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The Prophet's Day in China: A Study of the Inculturation of Islam in China, Based on Fieldwork in Xi'an, Najiaying, and Hezhou

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Abstract: Islam is widely spread throughout every corner of China, with the Hui people, the largest Muslim ethnic group in China, numbering over 10 million people, serving as its main carrier. Their culture types and local features exhibit great diversity across different provinces. The ceremony of Prophet's Day or Mawlid al-Nabi in China, as one of the three fundamental festivals of the Hui people alongside Eid al-Fitur and Eid al-Qurban, appears to be more comprehensive, open, and localized. Drawing from fieldwork in three Hui communities—Xi'an in Shaanxi province, Najiaying in Yunnan province, and Hezhou in Gansu province—this paper approaches the topic from the perspective of inculturation and cultural innovation. It aims to describe the ritual processes observed in these three different Hui communities and discuss how the Hui people integrate Islam with traditional Chinese culture in their local contexts, with the intention of forming and preserving their own cultural characteristics.

Keywords: Mawlid al-Nabi; China; inculturation; cultural innovation; Islam



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1. Introduction

There are ten officially identified Muslim ethnic groups in China, with a combined population exceeding 23 million, among which the Hui people are the largest, with a population of 11.3779 million (2020 census). The Hui people are distributed throughout China and mainly speak Chinese, distinguishing them from other Muslims. The remarkable works of Dru C. Gladney have provided a detailed study of four different Hui communities, focusing on their ethnoreligious identity. He argues that a unified Hui identity does not actually exist, as the Hui people are a result of continuous “making” and “negotiating” (Gladney 1991, 1998). Gladney's work inspires the idea that Hui communities are highly localized in different contexts, meaning that their communities could be examined by choosing a unique festival for discussion. Traditionally, the Hui people observe three fundamental festivals: Eid al-Fitur, Eid al-Qurban, and Eid Mawlid al-Nabi. Somewhat unusually, according to common Muslim tradition, only the first two festivals are typically regarded as religious obligations. Mawlid al-Nabi, or the Prophet's Day, though celebrated in many Muslim societies, is not mandated by God or established by Sharia law as a religious obligation. Therefore, if a Muslim society chooses to celebrate the Prophet's birthday, they have the freedom to innovate rituals and ceremonies, resulting in diverse local practices all over the world. Thus, viewing the process of the indigenization of Islam within a local context offers a specific perspective. In China, this process is also a process of inculturation under different local contexts. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in three Muslim communities, this paper aims to describe their distinct practices of Mawlid al-Nabi and explore the different experiments and expressions manifested through their unique ceremonies and rituals.

1.1. An Overview of the Prophet's Day

Mawlid al-Nabi is a celebration of the birthday of the Prophet Mohammad (Parvez 2014). According to Muslim records, the Prophet was born on April 21st, 570 AD. It is said that both the day of his birth and death fall on the 12th of the month of Rabi' al-Awwal in the Islamic calendar. According to the Sufi doctrine of Ibn Arabi, Muhammad—peace be upon him—is the last messenger of God, the seal of the succession of prophets, and the Perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), representing the archetype of humanity and the cosmos. Although the celebration of the Prophet's Day is not a religious obligation, the Quran does emphasize the importance of honoring and respecting the Prophet:

Lo! Allah and His angels shower blessings on the Prophet. O ye who believe! Ask blessings on him and salute him with a worthy salutation. (33:56)

That you [people] may believe in Allah and His Messenger and honor him and respect the Prophet and exalt Allah morning and afternoon. (48:9)

And indeed, you [Muhammad] are of a great moral character. (68:4)

Today, all over the world, the celebration of the Prophet's Day can be either official or unofficial, with rituals being either public or private. Typically, most Sunni Muslim communities observe it on the 12th of the third month of the Islamic Calendar, while Shiites opt for the 17th of the same month for their celebrations. Others argue that there is no need to designate a specific date as the Prophet should be remembered in every moment.

According to academic resources, the development of Mawlid al-Nabi can be divided into four stages.

The first stage is the emergence of the Mawlid from the 7th to the 12th century. Most historical sources indicate that the earliest official celebration originated from the Isma'il Fatimid Caliphate (909–1171 AD) in Egypt. According to Marion H. Katz, "The origins of the mawlid can be traced, not to the single innovative act of some identifiable authority, but to the slow coalescence of a constellation of devotional narratives and practices that eventually converged to form a single, highly flexible, and attractive form of ritual action" (Katz 2007, p. 208). Later in the 12th century, the first Sunni public Mawlid celebration took place under the rule of Nur al-Din in Syria (Schussman 1998).

In the second stage, spanning from the 13th to the 16th century, the Mawlid was established as a popular custom within Muslim society. As noted by Nico Kaptein, "the place where Muhammad was born is open every Monday until a specific day later" (Kaptein 1992). According to Andrea L. Stanton, there is evidence of "an early history of individual pious visits to Muhammad's birth house on his birthday, as a kind of informal pilgrimage to his mawlid" (Stanton 2015, p. 197), possibly predating the emergence of a more formalized ceremony. From then on, the Mawlid as a popular custom began to spread throughout the Muslim world, with the location of the ceremony gradually shifting from his birthplace and tomb to mosques. M. H. Katz indicates the practice of the Domestic Mawlid in Damascus during the 15th to 16th centuries, as well as the celebration of the Mawlid by women (Katz 2018, pp. 167–80).

In the third stage, after the 17th century, disputes over the religious legitimacy of the Mawlid arose. With the rise and development of Wahhabis in the 17th century and Salafis in the mid-19th century, the Mawlid came under severe criticism. Some political powers or Ulama argued that the Mawlid was a bad innovation rather than a laudable one. However, this has not diminished the love and celebration of the Prophet's Day by Muslims all over the world up to the present day.

The fourth stage is the Mawlid in the modern era of the nation-state, which emerged after the 20th century. On the one hand, it is discussed more in academic circles; on the other hand, it is practiced with more meanings and symbols than ever, including the multi-level expression of nation, ethnicity, gender, and class. Many scholars have written about the distinctive local characteristics and diverse representations of the Mawlid among different Muslim communities over time and space. Thomas Pierret wrote about the Mawlid of Damascus based on his fieldwork (Pierret 2012). Philippe Bourmaud studied the reli-

gious and political character of the Palestinian Mawlid today (Bourmaud 2009). Based on a survey of the Sei Saria community in Indonesia, M. Jupriani and E. Agusti concluded that the holding process of Mawlid implies the inheritance of education and values by the younger generation (Jupriani and Efi 2020). Z. Fareen Parvez argued that, in India, the Mawlid as a public performance is a (re)invented tradition that is part of the struggle for material, political, and symbolic goods of the nation-state (Parvez 2014). Andrea L. Stanton also pointed out that the Mawlid is more likely to become a source of national identity and cohesion in the Middle East but will continue to heighten differences between Wahhabi and non-Wahhabi communities and their interpretations of Islam (Stanton 2015, p. 205). It is enlightening that scholars have found that the Mawlid al-Nabi has a very important role in national construction and identity, far beyond its original religious symbolism.

1.2. *Mawlid al-Nabi as the Third Festival of the Hui People of China*

The origin of the Hui people can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty (7–10th century), formed by the descendants of merchants, officials, sergeants, and craftsmen from Central Asia and the Middle East. After hundreds of years of living in China and marrying native Chinese people, they finally formed a new ethnic group of China and gained the name “*Huihui*” (回回). As Chinese-speaking Muslims, the Hui people are distinct from the other nine officially identified Muslim ethnic groups in China. They are closely integrated with Chinese society and culture. In this paper, we will only focus on a specific aspect of the Hui people, that is, their localized festival rituals of the Mawlid. According to Gui Rong and her colleagues, the festivals of the Hui people have developed an identity deeply linked to Chinese culture by successfully reconciling the relationship between traditional Chinese culture and Islamic culture (Rong et al. 2016, p. 17).

Now we return to the question we proposed at the beginning of this paper: why is the Mawlid al-Nabi seen as one of the three fundamental festivals of the Hui people? The answer lies in the dual origin of Hui culture, which combines Islamic and Chinese resources.

Today, in China, the “Confluence of Islam and Confucianism” has become a hot topic. Only recently have scholars begun to recognize that, according to Hui classics, the Islamic learning of China is formed of three parts: the sharia and *fiqh* (jurisprudence, 礼学) of the Hanafi School, *kalām* (theology, 理学) of the Maturidi School, and *tasawwuf* (Sufism, 道学) of the Ibn Arabi School. The most famous Hui classic scholar, Liu Zhi (17–18th century), wrote three masterpieces of Han Kitab¹ corresponding to the following three parts: *Tianfang dianli* (*Rules and Proprieties of Islam*), *Tianfang xingli* (*Nature and Principles in Islam*), and *Tianfang zhisheng shilu* (*The True Record of the Utmost Prophet of Islam*). As Liu Zhi explained in the introduction, “the three books together form a unity” (Murata et al. 2009, p. 8).² The books of Han Kitab serves as the classics of Chinese Islam, which are written in Chinese but also shows a deep blending and permeation of Islam and Confucianism.

The Han Kitab has established its philosophical framework by incorporating elements borrowed from the School of Ibn Arabi. In the Sufi doctrine of Ibn Arabi, the nature of the Prophet can be seen as Logos (the Words of God), which is the seed of the cosmos and the guide of spiritual retreat. Though it is only a branch of Islamic philosophy, this doctrine of the School of Ibn Arabi formed the core of Chinese Islamic classics of the 17–18th century. Therefore, by praising the Prophet and imitating his life and spiritual retreat, Sufis believe that they may obtain Divine Grace and compassion and gradually approach the status of the Perfect Man. God is the First (*awwal*); He is the Last (*ākhir*). Whenever a Muslim returns to Allah, the Prophet serves as the model to follow. In this sense, Chinese-speaking Muslims willingly refer to themselves as “Hui-hui”, signifying the philosophy of “returning to the True One”. Wang Daiyu, a Hui classic scholar, wrote in the 17th century that “Hui-hui is the mirror of the True One, the result of the universe. Hui means return. Returning from this world to the True One, like mirror turns lights” (Wang 1999). Thus, the memorial of the Prophet holds philosophical significance among Chinese Muslims, serving as a symbolic drama through which they express their specific understanding of the Prophet.

The number three holds significant meaning in both Islamic and Chinese cosmology. In human knowledge, Allah is understood to have three dimensions: the Divine Essence (*al-dhāt*), the Divine Attributes (*sifāt*), and the Divine Act (*ʿamal*). The cosmos is the manifestation of the Divine Attributes and unfolds in an ever-lasting event of the Divine Act. As a fundamental philosophical text of ancient China, the Tao Te Ching (道德经) states: “Out of Tao, One is born; Out of One, Two; Out of Two, Three; Out of Three, the created universe”. In Confucian sociology, there are Three Cardinal Guides (三纲): father guides son, ruler guides subject, and husband guides wife. A trinity complex can be easily found among Chinese arts and literature everywhere. For example, a traditional painting with pine tree, bamboo, and plum blossom would typically be titled “three companions of winter” (岁寒三友), symbolizing the ideal Confucian personality type. So, it is no surprise that the Hui people would choose to establish their own three fundamental festivals, juxtaposing the Mawlid with Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Qurban.

In China, the study of the Mawlid is not quite sufficient either in extent or depth. Existing research includes studies focused on different Muslim communities, including Weishan county in Yunnan province (Rong 2012; Zhu and Gui 2013), Niujie Mosque in Beijing (Zhang 2013), and Linxia City in Gansu province (H. Ma 2013). It must be mentioned that the Islamic Association of China managed a three-month location shooting starting on 22 November 2015, which documented ceremonies held at 13 mosques all over China (Ma and Min 2016). In addition to these records and descriptions of the Mawlid in China, Mr. Cong, an Ulama of Chinese Muslims, argued that there are three reasons why Chinese Muslims would like to celebrate the Mawlid and provided affirmation from Sharia law (Cong 2016). However, a comparative and comprehensive study of the Mawlid in China is still absent.

