

**Unmasking power dynamics
in ethnic literature:**

Chinese population is divided in 56 ethnic groups (*minzu*). From the nation-state perspective, an ethnicity is a clear-cut category: one either belongs to it or does not. In the domains of Chinese ethnic literature (*shaoshu minzu wenxue*) and Chinese ethnic literary studies (*shaoshu minzu wenxue yanjiu*), boundaries are determined by the ethnicity of the author or by the ethnic characteristics associated with a literary text. Ethnicity is hence pivotal in governing the classification of literary texts and canalizing scholarly debate. In this paper, I take as a case study the Hui, one of the largest ethnic groups in China, to challenge (1) the notion of ethnicity as a monolithic and clearly defined entity and (2) the mainstream approach of compartmentalizing authors and literary texts according to their alleged ethnicity. Instead of debating definitions of Huiness, I advocate for displacing the debate on works by and about the Hui. More specifically, I argue for a more comprehensive and flexible framework for the study of Hui literature that transcends ethnic and national boundaries; allows to exceed sealed ethnic categories in order to put authors in dialogue with each other; and emphasizes the constant mutability of ties within and among ethnic groups. The first section provides background on the choice of this topic. The second section surveys the mainstream trends in Chinese and Western approaches to Chinese ethnic literature. Section 3 provides a close reading of two texts placed under the “official Hui literature umbrella” which reveals an intrinsic heterogeneity in terms of themes, content, and style. Conversely, section 4 presents two texts authored by non-Hui writers, one produced within and the other outside China. Both of these texts contain concerns that are central to the Hui group. Taken side-by-side, these four texts open a window on the rhizomatic connections interwoven in literature, and blur ethnic boundaries. The conclusion summarizes the paper and suggests reconsidering the approaches to ethnic literature.

Introduction

“As a Hui writer, what is Hui literature for you?”

“Ah, ah... A Hui writer? I don't call myself a “Hui writer”... that's what they call me, I guess... and I am ok with that... I am a mom, have two kids. That's how I see it. And I write some stuff, yes. Do they call it Hui literature? That's up to them, I don't mind.”

This is the account of how Ma Jinlian, one of the prominent Hui writers, presented herself to me during a dinner interview in June 2015. I had come to Guyuan, a small town in Central

China located at the center of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, on purpose to meet her, the acclaimed heroine of Hui literature. However, with my great surprise, she gave little weight to “her ethnicity.”

As literary studies have warned us, the narrator is not necessarily reliable. Ma Jinlian self-defining as “primarily a mother” and downplaying her role of emerging Hui writer might in fact have been a cultural performance: being humble at a dinner table while entertaining her guests. In online video-interview and conferences’ talk Ma Jinlian provided a quite different perspective and advocated for the development of Hui literature. Nonetheless, her statement made me aware that defining a corpus of literature is all but a straight-ford task. Multiple interpretations and definitions coexist side-by side, even within the same age.¹ During the next two months I traveled around China, and met with thirty Hui writers, twelve literary editors and five university professors. To all of them I basically asked the same question: what is Hui literature? The range of responses varied tremendously. Some advocated that Hui literature must contain references to Hui traditional culture; some others argued that the author must be a Hui person; and some other combined the two criteria.

Despite the polyphony of opinions, the bottom line is that – as stated in the introduction of the *Comprehensive history of Hui literature*– “Hui literature is the literature of the Hui” (Yang Jiguo 2014: 7) The central question is what is meant by Hui? In the contemporary use of the term, being a Hui signify to be administratively registered as a Hui ethnic category. The criterion of “being a Hui” certainly holds true for anthologies of modern Hui literature and book series collecting Hui works. All these publications uniquely feature works authored by people designated Hui. In addition, the Junma Literary Awards for Ethnic Minority Writers 骏马奖 respects the same logic. Awardees are strictly categorized according to their ethnicity.

