



Performing Differences

Pitcherdom and Water-Testing the Vendors

This article discusses the role of a folk object, the water pitcher, in identifying the Hui, a Chinese Muslim minority. It focuses on three permutations where different social actors appropriate the pitcher to represent and negotiate “who the Hui are.” These include a staged dance performance, a folk custom, and a narrative about a wordplay. By studying the Hui, this research addresses the bigger issue of the ways material culture helps construct and deconstruct a group of people on national, ethnic, and local levels.

KEYWORDS: material culture—China—Muslim—minority—pitcher—Hui

This essay discusses an important element of the material culture of the Chinese Hui Muslim people: the *tang ping* water pitchers,¹ which have not previously been sufficiently studied by Western or Chinese scholars. The focus will be how the same piece of material culture is contextualized by different social actors to identify the Hui people.

Pitchers are used by Chinese Muslims, especially the Hui, on a daily basis. The most common usage of a pitcher is for performing the *wudu*' ablu­tion² before prayers (Figures 1 and 2). Normally a pitcher has a handle, belly, and long spout to pour water from. It can be made of metal or wood, or more commonly plastic. Smaller metal pitchers, mostly of brass or iron, can be made with delicate Arabic calligraphy inscribed—mostly verses from the Quran—and are used as home decorations. Most pitchers currently circulating on the market are plastic ones resembling those in Figure 1, and are manufactured in Linxia, a city in Gansu Province, China.³ This city has a large Hui population and is nicknamed “China’s Little Mecca.” The production of Muslims’ religious items is part of its local economy. As a piece of important material culture of the Hui people, pitchers are recognized by almost all the Hui as a sign of their ethnic group, and many non-Hui people can also link the pitcher to the Hui as a group or to one or two aspects of the Hui lifestyle, mostly food customs, as I will discuss in this essay. The pitcher as a piece of material culture therefore helps people identify “Hui-ness” in different settings.

Material culture as an identification strategy is studied or mentioned in works of economists, anthropologists, and sociologists, including Edward Grubb and Harrison Grathwohl (1967), Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood (1996), Arjun Appadurai (1986), and Daniel Miller (Miller 1998, 2005), to mention just a handful among many.

Folklorists have also focused on how material culture helps represent a group of people. Mark Bender (2008) presents how domesticated stock and crops are related to the Nuosu people in China. Dorothy Noyes (1998) analyzes costumes as instruments of autonomy among the *petimetre* (French bourgeois) and the *majo* (indigenous, plebeian) in Renaissance Spain. Barbara Babcock (1994) discusses how jar-on-head Pueblo women become a representation of the Pueblo Southwest. The study of quilt patterns has a long history in American folklore studies, and they are considered closely related to the rhetoric of regionality and ethnicity (Milspaw 1997).⁴



Figure 1: A plastic pitcher being sold outside the Great South Mosque of Jinan. It is dyed golden to mimic a metal tincture. The metal tinge is, however, not a necessary attribute on a pitcher, as many are simply green or brown and only have a simple plastic finish, as demonstrated in Figure 2. Photograph by the author.



Figure 2: Plastic and metal pitchers in the washhouse of Zibo Mosque, Shandong Province. Photograph by the author.

In the field of Asian studies, too, scholars entertain studies that relate identity construction to material culture. For instance, in a book edited by Marianne Hulsbosch, Elizabeth Bedford, and Martha Chaiklin (2009), material cultures of various periods, regions, and groups in Asia are analyzed as identification strategies. For example, Miao costumes and women's hair ornaments in the Edo Period in Japan are instantiated as identification strategies of those people in their spatio-temporal specificities.

Particularly related to the Chinese Hui's material culture, Maris Gillette (2000) presented Hui consumer behaviors that are used to catch up with the pace of

modernization while simultaneously outlining their Hui-ness. Ha Guangtian (2017) creatively relates Hui women's choice of headgear (used as hijabs) to their idealized lifestyles. Simple references to the Hui's ethnic costume (the "white hats") and food customs, as well as detailed analyses of them as representations of Hui-ness, also flood writings about Hui (see for instance Lipman 2004, Gladney 1991). Of course, these citations do not exhaust studies in this field.

In most of the cited works, material cultures are analyzed not only as "texts" but are also contextualized. In other words, what is at stake is not only the objects but also the people who interact with the objects and differently contextualize such interactions, as Miller (1998, 3) and Hulsbosch and Chaiklin (2009, 12) have rightly suggested.

This essay engages with preceding studies in that it contextualizes the *tang ping* pitcher as a piece of material culture that is related to Hui-ness. This essay features different yet synchronically existing contexts in which the single object, the pitcher, is highlighted to identify the Hui people in service of different social actors' myriad purposes, be it political propaganda, creating ethnic space, or verification of halal food. I argue that the same folk object or material culture, if contextualized in different performances, can serve various identification strategies to differentiate a group of people and (re)contour boundaries of their spaces.

The basic frame of this essay is to juxtapose pitchers that appear in real and virtual mediums (in particular stage performances and narratives), in order to demonstrate ways a single folk object could be appropriated by different social actors to represent the same minority group on national, ethnic, and local levels and produce multi-leveled narratives and performances about Hui. The national-level performance can produce a grand narrative about the Hui as well as arbitrary connections between the pitcher and Hui "identity," while a different level of performance fosters smaller narratives. As Sabra Webber and Patrick Mullen point out, in the current academic milieu "[t]he stuff of folklore does tend to be fundamentally counter hegemonic, a push back against grand narratives" (2011, 215). However, folklorists should be cautious that folklore itself could produce grand narratives and performances that need to be deconstructed and gnawed away. This essay is thus framed this way so that each level can be seen as a grand narrative or rather, grand performance of the pitcher, while simultaneously the performance on a smaller level challenges the grand one.

Data used consist of three parts: a staged performance, an observation of a vernacular custom, and a folk narrative. This research being about material culture, my analysis thus emphasizes how the pitcher is used, or is believed to be used, as an object within three distinct data points. The first one is from mass media, and the last two were collected during ethnographic fieldwork. In terms of theory, sociolinguistic frameworks including performance⁵ (for instance, Bauman 2002 and Webber 2014) and semiotics (for instance, Chandler 2007) are applied interdisciplinarily in the investigation of the representational dimension of the material cultural or folk object, the water pitcher.

