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Re-imagining Silk Roads: Transnational Movement among the Sinophone Muslims between China and Central Asia

by

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ABSTRACT

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Nationalism is on the rise in contemporary Asia. It poses serious challenges to the mobility of ethnic and religious minorities in the region. Anthropologists have long been investigating the state-minority relationship and the diasporic communities in Asia. Studies in the past two decades have also explored the patterns of trade, artistic, and religious networks among the diverse Muslim groups between China and Central Asia. Yet, given Beijing’s increasingly nationalistic policies toward the Muslim minorities, traumatic memories of the past have re-surfaced as a contentious field for fostering mobile societies. My research fills this gap by examining how the post-imperial memoryscape has taken shape among the transnational Muslim communities and beyond. Titled “Re-imagining Silk Roads: Transnational Movement among the Sinophone Muslims between China and Central Asia,” this dissertation focuses on the cultural memories and practices that (re)connect Hui Muslims in Northwest China and Dungans (Hui diaspora) in Central Asia. In conclusion, I argue that while an authoritarian state like China aims to control the meanings of the past as part of its nationalistic policies, transnational minorities have long actively engaged with their own past and struggled to get their own voices across.
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Abbreviations

ACFTA: ASEAN-China Free Trade Area
APK: Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan
BERA: Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs
BRI: Belt and Road Initiative, or yidai yilu in Chinese
BRIC: an informal acronym for Brazil, Russia, India and China
BRICS: an informal acronym for Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
CADA: Central Asian Dungan Association
CCP: Chinese Communist Party
CHA: China Huizu Association
CI: Confucius Institute
CIS: Commonwealth of Independent States
CKCC: China-Kazakhstan Cooperation Committee
DAK: Dungan Association of Kazakhstan
KMT: Chinese Nationalist Government
KSDCF: Kazakh Society Dungan & Charity Foundation
MOT: Simon Wiesenthal Center of Tolerance
NGO: non-governmental organizations
NHK: Japan Broadcasting Cooperation
NSR: New Silk Road initiative by the United States
OCAK: Overseas Chinese Associations in Kyrgyzstan

PRC: People’s Republic of China

SCO: Shanghai Cooperation Organization

SEZ: Special Economic Zones

TWMM: Tang West Market Museum

WTO: World Trade Organization

WU: Western University

XUAR: Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

YLC: Youth League Committee
Introduction

Global Past Reimagined

1.1. Why the Silk Road now?

“Don’t call us Dungans. We are part of Huizu.” With these remarks, Imazov, Director of Sinology and China Studies Center in the Social Sciences Academy of Kyrgyzstan, publicly rejected the label “Dungans” during the China Huizu Association (CHA) annual meeting in July 2017. The meeting was held in Shaanxi Normal University in Xi’an. The three Dungan representatives Imazov, Shisr and Husei Daurov, who came from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, all insisted that they should be called Hui (Muslims) rather than Dungans. Husei Daurov, the President of the Dungan Association in Kazakhstan, even went further in his opening speech: “We Dungan people are part of the Chinese nation (zhonghua minzu).” When uttered in the Dungan spoken language, similar to the Shaanxi dialect spoken by Hui Muslims one hundred and forty years ago in Shaanxi Province, this comment received applause from the audience. But, not everyone
in attendance was enthusiastic in response. One Hui Muslim colleague sitting not far away from me commented: “The Dungans go where the wind blows.”

The “wind” he referred to what was widely known then as the Belt and Road Initiative (the BRI or “yidai yilu” in Chinese). It consists of two parts—the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Twenty-first Century Maritime Silk Road. First proposed by President Xi Jinping of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in Kazakhstan in 2013, the BRI quickly gained status as a diplomatic strategy as well as a set of multidirectional domestic policies. A more recent elevation took place when the BRI was officially added to the PRC Constitution in 2017. Faced with this “wind,” Gao Fayuan, President of the CHA, gave the closing speech at the end of the two-day conference in Xi’an, remarking: “Everyone, I mean literally anyone, could be talking about studying the Silk Road.” His comment elicited some laughter from the audience. Then he continued:

I think all the political and economic connections are easy. Governments and state-owned companies are doing a good job now. But people-to-people bonds (renxin xiangtong) are the hardest to achieve. In Africa and Myanmar, we [China] helped to establish infrastructure besides doing business. Why are we still hated there? Why do the people there still talk negatively about us? I think it is because we lack effective cultural communication. Apparently, over half of the countries along the Silk Road are Muslim countries. Huizu [China’s Muslim peoples], as the best combination of the Chinese and Islamic civilizations, have natural advantages in mediating between China and those Muslim countries along the Silk Road.