1.3. Methodology and Fieldwork

In summary, most researchers mention that the original intention of the Prophet’s Day is to make an internal connection between the ceremony and the hope of individual redemption by commemorating the Prophet’s words, deeds, moral character, and life. This commemoration fosters unity within Muslim society and strengthens the faith of Muslims. However, on a practical level, components of the ceremony often extend far beyond this original intention; various aspects such as politics, gender, historical narrative, and secular amusement may be observed. Mawlid al-Nabi may serve as a tool to achieve different purposes for certain subjects, thus shaping the cultural identity and boundaries of different identities. The ceremony of the Prophet’s Day among the Hui people in different places of China is an excellent window to show the process of inculturation and cultural innovation.

Inculturation is an important concept in the study of the localization of foreign religions. In the *English Chinese Dictionary of Social Sciences*, inculturation is literally translated as “cultural adaptation to local conditions” (Hu 2011, p. 827). Some Chinese researchers also use this concept in the title of their papers, especially in Christian studies. The main academic background of this concept is theology, which emphasizes missionary adaptation; that is, Christianity adapts to the missionary process of a non-Christian culture, and the church becomes a part of the local society. Although most researchers think that this is a unidirectional process, the concept expresses the dynamic relationship between the church and various cultures. The term entered the “official Catholic Church language in Pope John Paul II’s address to the Pontifical Biblical Commission in 1979 and has been used regularly as a theological term in church documents ever since” (Healey and Sybertz 1996, p. 6). According to Crollius, Christianity can be seen in this process as “the contraction of the expression ‘insertion in a culture’” (Crollius 1978). Some scholars have pointed out that “it is a process or attempt to find or root Christianity in different cultures of the world. It is also a process whereby cultural values can be transformed through their exposure to the Christian message and the insertion of Christianity into indigenous cultures” (Nche et al. 2016).

In an anthropological context, a similar concept to “acculturation” can be found. In cultural anthropology, acculturation is classically defined as “comprehending those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original cultural patterns of either or both groups” (Redfield et al. 1936). According to Vivencio Ballano, inculturation is not an anthropological concept (Ballano 2020). However, the more interactive view of anthropology on cultural change can be adopted to reinterpret the concept of inculturation as “a process of intentionally adopting an entirely new cultural element from another culture or adapting what is already in a culture to reflect a better version of it that exists in another culture” (Akah et al. 2020). So, the inculturation of a religion can be regarded as a more comprehensive process of culture-absorbing, which forms cross-cultural communication and interaction. In summary, inculturation expresses the dynamic relationship between religions and cultures, emphasizing the process of the localization of a foreign religion, through which it finally takes root in a local culture without destroying its integrity and independence. To achieve this goal, cultural innovation will be needed in the process of cultural contact and change.

As a foreign religion within the multicultural backdrop of China, how Islam and Chinese culture engage and interact through cultural vehicles like the Hui people poses a significant question: how has Islam integrated into Chinese society to become an important part of it? In this case, inculturation emphasizes cultural integration, mutual achievement, and enrichment between different groups and cultures in a moderate way. It is not a sad story about conflict, assimilation, and survival. In this study, we summarize three different cases of inculturation and cultural innovation based on fieldwork conducted in different regions of China. Shang Ping completed the fieldwork in Xi’an, the capital city of Shaanxi province, which is possibly home to the oldest Hui Muslim community in China. Zhou Chuanbin and Shang Ping completed the fieldwork in Najiaying, a famous Hui Muslim town in Tonghai county, Yuxi city, Yunnan province. Ma Wenkui and Shang Ping completed the fieldwork in Hezhou city, Gansu province, often referred to as the “little Mecca” of China.

2. Xi’an: Mawlid al-Nabi as Cultural Resistance Strategy

Xi’an (西安), also known as Chang’a (长安), the capital city of Shaanxi province, is located in the middle of the Wei River (渭河) basin, which was one of the richest agricultural areas in ancient China. Xi’an, the eastern starting point of the Silk Road, has served as the capital for thirteen successive Chinese dynasties, being home to many different ethnic groups, cultures, and religions. According to the *Seventh National Census* of 2021, Xi’an’s ethnic minority population is 132,151, accounting for 1.02% of the total population of the city; the Hui population is 77,851, accounting for 58.91% of all ethnic minorities (Xi’an People’s Government 2023).

2.1. Origin and History of the Hui People in Xi’an

As far as the history of Hui people in Xi’an is concerned, it can be divided into three periods.

The first period, spanning from the 7th century to the early Ming dynasty of the 16th century, marks the introduction of Islam into China and the emergence and development of the ethnic Hui community. In 651 AD, during the reign of Emperor Gaozong (ruled from 628 to 683 AD) of the Tang dynasty, the third Khalifah after the Prophet, named Uthman (who ruled from 644 to 656 AD), sent his diplomatic envoy to China. Chinese historians have identified this year as the beginning of Islam in China. From then on, Muslims began to settle in China and gradually indigenized as a new ethnic group: the Hui people. Li Jianbiao argues that there were three main origins of the Hui people of Xi’an: (1) Muslim merchants came to China from Arabia, Persia, and Central Asia. (2) Immigrants who arrived due to war, including a Muslim army (belonging to the Abbasid dynasty), invited by the Tang dynasty (as a small part of a multinational force) to suppress the An-Shi Rebellion

(755–763 AD); Muslim soldiers of the Mongolia Tammaci army (which was a pioneer corps consist of different ethnics) during the Yuan Dynasty (13th century); along with craftsmen, missionaries, and refugees. (3) Descendants of mixed marriages between Muslims and Chinese emerged due to the regulations of the Ming dynasty (late 14th century), which banned endogamy among the Muslim community. The Hui people identify themselves as being the result of interracial marriages, having, for instance, a Muslim father and a Chinese mother (J. Li 2000).

The second period spans from the middle Ming Dynasty (16th century) to 1862 AD of the late Qing dynasty. Chinese Islamic classic tradition originated from mosque education initiated by Sheikh Hu Dengzhou (胡登洲太师) of Shaanxi, and Xi'an became one of the centers of this academic tradition. Until the mid-19th century, the Hui people of Xi'an were well integrated into the local Chinese society. We quote from Yu Pengchou of the 19th century, who wrote that the Hui people of Xi'an during his time may have had "thousands of families which occupied half of the city. Their mosques and minars stand high into the sky, which are imposing magnificence. About one third of them are rich men. They live and work in peace and have their own customs" (Bai 1953, p. 219). According to Zhou Weizhou, "Hui people living in cities and towns are mostly engaged in commerce, mainly in food processing and small traders, some also engaged in long-distance trafficking or slaughtering of cattle and sheep" (Zhou 1997, p. 281).

The third period begins after the year 1862. This year indicates the "dark time" of the Hui people of Xi'an because the Hui rebellion began in the first year of Emperor Tongzhi (1862 AD). The war lasted for seven years and cast a long-lasting shadow between Chinese and Muslims, a legacy that persists today. At the end of the war, "the ruling class of Qing dynasty expelled or massacred all the Hui people in Shaanxi except those in Xi'an" (C. Ma 2003, p. 1). The Hui population of Shaanxi dropped sharply: only 30,000 to 40,000 people survived (Lu 2003). As the only surviving Muslim community, the Hui people of Xi'an were sentenced to remain within the city walls for eighteen years. One hundred years later, people (both Chinese and Muslim) still remember this miserable event and quarrel over it. For the Hui people of Xi'an, this event represents their most significant historical memory, emphasizing the need to initiate a new kind of life strategy for their survival.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the country defined itself as "a unified multi-ethnic state" in its new constitution. The Hui people have been identified as one of the 56 official ethnic groups in China. The miserable page in history has been flipped over. Today, the local Hui community in Xi'an is situated in the northwest central part of the old city, at the west side of the Bell Tower (the center point of the old city), which usually referred to as "Hui-Fang" (回坊, Hui Quarter). The Hui Quarter retains the old charm of ancient Chinese cities, thus making it a tourist attraction in Xi'an, especially famous for its local foods and snacks.

The Chinese term "*Fang*" (坊), meaning "Quarter", which originated from the term "*Fan-Fang*" (蕃坊), or "Foreign Quarter", in cities in the Tang dynasty, is not only a geographical settlement but also a grassroots cultural system of the Hui community. For the convenience of religious ritual and everyday life, the Hui people often live in proximity to a mosque, thus forming their community called a "*Fang*" in Chinese and "*Jamaat*" in Arabic. This kind of *Jamaat* system (Si-Fang Zhidu, 寺坊制度) is the basic social unit of the Hui people. Some scholars have explained that the *Jamaat* system consists of four parts and constitutes a stable three-dimensional structure: "The geographical-residential structure formed by the religious-cultural boundary provides the foundation for building this three-dimensional structure, supplemented by the lineage-marital structure of endogamy within Muslims, the economic-occupational structure mainly occupying small businesses to a certain extent homogeneity career or industry, and the religious-educational structure of mosque education aiming at inheriting Islamic faith, which constitute a trinity three-dimensional traditional social structure of Hui society" (Zhou and Ma 2004). This can also be applied to the Hui community in Xi'an.

There are 27 mosques in the urban area of Xi'an, 12 of which are located in the Hui Quarter, belonging to three different religious sects: Qadim (格底木, the Old Sect, 6 mosques), Ikhwan³ (伊赫瓦尼, the New Sect, 4 mosques), and Salafiyah⁴ (赛莱菲耶, the New-new Sect, 2 mosques). The old sect represents the traditional localized type of Chinese Islam, while the two new sects emerged in the 20th century due to the influence of modernity and religious movements in the Middle East. Today, the old sect is still the mainstream tradition among Xi'an's Hui community, which we will primarily focus on.

2.2. The Process of the Ritual

According to Feng Fukuan, due to the different interpretations of the religious dogma, only the Qadim (Old Sect) mosques in Shaanxi celebrate the Mawlid al-Nabi: "In the mosque, the Akhond⁵ would tell the life story of the Prophet Muhammad and hold a communal meal" (Feng 1997, p. 18). The basic procedures of the Mawlid al-Nabi in Xi'an include the preparation before the festival, local ritual of the Mawlid al-Nabi, and the communal meal. Banners, posters, colorful flags, and so on are hung during the day. Apart from the basic procedures, other activities may also be arranged according to specific mosques themselves. For example, in 2018, a marriage-seeking advertisement was displayed in the corridor at the entrance of one mosque, which attracted the attention of many young people who came to look at it. Additionally, in this mosque, a special fan-party for a Hui writer and his readers was arranged after the ritual of the Mawlid al-Nabi.

2.2.1. Who Can Attend the Ceremony?

Unlike Eid al-Fitur and Eid al-Qurban, rituals for which only male Muslims can attend, during the Mawlid al-Nabi in Xi'an, females, people of all ages, and even non-Muslim tourists can enter the mosque to participate. After the ritual, tables are set in the courtyards of mosques for a collective banquet. Traditionally, one table provides food for eight to ten persons, with male and female guests seated at separate tables; however, today, in some of the mosques, it is accepted for men and women to eat at the same table. From participant observation, we can see that an inclusive, temporary, and open social network is established during the ceremony, serving as a platform for showcasing and exchanging between different cultures and groups, such as Muslim Hui and non-Muslim Chinese.