Scholars of Hui literature have assumed slightly more nuanced approaches: the central criterion to be classified as Hui literature is to possess “Hui characteristics,” which generally translates in portraying features that are uniquely proper of certain Hui communities. Another, kernel of the discourse – even if more subtle and implicit – is that Hui literature is limited to the Hui within the Chinese territory. What I am trying to emphasize is that one the one hand, the debate about the boundaries of Hui literature is vibrant. On the other hand, the top-down administrative ethnic categorization permeates the discourse of ethnic literature studies and it is taken as the central and fundamental parameter. In other words, all the debate revolves

¹Shanghai Communication University - Hui literature studies's conference 上海交通大学 回族文学研究 16 讲 视频教程全套 <http://baidu.ku6.com/watch/1181775035661623159.html?page=videoMultiNeed> Accessed 15 Oct. 2016.

around the notion of ethnicity that is considered real, tangible and definable. It follows that, as one of the 56 ethnic groups, the Hui should possess a set of characteristics that distinguish them from the others. Analysis of literary texts proves the contrary. Still, clear-cut categories are convenient, maybe even necessary, for the state and for the publisher's agenda. They have to optimize efficiency in administering respectively the citizens and the literary market. As a researcher, however, I come to the study of literature with a different agenda. My interest is to access those texts that open a window on the Hui world, despite of how they are officially framed, promoted, commercialized and distributed. In the following section, I sketch the historical development of ethnic categorization and of the Hui arrival in China, to problematize the monochromatic perception of Hui ethnicity.

Ethnic policies in China and Hui history

Chinese population is currently divided in 56 ethnic groups. Among them Han Chinese account for roughly the 91% of the overall population. The other 55 make up the remaining 9% (Gladney 2004: 19). This model of ethnic classification dates back to the 1950s when, on the base of the Soviet model, ethnographers and anthropologists were sent out to determine which groups were distinguished from the Han in terms of religion, language, territory and psychology (Gladney 2004: 76). The Hui trace their ancestors to Arab merchants who come to China in the VII century, and do not fit well with the parameters of ethnic categorization. First of all, within the Hui community faith in Islam diverges tremendously from group to group and from individual to individual. Second, the Hui speak Mandarin and utilize a set of distinguishable terms for certain religious festivals and for kinship relations. However, these do not appear sufficient when one considers that linguistic variations are common in China according to the region. Third, differently from most of the other ethnic minority groups, the Hui are scattered throughout the whole Chinese territory. Fourth, Muslim merchants once they settled down in China intermarried with local women. Consequently, any conception of "Hui purity" is deeply faulted.

Some scholars have suggested that the Hui are better understood as being split between two traditions: the Chinese and the tradition of their Arab ancestors (Benite 210: 410). Such view depends on the assumption that the Han and the Arabs are inherently coherent groups. However, both of these assumptions are problematic. Anthropological research has demonstrated that the Han are extremely heterogeneous in terms of cultural practices (Gladney 2004: 31). The same can be argued for the Arab ancestors of the Hui who came from the Arabic peninsula, an area that presents a great deal of diversity (Hughes 2013:

31). Hence, the Hui as an ethnic category appears to be more an administrative classification rather than a label applied to a group of people that presents inherently coherent features.

However, I do not mean that the “Hui” as a ethnic category is not important. Though I am attempting to frame the study of Hui literature through a new theoretical approach, I find myself in contrast with existing models – to some extent internalized – by both Hui authors and Hui studies. The debate about Hui literature is indeed dependent on the notion of a distinct notion of Huiness. These two notions where, to same extents, forced into a diverse group of people. Nonetheless, they became progressively internalized and they are now inseparable from the Hui discourse.