Gao, himself a Hui Muslim from Shadian, Yunnan province, used to work as the Party Secretary of Yunnan University. As a veteran party official, Gao’s speech closely followed the party line. He emphasized that the BRI provides a good opportunity for Hui Muslims in China to “go out” and become cultural mediators between China and Muslim-majority countries. In his speech, the state was characterized as doing a good job
in terms of “political and economic connections.” The most difficult aspect of the initiative, in Gao’s opinion, was to cultivate a bond among the people along the Silk Road and to reduce the growing Sinophobia in places where the Chinese investors and merchants have gone. He portrayed Hui Muslims as best mediators between the “Chinese and Islamic civilizations.”

This vignette is telling of the strategic stance taken by the Sinophone Muslims vis-à-vis official discourses and policies in China. People like Daurov and Gao, as well as the anonymous commentator in the conference, all felt the “wind.” They re-adjusted their positions accordingly. As a public figure and a Hui official, Gao placed more emphasis on the “people-to-people bond” and “effective cultural communication.” It resonated, after all, with China’s ongoing soft power projects since the 2000s between China and other Asian countries, many of which are Muslim states. After the 2008 global financial crisis, the Chinese government increasingly saw alliances with the Muslim countries as an alternative to cultivate economic networks. As such, Beijing saw the Hui Muslims—with the exception of the Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang\(^1\)—as valuable transnational mediators

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\(^1\) Hui Muslims, also known as Chinese/Chinese-speaking Muslims, have a long, complex history of adapting to and being assimilated into mainstream Chinese society since the arrival of Islam in China in the seventh century CE (see, for example, Ben-Dor Benite 2005; Gladney 2003; Lipman 1998). In contrast, Uyghur Muslims, a Turkic-speaking Muslim people and the second largest Muslim minority in the PRC, most of whom live in the northwestern province of Xinjiang—a “new frontier” conquered by the imperial Qing rulers in the mid-18th century. Both the Republic of China (1912-1949) and PRC (1949-) inherited the basic territories with diverse ethnic and religious groups defined in the Qing Empire (1644-1912). However, the sociopolitical situation in Xinjiang has been tumultuous in the first half of the twentieth century. The First and Second East Turkestan Republic became independent for brief periods, respectively in 1933-34 and 1940s. In post-1949 China, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR, xinjiang weiwu’er zizhiqiu) was established as part of the ethnic policies of the PRC. Yet since the 9/11, the Chinese government has been utilizing the US-led global anti-terrorist discourse to racialize and criminalize the Uyghur population as potential threats to its territorial
through their religious and diasporic networks. For example, the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, a province adjacent to Shaanxi Province in the northwest, has become a bridge between China and the Arabic world since 2008 (W.-Y. Ho 2013). Similar trends have taken place in Guangzhou and Yiwu, in coastal areas where extensive transnational trade networks with the Muslim world have been developing (Q. Ma 2006; Marsden 2018; Mathews, Lin, and Yang 2017).

From the perspective of the Dungan participants in the conference, Daurov’s statement about being “Huizu” and thus “part of the Chinese nation” was not a denial of legal citizenship or ethnic status in their home countries. Rather, their claim to be part of the “Chinese nation” strategically aligned them with the Chinese government’s official acknowledgement of the Dungans as one of its “overseas Chinese ethnic minorities” (haiwai shaoshu minzu huaren huayi). (Barabantseva 2012). What Gao called “the best combination of the Chinese and Islamic civilizations,” refers to the fact that the PRC treats Sinophone Muslims differently from the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs in Xinjiang, who are welcomed by the Chinese and Central Asian governments as much less suspicious mobile Muslim minorities (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2017). While the Chinese government has used “overseas work” as part of its nation-building efforts, Dungans such as Imazov and Daurov have chosen to claim their diasporic identity as a sort of symbolic capital in China without renouncing their citizenry in Central Asia.