2.2.2. Preparations

The ceremony of Mawlid al-Nabi in Xi'an has a fixed time: around the Spring Festival, the most important traditional Chinese festival. We will discuss this special time selection custom later. Preparation begins at the end of the 12th month of the Chinese lunar calendar each year, generally organized and arranged by the Mosque Management Committee of each mosque. The preparation includes tasks such as choosing a specific day, sending invitations, hanging banners and flags, preparing food, and looking for volunteers for rear services.

When the date of the ceremony is confirmed, a mosque will advertise it through various means. For example, the traditional method of invitation involves posting a notice on the wall (Figure 1), and invitation letters are sent to special guests such as Akhonds, managers of other mosques, government officials, managers of specific associations, Muslim elites, etc. Nowadays, the Internet, including platforms such as WeChat, may also be used to spread information.

According to our fieldwork, the cost of hosting the ceremony at a mosque in Xi'an is approximately CNY 30,000 to 60,000. This amount is spent on food and religious donations (called Niyyah) to the Akhonds invited to perform the ritual. The funds primarily come from voluntary donations (also called Niyyah) from Muslims. The names of donors and the amount they donate are usually posted on the wall. If some donators cannot afford their pledges, the mosque managers (usually rich men) will often offer to pay the outstanding amount. Surplus money is saved for the next year.



Figure 1. A Hui person looks at invitations for the Mawlid al-Nabi sent by other mosques in front of the bulletin board of Xi'an Old Mosque (西安古寺) (photo taken by Shang Ping, 2018).

2.2.3. The Ritual

According to the fieldwork in Xi'an, the ritual of the Mawlid al-Nabi includes eight routines or procedures. The core components of the ritual are chanting poems praising the Prophet (*Zansheng*, 赞圣), reciting the Quran, supplication (*Du'a'*), and lectures (*al-Wa'z*). Among these, the chanting of praising poems is a dramatically indigenized artistic form, which we will focus on hereinafter. The day before the ceremony, after Salat al-'Asr (Hui people usually call this *Deegar* in Persian) in the afternoon, the first chanting of praising poems begins in the prayer hall of a mosque. The formal ceremony is typically celebrated the next morning between 8:30 and 10:00 a.m.

(1) Welcome Chanting from the Chanting Team

Most of the mosques in Hui Quarter have their own chanting team (*Zanshen-tuan*, 赞圣团) consisting of trained Muslim males who chant poems praising the Prophet in a local melody. In the morning, as the guests enter the mosque, the chanting team begins their chanting led by a lead singer.

(2) Reciting the Quran

The old sect (*Qadim*) has their own routine of reciting the Quran as a "collective reciting", differing from the new sects, which prefer to have only "one person reciting and others listening". The Hui people traditionally use the Chinese word "*Kai-jing*" (open the Kitab) to refer to the recitation of the Quran in any specific ritual. However, the most solemn and grand type of recitation, called "*Yuan-jing*" or "*Wan-jing*" (complete the Kitab, literally means to recite the complete Quran), can only be seen in important ceremonies such as the Prophet's Day. As in Xi'an, a mosque that holds such a ceremony will invite many Akhonds from other mosques to engage in this kind of "complete reciting". To fit this kind of "collective and complete reciting", traditionally, the Quran is bound in thirty volumes. During the ritual, every Akhond picks one of the thirty volumes; after the most senior Akhond recites the opening chapter (*al-Fatiha*), everyone begins to recite their volume; when everyone has finished their reciting, the leading Akhond finally recites *al-Fatiha* again and the first five verses of *Al-Baqara* (the second chapter of the Quran). When this "complete reciting" is over, the rear service team of the ceremony puts prepared money (called *Niyyah*) in a paper parcel on each table before every Akhond.

(3) Opening Speech

The opening speech, called "*Biao-hua*" (expressing words) in local dialect, is given by an important man such as the director of the Mosque Management Committee or the Akhond in charge of the mosque. Beginning with a Bismillah, the speech usually covers

welcoming and thanks as well as the origin and components of the ceremony, the story of the Prophet Muhammad, and the announcement of who the keynote speaker is.

(4) Supplication (*Du'a'*)

Following the opening speech, supplication to Allah and recitation of al-Fatiha take place. Usually, two Akhonds from guest mosques are invited to lead the supplication, and all the participants raise and fold their hands to pray to Allah. Then, another two Akhonds are invited to recite al-Fatiha.

(5) The Second Chanting and the Appetizer

Since the ceremony is always held in winter, a special appetizer called "*You-fan*" (literally "oil meal", a kind of congee made of meat and rice) is served at this stage to help resist the cold. During the wait for this congee, the chanting team provides a second rendition of the praising poems (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Scene of the Mawlid al-Nabi at Xi'an Grand Mosque (photo taken by Shang Ping, 2018).

(6) The Keynote Speech

In China, al-Wa'z (瓦尔兹) refers to a sermon in Chinese while al-Khutbah means a sermon in Arabic. In every such ceremony in Xi'an, an honorable keynote speaker is selected to give his al-Wa'z for approximately half an hour to interpret and propagandize the Islamic dogma based on the deeds and stories of the Prophet. This keynote speech is the climactic part of the ceremony.

(7) Traditional Collective Banquet

A traditional Muslim banquet in Xi'an is called "*Ba-da-wan*" (Eight Bowls, 八大碗) which usually serves eight dishes, accordingly. The typical dishes include cabbage with meatballs (白菜肉丸子), meat stew with yam (山药炖肉), crispy meat (小酥肉), yellow braised chicken (黄焖鸡), yellow braised fish (黄焖鱼), braised entrails (烩杂肝), eight-treasure sweet rice (八宝甜饭), thick hawthorn soup (山楂羹), and thick spinach and almond soup (菠菜杏仁羹).

(8) Farewell Chanting

Generally, sweet rice or sweet soup is used as the farewell dish. With the end of the collective banquet, the chanting team gives their third chanting, signaling the successful conclusion of the ceremony of the Mawlid al-Nabi.

2.3. The Strategy of Date Selection

One unique feature of the Mawlid al-Nabi in the Hui Quarter of Xi'an is the date selection strategy, which serves as a notable expression of cultural innovation and cultural

resistance in the process of inculturation of Islam in China. As mentioned previously, the birthday of the Prophet is traditionally celebrated on the 12th of the month Rabi’al-Awwal. Why then does the Hui community in Xi’an intentionally choose to ignore this date?

The Hui people of Xi’an opt to celebrate the Prophet’s Day according to the Chinese lunar calendar, with the date being flexible within a month-long period around the Spring Festival. A similar arrangement is adopted in the case of Muslims in Najiaying, Yunnan province (theoretically, they may celebrate the Prophet’s Day at any time of the year). We know that the Spring Festival is the most important traditional ceremony in China, which symbolizes the beginning of new year and spring, and relates to many folk customs covering the agricultural cycle, the notion of family and kinship, and philosophy and folk religion. A local Hui scholar, Mr. Ma, outlines the following: “According to the old Huis of Xi’an, it is because that the first month of Chinese lunar calendar is the leisure time among the agricultural cycle, people have free time”, and “it is the Chinese new year in this month, which is bustling and lively for the Chinese, otherwise Hui people do not want too cold and cheerless, [so they choose to celebrate at this time] to balance the influence of the Chinese new year” (J. Ma 2008, p. 233). Therefore, every year around the Spring Festival, the Hui community of Xi’an chooses to celebrate the Mawlid al-Nabi. Generally, mosques will each choose a different date throughout this period, thus forming a successive time schedule (Table 1). So, the Prophet’s Day is not one single day but can, in fact, be any day during this period. The exact origins of this custom are unknown, but it has proven to be an efficient and effective cultural strategy that has helped the small Muslim population in Xi’an survive until today.

Table 1. Schedule of the Mawlid al-Nabi of Xi’an Old Sect Mosques in 2018.

Date	Place
5 February 2018, Monday The 20th Day of the 12th Lunar Month	Yuanjia Village Mosque 袁家村清真寺
11 February 2018, Sunday The 26th Day of the 12th Lunar Month	YanLiang Mosque 阎良清真寺
15 February 2018, Thursday The 30th Day of the 12th Lunar Month Chinese New Year’s Eve	Beiguangji Street Mosque 北广济街清真寺
16 February 2018, Friday The 1st Day of the 1st Lunar Month Chinese New Year	Nancheng Mosque 南城清真寺
17 February 2018, Saturday The 2nd Day of the 1st Lunar Month	Old Sajinqiao Mosque 洒金桥清真古寺
18 February 2018, Sunday The 3rd Day of the 1st Lunar Month	Huajue Lane Mosque (The Grand Mosque) 西安化觉巷清真大寺
19 February 2018, Monday The 4th Day of the 1st Lunar Month	Xiaopiyuan Mosque 小皮院清真寺
20 February 2018, Tuesday The 5th Day of the 1st Lunar Month	Xiangmiyuan Lushan Mosque 香米园旅陕清真寺
21 February 2018, Wednesday The 6th Day of the 1st Lunar Month	Xiaoxuexi Line Mosque 小学习巷清真中寺
25 February 2018, Sunday The 10th Day of the 1st Lunar Month	Lintong Mosque 临潼清真寺
3 March 2018, Saturday The 16th Day of the 1st Lunar Month	Hansenzhai Mosque 韩森寨清真寺
11 March 2018, Sunday The 24th Day of the 1st Lunar Month	New Beiguan Mosque 北关清真新寺

Resource: fieldwork, 2018.

The date selection activity of the Hui people is a form of cultural resistance. Edward Said's research on imperialism and postcolonialism provide inspiration, particularly his proposal that "cultural dependence and resistance coexist" (Said 1994, p. 220). Cultural resistance does not need to be conflicting at any time; it also can behave as a dynamic relationship of sharing, symbiosis, and interdependence between different cultures. In this view, cultural resistance also maintains cultural diversity. In the case of Xi'an, the date selection of the Mawlid al-Nabi neither follows the Islamic tradition nor abides by the Chinese tradition; it is a cultural innovation instigated by the local Muslim community in the process of cultural change of Islam in China. Therefore, the Hui people or Chinese Muslims have constructed their own ethnic identity that is distinct from both (foreign) Arabs and (non-Muslim) Chinese. Replacing the bitter struggle of warfare with the strategy of cultural resistance "means that resistance is no longer a radical artillery shell, but a gentle cultural rewriting" (Wu 2008, p. 233). Otherwise, this kind of cultural resistance serves as a means of inculturation for the local Hui people to actively adjust their cultural patterns and adapt to the dominant culture. It may be argued that the strategy of cultural resistance is not only a process of cultural adaptation but also a result of it.

The cultural strategy of the Prophet's Day in Xi'an is also a reconstruction of historical memory. Although the tragic past has become history and memory, the Hui people of the Hui Quarter are rewriting "the historization of contemporary memory in their own way" (Gillette 2008). According to Maurice Halbwachs, collective memory is a process in which "the present reconstructs the past" (Halbwachs 1992, p. 119). The ritual in Hui Muslim festivals carries a direct memory of history, which, in the Hui Quarter of Xi'an, is the painful memory of rebellion. This is the impetus and stress for them to, on the one hand, maintain their ethnic identity and, on the other hand, interact with other groups. When Paul Connerton discussed "what was remembered exactly in the memorial ceremony", he suggested that it is useful "to understand the past as a collective autobiography with some obvious cognitive factors" (Connerton 1989, p. 70). So, the ceremony of the Mawlid al-Nabi in the Hui Quarter serves as a connection between the past and the future. The ceremony itself is the center of deconstruction and reconstruction of time in the present space. Therefore, the ceremony itself, historical events, and collective memory will all evolve into a part of the festival custom of the local Hui people.