The deadlock of Chinese ethnic literature debate

The debate about Hui literature sparked in the early 1980s, with the advent of People’s Republic of China, and it has remained nearly unchanged up to the present. Ethnic membership of the author and ethnic characteristics of the literary work are central in the discussion about the boundaries of Hui literature. These two criteria are often interwoven. Still, when primarily considering the ethnicity of the author two trends of thought can be singled out. Hui literature is defined as (a) the literature describing Hui people and authored by a registered Hui person; (b) or as the literature that portrays Hui’s modes of life and characteristics despite of the ethnicity of the author (Ji Guo 1985: 35-6). From these two definitions, it follows that an author registered as a Hui who does not address “Hui themes” is not considered part of Hui literature. The content of the work is primarily over the designated ethnicity of the author. However, many works authored by Hui people are not discernable from works authored by Han people. Under which umbrella should these works be classified? Some Chinese critics solve the problem by placing them in a distinguished category: “Since many Hui authors have lived for a long time in Han areas their works weakly reflects Hui modes of life. Still, these works cannot be considered as works of Han writers. [...] For this reason, they can be classified as ethnic literature” (Ji Guo 1986: 35). As a whole, the debate about Hui literature admits in some cases that Han and non-Hui authored works can cross boundaries and be considered as Hui literature. On the contrary, works authored by Hui (and it is legitimate to extend it to the other ethnic minority groups) even if they don’t present “Hui characteristics” cannot be considered as Han works. In other words, the ethnicity of the author can be irrelevant when writing ethnic minority literature. However, an ethnic minority author cannot simply write “literature,” which is to say Chinese literature, but (s)he is confined to the subset of ethnic literature. As an unmarked category Chinese literature seems

to coincide with the literature of the Han. A power dynamic seems to be at play to preserve the “purity” of Han literature.

In addition to author’s ethnicity, the discussion around Hui literature emphasizes that Hui literature has to present “Hui characteristics.” Jin Guo lists four elements that constitute “Hui characteristics”: themes *tikai* 题材, ethnic nature *minzu xingge* 民族性格, ethnic style *minzu xingshi* 民族形式, and ethnic emotion *minzu qinggan* 民族情感. For most of these categories Ji Guo provides few examples. Themes refer to heroic Hui figures and to outstanding achievements; ethnic nature refers to the inclination of the ethnic group like being earthy *zhibu* 质朴 and honest *chengshi* 诚实 but also fierce *pola* 泼辣 and stubborn *guzhi* 固执. Ethnic form refers to the preference for certain literary genres; techniques of expression *biaoshi shoufa* 表现手法, ethnic terminology and recurring imagery as phoenix *fenghuang* 凤凰, peony *mudan* 牡丹, pigeon *yazi* 鸽子, lamb *yanggao* 羊羔, grassland *qingcao* 青草 and springwater *ganquan* 甘泉. All these elements are rather abstract and attempt to provide prescriptive guidelines for identifying Hui characteristics.

In the West, Chinese ethnic literature and scholarship about Chinese ethnic literature occupy a marginal role. Translations of Chinese ethnic literature in English are rare, generally supported by university presses. Research on written Chinese ethnic literature is also scarce. A recently published book chapter identifies the pivotal element for defying ethnic literature in the ethnicity of the author (Bender 2015: 262-3). Transposed into the literary realm, strict obedience to administrative categories results in the exclusion of all the works by non-Hui writers. However, as Bender notices, many complications arise because some authors don’t speak the native language associated with their group or, like the Hui, don’t have a proper language; intermarry between different ethnic groups; and because some Han insightfully write about Chinese ethnic minorities.

The spectrum of Hui writers’ literary production

Hui writers’ production demonstrates an extremely heterogeneous content. On the one hand, works like “Changing the water” are imbued with the imagery associated with Hui traditions. On the other hand, works like the short poem “I overslept” are indistinguishable from Han literature in terms of content, language, and style.