A caveat should be introduced here. Hui and Han are state-imposed categories of ethnicity. But I still choose to use these two terms because, as my data

demonstrate, all the performances appearing in this article are to distinguish “Hui” and “Han” without a writ-large suggestion of further and more detailed differentiation under either ethnic title. I do not apply the terms to suggest an intrinsic and stable “identity” shared by groups of people, but rather only use categories of practice (Cooper and Brubaker 2005) recognized among the people with whom I work. Below, I situate this piece of material culture in three contexts.

PITCHER-ON-HEAD MAIDENS

First, I will present a stage performance from the 2012 Chinese Spring Festival Gala (*Chunjie Lianhuan Wanhui*), a “grand narrative” about the Hui and their pitchers.⁶

On January 22, 2012, at 20:00 o’clock, the annual Chinese Spring Festival Gala began. This annual gala is the peak of state-censored and officially approved cultural exhibition in contemporary China. It is broadcast from the Chinese Central Television Headquarters in Beijing to the Chinese-speaking population around the world, and it is also delivered in minority languages to cover ethnic groups in China. Reasonably, its reception differs from region to region, and in recent years it has been challenged by spring festival galas produced by local television channels. The popularity of this gala, however, does not really influence my argument, because it does not alter the fact that the gala is official propaganda and provides a specific context for me to study the pitcher. Despite its declining popularity, the gala is still something people would “watch” on Spring Festival Eve. Or rather, I should use the expression it is “being played,” because normally during Spring Festival Eves so many things are going on—such as cooking, gathering, chatting, and posting on social network services—that even people who choose to “watch” this specific Gala just play it on television and watch sporadically.

Showcasing ethnic diversity has been a “tradition” in this annual cultural exhibition since its first television broadcast in 1983,⁷ because the Spring Festival is such a harmonious and enjoyable event that all Chinese, including minority people, should celebrate it—or as I will demonstrate, be celebrated. One can always find at least one show featuring ethnic singing and dancing in every year’s Spring Festival Gala. In these shows dancers or/and singers, who dress in Disneyfied ethnic minority costumes, perform in order to amuse the “studio audience, who appeared to be largely members of the Han majority” (Gladney 1994, 96). Thus, the year of 2012 shouldn’t be any different.

At around 00:01 on 23 January, a dance show started. Entitled “Beauty in the Chinese Style,” it depicts various ethnic minorities living in China. At 1’4” of the show, the leading dancers were featured one by one. Since the dance lacked an introduction, it is difficult to tell exactly who is representing which minority. But one can still make educated guesses by looking at the dancers’ costumes. At around 1’47” of the performance, after a young Mongolian woman’s solo, a maiden dressed in blue and wearing a headscarf surrounded by a bunch of other headscarfed girls rushed out from the background, each one of them carrying a golden pitcher on her head. Their dance lasted for about 12” and was abruptly interrupted by a group of Tibetan boys swinging their long sleeves. The pitcher-on-head

maidens with headscarves in this show were representing the “Hui.” The performance is a clip of an original five-minute dance called “Golden Pitchers” (*Jin se tang ping*).⁸

As previously mentioned, exhibiting ethnic diversity is a purpose of this show. In this particular dance, the purpose is realized by the pitcher and the way it is carried. I rule out the possibility that instead of the pitcher, it was the headscarf that represents the Hui, because in China there are ten officially recognized Muslim minorities and women of any one of them could wear headscarves, but pitchers are mostly used by the Hui. How can we perceive the pitchers and their maidens, or the maidens and their pitchers, in this grand, state-sanctioned performance? A brief reading of this very brief, truncated piece of “performance” will serve for comparison with later analysis of a small, grassroots performance of/utilizing the same folk object, the pitcher.

The “pitcher-on-head girl” is such a ubiquitous romantic image that Chinese audience members do not have to be familiar with the theme of “Rebecca at the well” to find the scene exotic and Hui girls rural and close to nature. No evidence shows that Hui people have the custom of carrying anything on their heads, so that part of the performance only serves the purpose of creating artificial aesthetics and exotics.

These imagined Hui “Rebeccas at the well” together with the pitcher’s shape (especially the belly) and its function of holding liquid, feed the expectation of the alienating and eroticizing gaze of modern power, be it from the state or the audience, just as Barbara Babcock (1994) argues in her case of Pueblo women. They are images used by the state and appreciated by the audience to craft a homogeneous Other that is feminized, exotic, backward, and not like the Chinese majority, the Han.

The director of this gala, Ms. Ha Wen, and one of the choreographers of the original pitcher dance, Ms. Chen Liyun, are both Hui. This fact makes the artificial representation of Hui more acceptable or even celebrated by some of their co-ethnics. Simultaneously, when Ms. Ha and Ms. Chen, being Hui themselves, approve the exoticism, it only becomes more convincing to the Han. For Ha and Chen, to participate in a state-censored gala is also a personal performance of the political trustworthiness of privileged Others like themselves.

On the part of the state, to choose a Hui as the director, beside her competence, is a strategic performance of ethnic equality with the benefit of lowering the risk of being criticized as encouraging Han chauvinism and otherness of minorities. The inclusive way of rendering all “ethnic” dances under the name “Beauty in the Chinese Style” (my emphasis) is also a performance of a united Chinese Nation, or *Zhonghua Minzu* in Chinese.⁹ Furthermore, this dance is likewise the dancers’ performance on an abstract level, to promote their future career and monetary rewards. However, this multifaceted performance is produced in such a way that it is anything but a Hui performance in a quotidian setting: the Hui is only performed in a passive way. All the actors mentioned above appropriated the pitcher on stage arbitrarily in order to perform the Hui’s “markedness” (Roman Jakobson in Chandler 2007, 93–99) on the national level.

