



## **Ethnicity and language boundaries—An empirical study based on the Hui people in Huhhot, Inner Mongolia**

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### **Abstract**

Hui people is an ethnic minority in China with a blood tie from the Muslim Middle East. They were not Chinese-speaking nationality/ethnicity in history. However, with their ethnic boundaries dissolved as the result of assimilation, Hui is more regarded as a “Chinesized Muslim minority” compared with other Muslim minorities in China. Linguistically, Hui is governmentally recognized as a “solely Chinese-speaking ethnic minority in China” with some distinct linguistic phenomena discovered by academia (e.g. few Arabic/Persian code-mixing in Chinese dialogue, special language taboos, a series of specific business jargons, etc.). Ethnic boundaries tend to coincide with linguistic ones. To explore the ethnical identity of Hui and its relationship to language boundaries, this paper presents an empirical study of narratives collected from Hui people living in Huhhot, Inner Mongolia. The finding suggests a pragmatic difference of Hui people with a wide range of corresponding Hui identities. Language attrition is proportional to identity attrition, and different proportion of “Chineseness” and “Muslimness” among Hui people contribute to the ingroup language discrepancy and identity crisis. The result of this paper could partly reflect the fading of old, boundary-based ethnicity and the rise of new, imagination-based state-defined ethnicity in China.

**Keywords:** The Hui people, linguistic boundaries, imagination-based ethnicity

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### **Background of the Study**

Social boundary, which is defined as “continuous zone of contrasting density between internally connected clusters of population and/or activity” (Tilly, 2015), separate “us” from “them”. The social boundary between different groups is continuously in its formation, transmission, and activation-deactivation stages. It is an everchanging social being. And according to Tilly (2015), the social boundary is also uneven in its different stages: “We live in the presence of multiple social boundaries at varying levels of activation and deactivation. And activation consists of an increase in that boundary salience.”

Rather than being a static boundary among demographics, people within the same social boundary in one activity may also be differentiated in various social boundaries when the activity is changed. In personal interactions, individual’s self-perceived identity would transform from one to another according to each specific activity they join. In Feuer’s book on

diaspora Jews in Canada, she found that based on specific circumstances, participants' self-identification may change among "Jewish", "Israeli" and "Canadian" based on their social boundary activated by each activity (Feuer, 2008). Ethnic boundary, which is the social boundary between ethnicities, is also variable in different circumstances which further relies on different interpretations of the term "ethnicity" by scholars.

As defined by Fenton (1999), "ethnicity" is in the central domain of "sociological imagination". It is the social movement serves for a specific motive, and it is also the situational relevant identity based on context. For example, by past research findings, adolescents may tend to compromise for an identity/ethnicity harmony within his/her social interaction compare to the other age groups. Based on Tse's research (1999, 2000) on adolescents' sense of identity by examining Asian American's narratives, people at this age group are characterized by "rejection of values from minority people's group" under the ethnic ambivalence/evasion stage.

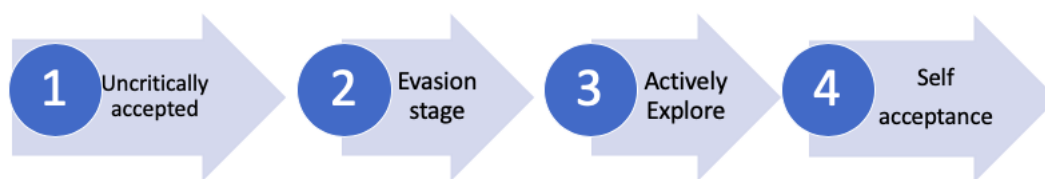


Figure 1——Stage models of ethnic identity formation

What is more, according to the research on American society (Holmes & Wilson, 2017), higher ingroup density and plexity within one identity group could also result in higher ingroup interaction as well as greater loyalty/self-recognized membership to the group. Ethnicity is not homogeneous among people who name themselves in the same ethnicity. It could be strengthened by dense ingroup interactions.

Before the rise of hegemonism and capitalism, ethnicity has already been established as the root cause of population differentiation in the west. In the process of decolonization, "ethnic identity" was also intendedly "activated" (Tilly, 2015) as a powerful political tool in contemporary society. Chinese people have adopted the same "cultural centralism" and using the degree of assimilation as an intensity indicator of the self-other boundary (Ma, 2013). Under the unified term "Chinese nationality", Chinese language played a considerable role in uniting and marginalizing each non-Han Chinese ethnicity.

Language is commonly defined as a system of communication used by a particular country or community and serves as a dimension to ethnicity. However, the relationship between language and ethnicity is not direct but, to some extent, paradoxical (Woolard, 1991). On the one hand, it has been demonstrated that specific ethnic language or vernaculars are contributive to the maintenance of ethnic identity. In Zang and Finley's research (2015), they looked closely to the relationship between Uygur language (language in Altaic family) and identity. By an empirical study about people's language usage in school, Mosque, family, etc. and their self-recognized identity in these according social settings, the paper concluded that "unique language is closely tied with their corresponding identity".