“Changing the water” is a short story by Li Jinxiang, an ethnic Hui writer from Tongxin, Ningxia (Li Jinxiang 2014). The story narrates the vicissitudes of Ma Qing and Yang Jie, a young wed-couple who has moves from the countryside to the city hoping to

improve their life. Ma Qing, the husband, works at a construction site while Yang Jie, the wife, takes care of the house. For a while things go well until one day, Ma Qing falls down from the scaffolding. Due to his injury he won't be able to lift heavy objects and ends up being fired. After many attempts, he finally lands on a new job as a janitor. He is really ashamed of his social position and grows progressively discontent. In the meantime, also Yang Jie tries out various occupations: vegetable seller, dishwasher, assistant in a hairdressing saloon, and she is finally drove into prostitution. At the end of the story, just when she has saved up enough money for her husband's surgery, she falls ill with some sort of sexually transmitted disease. All their money has to be spent into her medical treatment. In the end, the couple decides to return home. The story ends with the couple taking a ritual ablution.

The ethnicity of the characters is explicitly stated in the text. The incipit opens claiming that "The Hui people living along the River Qingshui "change the water" before they start a long journey" (Li Jinxiang 2014: 39). The practice of "changing the water" refers to the ghusl (Arabic: غسل), a purificatory bath, and it is a constant theme through the whole narration. Food practices are also used as ethnic markers and they distinguish the couple from the Han: "The food was simple because they were saving up, but also because they didn't know where to get halal beef or mutton. Han and Hui alike can eat vegetables that grow in the earth, but meat is a different matter" (Li Jinxiang 2014: 41). In addition, Yang Jie finds a job that is related to her being a Hui: "She had been a waitress and dishwasher at a halal restaurant for a while"(Li Jinxiang 2014: 47). "Changing the water" is an example of a literary text indisputably Hui because it is authored by an ethnic Hui and because it presents features uniquely associated with this ethnic group.

On the contrary, the classification of "I overslept" is more problematic. This short poem is about a person's experience with a small fish that just died. The language is highly allusive and it suggests a state of daydream:²

*I overslept,
The small fish turned on his side
I remove the weeds sticked in his dreams
All of the sudden the fishbowl is empty,
After all it is not the ocean*

² Imam Shan Yushun 闪宇顺阿訇

http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzlzODQ5NjAwNg==&mid=2247483926&idx=3&sn=1ad40e4047bbac046ab29fcec713f0e6&chksm=e939327fde4ebb69987997e494f3eac930504bdcca195f9a1d47eba6b1e759897b1a9002b866&mpshare=1&scene=1&srcid=0930zU9xHIQ2kldAx5vTpW8&from=singlemessage&isappinstalled=0#wechat_redirect Accessed 15 Oct. 2016.

*On my palm, I lift his corpse
I ponder
How to send it off
A drop of water falls from between my fingers
One head pricks through the world
From my hypnotic state, I perceive myself
Like a small drop of water
I mingle*

The poem suggests a state of self-reflection about the immanence of life; and its message is opened to multiple interpretations. It was authored by Shan Yushun 闪宇顺 a Hui imam who created the online WeChat public account “Poems of the Imam” 阿訇的诗. Despite being framed relating to Islam, the poem does not contain any feature that makes it distinguishable from Han contemporary poetry. However, instead of considering this poem as an example of sinicization, I interpret it as part of the spectrum of what constitutes. Three reasons stand behind my interpretation. First of all, the author’s is registered as Hui. Second, he posted this poem under the rubric “Imam’s poem,” a public account that he created on the WeChat platform in early 2016. Third, Shi Yanwei – a recognized Hui author, filmmaker and literary editor – has publically praised “Imam’s poem” has a new voice of Hui literature.³

As a large number of other literary compositions authored by Hui writers, “I overslept” is an example of a literary text that, despite being authored by a Hui, does not deal with “ethnic themes.”