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integrity, regional stability, and national security. As James Millward put it (2019), the Chinese government has shifted from an embrace of the “traditional Chinese modes of pluralism” to the “Han-centric ethnic assimilationism.”
As suggested in this vignette, the making of a Sinophone diaspora is not a one-sided business. There is a growing literature focusing on narratives of the Dungans in Central Asia (e.g. Jiménez-Tovar 2016; Li 2015; Yeoh 2015), but this dissertation offers another perspective involving not only Central Asian Dungans, but also multiple actors in China. I am particularly keen to understand the nation-building processes in late-socialist China through the lens of the past. What, for example, is the relationship between the Chinese state’s new Silk Road initiative and the longstanding Dungan-Hui connection? What is the pre-history of the Silk Road, before it generated so much anticipation and anxiety because of the Chinese state’s treatment of its Muslim minorities? What kind of alternative temporalities could a study of Dungan-Hui connections reveal about disjunctures in the official narratives?

Specifically, I will be looking at how the Sinophone Muslims in Northwest China and Central Asia relate to, interpret, use and embody their histories in the present. My work thus relies equally on historical and ethnographic materials for reconstructing some key sites and historical figures. My main goal is to show how the past and the present become entangled in individual lives and communal memories in the midst of profound sociopolitical transformations. Furthermore, I want to understand whether their experiences tell us something about the time we live in today. As the infrastructure of globalization and the flows of goods, ideas and capital expand rapidly, the emergent forms of cultural imagination and subjectivities often take unexpected turns. And they will continue to change outside the temporal-spatial framework of this dissertation.
1.2. Alternative Temporalities: Post-imperial Memorscape

With such questions in mind, I went to Xi’an in 2014 for my preliminary fieldwork. The city of Xi’an is the provincial capital of Shaanxi Province and one of most well recognized “starting points” of the ancient Silk Road in China. In his physiographic mapping of China, William Skinner identified Xi’an as a regional center in Northwest China peripheral to the political center of Beijing (Skinner 1995). Yet, in the CCP’s official discourse after 1978, Shaanxi and its provincial capital have been represented as the cradle of the ancient Chinese civilization and the birthplace of China’s modern revolution (Y. Wang 2006). By looking at Xi’an simultaneously as center and periphery in the Silk Road imaginary, I want to investigate how different local agents exercise their historical imagination and form cosmopolitan subjectivities in the late-socialist state.

It is important to mention that I did not intend to study the Muslim community in Xi’an in the first place. In 2014, I was initially trying to study the state’s use of the past and politics of cosmopolitanism through local cultural institutions such as museums, archaeological bureaus, tourist sites and so on. With its central-peripheral position, Xi’an was and still is an ideal site for such an inquiry. Later in 2015, I did carry out three months of fieldwork in the Tang West Market Museum (TWMM) thanks to the generous support of its director Wang Bin. However, the observations and questions arising from the preliminary fieldwork between 2014 and 2015 would change the focus of my research in the years to follow.

The Xi’an municipal government has spared no efforts in branding the city, and so the Muslim Quarter (Huifang) is featured together with other tourist and heritage sites as
the embodiments of the cosmopolitan spirit of the Silk Road. Islam came to China through the ancient Silk Road, officially recognized in the seventh century by the Tang emperor Gaozong (649-283 CE). Xi’an has one of the best-preserved Chinese-style mosques in China. Signs written in Arabic are aligned side by side with Chinese characters. The halal cuisine in the Muslim Quarter is widely known among the local consumers, domestic tourists, and foreign visitors. When I went with a good friend to one of the best-known restaurants in the area in 2014, the manager proudly claimed represent a new era of “cosmopolitanism” (guanqiuwua).