“Pitcher” here, although not a linguistic sign per Ferdinand de Saussure, is still “arbitrary” (Saussure et al. 1986, 67) in representing the Hui. No one denies Ha and Chen may be familiar with the inner logic that links “pitcher” and “Hui”

together. But a 12-second, decontextualized dance clip without any reference to the Hui's daily usage of a pitcher is not the instantiated "performance" where a group, here the Hui, "occasionally emerges," (Noyes 1995, 452), but instead serves an identification strategy applied by the state to represent the Hui by imposing a marker upon them from the top-down, just like placing the pitchers on top of the girls: an action that never happens in real life. Similarly, in the original, five-minute, full version of the dance, the pitcher is not situated in its everyday context either. Throughout the whole performance, the pitchers are either placed on the head, or held in hand as flower vessels. No audience member, if not previously informed of the Hui's relationship with pitchers, would understand what the pitcher is doing in this particular dance.

This depiction of the Hui pitcher is decontextualized, but it is at the same time a re-contextualization of the folk and ethnic object in a cultural setting dominated by political intentions. No explanation of the ethnicity supposedly suggested by the dances was available, and actually not everyone can read the costumes or objects such as the pitcher. Besides, the performance of Hui only lasted for 12 seconds. In a packed dance that featured many ethnic minorities, can the Hui's "beauty in Chinese style" really be appreciated by the audience? Moreover, as stated above, the Gala is not meant to be intensively watched, so the Hui, or any other featured ethnic group, easily slip by unnoticed. Therefore, I suggest that all the groups being staged are not differentiated but are considered as similar pieces in a jigsaw puzzle of "Chinese ethnic diversity," to holistically represent the state's titular tribute to its ethnic subalterns. The political, de- and re-contextualized use of the Hui pitcher was highlighted even more when the Chinese state carried "Golden Pitchers" to the international stage. On August 11, 2016 the dance was showcased in the Sino-Mexico Gala as part of China-Latin American Cultural Exchange Year program (Chinaculture.org 2016).¹⁰ In this show, as the audience included people of South America who, in general, have less knowledge about China's ethnic groups, the image of Hui and their pitchers became even more regulated by the state and driven by its political intention of showcasing China's cultural diversity. Interestingly, the name of the object was officially translated as "cup," a word that does not really convey the shape or the function of the object. This may be another piece of evidence that the pitcher's emic cultural meaning is not necessarily grasped or cared about by the government, which focuses only on its appropriated meaning.

What, therefore, does a pitcher do in the Hui's own quotidian, "small" performances that identify themselves and "gnaw away" the on-stage grand narratives about them (Webber and Mullen 2011)? In the following section, though far from comprehensive, I shall offer one quotidian usage of pitchers to facilitate a performance of Hui-ness, an occasion where the pitcher is used semiotically in relation to food, or the food prepared according to Muslim dietary rules.

PITCHERDOM OF HALAL-NESS

Different from its exaggerated and Disneyfied depiction on stage in the galas, in this section of the essay I present how the water receptacle, the pitcher, serves as

a daily sign¹¹ of special food customs in a social network. I also suggest that the pitcher, real or image, is a sign not merely for Hui food, but that it is used by Hui people to perform their differences, to negotiate a space, and to create a “Pitcher-dom” for themselves and many times also for their Han neighbors.

The Hui live in a society dominated by Han, whose major meat dish is pork. Understandably, they may well desire to mark their food as different from the Han and keep the Han’s food, pork in particular, out of the Hui space. Although the pork taboo or the halal-ness of food cannot be considered as the only reason for the Hui to mark a different space, they play a major role in driving them to do so. After all, “the primary distinction noted between the two peoples was pork avoidance” (Gladney 2004, 112). Understandably, halal food is linked to the Hui (and other Muslim groups) and vice versa,¹² while non-Muslims are traditionally not accepted in the business of marketing halal food. The pitcher therefore by default marks halal food, and thus the Hui too.

According to Bai Xueying (2009, 81):

Due to the common use of the *tang ping* pitcher in Muslims’ religious life and daily life, it gradually became a special sign of *qing zhen*. In towns or villages, most restaurants, food stalls, and snack stands run by Hui people have pitchers drawn or carved on the board-signs or curtain-signs with Arabic scripts.

(Translated by the author.)

The term *qing zhen* is the Chinese idiom for “halal” or “Islam(ic),” and it could be literarily translated as “clean and real.” For instance, a mosque is called a *qing zhen* temple (*qing zhen si*) in Chinese.

Akhond Wang Guanming¹³ of the Great South Mosque of Jinan City (Jinan Qingzhen Nan Da Si) has been a good friend and an important interlocutor with whom I worked for years and established intimacy. He also told me that in the past, Hui vendors used to carry cooked beef, lamb, or snacks on shoulder poles, and on one side of the pole they would always hang a pitcher. In the old days people used to hang real pitchers, but they also used images of a pitcher drawn on a piece of paper or a board to show their “Hui-ness.”

Board-pitchers have become more common these days (Figure 3). They are a common and functioning ornament in and outside a restaurant or on a vendor’s snack stall, to tell people that the food is halal, or prepared following Muslim dietary rules. In China, Halal-ness means that the animal or bird is not taboo according to the Quran, and is slaughtered after reciting *tasmiyah* or, “In the name of God.”

It is impossible to trace exactly from when the pitcher became a sign for halal food. What I can present here is the way these two are connected. The original function of a pitcher is to perform ablution before prayer, to bring “physical cleanliness.” As the ablutions are religious ceremonies, they are also a purification of one’s mind—i.e., to use a pitcher also brings “mental/spiritual cleanliness.”

The pitcher’s dominant function is thus cleansing, both physical and mental. As function gives birth to sign, the dominant function of the pitcher enables the pitcher-sign to signify general “cleanliness,” which is directly connected to “clean-real” food and the lifestyle of Islam.¹⁴ However, the sign’s (i.e. the pitcher’s) intrin-



Figure 3: A paper pitcher-sign on a beef stall. The Chinese characters on the paper board read “halal food.” Photograph by the author.

sic character of being a sign is not discernible until it is used to represent “halal food” (or Hui in general). Only a performance context can assign all the meanings to it.