Non-Hui writers

Works authored by ethnic Hui writers do not necessarily “utilize the imagery of local customs, rituals, material culture, and traditional expressive oral forms, as well as the regional environment” (Bender 2015: 261-2). “I overslept” is a clear example in this sense. At the same time, certain works authored by non-Hui writers – both within and outside the Chinese national borders – shed light on aspects of Hui customs and are insightful to open a window on the Hui world. For instance, *Beneath the red banner* 正红旗下 by the Manchu writer Lao She deals with Hui martial arts; “My grandpa’s city” by Yasir Shiwaza highlights

³ Shi Yanwei missive to "The Imam's poems" 石彦伟给《阿訇的诗》发来寄语
http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MzIzODQ5NjAwNg==&mid=2247483967&idx=1&sn=e2ee8d0e77576d63d25cb783e2b53eaf&chksm=e9393256de4ebb40315e853d1034329f1b28914eb527ceefbdf3b15862dcc9c2b04a3816d495&mpshare=1&scene=1&srcid=1006JVxYYxV4SKY5A39mXCfL&from=singlemessage&isappinstalled=0#wechat_redirect Accessed 15 Oct. 2016.

the ties between the Hui and the Dongxiang people living in Kyrgyzstan. Taken side by side all these texts deconstruct the current dominant framework deployed in Hui ethnic literature studies and invite to rethink how ethnic administrative categories applied to literature are not absolute.

In the semi-autobiographical work *Beneath the red banner*, Lao She (1899-1966) presents a Uncle Jin 金四叔叔, a Hui character that is a model of moral virtue and physical strength. The narration takes place toward the end of the Qing dynasty, an historical period when ethnic categories differed from the contemporary one. The population was in fact divided in five ethnic groups: the Han, the Manchus, the Mongols, the Hui, and the Tibetans. The term Hui referred to all the Muslim community in China, which are no divided in ten groups: Hui, Uyghur, Kazakh, Dongxiang, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Salar, Tajik, Bonan, and Tatar. *Huimin* 回民, *Huihui* 回回, *Huizu* 回族 are the terms used to refer to Chinese Muslim in Lao She's text. Hui as an ethnic category has changed its meaning. However, the Uncle Jin in Lao She's text is certainly a Hui in the contemporary. Beijing has in fact a large Hui community (Benite 2010: 118), Lao She during his childhood was friend with Hui people (Guan Jixin 1999: 327), and Uncle Jin's association with martial arts labels him as Hui. *Bajiquan*, *piguazhang*, and *liuhequan* are three martial arts carried on by the Hui (Wang Guoqiang 2015: 33).

Beneath the red banner is indicative about the relations between ethnic minorities in late Qing era. The first person narrator, a low-class Manchu, describes in a sympathetic way the Muslim community: "In Beijing, and perhaps in other places as well, no other group suffered more oppression at the hands of the Manchu authorities than the Moslems" (Lao She 1982: 117); "I could not understand why the imperial authorities got along poorly with the Moslems" (Lao She 1982:118); and "Uncle Jin refused to drink tea on religious principles. But this only made us respect him more. Everyone felt that although he was receiving an allowance from the imperial government, he was still a fine upstanding Moslem" (Lao She 1982:120).

Uncle Jin is also respected because of his physical strength and for being an extremely clean person: "As for Jin Fourth's physical attributes, in my opinion, he deserved at least the first prize in an imperial martial arts competition" (Lao She 1982: 117); and "As for his cleanliness, I won't even mention his clothing. He washed the chopping block on which he cut his meat so clean that you could see the grain of the wood perfectly" (Lao She 1982: 117-8). My mother added, "Forth Uncle, if I keep that teacup with a handle specially for you and

don't allow anybody else to touch it, would you drink our tea then?" Uncle Jin's answer was most appropriate. "I'll bring my own bowl tomorrow and just leave it here!" (Lao She 1982: 120). Ethnic characterization is conveyed also through food practices: "Moslems in Beijing were restricted to selling mutton and sesame cakes, opening small shops, or at most running a small-scale Moslem restaurant" (Lao She 1982: 118).