However, on the other hand, the profound assimilative power of the dominant ethnic language may also extend its corresponding ethnic identity. According to Tobin (2015), for getting more job opportunities and a better life, Monkaohan (using Mandarin Chinese as the

media of education in high school and prepare for Chinese-medium university) prevailed in Uygur students in Xingjiang Uygur Autonomous Region in China compare to Minkaomin (using Uygur language as the media of education in high school and preparing for Uygur-language-medium university). Students educated in Minkaohan showed less boundary with Han Chinese as demonstrated by his questionnaire. And compared to students educated in Minkaomin, they have a higher self-identification on “Chineseness” and a sense of belonging to “Chinese nationality”.

To the single ethnicity, the language may serve as both constructive and deconstructive power for its ethnic boundary. However, the role language played in self-identification is not decisive. Different from local Uygur inhabitants participated in the above two pieces of research, Mongolians inhabited in Tonghai county (Yunnan province) are migrants from exotic afar. They are the Mongol ethnicity (both state-defined and self-perceived) with Mongol-migrated-soldiers’ patriarchal blood originated from the Yuan Dynasty (1271AD-1368AD). According to the fieldwork, they still keep a strong self-perceived Mongolian identity although their language has changed to local “Luoluo” (Fu, 2014). The study not only demonstrates the importance of patriarchal blood in self-identification but also points out that, for identity recognition, the imaginary boundary (form) is more important than the factual similarities like language (content).

### ***Hui Ethnicity in China***

Over the past five decades, literature on Chinese ethnicity have witnessed much controversy on the identity of Hui as a special Chinese ethnicity (e.g. Hui’s cultural identity in the history of China, Hui’s self-identification after the establishment of PRC, the ethnical differences between Hui and Han, etc.). Some researchers see it as a conflicting ethnical identity with Han Chinese in both history and contemporary society, claim it to be incompatible with Chinese culture (Israeli, 2002; Atwill, 2005). Others posit a concept of double-identity “Chineseness-Muslimness” and emphasis on the successful co-existence of Islam and Confucianism within Hui community (Benite, 2005; Sachiko, 2000; Sachiko & Chittick, 2009). Still, others argue for the pluralism inside Hui group and call for the specific analysis of Hui people from different communities in China (Lipman, 2011; Gladney, 1991, 2004). Finally, there are also Chinese ethnic-policy makers who contend that Hui people’s identity should be seen as one part of the Chinese identity along with Han and other ethnic minority identities in China (Yang, 2010).

There is no widely-accepted definition of “ethnicity” in China, however, rather than employing self-recognition, China has developed a system of “state-defined ethnicity” and used it for a long time in secondary school admission, policymaking, selecting representatives for People’s Congress, etc. In contrast to the aforementioned numerous views on Hui people’s ethnic identity, there has not been much written about the development of “state-defined ethnicity” in the 1950s. It was started right after the establishment of the People’s Republic of China when the chaotic self-recognition of ethnicities has caused troubles. Three stages of “ethnicity recognition” was initiated (1950-1987) in protecting the equal rights of each ethnic minorities. It was once considered to be a pioneering working among all the nations. However, Professor Fei Xiaotong, China’s pre-eminent social anthropologist, once pointed out “Nationality categories of China has largely influenced by the similar ‘ethnicity authorization’ program in USSR” (Fei, 1981). Former Soviet Union uses “four commons” to identify different nationalities, in which Stalin simplified as “common language, common territory, common economic life, and common psychological make-up” (Tishkov, 1997). Although the similar

unsystematic anthropological approach used in China was considered “ill-equipped” (Gladney, 2004), its final achievement, which is named as “state-defined ethnic identity” or “state-defined nationality”, has restricted how people view their ethnic identity in Chinese social context.

Hui is the ethnic minority in China. According to culture adaptation theory, the unparalleled power and influences among groups, adjustment, conflicts even rivalries cannot be avoided in mutually “receiving” and “exporting” their cultures through cultural adaptation. In his book *The Dynamics of Cultural Change*, Malinowski specifically pointed out that the importance of “diffusion” for the “receiving group” as one instance in cultural contact. Come back to Hui people, as a majorly “receiving group” in Chinese-dominated social context, Hui people is the adaptive agent in absorbing Chinese “diffusion”. That is to say, culturally, Hui people tend to absorb Chinese “diffusion” by their original Islamic culture rather than the other way round. According to cultural adaptation theory, although Islamic proportion of Hui may in a gradual decline by receiving more “Chinese diffusion” and achieving a certain neglect of some Islamic rules, those who self-classified as Hui may not intendedly absorb direct-contradict ideologies like pork eating and alcohol drinking from Chinese culture. “They (Muslims) knew how to disregard all elements in one thought that would conflict with ‘the truth’ as established in their fundamental Koranic norms and precepts” (Bozeman, 1975). Cultural adaptation theory could help build up the macro theological foundation for the ever-changing shared identity of Hui in Chinese history.