2.4. Praising the Prophet in the Melody of Shaanxi Opera

The other unique feature, or cultural strategy, of the Mawlid al-Nabi in the Hui Quarter of Xi'an is the way in which they chant poems praising the Prophet, that is to say, the chanting team and their local melody.

The chanting team (*Zan-sheng-tuan*, 赞圣团, which literally means Prophet-praising team) is composed of local Hui people of the Hui Quarter. Not every mosque has their own chanting team. If they do not have one, they may invite chanting teams from other mosques. Among all the chanting teams, the most famous one is that from the Grand Mosque (Hua-jue Lane Mosque). It is said that, around the year 1998, local Muslims who were learning in their spare time among mosques founded these chanting teams voluntarily. At first, they came to learn Arabic letters and Quranic verses, mainly aged men, and it was difficult for them to remember the verses in Arabic. The teacher then changed their class schedule to Quran recitation on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday and chanting praising poems on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday. These part-time students formed the first chanting team of the Grand Mosque under the supervision of the Akhonds. Then, another chanting team was founded in Bei-guang-ji-jie Mosque (北广济街清真寺). Thus, a kind of new custom came into being, where the local Hui families would invite the chanting team to provide chanting during wedding and funeral ceremonies.

The chanting team of Xi'an uses a series of poems from the local oral tradition, including poems from different sources in Arabic or Persian (undoubtedly, many have a Sufi background).⁶ Though these poems have foreign origins, the melody and rhythm do have a local derivation. In a long-term process of inculturation of Islam in China, the melody

and rhythm of reciting the Quran and chanting praising poems performed by the Hui people in different parts of China is blended with traditional Chinese dramas and folk songs and, thus, resulted in different local styles and regional characteristics. Recently, Guangtian Ha published his masterpiece of a unique religious soundscape of the Jahriyya Sufis in China. He situates the Jahriyya in a global multilingual network of Sufis and shows how their characteristic soundscapes result from transcultural interactions among Middle Eastern, Central Asian, and Chinese Muslim communities (Ha 2022). As for in the case of Xi'an, the melody and rhythm of the reciting and chanting is somewhat similar to that of Shaanxi Opera (Qin-qiang, 秦腔), which is very popular in northwest China. Thus, we can explain why the new custom of the chanting team can be accepted by the local Hui community. For a Muslim community that speaks a local Shaanxi dialect, it is difficult for them to learn the Tajwid recitation of the Quran in standard Arabic, but it is more familiar and appreciating to learn the poem chanting in a localized style.

In short, festivals are external expressions of an ethnic group rooted in their daily life, belief, emotion, history, and identity. The functions of the Mawlid al-Nabi in Xi'an are not limited to the ceremonies of the specific days. It expresses and contains how the Hui people interact with, adapt to, and innovate the mainstream culture, and shows how individuals and communities store and inherit their collective memories. The Mawlid al-Nabi in Xi'an also has a narrative function, involved in the strategy of inculturation, as well as an implicit expression of discourse. The Mawlid al-Nabi in Xi'an contains both Islamic culture and Chinese traditional culture, which are interdependent in a whole system. On the one hand, it is a strategy of localization through inculturation and innovation, including the indigenization of the cultural representations of the Mawlid al-Nabi, like the date selection, the components of the ceremony, chanting tone, etc. On the other hand, it is the strategy of cultural resistance that creates differences, maintains subjectivity, and inherits memory and identity.

3. Najiaying: Mawlid al-Nabi as a Strategy of Cultural Insertion

Yunnan Province is in the southwest of China, and most of it consists of mountainous plateau terrain. In the mid-13th century, after the Mongols conquered under the guidance of Kublai Khan (1215–1271), Muslim soldiers from Central Asia may have already settled in Yunnan. Among them, the most famous is Sayyid Ajall Umar Shams al-Din (赛典赤赡思丁, approximately 1211–1279), who became the first governor (平章政事, *Ping-zhang-zheng-shi*) of the new established Yunnan Province in 1274 AD. According to Professor Yao, Shams al-Din is the 31st-generation descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (Yao et al. 2005, p. 59). The descendants of his family represent an important source of the Hui people in Yunnan Province. Until the 19th century, Yunnan had the second largest Hui community of China, next only to the northwest. In the mid-19th century, the so-called Muslim rebellion erupted, lasting for decades. The miserable story of the Yunnan Hui rebellion is far more severe than in northwest China, such as Xi'an. The war decimated the Muslim population, which shriveled to less than one-eighth of its original size. However, the Hui people of Najiaying village were an exception. They signed a "Hui–Han Mutual Insurance Agreement" with friendly Chinese families to guarantee the safety of both sides. This agreement proved effective, highlighting another strategy of inculturation and survival for the Hui community of Najiaying: a cultural insertion at the level of grassroots social organization and system.

3.1. Origin and History of Najiaying

Najiaying Village is located in Nagu Town, northwest of Tonghai County, Yuxi City, Yunnan Province. The Nagu Hui People Township was established in 1988, comprising Najiaying Village, Gucheng Village, and Sanjia Village. In 1997, it was reclassified from a township to a town. At present, it consists of two administrative villages: Najiaying Village and Gucheng Village. According to the fieldwork conducted in 2021, the town has a population of 9474, with the Hui people accounting for 82.83%. Other ethnic populations

include Han, Yi, Hani, Bai, and Zhuang. The town is also famous for its steel handicraft industry. Traditionally, people made a living through horse caravan businesses, farming, and handicraft (knives). Today, they are engaged in modern industry including manufacturing steel bars, building materials, plastics, instruments, etc.

Scholars have discussed the origin of the Hui people in Najiaying, mainly based on historical documents, genealogy, oral tradition, and inscriptions.

It is said that the fourth-generation descendant of Sayyid Shams al-Din, named Nashulu or Na Pu (纳璞) in Chinese, was the earliest ancestor to settle in this place and took the Chinese surname “Na”. However, only three of Nashulu’s four sons (named Na Rong, Na Hua, and Na Fu; the youngest one, Na Gui, moved to another location) settled in Najiaying, whose descendants formed three branches of the Na family. One of the tomb stones indicates that Na Yongjie (纳永阶) was appointed as a general of the Royal Embroidered Uniform Guard in the year 1432, under the rule of Emperor Xuande of the Ming dynasty (Minzu Affairs Commission of Tonghai County 1991, p. 234). Other Hui families gradually moved to this location after the Na family, including the families Li and Ma, as well as Han Chinese families with the surnames Lu, Zhang, Wang, and Miao. Then, the three neighboring villages came into being: Najiaying, Gucheng, and Sanjiacun. Muslim Hui and Chinese Han lived together in peace for hundreds of years.

In the year 1856, the 6th year under the rule of Emperor Xianfeng of the Qing dynasty, rumors spread around Yunnan that Muslims were to be exterminated. A genocide occurred in the capital city, Kunming, on 16 April 1856. Only 40 to 50 Muslims escaped (Yang 1994, p. 125). Hui Muslims all over Yunnan were forced to defend themselves. On 25 September 1856, Hui Muslims established a local separatist power in Dali, west of Yunan, which lasted for 18 years. The whole province turned into chaos and bloody civil war for the next two decades. In this grim situation, due to the personal friendship between Muslim and Chinese families, a Chinese family with the surname Gongsun sent a messenger to Najiaying to offer a “Hui–Han Mutual Insurance Agreement” to guarantee the safety of different ethnic groups (F. Gao 1992, p. 210). How could this agreement work? We argue that the effectiveness of the “Hui–Han Mutual Insurance Agreement” in the past and the ongoing observance of the Mawlid al-Nabi ceremony testify to successful cultural integration at the level of the grassroots social organization and system. In short, Hui Muslims of Najiaying successfully used their clan system and Jamaat system to insert into Chinese society.

Today, there is a street in Najiaying named Mutual Insurance Road (互保路), beside which we may find the Mosque, Tuzhu Temple (土主庙), Guanyin Temple (观音庙), and Kuige (魁阁) as neighbors.

3.2. The Process of the Ritual

The Mawlid al-Nabi is a unique and magnificent festival in Yunan Hui Muslim society because it has very different rules and customs. Many historical inscriptions of mosques all around Yunnan indicate that the ceremony is always important and spectacular. A mosque inscription from 1812 AD states the following: “every year we celebrate the Mawlid al-Nabi and food, and other expenses are so many that the income fell short of the expenditure” (Yu and Lei 2001, p. 404). Another inscription from 1827 AD reads: “every Mawlid al-Nabi in the mosque is all prepared” (Yu and Lei 2001, p. 406). Today, the ceremony of Mawlid al-Nabi in Najiaying is one of the biggest local Muslim festivals in Yunnan, even in China (Figure 3). This is due to the local tradition and the economic strength of the local Hui community. Based on our fieldwork, here, we take the Mawlid al-Nabi ceremony at Najiaying Mosque as an example to discuss how and why the ceremony is proceeded in a very different way compared with other Hui communities outside Yunnan.



Figure 3. The Prophet's 1444th birthday ceremony at Najiaying Mosque (photographed by Zhou Chuanbin, 2012).

3.2.1. Preparations

At a first glance, an anthropologist who studies this festival may find it strange that there is no fixed time or regularity for this annual ceremony of Najiaying and nearby mosques. The date of Mawlid al-Nabi in Najiaying does not align with the actual birth-date of the Prophet. Said differently, Muslims of Najiaying do not celebrate the Prophet's Day on the 12th of the month Rabi' al-Awwal, and they differ from Muslims of Xi'an, who generally choose a date around the Spring Festival. It is akin to Clifford Geertz's famous metaphor of "deep description"; if we look deep into the culture we surveyed, we may find it is interesting that the Hui people of Najiaying do have their own rationale for choosing the date: (1) each neighboring mosque must choose a different date so that they can invite each other and attend every ceremony; (2) the date cannot coincide with Eid al-Fitur or Eid al-Qurban; and (3) the date is chosen to suit the local climate and agriculture periodicity. In the past, because of the need for food preservation and leisure time, the Hui people of Yunnan liked to choose the slack season of agriculture from late autumn to early spring. Similarly, the Han Chinese people all over China like to hold their temple fair in the same season. In fact, researchers have long discovered that, in many places, the Han Chinese and Hui Muslim may invite each other to attend such ceremonies. In recent years, due to the influence of the policy of national legal holidays, the Hui people of Najiaying usually choose to celebrate the Prophet's Day on the National Day (October 1st) holiday, for which everybody is granted a seven-day holiday, so it is easy to gather more people to attend the ceremony.

Once a date has been set, a preparatory committee for Mawlid al-Nabi is set up. Professor Yao Jide recorded that the ceremony of Najiaying "will consume 30 to 40 cattle every year" (Yao and Xiao 2001, p. 4). Najiaying village includes five official groups of villages, of which four are Hui villages. The committee consists of representatives from these four villages. Though the committee does not include the fifth village of Han Chinese, they do attend the ceremony as guests. There are two major preparation tasks: assigning work to different teams and raising funds. Different work teams are set according to age and gender. The middle-aged and elderly take part in kitchen service such as chopping, washing, and cooking. Young men work as bus boys, while young women serve as waitresses for every table. The fundraising team visits local rich men and nearly 300 private enterprises to

obtain money, called “*Gua Gong-de*” (挂功德, raising donations) in the local dialect. It is interesting that the same word is popularly used by Han Chinese for any religious donations.

3.2.2. The Ritual

In all three cases presented in this paper, we found that the main components of the Mawlid al-Nabi in China can be divided into two parts: the religious part, which principally involves chanting poems praising the Prophet, and the secular part, which mainly revolves around a communal meal. The two parts are not so balanced in each case. If we take the case of Xi'an as a “model of balance” in which the religious part and the secular part is equal and balanced, then the Najaiying case can be considered a more secular one, in which the communal meal is the core of the ceremony. The ritual of the ceremony in Najaiying lasts for three days.

