representative selection of folk narratives for each of the fifty-five officially recognized ethnic groups in China.⁷⁵ The story’s publication trajectory—from regional publications for internal circulation to national level publications publically

⁶⁸ Ningxia daxue zhongwenxi minzu minjian wenxue yanjiushi, *Zhongguo Huizu wenxue zuopin xuan* (Yinchuan: n.p., 1979), 93-95.

⁶⁹ He Jide is listed as one of the cultural workers in a document about the year in which Hui folk literary texts were collected, see Li Shujiang, “Zhongguo Huizu minjian wenxue zuopin, ziliao nianbiao”, *Ningxia daxue xuebao*, no. 1 (1985): 72, 78.

⁷⁰ The “Hui Literary history Editorial Board” led to the publication of the first history of Hui literature, released in three distinct volumes since the late 1980s. For this trilogy, see Zhang Yingsheng and Ding Shengjun, *Huizu gudai wenxue shi* (Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 1988); Li Shujiang, *Huizu minjian wenxue shigang* (Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 1989); and Yang, *Dangdai Huizu wenxue shi* (Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 1994).

⁷¹ For a succinct overview of IEL and its history, see Guojia jigou bianzhi weiyuanhui bangongshi, *Zhongyang guojia jiguan suoshu shiye danwei daquan* (Beijing: Jingji kexue chubanshe, 1992), 1138.

⁷² *Huizu wenxue congkan bianji bu*, “Wan Gaisi de gushi”, *Huizu wenxue congkan*, no. 1 (1979): 32.

⁷³ *Zhongguo wenxue zuopin xuan xuanbian xiaozu*, *Zhongguo Huizu wenxue zuopin xuan* (Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 1981), 90-92.

⁷⁴ Li Shujiang and Wang Zhengwei, *Huizu minjian gushi xuan* (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1985).

⁷⁵ Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, “Bianji chuban shuoming”, in *Huizu minjian gushi xuan*, eds. Li Shujiang and Wang Zhengwei (Shanghai: Shanghai wenyi chubanshe, 1985), i.

available—highlights the role of the CCP in canonizing a particular myth of origin myth on the national scale.⁷⁶

Before examining how this particular origin myth circulates in post-Mao China, it is necessary to consider two pivotal agents involved in the canonization process, namely the editors of *Selected Hui Folk Stories*. This volume was edited by Li Shujiang (李樹江, 1946-2004) and Wang Zhengwei (王正偉, 1957-). Both Li and Wang were involved in the preparation of the 1979 document for internal circulation in which the myth was first published. Specifically, Li held a managerial role and presided over meetings that gathered party officials and experts to deliberate which narratives were representative of the Hui group and were politically correct.⁷⁷ For his part, Wang was one of the numerous cultural workers sent to collect folk narratives in rural areas.⁷⁸ Li and Wang's involvement in the Hui folk literature collection project stems from the project conducted by the Research Institute on Hui Literature at Ningxia University (寧夏大學回族文學研究所). During his career, Li Shujiang served as director of the Research Institute on Hui Literature at Ningxia University (寧夏大學回族文學研究所).⁷⁹ While the period in which he served in this capacity is unclear, it is unlikely that he occupied this high-profile position in 1979, as he had graduated from the department of Chinese language at Ningxia University in 1975.⁸⁰ Wang was instead a student at the same department in 1979 and graduated in 1982.⁸¹ Li and Wang's complementary career paths underscore the relationship between institutional power and textual canonization. In addition to Li's teaching occupation at Ningxia University—where he also taught Wang Zhengwei,⁸² he occupied numerous prominent position within the Ningxia cultural sphere, including that of director of Ningxia People's Press (寧夏人民出版社) and vice-party secretary of the Ningxia CASS (寧夏社會科學院黨組副書記). After graduation, Wang Zhengwei turned away from academia and embarked on a successful political career. He was first appointed to the position of Chairman of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (a position comparable to that of a U.S. governor) (2007-2013). Later, he became the Chairman of the State Ethnic Affairs Commission, a cabinet-level department under the State Council of the People (2013 to 2016). Occupying key positions within the Ningxia cultural and political spheres, Li and Wang have the institutional power to facilitate the canonization of a particular version of the Hui's origin myth.

Unlike pre-modern versions of *The Origin of The Huihui*, post-Mao publications of "The Story of Wan Gars" have been conducted under the aegis of state institutions. This poses the question of how to analyze these narratives in terms of memory construction. Pre-modern textualized versions of *The Origin of the Huihui* are the product of the Han Kitab community which had as a primary interest that of legitimating their position within imperial China. In all the post-Mao publications of "The Story of Wan Gars", however, the same narrative is repackaged under the rubric *Hui* folk literature. The transition to the Hui category is evident from two elements. First, all the publications including this myth—both those for internal circulation and those publicly available—include the term "Hui" in their title. Similarly, in a

⁷⁶ More recently the myth has been re-printed in Li Shujiang, *Huizu minjian gushi ji* (Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 1988), 577; Li Shujiang, *Renzu Adan* (Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 2000), 86-88; Li and Wang, *Huizu minjian chuanshuo gushi*, 40-41; and Li and Wang, *Huizu chuanshuo shenhua gushi*, 62-65.