What is more, negotiable as a Hui identity is in micro personal level, since over 99% of the population in Huhhot are non-Hui, their preconceived stereotype of “what Hui ethnicity means” may also influence Hui people’s self-perceived identity of “who am I” (e.g. overlapping or entirely cut apart Hui identity with Muslim identity. etc.). During the interview, informants showed their hardship in handling “two mutually strange and incompatible cultures” (Islam and Chinese culture) in other non-Hui’s eyes. One of them even tries to explain the irrelevance of “pork-prohibition tradition in Hui” and “Islamic believing” based on his understanding. For those who would like to accept both values of being “Chinese” and being “Hui”, such conflict might be a very common situation. Under Berry’s cultural adaptation model, such agreement on both mainstream and maternal cultures will result in “integration” (Xiu, 2009).

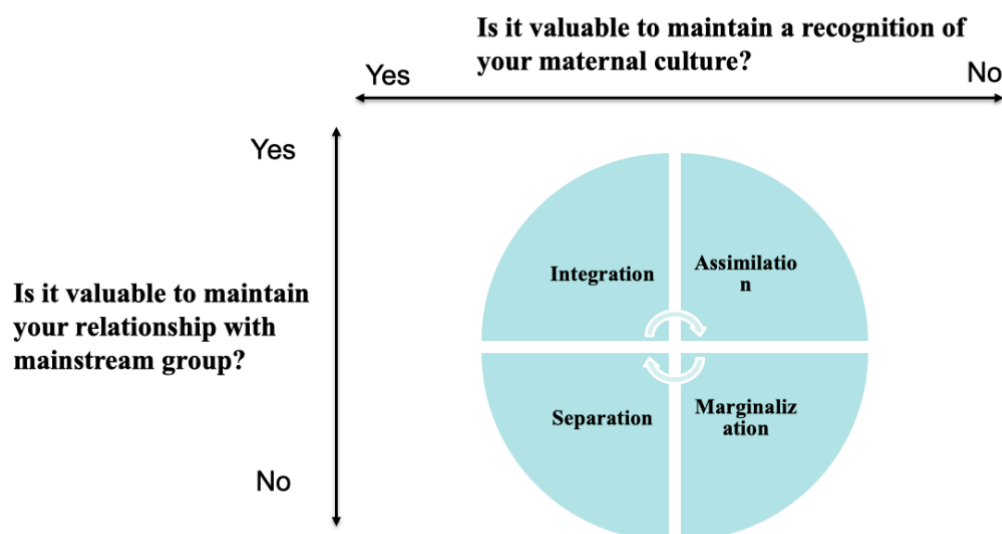


Figure 2——Four types of cultural adaptation model in 2-D version

Ethnicity has increasingly been regarded as a largely relational construct underlying social distinctions. It is partly inherited, partly negotiable (Stell, 2018). Ethnicity in China may have many ways of expression other than the “rigid, ill-equipped” governmental “ethnicity recognition” decades ago. Based on the previous researches on the identity construction (Glady, 2004), this paper may propose the construction of Hui people’s identity as a process of dialogical interaction between state-defined identity in sociopolitical context and the self-perceived identity as a notion of ego. Both sides of the Hui identity will be addressed in the following discussion.

### ***General Background of Hui***

China, a civilization rather than a nation-state, has a time-honored mutual existence of different ethnicities. Its widely dispersed non-Han population (10% of the total population) were classified into 55 different minority groups in three stages of “ethnicity recognition” (from 1950 to 1987). Hui people, an inherited Muslim ethnicity with more than ten million population and ranked the third largest ethnic minority in China, will be the focal point of this paper. “Hui people” in this paper mainly refers to the group of people with state-defined ethnic identity written on their Chinese Identity card.

By historical data from the Middle East (Israeli, 2000), there could be three trends of migration by Hui people’s ancestry from the 8<sup>th</sup> century to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest trend is recorded to be a group of Shiah war refugees who escaped from the area of current Iran and settled down in current Chinese territory. Credit to the prosperous business in Silk Road, later on, the second trend was a continuous migration from Persia (mainly by the land route, from 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> century) and Arab (mainly by the sea route, after 10<sup>th</sup> century). The third trend was initiated by the military force of the rising Mongolia empire. A large number of Muslim artisans, businessmen and intellectuals were recorded to migrate into China under the unified

Mongolia empire. Since Mongolian rulers have a high alert mindset to their long-time Chinese rivals, Chinese people were restricted in travel and in serving as government officials under Mongol's rule. And those migrated Muslims from the Central and Middle East either joined in the administration of Yuan Dynasty (1271AD-1368AD) or become the settled businessmen in this Oriental territory. By the time when Ibn Battuta arrived in China (1345AD-1346AD), Muslim communities where bilingual (Chinese and Persian) or trilingual (Chinese, Persian and Arab) out-comers inhabited have already thrived for centuries (Yang, 2010).