(1) Day 1: al-Wa'z, Poem-chanting, and Eating

The components of the first day serve as a prelude to the ceremony. After the first prayer of the day (Salat al-Fajr), the Imam of the mosque gives his speech (al-Wa'z) for approximately half an hour. Then, the chanting of the poems praising the Prophet in a local tongue begins. The chanting team is divided into a local team and guest team to select the best members to join a temporary chanting team the next day. The students of the madrasa perform some shows and a reception dinner is served.

(2) Day 2: the Meeting, Poem-chanting, and Eating

The second day is the prime day of a formal ceremony.

The first procedure: After Salat al-Fajr, hosts and guests recite the Quran (using the same word “*Kai-jing*”, open the Kitab, as in Xi'an) and chant praising poems. This stage lasts for one hour.

The second procedure, called “Meeting” (开会, “*Kaihui*”) in local tongue, resembles the “Opening Speech” in the case of Xi'an. During this procedure, government officers may promote political dogma and policies, the director of the Mosque Management Committee introduces the management of the mosque, the Imam of the mosque gives his welcoming, the headmaster of the madrasa introduces his school, and the graduate representative gives a farewell speech. This procedure lasts about two and a half hours.

The third procedure is the poem chanting. There are three teams: the graduate team of the madrasa, the mosque team (“*Lao-qiang*”, old tune), and the female team with Malaysian melody (“*Xin-qiang*”, new tune). Usually, the madrasa of the mosque may hold a graduation ceremony at this time, so this procedure may last for more than four hours.

The fourth procedure is the banquet, which is served separately as the guests arrive in succession. In three days, more than 30,000 guests attend and eat. Not every guest attends the religious part of the ceremony, but they do attend the banquet in succession. The banquet is a traditional style called “nine bowls” (*Jiu-wan*, 九碗, see Figure 4), made of beef and vegetables. A banquet in succession, which is called a “running-water banquet” (*Liu-shui-xi*, 流水席), is popular in the grassroots society of China, especially during wedding, funeral, and temple fairs. The guests come and eat in succession like running water, which creates a very strong feeling among guests and a unique experience related to the ceremony. As in the case of Najaiying, this kind of “running-water banquet” lasts for all three days; whenever the guests come, there is always a banquet for them. Moreover, as the old saying goes, “nothing is free”; guests customarily give gifts, which are usually cash (Niyah, religious donation). This bears resemblance to the study of Marcel Mauss (1872–1950) on gift giving, which indicates that a form of exchange will always include giving, receiving, and repaying (Mauss 2002). The Mawlid al-Nabi of Najaiying mosque is a grant exchange between host and guest, Hui Muslim and Han Chinese, through which they exchange not only money and food but also culture and social relation. For the study of food in anthropology, building on the sayings “good to eat” and “good to think”, we may add “good to exchange”, or in a more fashionable and postmodern mode, “good to entangle”. It is in this

sense that we see the communal meal as the core of the ceremony of Najiaying. Though appearing more secular in nature, it is in fact very meaningful and productive.



Figure 4. The “nine bowls” banquet at Najiaying Mosque (photo taken by Zhou Chuanbin, 2012).

The fifth procedure is the night snack after Salat al-Maghrib, for which congee is usually served. The sixth procedure after Salat al-Isha is the collective poem chanting and al-Wa’z from the Imam. The procedure of the day is then ended.

(3) Day 3: al-Wa’z, Eating, and Farewell

The third day is the day of farewell. After Salat al-fajr, the Imam will give his farewell speech (al-Wa’z) for half an hour. All the guests will leave after breakfast. The local villagers, that is to say, the host team of the ceremony, will have their own banquet in the afternoon. The Mawlid al-Nabi of that year is then considered to have been completed successfully.

3.3. The Insertion of Social Structure at the Grassroots Level

The guests invited by Najiaying mosque include public officials, entrepreneurs, Imams and administrators of neighboring mosques, Han Chinese neighbors and administrators of temples, social celebrities, other voluntary guests from all around China, and even guests from abroad. According to Ma Xuefeng, “Through the activities of the Prophet’s Day, the neighboring districts can be connected to form an interconnected network, which we may call it as the Mawlid al-Nabi network” (X. Ma 2013, pp. 122–25). From this perspective, we can say the social function of the Mawlid al-Nabi in China is integrated into the traditional Chinese social structure. Researchers regard this as evidence that the state order and grassroots society of China are connected through religious places and institutions. The traditional Chinese society is an earthbound society based on agriculture, in which temples of folk religions are closely related to the land and the social status of villagers. According to the most popular views of Chinese scholars, the imperial power in traditional China does not work under the county level, and the autonomy of the grassroots society is very common (Zheng 2013). The autonomy of the grassroots society is based on traditional social institutions called “She” (社, literally means land god) and “Hui” (会, literally means gathering), which originated from the ancient sacrificial ceremony to the land god and formed the basic social unit of rural China. Each village in China always has its own temple and local gods up to the present day, which means, to quote Maurice Freedman, that “Chinese religion exists” (Freedman 1974). In short, the symbolic order or religious cosmology is, no doubt, important for understanding traditional Chinese society.

In the early 1940s, under the guidance of the outstanding Chinese anthropologist Dr. Fei Xiaotong, several young scholars gathered in Yunnan University during the Japanese invasion, engaging in a very famous sociology and anthropology study in villages

of suburban Kunming. They found that, under the basic-level government of Yunnan,⁷ there were still other kinds of traditional grassroots organizations like “Gong-jia” (公家, which literally means public), “Cun-pu” (村铺, which literally means village unit), and “Cun-pai” (村牌, which literally means village icon), which were labelled an “autonomous unit” by Dr. Fei Xiaotong. “Because on the one hand, it meets the public needs of local people, including water conservancy, self-defense, mediation, mutual assistance, entertainment, and religion”, Dr. Fei wrote, “on the other hand, its main task is to deal with the government” (Fei 2011, p. 382). He defined four kinds of powers to understand Chinese traditional political structure: imperial power, gentry power, gang power, and civil power (Fei 2011, p. 488). The so-called “autonomous unit” indicates civil power.

Fei’s colleagues, Hu Qingjun and Gu Bao, in their studies of suburban Kunming, also noticed that new organizations like “Gong-jia”, “Cun-pu”, and “Cun-pai” broke the traditional local power structure in China at the grassroots level as clan villages. After his fieldwork from 1945 to 1947 in An village (安村), Hu Qingjun wrote: “the whole village is divided into ten ‘Hui’ (会, groups or communities), in which eight belong to big villages (‘the Big Eight’) and two belong to small villages (‘the Small Two’). The Big Eight system includes the following: Local Lord Temple (土主庙), Dizang Temple (地藏寺), Dragon King Temple (龙王庙), Five Grain Temple (五谷寺), Guandi Temple (关圣宫), Kuan Yin Temple (观音寺), Big Buddha Temple (大佛寺) and Mosque (清真寺)” (Ma and Su 2019, p. 63). This clearly indicates that every community (“Hui”) inside the village corresponds to a temple in which the Mosque is equal to other Buddhist temples and the Muslim community is seen as a part of the system. The fieldwork of Gu Bao in Huacheng village revealed there were three levels in the vertical autonomous organization: “Da Gong-jia” (大公家, big Public), “Xiao Gong-jia” (小公家, little Public), and “Pu-hu” (铺户, membership of village unit). With the headmaster called “Da Guan-shi” (大管事, big administrator), the Big Gong-jia was the highest public organization, in charge of official duties entrusted by the government and public and religious affairs of the village. Similarly, the Little Gong-jia, with its headmaster “Xiao Guan-shi” (小管事, little administrator), corresponding to the second-level unit “Cun-pu”, is in charge of the civil affairs among the unit such as the births, deaths, and marriages of its members. Gu Bao emphasized that the membership of “Pu-hu” was a hereditary social status, distinct from the common villagers. If an immigrant wants to join the village unit “Pu” as a member, they need to show their loyalty to local gods; in other words, they need to donate (“Gua Gong-lao”, 挂功劳) to the local temple (Ma and Su 2019, pp. 130–34). To be a member of the village unit is the same as being a follower of its temple. Mosques plays the same role as these temples and are accepted in Han Chinese society. In such a sense, we regard it is a strategy of cultural and social insertion for Hui Muslims to accomplish their localization and become one organic part of the whole Chinese society.

Today, mosques and temples of Yunnan still play such a role at the grassroots level, somehow under the administration of government. Such grassroot, autonomous organizations regard Hui and Han people as equal residents, which differs from the historical situation for Hui Muslims and other ethnic groups in other regions. From the Ming to Qing dynasty (14–19th century), the central government developed a system of chiefdoms (土司制度) to rule most ethnic areas of the empire indirectly through local authorities. However, the identity of Hui Muslims was not so clear to the imperial officials, so they were usually seen as people between “civilized” Chinese majority and the “savage barbarians”. As some researchers have argued, the Rural Contract System (乡约制度) in north-west China during the Qing dynasty (17–19th century) saw Muslims as outsiders who one must “watch and guard against” through strict law and administration (Wu and Yu 2007). However, in the Yunnan case, Hui Muslims were seen as equal to the Chinese majority. This is possibly due to the high number of different ethnic groups in Yunnan. Due to the census of China, 26 ethnic groups are considered aborigines of Yunnan province. According to the Marxist evolutionary theory of China, many of them were still in the stages of primitive society, slave society, or serfdom society until the 1950s. The Hui people all over China identified themselves rather as more like Han Chinese than other ethnic groups. For

example, Muslims that entered Yunnan since the Yuan dynasty (12 century) were mainly officials, soldiers, and merchants along with the imperial power, which made them more like the Chinese majority. Additionally, in the Hezhou area, Hui Muslims often refer to themselves as “*Zhong-yuan Ren*” (中原人, people from central China), which differs from local minorities, labelled as “*Fan*” (番, barbarians) during the Qing dynasty. They accepted many Chinese cultural norms including the language, architecture, dress, cooking style, etc. We posit that the insertion of social structure at the grassroots level in Yunnan is a result of the cultural process of hundreds of years of indigenization.

3.4. Donation and the Economic Function of the Mawlid al-Nabi

As mentioned previously, “*Gua Gong-de*” (挂功德, raising donations) is one of the main components of the ceremony of Najiaying. The word “*Gong-de*” (which literally translates to merits and virtues) comes from Chinese Buddhism. In a broad sense, it is a kind of charitable and pious behavior including chanting Buddha’s name, reciting Sutras, releasing animals, giving alms, and performing other good deeds. The Hui people in Yunnan and Guizhou province borrowed this word to correspond to the Arabic word *sadagah*, which indicates a kind of Islamic doctrine of donations. So, the concept of “*Gua Gong-de*” (raising donations) is shared by Hui Muslims and Han Chinese. Such shared words and concepts form a system of terminology in the local context of Yunnan. Obviously, the construction and operation of the mosque or temple requires financial support, and the holding of the ceremony costs money. So, if the Mawlid al-Nabi is annually the most spectacular festival of a mosque, which may have the largest number of participants even including Han Chinese neighbors and officials, why do we not make it an annual donation activity? Thus, there is no doubt that the economic function of the Mawlid al-Nabi is prominent.

“*Gong-de*” (donations) serve as a significant source of income for mosques and also play an important role in the expression and affirmation of social relations. On the day of the ceremony, mosques set up special personnel seating at their gates to record and count donations. Though it is not a religious obligation, every guest gives a donation. After the ceremony, the mosque will display a list of donations on the wall. The donors and mosques have a subject–object relationship, which forms a complex social network among different communities and ethnic groups. The donors, the subject of the donations, can be divided into four categories of social groups and organizations; each category indicates one special clue of this regional social network.

