

Communal Secularization in a Secularist State:

Religious Change among Hui Muslims in Northwest China since the 1990s

One scene that struck me the most in my ethnography of Hui Muslim communities in northwest China was a local mosque in Ningxia I visited with my informants: while keeping the second floor for religious use, the “mix-use” mosque, had its first floor converted to a private-owned carwash. Although such “semi-conversion” of the mosque as an extreme example of the secularization process in Ningxia is not common during my ethnography, it would have been very hard to imagine the scene just eight decades ago. In his book *The Northwest Corner of China*, Fan (1936: 190) depicted a contrasting image of the religiosity of Hui Muslims in Ningxia as exceedingly pious, performing strict religious observance of prohibitions against the use of opium. “Most Hui are strong and did not addict to opium, while Han people are the opposite.....all social classes smoked the narcotic, consuming one-half of Ningxia’s yearly output of 499,875 pounds”. However, ironically, in 2001, a county with the highest proportion of Hui population in Ningxia, was listed by the government as one of the 13 “main counties of drug crimes” in China (Ma 2009).

While I was in shock of the bizarre and somehow offending reconciliation of sacred and profane spaces represented by the converted mosque, one of my Muslim informants next to me commented in a resigned tone, “they have sold their belief for money”. From one perspective, this succinct sentence seems to be able to summarize the whole story of the secularization process of Hui Muslims in Ningxia, and to some extent, fit well with the orthodox secularization theories of the 1960s which emphasis the link between the decline of religion and modernity.

With the opening of the Chinese economy since the 1980s, a radical modernization process has first made its way in the coastal and urban areas, and then, while a little bit late, it did not miss

the rest vast inner land and rural areas in the end. Being part of the inner land with a low level of urbanization, Ningxia, as a minority ethnicity autonomous region with Islamic heritage, also experienced its rapid urbanization along with increasing migration flows of rural population to those relatively affluent areas with more cities and economic opportunities since the 1990s. In this process, the authority of Islam for the Hui Muslims in their social life has started to be challenged by a new ideology that upholds a nationwide “atypical” neither-socialist-nor-capitalist modernization process in a non-Western society: materialism, through their contacts with a non-Muslim world outside their communities, and even gradually becoming part of the outside world, both physically and subjectively. On the other hand, the converted building was still in the shape of a mosque, rather than a carwash. Precisely speaking, the carwash business was “embedded” in the mosque. In this sense, the mosque epitomizes the secularization process of the Hui Muslim communities. While the ideology of materialism and other market forces have intruded into the social space previously under religious control or influence, Islam still has its explicit impact on the social life of the local Muslim communities, and moreover, shapes the very secularization process of itself.

Regardless of all the debates about secularization theories and “how much the terms of the secularization debate have shifted since the late 1960s” (Gorski and Altınordu 2008: 57), the secularization thesis came into being in the field of sociology as a thesis not only on religion, but also on modernity, and the complex dynamics between the two “grand” sociological themes. And almost all the secularization theories derived from the “orthodox” theories in the late 1960s have merely further explicated the various forms of the existence/remnants of religion in different kinds of modern societies. Besides, most of the prior secularization studies only focused on either the Christians or the non-Christian religious immigrants in the historically Christian Western societies.

Meanwhile, more and more scholars have realized the complexities and varieties of both secularity and secularization in different social environments, due to the “cross-national variability of historical contingency of the secularization process” (Gorski and Altinordu 2008: 59). Despite the growing interest in the multiple secularities (Wohlrab-Sahr and Burchardt: 2012) beyond the general secularization model originated in Western Europe, however, very little research has examined the secularities and secularization process in the non-Western context (Gorski and Altinordu 2008: 62), and even fewer attempts have been made to investigate the secularization of minority religious communities within non-Western societies.

In this context, drawing on previous ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in Ningxia, China in 2018, this paper is a preliminary attempt to explore the religious change and secularization process of Hui Muslims in northwest China since the 1990s and uses it as a case study to examine the validity of the secularization model mainly based on the Christian Western context as well as its approach and main elements, such as the differentiation, rationalization, and worldliness (Tschannen 1991), in a minority religious community within a non-Western society.

In order to get a more comprehensive understanding of the secularization process among Hui Muslim communities in Ningxia, I primarily used the qualitative methodology of ethnography with the combination of some socioeconomic and demographic data. I conducted my official fieldwork in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region from March to April in 2018. Before that I also took a pre-field trip during the end of January in 2018 to have a general impression of the field site and set up some local connections in Ningxia. All the interviews are semi-structured with open-ended questions. I have conducted 15 interviews, each around 2 hours. Other relevant secondary data was collected from various sources including literatures, newspaper, official documents, and archive files.

## References

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