Hui's ancestry were considered to be mostly Persians and Arabs (Lipman, 2011), and its language was still recorded to be very different from other Chinese by early Ming Dynasty (around 1390AD) before the prohibition (around 1400AD) of "publicly using barbarian language" and "marriage within Muslim community" from the central government in Nanjing (Liu, 2016). Their environment-endowed bilingualism also contributed greatly to the businesses on the Silk Road (Wu, 2003). However, with turbulent Chinese history and discriminating policies against out-comers' identity after Yuan Dynasty, Hui people and their community were continuously forced to relocate into Chinese inland territory to transfer the fertile lands to local Chinese (Bai, 2004). Coming into today's situation, Hui people is no longer a "border ethnicity" in China. According to the national census, it is the most widely dispersed ethnic minority in China, with more than 10 million people inhabited in nearly every county of the nation (Shan, 2010). By the influence of different social backgrounds among Chinese provinces, Hui has also become "culturally inhomogeneous" (Gladney, 2004). Besides being "dual Chinese-Muslim in different composition ratios" as proposed by early literature, they may also share some common cultures with other non-Han ethnicities. In Minjia, a Bai (a non-Islamic ethnicity in China) autonomous village located in Yunnan province, Hui imams wore in traditional Bai dresses and spoke only the Tibeto-Burman Bai language (Zhao, 2003). Meanwhile, in a Malay-Austronesia-Speaking fishing community at Hainan Province, those registered as Hui in their Identity Card may self-recognized as "Utsat" (meaning "Persian descendants come from Vietnam"). And they speak a language called "Fai back" which is defined as a language from Austronesian family (Sun 2004). State-defined Hui ethnicity has a wide range of spectrum in their custom and language around China. However, generally speaking, the Hui people can still distinguish themselves from other non-Hui Chinese by "the rejection of pork, the common surname Ma (Mohammed) and Arabic inscriptions" (Gladney, 1996). As Muslim-Chinese descendants with blood-tie from immigrant foreigners, linguistic phenomena like Arabic and Persian loanwords, specific Hui business jargons and commonly accepted language taboos undeniably help in constructing Hui's identity (Sha, 2013). For avoiding overgeneralization, this paper will focus on the Hui community in Huhhot, Inner Mongolia exclusively. According to the local choreography, the history of Muslim inhabitation here could trace back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271AD – 1368AD). During the Qianlong Period (1736 – 1795) in Qing Dynasty, Hui population in Huhhot boosted due to failures of Hui rebellion in Shaan'xi province which caused a following Hui people's migration (Cheng & Dai, 2014). In the recent demographic statistic (2008), the population of Hui is about 30,000 in Huhhot which counted for 1% of the total population in this Capital City of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. Their communicative language is solely Chinese (Yang, 2015).

## **Methodology**

### ***Setting and the Participants***

As demonstrated in Feuer's research about Canadian Jew's identity (2008), Hui people in China also cannot be easily recognized by "face and skin" in Chinese social context since

generations of intermarriage with Han. This is an ethnicity only visible in Mosque, Hui community (space) and on a traditional festival like Corban and Lesser Bairam (time) (Gladney, 1996). That is to say, when activities are changed according to different time and space, Hui's self-perceived identity could also change accordingly. To avoid misunderstanding, "social boundary" in this paper would only refer to intergroup boundaries, specifically between Hui and non-Hui. The intragroup difference within Hui would be investigated with a method measuring "frequency of social interaction with extra-group members" proposed by Feuer. It is to classify informants into different social groups/spheres based on their visibility in the public social sphere (Fraser, 1990) and summarize interview findings by each classified group.

Under the abovementioned methodology, this study collected samples from three distinct social groups naming Jama'at (private sphere of religion with least visibility, Arabic transliteration, means "Muslim group of solidarity"), Hui inhabitants living nearby the Mosque (sub-public sphere with the middle visibility in Hui community), and Hui college students of Inner Mongolia University (public sphere with the highest visibility in education system) accordingly with three to four interviewees in each sample group (see Appendix A). For constructing a better understanding of Hui people's self-perceived identity and its relationship to the linguistic boundary, interview findings will be presented by their separated social and linguistic distinctions. Answers given in three different sample groups will interweave with each other for an all-round picture of the self-perceived identity of Hui interviewees.

Except for the separation of different social groups, age was also considered as one of the influential factors. For Jamm'at group, four of the informants have all retired from their jobs (over 55 years old) and with their children working outside to support the family. For three informants of local inhabitants, they were all middle-aged (around 40 years old) employed men working as teachers and government officials. And four college students were aged under 22. Among all the informants, two of local inhabitants and one college student were members of the Communist Party. Rest of the informants are nonparty personages. The limitation of the demographic of informants is that there was no female participant and the research is only based on males' perspective on their ethnic identity.

There are three fields of questions, each field was designed to have a few specific questions according to the social backgrounds of different interviewees.