Lao She explicitly refers mutual respect and peaceful integration: "Except for a few special Moslem terms he used once in a while, Uncle Jin spoke just like the rest of us. He both understood and used Manchu words, such as *niulu*, * *jiala*, ** or *gege**** with perfect accuracy" (Lao She 1982: 119). Clearly at this time ethnic differences are already inculcated in people's perception: "When different groups of people are not in constant contact with each other, their particular habits and customs can become a source of mutual prejudice. But when they become good friends, one group's strict adherence to a set of rules can be a source of admiration for the other (Lao She 1982: 120).

Beneath the red banner is an example of an ethnic author including in his writing elements normally associated with another ethnic group. Since the novel addresses both Manchu and Hui elements, it can open a window in both of the communities and underline how ethnic minorities cohabit and intermingle in the same space. For this reason, I see the value of including works such *Beneath the red banner* in the discussion of Hui literature.

Hui literature is mainly confined within the Chinese national borders. However there are few exceptions. The most striking example are the Duogan, an ethnic minority living in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz. They leaved China through two distinct migrations. The first one took place in the winter of 1877, when Muslim communities in Gansu and Shaanxi provinces fled from the Manchu army. The second migration took place over a period of three year (1881-1884) when groups of Muslims from China decided not to remain under Manchu rule (Ge Weida 1991: 33). Yasyr Shiwaza (雅斯尔·十娃子) (1906-1988) was one of their descendent. Known as Soviet writer, poet, translator and scholar, Shiwaza was instrumental in the creation of Donggan language that is based on a Southern Chinese dialect and written with the Cyrillic alphabet. His ancestors were born in Shaanxi province, and moved to the Soviet Union from the Ili region in the 1880s, after the defeat of the Dongan Rebellion.

Shiwaza's literary production was recently translated into Mandarin Chinese and it is anthologized in two independent collections by the Hui writers Yang Feng 杨峰 (Yang Feng 杨峰 1996) and Ma Yongjun 马永俊 (2011). In both of the collections the common ties of the Hui and the Dong are underlined defying Shiwaza as a Donggan Hui writer 东干 (回) 族.

In the poem “My grandpa’s city” 我爷的城, Shiwaza nostalgically evokes the departure of his grandfathers from China. It is worth noticing that Shiwaza traces his people’s origins to Yinchuan, the contemporary capital of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, even if his ancestors came from another province. In so doing, he puts emphasize on the ties with the Hui people. My grandpa’s city” further problematizes the current debate about Hui literature. Shiwaza was in fact born in the Soviet Union (in what is now Kyrgyzstan), he spoke a variety of Southern Chinese dialect, and contemporary Chinese Hui writers have translated his work in name of common ancestral origins.

Conclusion

Ethnicity is a construction based on selecting certain features and ignoring certain others. Despite being a rather arbitrary category, it shapes the discourse surrounding Hui literature. Chinese scholars have proposed different modes of framing ethnic minority literature, such as according to the author administrative ethnicity or according to the content and/or the style of the literary work. I have argued that none of these available frameworks is suitable for the study of Hui literature. They are in fact too rigid and they do not allow to reflect the complexity of the Hui community. “Changing the water” and “I overslept” stand at the extreme of the Hui spectrum. The first text is immediately recognizable as a piece of Hui literature. The second text would not be recognizable as Hui literature if not because it is framed under the rubric “Imam’s poems.” The same is true for most of the Hui designated people. Most of the time they are not discernable from the Han if not because “framed” as Hui by their ID. *Beneath the red banner* is an example of a novel authored by a Manchu writer that describes both the Manchu and the Hui. Authored by one of the Hui descendent migrated in the Soviet Union “My grandpa’s city” frees Hui literature from the Chinese national borders. These four texts provide a glimpse into the rich literary production of and about the Hui. Only by considering the multiplicity of voices that make up the literary discourse, one is provided with the sufficient horizon to see thing in perspective and becomes aware of how ethnic classification is largely a modern construction. With this considered, I believe that ethnic literature should be reframed in order to highlight commonalities and continuous interaction that pervade literature.

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