Yet around the same time, I also found an outpouring of anti-Muslim sentiments online. Many anonymous netizens criticized the idea of “harmoniousness” (hexie) in the

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2 This outpouring of anti-Muslim sentiment in China’s digital sphere and public spaces has already alerted scholars, media reporters, and policymakers both in China and abroad (e.g. Leibold 2016; Yang and Luqiu 2017). To what extent such anti-Muslim sentiments resemble or differ from the European forms of Islamophobia still awaits more research. But when it comes to understanding Islamophobia in European contexts, scholars have engaged in heated debates regarding its historical precedents and contemporary contexts. According to Bunzl, Islamophobia emerged in the late 20th century and early 21st century, “fueled by geopolitics and unprecedented population…. Islamophobia, in other words, functions less in the interest of national purification than as a means of fortifying Europe (2007:13).” Basically, Bunzl argues that anti-Semitism and Islamophobia have very different historical genealogies and should be viewed as distinctively different phenomena. In response to Bunzl’s argument, Paul Silverstein differentiates Islamophobia from anti-Semitism. He admits that significant differences exist between the two, given their respective histories. But he highlights two structural factors that make those two phenomena both diverge and converge, which are colonialism, decolonization, and what Silverstein calls “the pernicious politics of difference.” He sees both anti-Semitism and Islamophobia as “politics of exclusion (2007:65).” While it seems that European Jewry has finally integrated and accepted, the essentializing politics of exclusion does not really go away. Rather, it changes its target toward Muslims. Another Simmelian argument, proposed by Zygmunt Bauman (2016), highlights the fear and anxiety toward the “strangers” raised by the European refugee crisis. Bauman pays particular attention to the increasing precarity among the middle class in Europe and to the changing media and technological infrastructure. Nevertheless, he does not see such technological infrastructure as the root cause of those sentiments; rather, he argues that such specific time-bound factors do play a significant role in widening the gap between
state’s official discourse promoting international connections with Muslim minorities. Specifically, in the case of Xi’an, one often sees references to the Muslim Rebellions in the late nineteenth century, characterizations of Muslims as “inherently violent,” and references to the contemporary return of the Dungans as the remaining descendants of the Muslim rebels. The inter-ethnic violence of the past (to be discussed at length below) is vividly described as if new dangers were lurking somewhere in the near future. I was puzzled.

“We have been living in the city for over a thousand years,” Liu Lang, a Muslim resident at his late twenties, once told me, “much longer than those [urban residents] whose grandparents or parents came to the city only decades ago. But now, we are being called ‘foreigners’ online. How strange!” Odd as it may sound, the reconnection between the Hui Muslims in the northwest and the Dungans from Central Asia came to destabilize the “harmonious” state discourses in the public perception. But who are the Dungans in relation to the Hui in China? What is special about the Hui-Dungan connection? How could something that happened over a hundred years ago still capture the public imagination in the twenty-first century?

The history of the Hui Muslim community in Xi’an complicated my previous observation of the imperial past as an enchanted object fashioned in nationalistic moral thought and moral action in contemporary societies. It is my next project to address these questions from a comparative perspective: (1) is the Islamophobia in China today structurally similar or different from the anti-Muslim sentiments in the Qing Empire? (2) How can we understand contemporary anti-Muslim sentiments and discourses from a comparative perspective, learning from European contexts? (3) What is the relationship between the problem of secularism and the governance of diversity in contemporary China when it comes to the recognition of ethnic/religious minorities such as Muslims?
discourses. On the one hand, the promotion of the cosmopolitan image of the city is predicated upon its representation of its diverse populations, cultural heritage, and imperial histories. Going along with this discourse, the local Hui Muslims have benefited from the booming tourist industry and the diasporic connection with the Dungans. This phenomenon reflects ethno-futures around the world, challenging the “one-way process of abstraction” in the Eurocentric world order in the 19th and the first half of the 20th century (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009a; Mazzarella 2003). Self-identification and commodification mutually reinforce each other, a dialectical process further accelerated as well as constrained by various institutions and state effects (Boyer 2005; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009b; Harvey 2005; Young 1993). On the other hand, the metaphor of the Silk Road entails different historical imaginaries. The imperial past can easily be invoked as an unhealed wound. It may involve victimization without any living witnesses. Personal biographies can be refashioned in ways that connect the past and present, near and far. In an alternative terrain of diverse texts such as graves, books, and museums, cities may become disparate yet interconnected sites for constructing alternative temporalities.