Erving Goffman’s (1959, 15) definition of performance helps elucidate a connection between a sign and performativity. He calls performance “all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants.” Although the pitcher-sign *per se* as an object can hardly fit into the frame of “performance,” it has the potential for performativity. The action of selling food under such a sign or showing a sign in the first place fits his analytical category of “performance.”

Besides, although the “sign” here could be seen as part of the “setting” in Goffman’s sense (1959, 22), it does more than “setting” in that it actively influences the whole performance: only under this pitcher-sign can the simple action of selling food be related to Hui or Muslims. Without the semiotic meaning conveyed by the sign, the action of selling food becomes a different event that may have nothing to do with Hui people’s ethnicity. Therefore, the pitcher itself is foregrounded in performing Hui-ness; it influences the performance not as a setting that passively serves the performers, but as an object that performs itself.

Martha Sims and Martine Stephens (2005, 135) have illustrated the link between expressive culture (object) and the approach of “performance”:

When we read an *object* or practice in this way, we are...analyzing its performance—what it communicates actively to the world, both within and outside the folk groups that created it. (Emphasis added.)

For a pitcher-sign, the boundary between semiotics and performance merges when the sign is put up or shown, i.e. when the addressor of the sign uses it to influence potential addressees.

From the beginning of the performance, i.e., showing the pitcher-sign, the whole event ceases to be performative just *about* food (or where certain kinds of food are themselves synecdoches for Muslim-ness), but becomes *beyond* food, thus a means of performing ethnic differences and creating a space where social relations are embedded. When a pitcher-sign is shown, the idea of being different or marked becomes explicit and hard to ignore, and “it leads us to ask not merely what these forms mean, but what they *do* in a network of social relations...” (Mitchell 1994, 423; emphasis added).

Thus we can ask, what does a pitcher-sign actually do in real-life grassroots performances? Although a pitcher and/or its picture exist in both public spaces and private households, the following focuses on what it can “do” in public spaces.

Bauman states in his analysis of Bogatyrev’s study of the semiotics of folk costume in Moravian Slovakia, that “various forms of the costume available to members of a community are seen as a repertoire of communicative means for conveying social information” (1982, 12). Similarly, a pitcher-sign as a folklore form also communicates social information to its readers, although different readers have different understandings of what is conveyed (see Mannheim and Tedlock 1995). One needs to “delineate the ethnosemiotic frameworks of *participants*” (Rosenstein 2003, 139; emphasis added) in order to analyze a culture-specific rather than cultureless sign-reading, to allow various perceptions of the same performance of displaying a pitcher. The Hui people and non-Hui people can be seen as two different groups of addressees or sign-readers, with a caveat that they do share some understandings regarding the sign.

Pitcher-sign for the Hui

Hui people do not live in exclusive communities but rather scatter among the unmarked Chinese people, so on many occasions Hui and non-Hui share the same public sphere and are hard to distinguish from each other.¹⁵ A pitcher-sign can assist Hui people who are using it to mark a difference, to negotiate an “ethnic island” out of the public space shared by both Hui and Han.

Putting aside the possibility that signs can lie for the moment (lying signs are addressed in the third section of this article), normally, wherever the pitcher-sign is hung up, it claims that the users of this sign are from the Hui ethnic group, and for the Hui Muslims, to see such a sign may arouse their sense of belonging. Pitcherdoms not only remind them of their spiritual homeland, the Arab-Islamic world that “serve[s] as symbolic anchors for dispersed people” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 39), but they also offer Hui people concrete places to practice their own traditions (to use the term widely; for a discussion on “tradition,” see Noyes 2009) and construct a home-island in a space that is predominantly “Other”—i.e., Han.

This “homeland,” though existing in spaces shared with majority Chinese people, is but “ours.” Because in this “homeland” majority Chinese are relatively rare or excluded by definition, they are othered by the minority people, the Hui.

Pitcher-sign for the Han

For sign readers who are Han, the majority Chinese people, a pitcher-sign could appear as an arbitrary symbol of the Hui ethnic group—“arbitrary” because Han individuals may not be aware of the logic behind the connection between Hui and pitcher. The pitcher, however, becomes “an early warning system” (Schwimmer 1986, 366–67) more or less due to its arbitrariness. Between Hui and Han, two groups living together yet having different, even contradictory customs—such as pork taboo vs. taking pork as a main meat dish—it is important to know where the line is. In a pitcherdom, the ethnic becomes the spatial, and the spatial becomes the ethnic (appropriating Pred 2000).

Nonetheless, like the totem plants in Schwimmer’s analysis, the pitcher-sign “...as icon of identity, goes *beyond* Sebeok’s notion of identity in one important respect. For identity, as regulatory mechanism, is more especially concerned with *the protection of boundaries, with the disconnecting of spaces*” (Schwimmer 1986, 368; emphases added).¹⁶ First of all, as previously mentioned, it is impossible for two peoples to occupy disconnected and isolated spaces: they are always intertwined; secondly, the purpose of the performance of hanging pitcher-signs is not simply to declare “identity” or “ethnicity”; rather, the purpose of this activity is in fact to avoid potential conflicts between different behavioral patterns (Bateson 2000) adopted by different groups of people, in this case the Hui and the Han, or even to invite other groups to enter the Hui’s space with due respect.

Therefore, I suggest that the sign is declaring a “contact zone” (Pratt 1991), informing the non-Hui people that the codes of conduct in this space are different and they may adjust their behavior patterns when entering. For instance, if non-Hui Chinese people want to have food in a Hui restaurant, it is better if they do not bring pork products to consume in the restaurant¹⁷ or openly carry pork with them. If they want to cross a community densely populated by Muslims, they should be very careful not to carry pork overtly too.¹⁸ Breaking the rules, whether intentionally or not, can be considered as an offensive provocation.