The first category is government officials, representatives of public institutions, and private enterprises. As outlined earlier, fundraising is one of the two major tasks of the preparation team. Thus, special invitation letters are sent to private enterprises. Invitations are also extended to government officials and public institutions to inform and gain permission from the state power. As Marcel Mauss stated: “Moreover, we have identified the circulation of things in these societies with the circulation of rights and persons” (Mauss 2002, p. 59). The invitation from the mosques and donation from the guests of the first category is a “vertical flow of gifts” between the public power and the grassroots society of the Muslim minority. The second category is representatives of neighboring mosques. Through the mutual visit and donation between mosques, a “parallel flow of gifts” between Muslim communities comes into being. The third category is the representatives of Chinese temples, village committees, and villagers. As mentioned above, through a kind of social insertion, the Muslim community, symbolized by a mosque, is accepted as one part of the whole regional social system in Yunnan. Muslims invite Han Chinese to their ceremony, and Han Chinese invite Muslims to attend the temple fair. This constitutes a kind of “cross-ethnic flow of gifts”, which maintains the “Mutual Insurance” tradition between Muslims and Han Chinese. The fourth category is other Muslim individuals. For Muslims themselves, participation in the ceremony and donations to mosques are a form of religious beneficence that will “be paid” by God through Divine Grace. Thus, we may also say it is a kind of “transcendental flow of gifts” between this world and the divine world.

In a modern world after the 17th century, the nation-state system has accomplished its political construction upon grassroots society everywhere on the earth, which has broken the economic base, political structure, and cultural traditions of grassroots society and reconstructed; that said, some traditions do continue. Traditional ceremonies such as the Mawlid al-Nabi and temple fair in Yunnan province are not only the inheritance of Chinese culture but are also beneficial to the connection and interaction between the state and local society. In this case, the Mawlid al-Nabi of Najiaying village, as a ritual space and field, produces social relations and integrates economic, political, historical, cultural, and other aspects, forming an order and community transcending ethnic and religious social relations and reuniting modern private life in collective religious activities. The Hui Muslim and Han Chinese populations do have different “little traditions”, that is to say, different religions; however, through a social mechanism we call “social insertion”, the two different traditions were successfully integrated into one whole “autonomous unit” at the grassroots level, symbolized by a regional temple–mosque system. These united “little traditions” (also an “autonomous village unit”) maintain and shape the regional unity and its symbolism, forming the process of adaptation of grassroots autonomous organizations to the “big tradition” of Chinese society, that is, Confucianism represented by aristocrats, officials, and literary figures. It establishes an effective connection and interaction between the formal state institutional system and the rural autonomous organizations, through which the relationship of “state–village–temple–family” is preserved and the traditional order between “state–family”, “state–society”, and “state–religion” is continued. The most significant result is that Islam as a foreign religion and Muslims as immigrants have successfully inserted into the local Chinese society and its symbolic system.

4. Hezhou: Mawlid al-Nabi as a Strategy of Cultural Innovation

Hezhou city (河州), located in Gansu Province, northwest China, is the capital city of Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture, which was established on 19 November 1956. It is often referred to as the “little Mecca” of China. According to the *Seventh National Census of China*, spanning up to 1 November 2020, Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture had a total population of 2,109,750, of which the Muslim population (including Hui, Dongxiang, Baoan, and Salar people) constituted almost 60%.

4.1. Origin and History of the Hui People of Hezhou

According to some local records, the origin of the Hui Muslim community in Hezhou area can be traced back to Muslim immigrants of the Tang dynasty (7th century). Then, under the Mongol conquest during the 13th century, Muslim soldiers, craftsmen, and other refugees settled down in this area ([Linxia Prefecture Annals Compilation Committee 1993](#), p. 187; [Compilation Group of General Situation of Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture 1986](#), pp. 60–63). After the building of Hezhou city wall in 1377 AD, during the reign of Emperor Hongwu (ruled from 1368 to 1398 AD) of the Ming dynasty, this area was finally under the control of the central government of China. At the same time, the Tibetan power was gradually expelled from this area, and Chinese immigrants moved in, bringing their culture and social networks with them. It was from this time that the Muslim community emerged in Hezhou, which formed the third largest community besides the Han Chinese and the Tibetans. According to some scholars, Muslims merchants acted as a kind of “middleman” between Han Chinese and Tibetans, thus accumulating a great deal of wealth. Given its position along the Southern Silk Road and its role in the tea–horse trade, Linxia (Hezhou), for most of its imperial history, was a central place embedded in an economic hierarchy, above Tibetan towns like Tsod and Labrang and below the provincial capital and Silk Road gateway of Lanzhou ([Erie 2016](#), p. 97). From then on, Hezhou city has gradually become the Islamic intellectual center of China.

From its nickname, the “little Mecca” of China, we may understand the significance of Hezhou among Chinese Muslims. It is believed that Hezhou is the origin place of almost all the Chinese Sufi orders (X. [Li 2006](#)). Mr. Ma Zikuo posited that Hezhou city “was

the center of Islam in northwest China, where produced many sages and saints during the end of Ming Dynasty and the beginning of Qing Dynasty” ([Gansu Provincial Library 1984](#), p. 460). According to Professor Gao Zhanfu, “most sects of China inland Islam were born here, which is unique in Chinese Muslim society” ([Z. Gao 2002](#)). Today, one can find all three Chinese Islamic sects (Qadim, Ikhwan, and Salafiyah) and four Sufi orders (Khufiyah, Jahriyah, Qadiriya, and Kubrawiyah) in the Hezhou area. At the same time, Hezhou is, no doubt, the center of religious education of Chinese Muslims, where thousands of Imams of China have been trained. So, either in intellectual achievement or practice of everyday life, Muslims of Hezhou were pioneers in blending Islam with traditional Chinese culture. This led to two opposite results: cultural vitality, on the one hand, and internal conflicts within the Muslim community, on the other. In 1781 AD, the 46th year under the rule of Emperor Qianlong (rule from 1736 to 1791), the internal conflicts between the “old sect” (Hua-si branch of the Khufiyah Sufi order) and the “new sect” (Jahriyah Sufi order)⁸ led to a bloody rebellion, which angered the emperor and was cruelly suppressed. After the rebellion, the empire changed its policy toward the Muslim community in northwest China, leading to tense government–Muslim relations and worsening conditions for Muslims. Thus, the Muslim community of Hezhou shared a unique collective memory and historic experience that differed from Xi’an and Najiaying, which shaped a different cultural pattern. Only after the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 were the socialist ethnic relations of equality, unity, and mutual assistance in Hezhou area further consolidated and developed with the establishment of Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture.

4.2. The Ritual

As mentioned earlier, the religious part and the secular part of the ceremony of Mawlid al-Nabi are quite different across the three cases explored in this paper. The Hezhou case is a more religious one dictating that the Sufi doctrine of the Prophet is the soul of the ceremony. Generally, only the “old sect” (including all Sufi orders and the Qadim) celebrates the Prophet’s Day, which begins around the 12th of the month Rabi’al-Awwal and lasts for three days. Based on our fieldwork, here, we take the ceremony of the SMC mosque of Linxia city as a case to show the local practice of Mawlid al-Nabi in the Hezhou area. The SMC mosque belongs to the “old sect”, around which there are about 1500 Muslim residents.

One month before the Mawlid al-Nabi, the Imam of the SMC mosque began to tell the life story of the Prophet and the meaning of the ceremony every Friday. According to local customs, the ceremony lasts for three days. On the first day, the ritual calls for “Kai-jing” (开经, reciting the Quran); on the second day, “Da-zan” (大赞, the Grand Praising); and on the third day, “Tai-jing-lou” (抬经楼, a parade of the Quran-ark) and “Minshār” (the Arabic title of a typical dhikr).

4.2.1. Preparations of the Ceremony

For Muslims of the Hezhou area, the month of Rabi’al-Awwal (the third month of the Islamic calendar) is “the month of the Prophet”. Although Mawlid al-Nabi has a fixed date in the Islamic calendar, Imams of local mosques calculate and determine a specific date during this month to perform the ceremony. They consult with neighboring mosques to determine the specific date of each mosque and, in turn, make sure it will be held. The benefits of this are that Muslims can freely attend every specific ceremony at different mosques; at the same time, every mosque can gather enough participants for their ceremony. In our case, the SMC mosque chose to celebrate the Prophet’s Day on the 6–8th days of the 12th month of the Chinese lunar calendar (5–7th Rabi’al-Awwal, 1434 AH). The ceremony was paid for through donations from local Muslim residents. During this year, there were 158 volunteers for the kitchen service on one day, who made 11,300 “You-xiang” (油香, a kind of deep-fried dough cake made by Chinese Muslims). The three-day ceremony cost twelve cattle, thirty sheep, and two camels.

4.2.2. Day 1: The Recitation of the Quran (Kai-Jing)

As in the case of Xi'an, "Kai-jing" (literally "open the Kitab", meaning reciting the Quran) means the start of any Islamic ritual. In the SMC mosque, this ritual is held by representatives from all the guests of different Sufi orders. For example, during the year we surveyed, the participants of the ritual came from nine Sufi branches belonging to the Qadiriya and Khufiya Sufi order.

After Salat al-Fajr of the first day, two students of the mosque chanted a collection of poems entitled "*Maulud*" (卯路德)⁹ in the prayer hall. Like a kind of "background music", the chanting of the "*Maulud*" lasts for three days. When all the guests arrive, the ritual of "Kai-jing" begins, with three procedures of "Qiu-qi" (求祈, supplication), reciting the Quran, and praising the Prophet.

(1) "Qiu-qi": The Supplication

The "Qiu-qi" follows a special routine of reciting some Quranic verses and prayer phrases with fixed-count iteration, structured as follows: al-Fatiha (Chapter 1), recited seven times; praising the Prophet one hundred times; al-Sharh (Chapter 94), recited one hundred times; al-Ikhlās (Chapter 112), recited one hundred times; al-Fatiha (Chapter 1), recited seven times; praising the Prophet one hundred times; and nine typical prayer phrases, each recited one hundred times.

(2) The Collective Reciting the Quran

After the reciting of al-Fatiha by the Imam of the SMC mosque, all the guests took one of 30 volumes of the Quran and recited it in a whisper. As we mentioned earlier, like in Xi'an, the old sect prefers a collective recitation, which is called "Yuan-jing" or "Wan-jing" (complete the Kitab).

(3) Praising the Prophet

After the collective recitation, collective chanting of *Maulud* continues. It will be finished by collective chanting of Shahadah (three times) and Du'a (supplication).

4.2.3. Day 2: The Grand Praising (Da-zan)

The Chinese word "Da-zan" (大赞, the Grand Praising) is used by Muslims of Hezhou to refer to the chanting of a certain chapter of "*Madāyah*".¹⁰ During the second day of the ceremony, a guest Imam gives his *al-Wa'z* (sermon) about the Prophet before Salat al-Maghrib. Then, the ritual of the Grand Praising begins at night after Salat al-Isha.

(1) "Wan-zan": The Complete Praising

The Chinese word "Wan-Zan" (完赞, the Complete Praising) is used by Muslims of Hezhou to refer to the last part of *Mawḥud al-Nabī' Sharaf al-Anām*, which forms the main components of *Madāyah*. Two Imams give a cross chanting of the poems. At the same time, the manager of the mosque distributes *hadiyyah* (gifts, the same meaning as *niyyah* in China, usually meaning cash) to the guests.