1. Question on the identity boundaries between Hui and non-Hui. (Specific questions: Would you have some preference in choosing restaurants? Do you feel any identity boundaries with non-Hui? etc.)
2. Question on the language boundaries between Hui and non-Hui (Specific questions: Is there any specific language usage only happen in interaction with Hui people? Which language do you think of the language of Hui people? What is the relationship between Hui and different languages? If you have to define your ethnic identity, what would come to your mind first? Would you accept a son/daughter in law who is non-Hui? You may have different identities like teacher/father/Hui/Muslim, which is the 1<sup>st</sup> ranking identity in your mind? etc.)
3. Question on the experience of cross-group communications (Specific question: Do you have any difficulties in making friends with non-Hui? Are there any misunderstanding and obstacles when you communicate with non-Hui? etc.)

(Chinese equivalences of these specific questions were used in the interview. Translation, explanation and the reasons behind some of the questions were listed in Table 1)

The interview is carried out by the author, whom the interviewee considered as “Muslim fellow” (to Jama’at group) or “college student” (to Hui inhabitants and college students from University of Inner Mongolia). The interview is conducted in Masjid (Jama’at group), Hui people’s living community (Hui inhabitants) and in the University of Inner Mongolia (college students). Each interview is conducted in a one-by-one approach. Before starting the interview, all the participants have already known the topic of this interview. Specific questions were designed for each informant to help generate effective conversation for an interview. (e.g. For elder participants from the Jama’at group, questions on their self-perceived identity may specifically be related to their ideal son/daughter-in-law. For college students, this question is mostly answered by their manners and customs in everyday life.) Follow-up questions were asked based on the quality of each answer.

### ***Case study- Self-perceived Language Heritage: Tuodiao (Camel Song)***

Tuodiao (Camel Song) is a term used for Chinese written songs created by Hui camel men in the past 200 years in Huhhot. In the local chronicle *Huizu Shiliao (History of Hui People in Huhhot)*, it is listed as “a symbol of Hui’s language”.

Since the migration background of Hui people, they have a natural advantage (e.g. do not have land to cultivate, professional in cross-cultural communication, etc.) of doing businesses in commerce-restraining China. Huhhot, which located nearby the border of China, Russia, and Mongol, and have served as a long-time trading center since late Ming Dynasty (the market was established around 1572AD), is an ideal place for doing international trade with where are Russia and Mongolia today. During the late Qing Dynasty and the early Republic of China, Hui camel men dominated the international transportation industry in Huhhot (Xiu, 2009). These camel men developed “camel song” on their suffering journey through the Gobi. All the songs are song in Chinese without any Arabic/Persian characteristic in its written version. After reading all of the recorded Tuodiao in *History of Hui people in Huhhot*, I found that there is almost no linguistic symbol of Hui people. Table 4 is one of the original songs of Tuodiao from *History of Hui People in Huhhot*. I also attached my translation under each Tuodiao in Table 4.

Tuodiao is not spoken or written in a language specifically used by Hui. It is in Chinese. However, since it is created by Hui people, it is socially recognized as a linguistic symbol of Hui’s identity.

### ***Case Study- Specific Language Institution: Mosque Sponsored Education***

An informant from a local inhabitant group introduced me the Mosque sponsored education which was designed to preserve Koranic language (Arabic and Persian) in Huhhot. Mosque-sponsored education is supported by Zakat (Money obligatory donated to Mosque by Muslims) and it can be divided into two separated stages. The first stage is an everyday after-school public class for teaching basic Arabic and Islamic traditions. Most of the students joined this stage are primary school kids (grade one to grade six). The informant himself was one of the young students in class decades ago, and now it is his daughter who participated in the class. The second stage is more professional and only open to secondary school graduates. Students on this stage were taught to be future’s qualified Imams. This stage is designed to be a five-year-long stage, quite a few of the participants can finish this education but not all of the graduates can be a socially accepted Imam. The content of education involved 13 traditional Islamic religious books (*shisanbujing* in Chinese, which means “Thirteen holy books” in



English), and the students were required to understand “holy books” in both Arabic (7 books) and Persian (6 books) before graduating from this program.

The informant can speak a little Arabic and Persian words like “asaliamarlaikumu” (Arabic origin: wish you peacefulness) and “Nietie” (Persian origin: donated money) but know nothing about the grammar of these languages: *“My work has nothing to do with these foreign languages. I can’t remember all of what I learned years before.”*

Although Arabic and Persian will always be the foreign languages of Hui for the generations to come, the Mosque still plays its role in preserving the language of the past.

## **Findings**

### ***Social Boundaries***

#### ***Ancestry and History in Hui Ethnicity***

By the result from the interview, there is a significant demographic difference in understanding of the history of Hui ethnicity, and informants tend to talk about the recent family history rather than put it in a wider social and historical background. As previously reported by the local chronicles, Hui people in Huhhot are mostly war refugees from Shann’xi Province. However, none of the informants talked about this history in the past (It may credit to the small number of Hui subjects in interview). Instead of talking about shared memories of the earliest time of migration to Huhhot, informants gave their different stories of the development of their families and Hui community in their eyes.