⁷⁷ Hu Zhenhua, "Wei Huizu wenxue jiaoxue yanjiu gongzuo zuochu fengxian de Li Shujiang tongzhi", *Zhongguo Musilin*, no. 6 (2008): 40.

⁷⁸ Wang Zhengwei collected and edited one story included in *Selected Works of Chinese Hui Literature—Folk Stories to Be Selected*, see Ningxia daxue zhongwenxi minzu minjian wenxue yanjiushi, 19-24.

⁷⁹ This information is reported in the biographical paragraph about Li Shujiang, see Li and Wang, *Huizu minjian chuanshuo gushi*.

⁸⁰ Bai Gengsheng and Xiang Yunju, *Zhongguo minjian wenyijia da cidian* (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 2004), 318.

⁸¹ Dong Wenliang *Zhongguo minzu nianjian 2009* (Beijing: Zhongguo minzu nianjian shebian, 2009), 548.

⁸² Wang Zhengwei, "Qianyan", in *Huizu minjian chuanshuo gushi*, eds. Li Shujiang and Wang Zhengwei (Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 2009), i.

scholarly publication about Hui folk literature, Li Shujiang has analyzed the narrative of “The Story of Wan Gars” as “Hui folk literature”.⁸³ Second, in the appendix to the 1979 textualized version of the myth is an explanation (說明) of the significance of the story in the context of the national project of collecting folk literature: “This folk legend [民間傳說] circulates in the areas of Xi, Hai, and Gu in Ningxia province. The legend reflects the unity [民族團結] between the Hui and the Han; it is therefore valuable in our country’s study of Hui history”. In this particular instance, the myth is taken as proof of long-lasting inter-ethnic harmony between Han and Hui. The shift from a religion-based categorization (i.e. Chinese Muslim) to an ethnicity-based categorization (i.e., Hui) serves primarily the state’s agenda in constructing the Hui as a distinct Chinese ethnic minority group characterized by its own mythical past⁸⁴. The modern rationalization of this particular type of Chinese Muslims’ past advanced by state’s institutions constructs what I call an “official cultural memory”. The central defying characteristic of this official cultural memory lays not in the myth’s canonized, but rather in the way the myth is situated within a state-sponsored project. The book series in which “The Story of Wan Gars” is anthologized (i.e., *China’s Ethnic Minority Folk Literature Series*) provides narratives of origin for each of the fifty-five officially recognized ethnic minority groups in China. The constellation of origin narrative posits each ethnic group as distinct from the others, thus re-affirming the state-orthodoxy of China as a multi-ethnic country (多民族的國家).

Conclusion

Whereas this study has focused on narratives about Chinese-speaking Muslims, at times these same narratives are also co-opted by members of other Chinese and non-Chinese Muslim groups. For example, my encounters at the Sage’s Tomb has pointed to the practice of tomb visitation by members of other Islamic communities, both of Chinese and foreign citizenship. In other words, the narratives here analyzed have a resonance beyond the scope of Chinese-speaking Muslims. The fact that these narratives of origin are known by a wide array of groups might lead to interpret them as a disembodied “collective memory”. This interpretation, as already suggested, has been advanced in both the Chinese and the Western scholarship. Countering this interpretation, in this paper I have argued that the term collective memory, in its strong version, is not adequate in capturing how individuals, groups, and institutions create, modify, and appropriate origin narratives to advance, perhaps unwittingly, specific needs.

To illustrate my point, I have focused on the accounts in He Qiaoyuan’s *Book of Min, The Origin of the Huihui*, and “The Story of Wan Gars”. The obvious similarity between these narratives is that they all trace the beginning of Islamic civilization in China to legendary worthies dispatched by the Prophet. Despite this similarity, these narratives are mobilized at different sites of memory for a variety of reasons. The three main sections of this essay have proved this point. In fact, at historic Islamic tombs, the four legendary worthies mentioned in the *Book of Min* are evoked within a religious context during private tomb visitations and communal commemorative ceremonies. In *The Origin of the Huihui*, Han Kitab scholars strive to balance elements of the Islamic tradition with loyalty for the Chinese emperor, thus legitimating the presence of the Muslim community in China. “The Story of Wan Gars” has instead been collected, edited, and published under the aegis of the CCP within a national scale project of mapping the folk traditions of each Chinese ethnic minority group. At a more general level, this essay suggests that specific versions of group’s memory, rather than being

⁸³ Li, *Huizu minjian wenxue shigang*, 135-36.

⁸⁴ The CCP’s recognition of disparate communities of Chinese-speaking Muslims as Hui marks the transition from a loosely confession-based classification to an ethnic-based classification.

independent entities, are distributed in social group and that these groups rely on specific memory tools—in this case primarily tombs and textual narratives—to negotiate their presence in given contexts.

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