(2) Al-Barzanji

When the Imam is chanting the poems from al-Barzanji, everyone receives a burning joss-stick named Balan (only Chinese Muslims make and use this kind of incense). When the last sentence is read out:

أخذها المخاض و اشتدت بها الامه فولدت النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم

She went into labor and gave birth to the Prophet (peace be upon him).

all the people stand up, with a joss-stick in their hands, and divide into two opposite columns, leaving a passage between the entrance of the hall and the *Mihrāb* (prayer niche).

(3) The Bayti (couplet) and Jawāb (response)

Then comes the climactic part of the ritual: the cross chanting of *bayti* (couplet) and *jawāb* (response). Two Imams chant the couplet poem, and the rest respond with:

يا نبى سلام عليك	Oh, prophet! Peace be upon you!
يا رسول سلام عليك	Oh, messenger! Peace be upon you!
يا حبيب سلام عليك	Oh, beloved! Peace be upon you!
صلوات الله عليك	May Allah bless you!

(see Figure 5).



Figure 5. One page of the *Madāyah*.

It is believed that the spirit of the Prophet will present himself and receive the greetings from Muslims. The passage between the entrance and the prayer niche is left for him. The poem chanting is so moving and people are so touched that many of them cry in tears. Until their joss-stick has nearly burned off and the poem is finished, people will kneel again, and all the joss-sticks will be collected into a censer.

(4) al-Barzanji and Du'a

The Imam chants the Burzanji again and finishes with a supplication. Every guest receives the gift of the ceremony, which includes “You-xiang” and pieces of meat (beef, mutton, or camel meat).

4.2.4. Day 3: The Dhikr of Minshār

Minshār, which literally means “saw” in Arabic, is the title of a collection of dhikrs (the remembrance of Allah) and Prophet-praising poems, which are believed to have been brought back to China along with *Maulud al-Nabi* by Sheikh Ma Laichi from Arabia in 1734 AD. According to Ding Shiren, the core of *Minshār* is three dhikrs: “*Lā ilaha illa Allāh*” (No god but God); “*Allāh hayyun*” (God is ever-living); and “*Allāh hayyun dā'im bāqī*” (God is ever-living, ever-lasting).¹¹ When Muslim recite these dhikrs to remember Allah, they will rock their body back and forth, which looks like “sawing”. On the third day, the ritual includes a parade of the Quran-ark, the recitation of *Minshār* dhikr.

(1) “Tai-jing-lou”: A Parade of the Quran-ark

The Chinese word “Jing-lou” (经楼) means a Quran-ark made of wood to contain a handwritten copy of the Quran. “Tai” (抬) literally means “lift up”, so “Tai-jing-lou” means

to lift up the Quran-ark for a parade around the yard of a mosque. Here, we may compare the dogma of “the Word of God” in Christianity and Islam. There is no doubt that the Word of God is the divine power of the Creation, which results in the existence of the Universe. In Christianity, the Word (Logos) became flesh among us as Jesus Christ; however, according to Islamic dogma, the Quran is the Word of God (*Kalimatullāh*). That is to say, the Quran is equal to Jesus as the embodiment of the transcendent God. Now, we investigate Chinese religions: the sense of the embodiment of any gods to be expressed as an idol put in a Chinese ark like a sedan chair is so popular in China that we may see it as an extraordinary character of Chinese folk religions. An interesting point is that, by using the Quran-ark, Muslims of Hezhou combine the monotheistic dogma with a Chinese expression of the embodiment of gods. This is the core point for us to understand the significance of this ritual. We will focus on this topic later.

In Hezhou city, the Quran-ark is made in the shape of a Chinese pavilion (Figure 6). In the morning, the Quran-ark is put in the yard of the mosque and covered with silk fabric. Muslims touch the cover to receive “*barakat*” from Allah. When all the guests arrive, with a burning joss-stick in hand, the Imam leads Muslims to lift the ark and parade into the prayer hall, along with the chanting of poems. Finally, the ark is placed before the prayer niche. In the eyes of anthropologists, this parade is rich in symbolic meaning.



Figure 6. The Quran-ark of the SMC mosque, approximately 1.5 m high (photo taken on 8 October 2021).

(2) The Dhikr of Minshār

After the al-Wa’z of an invited Imam, the recitation of the Quran begins. Then comes the climactic part of the ritual: the dhikr of Minshār. The dhikr is the remembrance of Allah, which is seen as the most important spiritual practice of Sufism. The dhikr of Minshār in Hezhou mosques includes the following five phrases:

- A. “*Lā ilaha illa Allāh*” (no god but God). People will chant loudly and rock their body back and forth, which looks like “sawing”, raising their heads and chanting “*Lā ilaha*” or lowering their heads and chanting “*illa Allāh*”. This repeats 300 times in total, with every 100 iterations being followed by the phrase “*Muhammadun rasūlullāh*”.
- B. “*Allāh Hayyun*” (God is ever-living), 100 times.
- C. “*Allāh Hayyun Dā’im Bāqī*” (God is ever-living and ever-lasting), 100 times.
- D. “*Allāh al-Hayyu*” (God is the Ever-living), 100 times.
- E. “*Allāh*”, 100 times.

As the phrases of the dhikr gradually shorten, the rhythm and speed of chanting become faster and faster. This kind of praise of “leaning forward and falling back” resembles the action of sawing. In the display of sound, meaning, rhythm, and movement, people gradually approach a climax of emotions, and many people are moved to tears.

(3) Banquet

After the ritual of the Minshār, all the guests are served a traditional banquet.

4.3. Interconnection between Human Beings and the Sacred

The most distinctive feature of the ceremony of Mawlid al-Nabi in Hezhou city, Gansu province, is the ritual of “Tai-jing-lou” (the parade of the Quran-ark) on the third day. We would like to emphasize that this represents a dramatical cultural innovation in the process of indigenization of Islam in northwest China. By borrowing and using certain cultural traits of Chinese folk religions, Muslims of Hezhou have found a new way to concretely express their understanding of and reverence for the Sacred.

In every religion, there always problems regarding how to understand and express the Sacred. In her study on the statues of gods in Taiwan Chinese society, Lin Weipin described how, after a statue is made from wood, it undergoes two processes: “embodiment” and “grounding in a village”. Only then can it finally acquire its spirit and gain acceptance by a social group (Lin 2004). In monotheistic traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, God cannot be expressed by idols. However, in Indian and Chinese traditions, gods can be seen and touched through statues. According to Lin Weipin, the Chinese understanding of gods includes two aspects: every god is unique, formless, and omnipresent; but it can manifest in different images through embodiment and localization in the connection with communities and places. This is the same in northwest China. In Gansu province, it can be seen that every Chinese village has its own temple and local gods/goddess, which act as local protectors. Every year during the time of temple fairs, the statue of the local gods/goddess will be set in their sedan chair and paraded around the village. Furthermore, the local gods/goddess can visit their neighbors because the villagers will lift the sedan chair to other temples to attend their neighbor’s ceremony. In the fieldwork of a traditional temple fair of suburban Lanzhou, the capital city of Gansu, we saw how the villagers interact with the Sacred through the using of the divine sedan chair (see Figures 7 and 8). The sedan chair with a statue inside is the objectified symbol of a mysterious, hidden gods/goddess, with which people can understand, feel, and interact with the Sacred through the movement and indication of the sedan chair. People who lift the sedan chair are actors who are displaying the ideas and opinions of their gods/goddess, while all the participants of the fair are simultaneously audience members and actors of collusion. Thus, a temple fair is a lively expression or performance of the connection between human beings and the Sacred.

As for the ceremony of Mawlid al-Nabi in Hezhou city, the customs of parading the Quran-ark and burning joss-sticks are clearly borrowed from local Chinese culture. In the morning of the third day of the ceremony, as mentioned before, Muslims of Hezhou will lift a Quran-ark with a silk cover, parading in the yard of the mosque and finally setting it in the most honorable and important place of the prayer hall, the prayer niche, which is equal to the shrine for statues of temples. During the parade, the crowd touches the cover of the ark to receive a blessing from Allah.

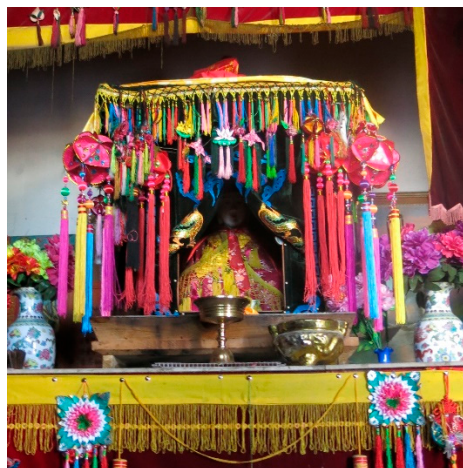


Figure 7. Sedan chair of a local goddess in the Chinese village of Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture (photo taken by Zhou Chuanbin, 2016).



Figure 8. People lifting a sedan chair in a temple fair in Suburban Lanzhou (photo taken by Zhou Chuanbin, 2017).

As an anti-idol religion, how does Islam express a transcendent God in a material world? This is an interesting question. In the Bible, God spoke directly to Moses from a burning bush and instructed him to make the Ark to contain the Ten Commandments, that is, the Word of God. The Ark and the Tabernacle became the center of religious life of the ancient Israelis. And, with the Ark gone after the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem, it is said that the Glory of God was taken from Israel. As in Islam, we cannot find the tradition of using an ark to contain the Quran. So why do Muslims of Hezhou make their own Quran-ark? The answer is that this inspiration does not come from the Bible but from the local Chinese religions.

Unlike the cases of Xi'an and Yunnan, Muslims of Hezhou chose to share a common symbolic system with local Han Chinese folk religion. According to our fieldwork in northwest China, a particular system of Sufi shrines belonging to the Qadriyah Sufi order (which includes several different branches) is shared by Muslims and Han Chinese. One of these shrines is the Er-shi-li-pu Qubbah (二十里铺拱北) of Guyuan city, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Every year during the Spring Festival, the Han Chinese villagers complete a pilgrimage to this shrine and pray for blessing (Zhou 2012). The gods/goddess can be objectified through the process of embodiment and localization; similarly, God can be concreted through the embodiment of one of His Divine Attributes: the Word of God.

According to Ibn Arabi (1165–1240 AD), God is both transcendence and presence. In his masterpiece entitled *Fusūs al-hikam*, he argues that “the human and individual nature

of each prophet is in turn contained in the logos, or word (*kalimah*), which is his essential reality, and which is a determination of the Supreme Word, or the ‘primordial enunciation of God’ (Nasr 1999, p. 99). So, in Muslim theology, the transcendence of God is the Divine Essence, which is unknown to human beings, but the presence of God is His Word, which not only formed the essential reality of all the prophets but was also expressed in Arabic through the mouth of Muhammad and was written in objectified form as the Quran copies. What else is better than a Quran-ark as the objectification of the Sacred when Muslims need to show something visible in their rituals? (see Figure 9).



Figure 9. The Quran-ark with a green cover is settled in the yard of the SMC mosque (photo taken by Shang Ping on 9 October 2021).

Along with the parading of the Quran-ark, there are a series of cultural innovations that indicate the process of cultural change or acculturation of Hezhou Muslims. We may cite the burning of joss-sticks and the brick-carving arts as examples. Incense is an important symbol in various religious ceremonies all over the world. In China, it is believed that burning joss-sticks is a symbol of communication with deities, because the scent and smoke of the joss-sticks and candles make a scene and atmosphere of mystery and something unseen. The Hui Muslims all over China burn their own specially made joss-stick, which differ from the Chinese ones in smell and color. Especially in Sufi shrines in the Hezhou area, large metal censers set before the entrance of the shrine can be observed. The brick-carving arts of Hezhou Muslims are famous in China. Zhou Chuanbin and Ma Wenkui discussed typical images and symbols in brick-carving art in a Sufi shrine of Hezhou (Zhou and Ma 2017, 2014). In this brick-carving art, many traditional Chinese images and symbols are used, including mirrors, the Chinese graph “Shou” (寿, longevity), the dragon and phoenix, the sea and sun, etc., but interpreted in Sufi doctrines.