For the elder informants from Jama’at group, they all mentioned about the prosperous Hui people’s business street at their early age (about 50 years ago). One of the informants was also grown up in one of the stores on the street, and he introduced me lots of Hui people’s specific business jargons used at that time (see Apendix B). This prosperous business street and Hui people’s mass occupation of businessmen and artisans certainly left them with a sense of belonging. Other than their early memories, informants from Jama’at group also intensively shared with me their understandings of the story of the Prophet Mohammad. One of them also said: *“This is the history of all our Muslims.”*

For the informants from the Hui community inhabitants, they tend to have their views of history mixed with the story of their families in Hui community (e.g. credit the “development of living standard” of their family alone with “successful ethnic policy” to all ethnic minorities in Huhhot). There was not a turning point of identity through their stories, and there was also no family history/stories clearly demonstrating their Hui identity.

For college students, their understanding of history is not very linked with Hui community. Despite sharing the same memory of joining Islam weddings, funerals and get bonus marks in high school entrance examination, their understandings of history were mainly unrelated to Hui community (e.g. tracing wrongly to the mythologies from Chinese culture or simply have no idea about the history of Hui).

And for the ancestry of Hui ethnicity, none of the informants could clearly figure out the time and nationality of trends of Hui migrants from the Middle East.

#### ***Islamic Religion in Hui Ethnicity***

Islamic religion performed as the national form for Hui people (Yang & Yu, 1995). But its influence is not homogeneous among informants from different social groups. For informants from Jama'at group, they were determined to rank Muslim identity as their first identity in social relations. However, for the informants from college students and community inhabitants, struggling on self-recognition was more prevail.

Food preference is one of the most prominent habits that revealing ones' ethnic identity. To my surprise, all of the informants shared the same taboos in the diet (no pork and alcohol). However, only informants from Jamm'at group showed a strong preference to Halal food (eat nothing but Halal food) and saw it as part of "religious believing". The rest of informants did not mention their prohibition on non-Halal food, and most of them saw the food taboos (no pork and alcohol) as a "family tradition" or "ethnic tradition" (see Appendix C).

Even shared the same view of "family/ethnic tradition", experience and idea differed between local inhabitants and college students. Three out of four student informants mentioned: "bringing other troubles" and "leading to embarrassing moments" when talking about this "tradition". One student joined in Communist party expressed his strong feelings in having this tradition, as well as his identity struggle: *"They said that a real communist should be an atheist. I am a communism atheist, and my food prohibition is just a family tradition – this is far away from becoming a Muslim."*

For local inhabitants, such struggle is not very mentioned since they most likely to cook themselves at home and buy raw materials from nearby Halal stores. Hui community provides a convenient living context in inheriting their "ethnic tradition" and it helps in keeping Hui's traditional lifestyle among themselves.

However, when asking about "religious believing" from local inhabitants, their answers were either "hard to tell" or skip this question directly. There is a, to some extent, representative paradoxical answer elicited from the interview: *"It is hard to tell whether I am or I am not a Muslim. I have 'Imani' (Arabic word, means 'belief'), We Hui people have 'Imani, but we do not need to be a Muslim."*

For college students, all of them simply choose "no religious belief" as their answer.

### ***Interaction with the non-Hui Group***

Based on the answers from the interview, informants from the Jama'at group usually do not make interaction with the non-Hui group. Their living context is mostly limited in the Hui community, and they have a dense in-group reaction with other members from the Jama'at group. To conclude the reason behind, I may use one answer from the Jama'at informant: *"We do not have much to talk."*

Strong in-group relationship restricts their interactions with people from the non-Hui group. However, for Hui inhabitants working outside Hui community and college students study in University of Inner Mongolia, frequent interaction with non-Hui is unavoidable. The social environment today has already changed in contrast with the time mentioned by elder informants from Jamma'at group where Hui people mostly live and work in Hui community.

By the demographic census in 2010, Hui people did not share much demographic difference in any working sector. Under the question *"do you feel any communication boundary*

with non-Hui?”, no informative answer was given from Hui inhabitants. Same situation also happened in college students’ group. In fact, under the question “do you feel any identity boundary with non-Hui?”, no informative answer was given from these two groups either. Since no ethnicity was reflected in their social interaction, there could also be fewer obstacles and misunderstandings happen.

### **Language Boundaries**

#### ***Similarities between Hui and non-Hui***

All of the informants recognized “Chinese” as their mother tongue. And except for one elder informant from Jama’at group with some local accent, no one complained about their intelligibility when talking with non-Hui people. Similarities in grammars and vocabs were not mentioned in the interviews. By the only complained informant, he gave his opinion on the similarity between Hui and non-Hui people in communication: “*Hui people used to pronounce somethings differently in my hometown (Wuchuan, a little town affiliated to Huhhot), but the citizens, no matter he is Hui or non-Hui, they pronounce things in the same way.*”

#### ***Differences between Hui and non-Hui***

Except for the widely recognized Tuodiao (Camel song), specific business jargons and religious codemixing, language taboos also played a very important role (see Appendix D). In the interview with local inhabitants, informants also mentioned about this linguistic difference in Hui community (see table 3)—Although there was no strict prohibition by external forces, Hui people established such linguistic rules within their social practice. However, the same issue on language taboo was not mentioned by college students.