Of course, for Hui who use this sign as a warning system, they too read their own sign as inviting contact with diverse customers and will adjust their own patterns of behavior to avoid overreacting to unintentional or inevitable offenses. For instance, I noticed that both Hui and Han frequent the market affiliated to the Hui village of my dissertation fieldwork, and some Hui vendors do expect Han customers not to understand Hui taboos. On 11 October 2014, one beef vendor in the market encountered a customer who compared the beef to pig-face. The vendor kindly told the customer not to say such things in a Hui market, but did not take offense.¹⁹

A non-Hui person could also read the sign as an invitation to sample a Hui dish, be it an exotic experience or an already accepted taste. For instance, in my hometown, Jinan City of Shandong Province, one can always find Han people gathering from early in the morning to late at night enjoying Hui food, especially barbecues in streets of the “Hui Community” (*Hui min xiao qu*). In the City of Xi’an of Shan’xi Province, the “Hui Street” (*Hui min jie*) has become a place of interest

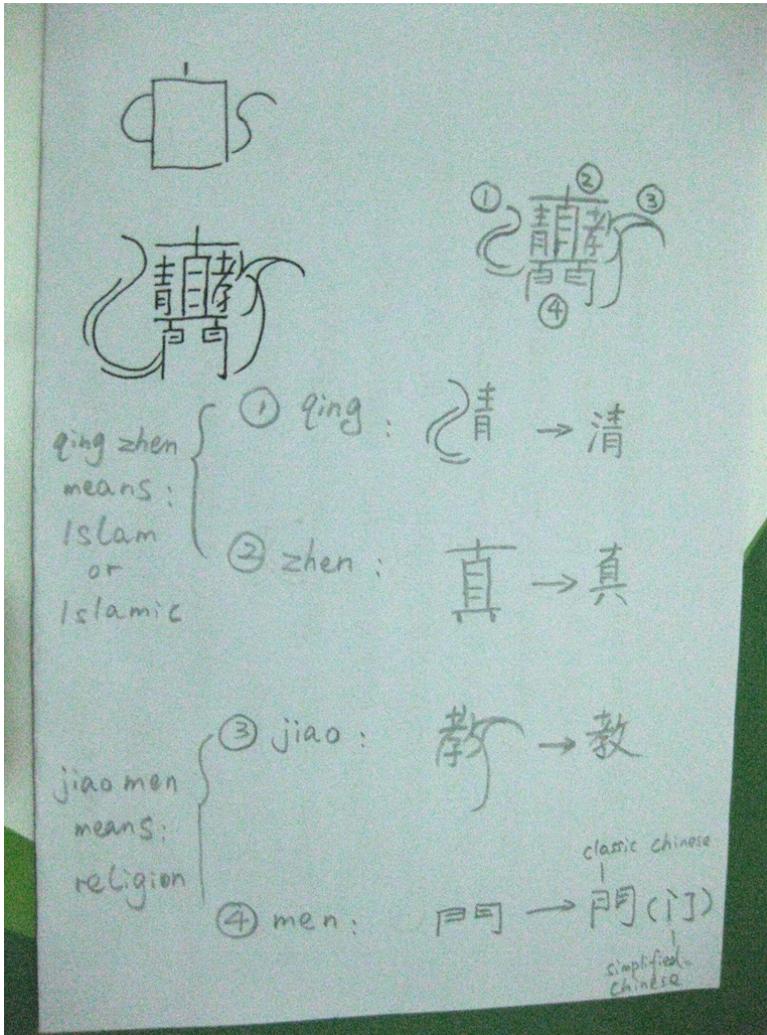


Figure 4: A pitcher-sign consisting of Chinese characters drawn by the author, following Mr. Yang He's description.

where tourists and local people celebrate Hui cuisine. A pitcher-sign as depicted in Figure 4 can thus become a guide to the desired food-site.

Therefore, for both Hui and Han, although the pitcher-sign can be used as a landmark, the boundaries it indicates are of fictitious and relatively vague “our” space and “others” space: people cross boundaries all the time. As James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta remind us, one cannot simply “map culture onto places and peoples” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997, 36). The spatial and the ethnic are always negotiable. Moreover, many Hui vendors do not have settled stalls but are peddlers carrying goods on shoulder poles or in wheeled stalls. So wherever they peddle, the pitcher-sign follows them, and the border of the pitcherdom moves with them as well. The Hui space can thus become physically movable.

A more extreme situation in border marking by a pitcher-sign occurs with a lying sign. Although the owners of halal food stands, carts, and restaurants are by

default Muslims and the pitcher-sign is used to show “Hui-ness,” there *are* Han people appropriating pitcher-signs and other halal signs.²⁰

LYING SIGNS AND TESTING THE VENDORS: DOES IT HAVE WATER OR NOT?

Everyone—not merely Hui themselves—who knows the meaning of the pitcher-sign could apply it to perform Hui-ness. Thus, the production and circulation of pitcher- (and also other halal) signs have never been exclusively a Hui, or Muslim, issue. In fact, the willing appropriation of pitcher-signs for the sake of monetary benefits is a phenomenon widely observed, at least in areas around Jinan City where I conducted fieldwork.

As mentioned above, most pitcher-signs are now printed, and printing as an industry does not guarantee that its participants are all Hui. Actually, even before pitcher-signs were available in large quantities thanks to printing, many Han had become familiar with these signs. According to mosque member Mr. Yang He of my hometown, some Hui vendors used to ask a professional storyteller, Ma Heyi, to draw them the pitcher-sign that consists of four Chinese characters 清真教门 (*qing zhen jiao men*), meaning “Islamic Religion,” because although this storyteller “was a Han, he drew this [sign] beautifully.”²¹ I do not mean that Ma Heyi was abusing or exploiting the sign, I only want to show that a Han can perceive, obtain, and even create a pitcher-sign that is supposed to belong to “Hui.” Nowadays, to perform Hui-ness using the pitcher-sign is even easier, because printed board pitcher-signs (see Figure 3) are available in stores near any mosque in China and in many “Hui” markets. Anyone can purchase such a sign.