Another symbol of connection between human beings and the Sacred among the ritual is the Prophet Muhammad. We may say that the Sufi understanding of the Prophet is the core metaphor of the whole ceremony. In the Sufi doctrine, the essential reality of Muhammad, often referred to as *al-haqīqat al-muhammadiyah* (the reality of Muhammad), is the archetype of the entity and the logos (*al-insān al-kāmil*, the Perfect Man or Universal Man) of the universe. As professor Nasr wrote, “The Universal Man, who is also the Logos, is the total theophany of the Divine Names; he is the whole of the Universe in its oneness as ‘seen’ by the Divine Essence. In Ibn Arabi’s doctrine, the Universal Man has essentially three different aspects, namely, the cosmological, the prophetic, and the initiatic” (Nasr 1999, p. 110). Therefore, the Sufis believe that, by praising the Prophet and following his moral life and spiritual retreat, they may return to the origin of the creation, which is the Sacred itself. From such a perspective, we can interpret the metaphor of the ceremony of Mawlid al-Nabi in Hezhou as a resurgence of the spiritual connection between human beings and the Sacred through the intermediary of the Prophet. In this interpretation, the whole purpose of the moral life is interpreted as “realizing God/Truth and returning to Him”.

In his famous study of the Edemba ritual in Africa, Victor Turner noted that “Each kind of ritual may be regulated as a configuration of symbols, a sort of ‘score’ in which the symbols are the notes” (Turner 1967, p. 48). From a perspective of symbolic anthropology, both the divine sedan chair of the Han Chinese and the Quran-ark of the Hui Muslims serve as objectified symbols of the presence of God and temporary sacred spaces in their respective rituals. That is to say, ritual turns secular space into sacred space. In this temporary sacred space, such as during a temple fair or a ceremony of the Prophet’s Day, the connection between human beings and the Sacred is achieved through symbolic performances in which people direct and act out a social drama by themselves.

5. Conclusions

Hui Muslims all over China no doubt share some common components in the ritual of Mawlid al-Nabi, such as the recitation of the Quran, chanting of Prophet-praising poems, speeches centered on Islamic dogma, and a collective banquet. However, in the three cases presented in this paper, the ceremonies of different places do have their own characteristics suited to different historical, ecological, social, and cultural circumstances, through which the process of inculturation of Islam in China can be seen clearly. In his profound study of religion, Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) claimed that religion serves as a kind of classification, dividing things into two categories: the sacred and the secular. These two categories may be found in the ceremony of Mawlid al-Nabi in China. However, differing from Durkheim’s perspective, the secular part in the ceremony may also play a significant role in maintaining social order. As stated earlier, we can conclude that the main components of the Mawlid al-Nabi in China consist of two parts: the sacred part, which is principally the chanting of poems praising the Prophet, and the secular part, which revolves around a communal meal. The combination of these two parts gives rise to three distinct patterns. In the case of Xi’an, there is a “model of balance” where the religious part and the secular part are equally emphasized and in harmony. Conversely, the Najiaying case leans more towards the secular side, with the communal meal taking precedence, while the Hezhou case is the most religious one (Figure 10).

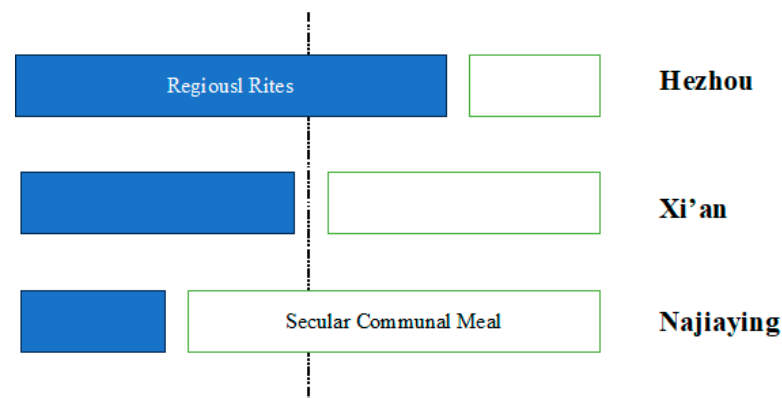


Figure 10. Three patterns of the sacred and secular parts in the ritual of Mawlid al-Nabi in three cases in China.

In the Hui Quarter of Xi’an, due to the painful historical memories and tension of surviving as an ethnic minority group among a Chinese majority, the Hui Muslim community chooses to celebrate the Prophets’ Day during the Spring Festival. This reflects a euphemistic strategy of cultural resistance aimed at maintaining their identity. At the same time, they also show complementary factors such as the mosque chanting team performing in the local dialect, the traditional banquet, and their welcoming attitude toward tourists from different ethnicities and religions. So, the “model of balance” in Xi’an is based on the balance between the confirmation of ethnic/religious identity and the open interaction with non-Muslims. Moreover, because many descendants of urban Muslims may not be so

familiar with religious rituals, the secular banquet plays an important role in maintaining the collective memory and identity of the Hui community.

In Najiaying village of Yunnan province, the date of Mawlid al-Nabi does not align with the Islamic calendar at all, which may seem peculiar. However, the true rationale behind the ceremony is to insert the Muslim community into the broader local social system, as indicated by historical documents such as the “Hui–Han Mutual Insurance Agreement” and contemporary economic practices such as “*Gua Gong-de*” (raising donations). Through these mechanisms, the Hui Muslim and Han Chinese populations are integrated into one whole “autonomous unit” at the grassroots level. This integration is a historic legacy of successful social insertion into the local context. It manifests as a “vertical flow of gifts” between the public power and the grassroots society of the Muslim minority, a “parallel flow of gifts” between Muslim communities, a “cross-ethnic flow of gifts” between Muslims and Han Chinese, and a “transcendental flow of gifts” between Muslims and God. In this context, the secular part serves a more specific social and economic purpose.

As the “little Mecca” of China, the Muslims of Hezhou seem to have no concerns about maintaining their religious identity. The ritual of the Mawlid al-Nabi in Hezhou is very similar to those throughout the Islamic world. The collection of poems they use is very popular in India, central Asia, and the Middle East. What is remarkable is that they have invented a new system of symbolism to express the Sufi understanding of the “God–Prophet–Muslim” relationship in a local context, which makes the sacred part of the ceremony particularly profound.

In fact, as two inalienable parts, the sacred and secular parts both form one totality of the ritual of the Mawlid in China. Clifford Geertz criticized Émile Durkheim for “parochializing” our understandings about religion. Intending to move on, he defined religion as “a system of symbols” (Geertz 1973, p. 90) “It is in ritual –that is, consecrated behavior”, he wrote, “that this conviction that religious conceptions are veridical and that religious directives are sound is somehow generated”. (Geertz 1973, p. 112) It is in rituals that the world of everyday life and the world of imagined are turned to be the same one. Or, in other words, things like ethnic identity, feeling as a part of a bigger society, or attitudes toward real life are produced and reproduced.

As their residential pattern is characterized by dispersed communities across Chinese society nationwide, the Hui people and their culture are diverse and varied. Islam has gradually indigenized through different patterns of inculturation, acculturation, and cultural innovation, resulting in the promotion of the mutual development of different cultures rather than contradiction and conflicts.

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Notes

- ¹ Han Kitab is a combination of the Chinese word “Han” and the Arabic word “Kitab”, meaning Muslim books written in Chinese.
- ² Sachiko Murata, William Chittick, and Tu Weiming published their interpretation of *Tianfang xingli* in English. See in the references.

- 3 Ikhwan is a sect of Islam in China founded in the late 19th century by Akhond Ma Wanfu. He traveled to Mecca in 1888 AD and was influenced by the Wahhabis. When he returned, he started a reform movement advocating for a return “back to Quran and Sunnah”.
- 4 Salafiyah is a sect of Islam in China founded in the 1930s by Akhond Ma Debao. He traveled to Mecca in 1936 AD and took back several Wahhabi books.
- 5 Chinese Muslims traditionally refer to religious authority figures as Akhond (阿訇), a Persian term meaning “teacher”. Typically, it is synonymous with the Arabic term “Imam”. But, in Xi’an, particularly in certain mosques such as the Grand Mosque, Imam and Akhond are two different positions. The Imam is selected from local Muslim scholars and oversees local rituals and customs, while the Akhond is an employed religious authority responsible for the madrasa, leading collective prayers, giving lectures on the Friday prayer, and providing interpretations of Sharia law.
- 6 The Xi’an version of the collection of poems includes 28 poems, each of which also has a Chinese translation. We cannot identify the original source of every poem, but some of them are very similar to the poems used in Hezhou (see the next section of this paper).
- 7 This is called the Bao-jia system in ancient China. The basic-level government under the county in the 1940s included “Xiang” (township), “Bao” (village), and “Jia” (group). At the same time, there was still another autonomous system at work, as these scholars observed.
- 8 The terms “old sect” and “new sect” in China are relative and subject to change over time. In the 1780s, Jahriyah was considered a “new sect” when compared with Khufiyah. Similarly, by the 20th century, Ikhwan began to be referred to as a “new sect”, with all the sects before it (including all the Sufi orders) being labelled as “old sects”.
- 9 The full name of this book is *Maulud al-Nabī*, which belongs to the Qadiriyyah Sufi order, said to be written by ‘Idrūs. According to professor Ding Shiren, this person is mostly supposed to be a Yemen Sufi named Hussein ibn Abdullah ‘Idrūs (Ding 2023, p. 352). A famous Sufi master of China, Sheikh Ma Laichi (马来迟, 1681–1766), the founder of the Hua-si branch of Khufiyah Sufi order, traveled to Yemen, Mecca, Baghdad, Damascus, and Cairo during 1728–1734 AD. When he returned, he took several books with him, including one copy of the *Maulud al-Nabī*. Since then, this copy of praising poems was used and spread throughout northwest China, especially among Sufis. We have no further information beyond these legends.
- 10 *Madāyah* is the title of another famous collection of Arabic poems in China. According to professor Ding Shiren, the popular version of this book in Hezhou is drawn from three original sources: (1) *Mawlid al-Nabī Sharaf al-Anām*; (2) selected components of *Mawlid al-Barzanji*; and (3) selected components of *Qasīdath al-Burdath* (Ding 2023, p. 347). We do not know exactly when and how these texts came into China, or who edited this version by merging different sources together. *Mawlid al-Nabī Sharaf al-Anām* is the main part of *Madāyah*. The author is supposed to be a Yemeni Sufi named ‘Ahmad ibn ‘Alī ibn Qāsim. The book includes three parts: (1) the poem begins with “al-Salām”; (2) the main components consist of *rāwī* (prose), *baytī* (couplet) and *jawāb* (response); and (3) the poems begin with *Da-zan* (the Grand Praising) and finish with *Wan-zan* (the Complete Praising) (Ding 2023, p. 347). *Mawlid al-Barzanji* is an Arabic collection of poems written by a Medina scholar named Ja’far ibn Hussein ‘Abud’l-Karīm (1715–1763 AD) (Ding 2023, p. 353). *Qasīdath al-Burdath* is so famous all over the world that no reference is needed.
- 11 It is said that the Prophet Zakariya was killed with a saw. Before he died, he remembered these three dhikrs. This is the reason for the term the “Minshār dhikr”. See (Ding 2023, p. 348).

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