Other than practical linguistic rules, Hui informants were also seen as a group with higher interest in Arabic learning compare to the average. It may partly credit to the existence of Mosque sponsored education. In addition to one inhabitant and one college student, all of the rest informants joined in first stage Mosque-sponsored Arabic education before. However, their pragmatics of this foreign language differs. Only informants from Jamma’at group claimed to use this language (majorly for pray) every day. And among all the informants, only one of the informants from Jama’at group is literacy in the Arab language.

Some minor grammatical differences and different pronunciation of specific words were also mentioned. But since it is not systematical and may also be influenced by local dialect, these findings would not be reported.

### **Discussion**

What is Hui identity? Practically speaking, it is an ethnic minority recognized by the Chinese government and written on Hui people’s Chinese Identity Card. It is a specific political identity which could affect the public examination and selection of civil servants (Lipman, 2011). No matter what people believe or behave, this factual identity will always play its role of “boundary” between Hui and non-Hui.

However, what is Hui people’s self-perceived identity? It is a “hard-to-tell” question and the answers may vary from person to person. Linguistically speaking, language and identity are intrinsically connected (Holmes & Wilson, 2017). From the macro perspective in history, Hui people’s language has already shifted from non-Chinese to almost sole-Chinese. This process echoes with Hui people’s changing identity from “foreigner” to “One of Chinese ethnic

minorities” through the past hundreds of years. With the constant attrition of past languages, Hui people’s “Muslimness” may in a decline in contrast with their “Chineseness”.

Based on dialogical interaction between self-perceived identity and state-defined identity, for Jamm’at group, their identity might be seen as a combination of “Muslimness” and “Chineseness”. For this devout Hui Muslim group, although the general trend of Hui is under integration with influential Chinese society, these Hui individuals could also assemble at Jama’at (a dense Muslim sphere) and choose to strengthen their “Muslimness” as an “inherited national form”. However, for local inhabitants and college students who prefer to use “family/ethnic tradition” to classify their different identity, their Hui identity is not based on concrete boundaries. For the non-Muslim group in Hui and most of non-Hui Chinese, they may choose to build up an imaginative identity of Hui. Take Tuodiao (Camel Song) as an example, there is almost no special Hui ethnicity demonstrated by lyrics. However, since it is socially perceived as Hui people’s work, Tuodiao helped in constructing Hui identity in contrast with the other non-Hui in Huhhot.

With the time goes by, three of the most distinguished social boundaries—religious believing, vocation in business and a dense Hui community—have all inevitably in decline by the trend of integration/assimilation. The boundary of Hui, except for the state-defined identity, could only become vaguer and more obscure compared to the past. It is questionable whether the imagine-based boundary could still effectively tie the relationship among Hui with the time goes by. And it is also questionable whether the state-defined identity would keep unwavering and become one of the few remaining sources of self-identification in future’s Hui community.

The future of Hui people’s language may still be unforeseeable. There could be two different possible predictions. Firstly, thorough assimilation is likely to happen when the factual ethnical content is no longer recognized. Base on the analysis and accommodation theory (Giles, Mulac, Bradac & Johnson, 1987), boundary of “Muslimness” can be hardly strengthened by underpopulated Muslim groups. The specific language phenomenon of Hui may continue its decline. Secondly, as Verkuyten (2007) mentioned, Identification establishes a psychological link between the individual and the group. As soon as people accepted their state-defined ethnicity, the sense of belonging will become their basis for thinking, feeling and acting. Since Hui identity has already been identified as a factual political identity, this ethnicity will always be the basis of Hui people’s identity in the future. The imaginary boundary (form) is more important than the factual similarities (content). (Fu, 2014). Small linguistic differences like Tuodiao (Camel Song) and language taboos could be further raised as “characteristics of Hui’s language”. Such language phenomena may perform as future’s symbol of Hui’s specific ethnicity.

## **Conclusion**

As Chinese-Muslims, Hui people use Chinese as communication language and Arabic/Persian terms as a cultural inheritance. The pragmatic differences within Hui group echo with a wide range of Hui people's identity in Huhhot. If Chinese identity dominated the self-recognition, non-Chinese linguistic phenomena (Arabic, Persian and other language reflecting Hui’s ethnicity) will disappear. On the contrary, if Muslim identity dominated the self-recognition, non-Chinese linguistic phenomena will be used more frequently. By the findings from the interview, Hui's pragmatics and identity serve more like a continuum rather than a dichotomy in all groups.