In the summers of 2014 and 2015, Akhond Wang and another *akhond* of the Great South Mosque, Mr. Bai, both told me that even inside the market of the Hui community affiliated to the South Mosque, there are Han people sneaking in and using pitcher or other halal signs to sell beef and lamb that are not necessarily actually slaughtered according to Islamic rules. These Hans’ positions are secured by their connections with market or higher-level administration, or with their Hui relatives. No one really knows by merely looking at their signs whether the food they sell is in fact halal, or in other words, whether the meat they sell was ritually slaughtered.

Now the assertion that the “pitcher-sign is used by Muslims/Hui” has become another grand narrative that sweeps all sign users under the banner of “Hui” or “Muslims.” In order to break this grand narrative, Hui people introduced a more complicated and sophisticated performance to challenge the assumption, that is often taken for granted, that any sign user is a Hui qualified to deal in halal food. Therefore, an interesting phenomenon becomes observable, in that some Hui people not only perform differences to apparent “others” from different groups, but also perform differences to the seeming “us,” the pitcher-sign users. These Hui people question the space created by a pitcher-sign, and their approval of it is conditional and negotiable.

One piece of verbal art performed by some Hui people addressed pitcher-sign users in order to discern lying signs at another level, namely the Hui-ness or Muslim-ness in local settings.

This story was told by Akhond Wang Guanming (“W” hereafter) as we were having a chat in his office in the Islamic Religion Association of Jinan City, on 22 June 2011.²²

W: Some Hui people love to test people’s knowledge. They deliberately test the vendors sometimes. When they see that a vendor puts out a pitcher, they ask: “Does it have water or not?” If the vendor says: “Yes, it has water,” s/he understands [Islam], but if the vendor says: “No, it does not,” then s/he is a fake [Hui/Muslim].

Me: Well then, the pitcher here is a drawing on a board or...?

W: Yes, a drawing on a board. “Having water” (*you shui*) here has another meaning: we Hui Muslims express the idea of having finished the ablutions before prayer by saying “having water [on the body],” and one who has not yet performed ablutions before prayer says s/he “does not have water.” Thus, to ask whether the pitcher has water in it is to ask whether the food is clean.

Me: There are two meanings?

W: It is double-entendre.²³

Me: Yes, a double-entendre.

As mentioned in the previous section, a pitcher is primarily used as a water receptacle, so it could literally “have water in it.” This is the first layer of meaning in Akhond Wang’s narrative. By the water poured from it, Hui Muslims make ablutions before prayers, or “have water [on the body]” to use the local term according to Akhond Wang, and this is the other layer of meaning in Akhond Wang’s narrative.

This story offers a case of multilayered performance or interacting speech events. The first layer of performance is to hang a pitcher-sign. By so doing the vendor becomes the addressor in a performance or of a signification process, and people other than him/her become audience/addressees. The purpose or end of the vendor was to notify his/her prospective customers, Hui or non-Hui who celebrate Hui food customs, that “I have the food you want.”

However, troublemakers are everywhere. In this story “some Hui people” are active addressees, or more accurately, active sign readers. They refuse to act as ordinary addressees who are supposed to recognize the sign, buy (or not buy) the food, and leave. Instead of reading the pitcher-sign as an invitation to have some Hui food, “some Hui people” in the story nevertheless “key” (see Goffman 1959, 43–45) the performance mischievously as an opportunity to test the halal-ness of the vendor’s food or the vendor’s religious knowledge. The first layer of performance thus provides them with a motivation and proper context in which they initiate the second layer of performance: to ask whether the pitcher has water in it or not. Roles of addressor and addressee are switched. For “some Hui people,” the metaphorical question is shorthand for asking whether the vendor has performed ablutions or is familiar with “our” rules, and thus a test examining the vendor’s—now the addressee’s—qualification to use a sign representing the Hui people, and thus the halal-ness of the food.

However, as previously analyzed, participants of a certain speech event do not necessarily understand the same performance in the same way. Therefore, if the vendors were not familiar with the double-entendre, they would most probably read the question literally as “Is there any water in this pitcher?” and thus inevitably key the question as a joke and think, “How could a *paper* pitcher have water in it?!” They then deny the existence of water, and unfortunately, simultaneously deny their status of being a qualified sign-user in “some Hui people’s” eyes.

That is why I asked, “Well then, the pitcher here is a drawing on a board or...” I wanted to make sure that the question of “does it have water” would not be miskeyed due to a confusing situation: what if the vendor were using a real pitcher instead of a pitcher-sign? In that case a vendor probably would *indeed* put some water in it for drinking or washing, even if s/he is not a Muslim, because the pitcher can be used as a water receptacle in the first place without any religious meanings attached. Under this circumstance, when being asked “Does it have water or not?” a non-Hui vendor can also respond “yes” without knowing the double-entendre. Nevertheless, if the pitcher in Akhond Wang’s narrative was a paper one, someone could hardly think of delivering a positive answer if s/he does not know the embedded or hidden meaning in a pitcher. The second layer of performance becomes open ended.

The first layer of the performance, i.e., hanging the pitcher-sign, is an identification strategy to distinguish between different ethnic groups, such as Hui people and majority Han people, while the second layer of performance, the double-entendre, is another identification strategy that shakes the ethnic boundary drawn by the first layer of performance. Likewise, although both performances are about Hui spaces, layer one tries to construct a space for Hui/halal food customs or Hui people, while layer two tries to question the legitimacy of an existing Hui space or even deconstruct it. Hui people do not necessarily celebrate the existence of an alleged Hui space; rather, they are always ready to negotiate the boundaries of their own space, or a space seemingly of their own.

The meaning of the double-entendre, not as the representational relation of the sign, is a more interior knowledge. By asking “does it have water,” “some Hui people” assert that they possess a higher rank in the knowledge hierarchy: they do not merely know that the sign of a pitcher means “Hui/halal food,” they are also familiar with the usage of a pitcher as a water receptacle to wash before prayer, which some people may not know.

Nonetheless, on the one hand, a possibility still persists that a non-Hui vendor could possess all the required knowledge to pass the test, perform Hui-ness in both the extended and restricted notion of “performance” perfectly, in which case the double-entendre would not function ideally, and the performers could continue performing to their own advantage.

