

David R. Stroup, *Pure and True: The Everyday Politics of Ethnicity for China's Hui Muslims*

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As a historian who has a lot of distance from her subjects (they are all long dead), I sometimes find that ethnographers overstep into the lives of their subjects, providing too much analysis from one-time observations. At the same time, the methodological boundaries between history and anthropology often seem almost insurmountable, as if the two disciplines barely have anything to say to one another. I am very happy to report that neither of these remarks ring true with David Stroup's new book on Hui Muslims living in urban China.

Stroup does a fabulous job personalizing his subjects while keeping a professional distance from them. He also grounds his observations in history, rooting his research not only in the field of Hui studies but in the history of urban development in China more broadly (see, for example, Friedman 2022). His deep and thorough fieldwork allows him to draw from a multitude of different interviews from his four research sites (the Chinese cities of Beijing, Jinan, Yinchuan, and Xining) to make insightful and thoughtful conclusions about the ways that Hui Muslims negotiate the expression of their "everyday ethnicity" (27).

After two introductory chapters, Stroup divides his book thematically. Chapters 2–5 focus on different themes named after active verbs: "Choosing," "Talking," "Consuming," and "Performing." The conclusion and the epilogue tie together his observations and provide an ominous report on developments in Hui communities since he finished his fieldwork in 2016. He centers his analysis on understanding "how the complex interactions between changing urban landscapes and tactics of authoritarian governance influenced the daily expression of Hui identity" (xv).

In the introduction, Stroup argues that by focusing on urban Hui in four very different Chinese cities, he gets at the ways that "cross-cutting identity cleavages like class, region, education level, and sect" provide urban Muslims with enough ways to "express their Hui identity" without coming into direct conflict with the state (6). This isn't always the case though, as the authoritarian party-state looms heavy in the daily lives of Hui Muslims. As Hui navigate their status as one of the fifty-six state-designated ethnic groups (*minzu*) in China (with the Han being the largest), Stroup explains the peculiarities and particularities that distinguish the Hui from the other Muslim minority groups in China, such as the Uyghurs or the Tajiks.

Throughout the introduction, Stroup also offers historical context about the ways that the relationship between the Hui and the state have vacillated over time—at times being more congenial and at others being both violent and oppressive. This provides a setting for the current "de-Islamification" campaigns being carried out in Hui communities, as the party-state attempts to lessen expressions of Islam in public spaces by doing things like removing Arabic signage from shops and taking minarets off mosques. Yet, Stroup also shows how the Hui themselves sometimes underpin, and are often complicit in reinforcing, state-crafted narratives about the place of ethnic minorities within the People's Republic of China, especially if it proves to be economically advantageous for them.

Chapter 1 explains some of the ways that the current regime under the leadership of Xi Jinping deals with Islam. Stroup argues that because the state officially recognizes

the Hui as an ethnic group, the CCP can “assert control over the expression of ethnicity and reinforce narratives that downplay ethnic resentments or cause for conflict with the state” (35). In essence, there is an ongoing tension between the state-proscribed visions of what Hui ethnicity should be and the ways that the Hui themselves live in their everyday lives. By presenting the officially sanctioned view of what is both expected from the Hui and provided for them by the state, Stroup uses this first chapter to frame how expressions of everyday Huiness either conform to or diverge from state-sanctioned categories (55–57).

Chapter 2 covers how Hui express their own religiosity in their choice of marriage partners. For instance, many Hui living in urban environments make the choice to marry non-Muslim partners. For Hui Muslims, choosing a partner also relates to questions of citizenship, because their ethnic status is listed on their national identification cards. This means choices of marriage and childbirth are “linked to the survival of the group and to the transmission of culture,” because the state classification maintains that you can only choose one ethnicity, even if you are multiethnic (say, Hui father and Han mother) (55–56). Of course, in real life, these rigid categories are surmountable, but it still requires a degree of choice, turning “the process of self-identification into an ethnically motivated choice for reasons of self-preservation” (57).

Chapter 3 deals with the issue of Arabic literacy. The paradox is that most Hui do not read or speak Arabic, even though it is an important marker of religiosity among Muslims. This means that varying levels of Arabic proficiency are spaces for Hui to contest the religiosity of other Hui (86). Chapter 4, titled “Consuming,” deals with notions of Islamic purity and *halal* food consumption among the Hui. In Chinese, *halal* is rendered into two Chinese characters: *qingzhen*. The characters *qing* and *zhen* provide the title for Stroup’s book—“pure” (*qing*) and “true” (*zhen*). For Hui living in urban Chinese cities (where eating pork and consuming alcohol are staples in daily life), adhering to a *halal* diet can be both difficult as well as one of the most outwardly apparent markers for non-Muslims to identify them as Hui.

In chapter 5, Stroup addresses the performance of faith in daily life. He distinguishes between public rituals (which, as he says, “hold an important place in an authoritarian state’s toolkit” [112]) and private expressions of Islam. For many Hui, dressing is also an outward expression of religiosity, and the individual choice to wear a white skullcap (for Hui men) or a headscarf (for women) is a personal decision that can carry many different meanings. Overall, the chapters show that there are many ways for individuals to express their Huiness in urban spaces. This reader was struck by the ongoing tensions and contradictions for the individuals portrayed in the book about what it means to be Hui in day-to-day life.

In the conclusion, Stroup explores how the mass migration from rural areas to cities that has characterized China’s development over the past thirty years has altered “the way that boundaries of Hui ethnic identity are formed and maintained” (129). Stroup also notes that the contestation of new identities can potentially “present limited opportunities for disruption of CCP authority” (130). Essentially, migration is changing what it means to be Hui and could even be used as a way to contest authoritarianism.

The epilogue addresses the post-9/11 global war on terror and the illegal arrest and subsequent incarceration of Uyghurs (as well as other Muslims, like Kazakhs) living in Xinjiang and what this means for the Hui, who have until now avoided these roundups. Stroup also explores how the surveillance technology that is deployed to monitor

Muslims throughout China is reason for concern. The convergence of these two issues, he argues, might provide a catalyst for resistance against state-imposed categories, although I do not think either of us are overly optimistic that this will be the case in the foreseeable future.

Overall, the book is a welcome addition to the growing field of Hui studies. *Pure and True* joins an impressive list of books in the Studies on Ethnic Groups in China series edited by Steven Harrell. It is clearly written and easy to read, making it accessible to advanced undergrads and non-specialists. This is no small feat, given the complexity of the subject matter. Stroup deals with a difficult and potentially volatile subject in a professional and intellectually engaging manner. He also recognizes the limitations of his own research as a white, non-Muslim, American male.

Another strength of the book is the end matter, an aspect of academic publishing sometimes overlooked by reviewers. After the narrative ends on page 165, there are still almost eighty pages including three appendixes, a glossary of Chinese terms, notes, a bibliography, and a very useful index. The appendixes include a list of anonymized interviewees, a list of research sites, and a chart tracking the inflow of migrants into Beijing, Jinan, and Xining between 2006 and 2016. These details might seem small, but they both make the book more readable and accessible to non-specialists and show just how much research Stroup did to write this book.

It is also worth noting that this might be one of the last in-depth ethnographic research projects conducted by a foreign researcher in China about the Hui to be published in the next few years. Stroup notes that most of his fieldwork was conducted in 2015 and 2016. It would have been impossible for him to do the same research in 2019 and 2020 given the increasingly stringent political climate in China. Unfortunately, this book and a few others coming out this year (Ha 2022) might be the last deep ethnographies of Hui communities that we see published in the coming years. I hate to leave the review on such a pessimistic note, but I think David Stroup would agree with my assessment.

REFERENCES

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