What is more, within Hui community, small linguistic differences (e.g. language taboo, some Arabic/Persian terms from Islamic religion, Tuodiao, etc.) played a major role in

distinguishing “self-and-others”. As a less-factual-more-imaginative community, unique language characteristics (e.g. Arabic/Persian codemixing, Hui business terms, etc.) is closely tied with Hui’s corresponding identity as hypothesized in the introduction. In the future, the linguistic boundary may serve a small-but-important role for Hui’s self-recognition.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A. Interview Questions

Table 1. Specific questions used in interview

English	Chinese equivalence	Reason
If I say “there is no identity boundary between Hui people and Han people”, do you agree with it?	你是否同意“回族和汉族之间没有民族身份的区隔”？（没有自我与他者的区别？）	“ <b>Identity boundary</b> ” is translated as “ <b>identity boundaries in nationality</b> ” for making the meaning clear. “Self-other differentiation” is used as a further explanation according to <b>Reference 8</b> in which “ <b>identity boundary</b> ” was defined as “self-other differentiation”. (Hall, 1994. Who does the language belong to P 11)
If I say “there are language boundaries between Hui people and Han people”, do you agree with it?	你是否同意“回族和汉族之间有语言上不能互通的地方”？	“ <b>Language boundaries</b> ” is translated as “ <b>language unintelligibility</b> ” for better understanding according to <b>Reference 9</b> in which “Language boundaries” was defined as “intelligibility between languages”.
Do you think Hui people's language usage in daily life is different from Han people?	你是否认为回族的日常语言使用与汉族不同呢？	Direct translation
How do you think of the language of Hui people? What is the relationship between Hui and different languages? (Arabic, Persian, Mandarin Chinese, local dialect)	你怎样看待回族语言？回族语言和其他语言之间有什么关系吗？（阿拉伯语，波斯语，普通话，中国地方方言）	Direct translation
If you have to define your ethnic identity,	如果要你定义自己的民族身	Direct translation



what would come to your mind first?	份, 你认为排在第一的是哪种身份?	
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## Appendix B. Hui Business Jargons

Table 2. Hui business jargons (colloquial language without written version)

Hui business terms	Chinese equivalent	English
Liur	一	one
Chua	二	two
Pin	三	three
Xia	四	four
Guai	五	five
Che hur	撤退	withdraw
Lan za	吃饭	eating
Gai la-er	男人们	men
Mieter	女人们	women

## Appendix C. Language Taboos

Table 3. Language Taboos

Type	Forbidden word	Replaced by	Reason
Belief	信仰 (belief)	伊玛尼 (Imani)	“信仰/Belief” cannot specifically refer to Islamic belief
Belief	天 (Sky)	安拉/胡达 Allah (Arabic) /Huda (Persian)	“天/Sky” cannot specifically refer to “Allah”
Funeral	死 (die)	口唤 (free translation to “Idhn”, which means “agree” in Arabic)	“死/die” cannot refer to the Islamic view of life and death.  It can be very offensive to say “死/die” at Muslim funeral
Funeral	遗体 (body)	亡人 (transliteration of “Mayyit”)	“遗体/body” is only used by Han Chinese and it cannot refer to the Islamic view of life and death.  It can be very offensive to say “遗体/body” at Muslim funeral
Food	猪肉 (Pork)	大肉 (“big meat” in Chinese)	“猪肉Pork” is considered to be dirty

			in the Islamic religion. For avoiding mentioning this taboo, “大肉/big meat” was invented.
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#### Appendix D. Excerpts of Tuodiao (Camel Song)

**Table 4. Excerpts of Tuodiao (Camel Song)**

Chinese	English translation
拉骆驼路程歌（节选）	One the road with camel song (excerpt)
自幼儿长大在归绥地面，	Grow up at Huhhot
上有老下有小的度日如年。	With a heavy family burden, everyday feels more like a year
天遭旱地遭荒黎民受难，	The drought damaged the farmland, we are all suffering
无奈何我拉驼要去远边。	I have to become a far-leaving camel man without any choice.
叫媳妇昼夜里缝补衣衫，	Call my wife to sew the shirt day and night
起程时带毛袜又套铁鞋。	Stocking and shoes should also be well-knit when I leave.

Chinese	English
叹十声（节选）	ten times sigh (excepts)
拉骆驼起五更苦不过第一声，	Leave at 3 am, camel men have the first-bit sigh
撇父母和妻子给人家拉长绳。	Abandon the family for a camel-leaving
走一趟新疆省就得几个月，	Months ahead before reaching Xingjiang Province
一路平安不出事来回一年整。	One year ahead before coming back, if we still alive
咿呀诶。	Yi Ya Ei (Interjection)
拉骆驼起五更苦不过第二声，	Leave at 3 am, camel men have the second-bit sigh
一起程出家门全家都揪心。	The whole family were worried about me from afar
遇官兵来缠扰那是平常事，	Not be stalked by the officers and soldiers, although it is common
遇土匪抢东西有时把命送。	Not be robbed by the bandits, it may get my life doomed
咿呀诶。	Yi Ya Ei (Interjection)

Extract from: “*Tuodiao*” *Chukao* (Dai, 2009)