On the other hand, I argue that the double-entendre is a local vernacular knowledge rather than common religious knowledge, because the hidden meaning is based on a local idiom that expresses ablution by “having water.” Understandably therefore, if the vendor being tested *were* a religious Muslim or a Hui from other regions where “having water” only has its literal meaning, the double-entendre

would work in a different way: it would become a test of “are you from the circle in which this double-entendre is used” rather than a test of “are you a real Hui/Muslim.” And if the vendor being tested cannot give a satisfactory answer, misunderstandings may occur. “Some Hui people” might key the failure in providing a positive answer to the question as a failure in performing Hui-ness, while the vendor him/herself actually just fails to perform “localness.” Under this circumstance, the spatial would become the local rather than the ethnic.

Furthermore, “some Hui people” who are testing the vendors do not use other means such as the most commonly used greeting among Muslims, *as-salām ‘aleikum* (may peace be upon you),²⁴ or ask vendors to prove their Hui-ness by showing their ID cards. Although the exact reasons are unknown, I suggest some possible explanations. Above all, as mentioned, the second layer of performance was motivated by the first layer. In other words, the action of hanging a pitcher contextualized the using of the double-entendre: given the pitcher-sign is shown in the first place, “some Hui people” would naturally use a pitcher-related double-entendre to test the vendors.

Second, not every Hui person understands Arabic, so using the pitcher-related double-entendre guaranteed that even if the vendor being tested does not understand Arabic, as long as s/he knows about the double-entendre, s/he could pass the test. This, however, again confirms the localness of the test and dilutes its relation with Islam.

Additionally, the double-entendre is unaggressive. On the one hand, it could be seen as a well-intentioned joke bearing coded religious meanings, thus less likely to irritate the vendors than directly asking them to prove their Hui-ness. On the other hand, although it is playful, it could still be powerful and suggest a possible “aftermath” of failure in the test. The story did not tell us what happens if some vendors fail the test, but maybe they would be denied the use of a pitcher-sign, or the buyers just refuse to purchase from them.

As a folklorist I cannot ignore yet another layer of meaning in Wang’s narrative: education. I started the conversation by asking about pitchers and their uses. Wang, in his fifties, as an elder religious elite, may have well appreciated this opportunity to educate me, a young scholar who is interested in this folk and ethnic object, about the tradition, dynamics, and livelihood in the object, and warn me about an arbitrary reading of it. But as this section focuses on how people challenge the assumption that the pitcher-sign represents halal food or Hui spaces, I choose to put aside the analysis of the teaching relationship between Akhond Wang and me.

CONCLUSION

As a folk object the pitcher occupies an existential connectedness with many Hui people, in that it shapes their personal experience as being a Hui physically and spiritually on various occasions, and it provides food for thought for people identifying themselves as Hui or not, or even for fantasies about what is it like to be a Hui, as in the staged performance.²⁵

The pitcher is so loaded with meaning that people have to switch their readings of it according to contextual permutations, while not a single aspect of it should be arbitrarily privileged to represent Hui-ness (see Sahlins 1987, ix–x for “division of linguistic labor”). The pitcher is also useful in “spatial struggles” (Yang 2004) between Hui and non-Hui and among people who claim to be Hui, to negotiate a fuzzy-bordered pitcherdom facilitating all sorts of performance and counter performance, about what could (not) be done in such a space.

Of course, it is incorrect to say, as revivalists or purists may do, that “traditions” about the pitcher have been contaminated, or to “treat ‘folklorists’ own fantasies’...as transparent representations or transcendent ideals,” claiming that it is a tradition “foundational, closer to the ground of both cultural process and actor consciousness than are accounts of institutions or commodities” (Noyes 2009, 249). Because the pitcher ceases to be only “the Hui’s pitcher” since the very moment it is used to display Hui-ness, any actant,²⁶ including the state, the gala director, the dancers, the vendors, the Hui who water-test the vendors, Akhond Wang, and even myself, mobilizes and evaluates, but never valorizes pitcher-lore. On the end of the receiver, no matter how much s/he understands Hui-ness, s/he recognizes and appreciates some of it in the performance. As a folklorist, I make arguments about a certain performance, but do not judge its value and meaning to the folk.

The pitcher, like any piece of folklore, bridges aesthetics and usefulness; individuality and groupness; fantasy and reality; religiousness and secularity; past, present, and future; material culture and human beings; powerful and powerless; scrutinizer and scrutinized. As folklorists, we have to always be aware that the usage of folklore is not confined to one pole of any of the continua above, and any single performance seemingly prone to one side could address the other in many capacities, such as performing ethnic marks on stage ironically can betray a general lack of understanding of the Marked, and to hang a sign verifying Hui-ness could invite deconstructing verbal duels. Our job is to make these performances converse, not to simply celebrate some and ignore others.

NOTES

1. The character *tang* 汤 means “hot water” and *ping* 瓶 means “pitcher” or “bottle.” One folk etymology of the name *tang ping* for the pitcher, according to Mr. Ma Xinci, Chairman of the Great South Mosque Management Committee, can be traced back to the Tang Dynasty. He says that the pitcher was first invented by craftsmen of the Tang Dynasty and named *tang ping* (唐瓶), meaning “pitcher from Tang (Dynasty).” Gradually however, the character *tang* 唐 in “Tang Dynasty” changed into another phonetically similar character in Chinese—*tang* 汤 meaning “hot water”—thus the name *tang ping* 汤瓶.

2. The *wudu*’ is a partial ablution that does not require a Muslim to wash his or her whole body.

3. As the patterns of decoration and circulation of pitchers are not my focus, I will not elaborate on them.

4. These are just very limited examples of folklore studies of material culture. For more information, see Simon Bronner (1979) and Henry Glassie (1999).

5. The definition of “performance” in this article draws on that offered by Richard Bauman, who defines performance as “communicative practice” (2002, 93), and Sabra Webber, whose

notion of performance includes “events that...could depend on more than one medium and genre within a frame recognized by both speaker and audience as performative” (2014, 89).

6. See cntv.cn 2012a and 2012b for recordings of the dance show and the English version of the full 2012 Spring Festival Gala, respectively.

7. For example, in the 2015 Gala there is a singing and dancing performance, “Folksong from the Grasslands” (*cao yuan min ge*), featuring the Mongolian ethnic group (see YouTube 2015).

8. See YouTube 2011 for the full version of the original dance.

9. See also Dru Gladney, who states that “the state’s preferred slogan, ‘Nationalities Unite’ (*Minzu tuanjie*)...intended to encourage all minorities to unite together with the Han majority for the good of the country” (1991, 313). The Chinese term for nation and ethnic group is the same, *minzu*, borrowed from Japanese. So Hui is seen as Hui *minzu*, while at the same time belongs to a bigger Chinese *minzu*.

10. For a more detailed description in Chinese, see Ningxia 2016.

11. To very briefly explain my perception of the pitcher as a “sign” in this article: although a “sign” in semiotics was originally used in linguistic analysis which “brackets the referent” (Ferdinand de Saussure, in Chandler 2007, 16), non-linguistic signs within their social and cultural (to use these terms widely and wildly) contexts have been reclaimed from “Saussure’s rubbish bin” by scholars such as Roman Jakobson (Hodge and Kress 1988 in Chandler 2007, 100). As a folklorist, I am a believer that “folklore *is semiosis*” (Langlois 1985, 77; italics in original) and would follow scholars such as Victor Turner to “stretch’ [the semiotics of] language in the areas of *folk custom*, ritual and *material culture*” (ibid, 80, emphasis added), in the case of this article using the pitcher.

12. Of course, as I will demonstrate in the next section, this link is open to challenge. But in this part I will focus on the pitcher-sign as a default mark of Hui food customs and spaces.

13. Wang’s title, *akhond* (阿訇), is a Persian word meaning mosque clergies or religious elites. This term is among the Persian terms that are still used by Chinese Hui Muslims in their daily life.

14. A pitcher-sign could be seen as being positioned threefold in the Peircian modes (see for instance Chandler 2007, Deely 1986, and Ransdell 1986). It is “motivated” *and* not, and it is simultaneously a symbol, an icon, and an index: it is a symbol as it does not resemble any food but stands for Hui or halal food (customs); it imitates a real pitcher so it is an icon; and it is linked with cleanliness so it is indexical.

15. Even if there are some Hui communities, they are either surrounded by or adjacent to non-Muslim communities, and it is possible for non-Muslim Chinese people to enter the Muslim communities and eat in Muslim restaurants. The mingling of Hui people and non-Muslim Chinese people can be observed all around China, especially in eastern and southern areas. As Dru Gladney (2004, 152) observed, the differences among Hui who live dispersed in different regions of China “are far wider than their distinctions from the non-Hui among whom they live.”

16. I have Frederick Cooper and Rogers Brubaker (2005) in mind. Identity is not a necessary term to be applied in my research, because as a category of analysis, identity needs to be unsettled or simply abandoned. Here identity can actually be expressed with more specific terms, such as boundary protection.

17. For some readers it may sound unlikely that anyone would bring food to a restaurant, but this is not uncommon per my experience in China. When attending college in Beijing, I found it quite normal for some students to buy bites of food from different stalls and finally choose a small restaurant and order something just to secure a seat. I personally encountered pork bun consumption in a Hui restaurant—but I would restrain from telling the whole story here.

18. Two points need to be clarified here. First, non-Muslims’ behaviors when eating in Muslim restaurants are difficult to observe. Generally, Muslim restaurants welcome non-Muslim

customers, and the way people tell whether or not a person is Muslim is merely by costume and greetings—most of the time a customer is not tested when s/he wants to enter a Muslim restaurant. Moreover, in some places in southern China, a non-Muslim can even carry pork into a Muslim restaurant, which is intolerable in restaurants in other Chinese Muslim areas (Gladney 2004). Second, to carry pork “overtly” may sound strange to some Westerners who only purchase sliced and well-packed meat from stores, but in China, meat bought directly from butchers may not be well packed, and some people buy body parts of pigs such as feet and heads, which can be hard to carry invisibly. Of course, tolerance of pork differs from place to place.

19. Figure 3 was photographed at this stall.

20. Even without a lying sign, the link between Hui and halal food, which is often taken for granted, can be challenged. First, after mass-produced food such as vacuum-packed meat was introduced into China’s food market, especially after the spread of department stores, halal food can be mass produced and food with halal signs is no longer exclusively available in Muslims’ stores. It is almost impossible that all the producers or vendors involved are Muslims. Second, even for the food sold by Hui or other people who claim to be Muslim, there is no guarantee that the food is prepared strictly following Islamic rules. But as this essay discusses the contextualization of pitcher-signs, I do not intend to elaborate on all the other possibilities to question the link between Hui and halal-ness.

21. To see what a “pitcher-sign consisting of four Chinese characters” may look like, please see Figure 4, which is drawn by the author following Mr. Yang He’s description.

22. Wang was happy to share his knowledge about the pitcher, and agreed that I can use his real name and affiliation. I also heard similar narratives many times during my fieldwork in Jinan City. In WH village I also collected different versions of this narrative, from both mosque members and Hui store owners.

23. Akhond Wang used the Chinese term *shuangguan yu* (双关语), which means literally “a word has two meanings.”

24. In many Hui areas this greeting is indeed a test one needs to pass by giving the correct response, *wo ‘aleikum as-salām* (may peace be upon you too) in order to be allowed into a mosque. More detailed variations in pronunciation of the syllable “*kum*” suggest further distinction among the Hui, but this is another story. Interestingly, this greeting was also performed on stage in another year’s Spring Festival Gala as the Hui’s “traditional new year greeting” (Gladney 1994, 95).

25. Or as Bronner argues, “meaningfully incorporate them into their psychological and social worlds” (1979, 134).

26. A term coined by Bruno Latour (1996). It is used to avoid an overwrought application of the term “agent,” which suggests an arbitrary attribution of willingness to a social actor, such as the state. But this term does not deny agency of social actors that have no free will.

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