This shifting field of local actors’ embedded practices in appropriating the state discourse for re-imagining their social worlds is what I call the post-imperial memoryscape in late-socialist China. Let me briefly unpack this concept. The notion of the “scapes” was proposed by Arjun Appadurai to capture the different aspects of global flows and interconnections (Appadurai 1996). These five scapes—ethnoscape, finanscape, ideoscape, technoscape, and mediascape—encapsulate the fluid and expansive aspects of global modernities. They are also constitutive of “imagined
“communities” through short-, medium- and long-distance nationalism (Anderson 1983; Skrbiš 2017). Yet, scapes are not confined to the five analytical frameworks outlined in Appadurai’s work. The concept of a scape can also invoke a coalescence between memory and space, which I call a memoryscape. This relationship between memory and space has a long historical pedigree.

From Ancient Rome and Greece up to the seventeenth century, rhetoricians constructed their own memory palaces to better remember their speech elements. Pierre Nora, the French historian, popularized the concept of les lieux de mémoire (realms of memory or often translated as memory space in English) for understanding the collective memory in the twentieth century. In Nora’s conceptualization, les lieux de mémoire consist of heterogeneous things. They include but are not exclusive to everyday places, physical objects, natural environments, and historical events. Some are material and sensorial while others can be metaphysical or symbolic (Nora and Kritzman 1998). The memoryscape I refer to here adds a twist to Nora’s conceptualization—it brings together the remembrance of the past and global forces such as people, ideas and capital.

Among the emergent studies of memory and trauma in contemporary Asia, Yukiko Koga (2016) shows how the inheritance of Japan’s colonial occupation of several Chinese cities has been re-imagined in the service of market economy after 1978. Koga pays close attention to the lingering effects of colonial violence since the mid-nineteenth century on the political, economic and moral landscapes of everyday life today. In short, she conceptualizes this landscape of historical memory as the political economy of redemption. Inspired by her approach, I am also interested in the use of the imperial, colonial past in the present political economy of China. Yet, the post-colonial framework
does not sufficiently reflect the mode of multicultural governance and its relationship to
the imperial past in China. As the Taiwanese anthropologist Liu Shaohua (2018) has
pointed out, China’s social experiments with modernity in the twentieth century has been
profoundly shaped by the imperial modernity. This refers not only to the late Qing empire
but also include to the imitation of, and competition between, different imperial models
such as Japan, the Soviet Union, and the United States. By using the term *post-imperial
memoryscape*, my goal is to develop a conceptual framework involving three interrelated
themes.

First, *post-imperial* refers to the inheritance of the imperial past in the ongoing
construction of national and minority identities. “Post-imperial” suggests the projection
of the contemporary back into the imperial past for the purpose of building new
connections. It is an imaginary space, not necessarily related to the direct witnesses
because of its extended temporal scale. This lack of direct witnessing is also a key feature
to what Mirianne Hirsch defines as *postmemory*, what “most specifically describes the
relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of
their parents, experiences that they ‘remember’ only as the narratives and images with
which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories
in their own right (2001:9).” Although Hirsch mainly focuses on the intergenerational
transmission of traumatic memories, she also notes that such postmemory can be widely
applicable and “need not be restricted to the family, or even to a group that shares an
ethnic or national identity marking (2001:9).” While Hirsch’s definition of postmemory
illuminates the broad mechanism of memory work, the term post-imperial highlights the
specifically belated spatio-temporal framework involved in understanding the remembrance and reinvented traditions among Sinophone Muslim communities.

Second, I use *memoryscape* to highlight this ambiguity in the use of the past by different actors, like the multiple locations in a landscape. The memoryscape also suggests an alternative temporality distinct from official historical narratives. As Homi Bhabha (1994) puts it, there is “always the distracting presence of another temporality that disturbs the contemporaneity of the national present.” Many historical figures, sites and events remembered by the Sinophone Muslim communities are contested histories. These hidden stories are often deeply local and highly controversial in the official discourses.

Third, the concept of the *post-imperial memoryscape* opens up an analytical space to engage with local communities, whose histories extend beyond local and national frameworks. In his advocacy for Inter-Asian concepts, Engseng Ho (2017) points out the often-overlooked histories of “old, mobile societies” in the interstices of empires and nation states. Given the present conditions of hardening boundaries and tightening controls in Asian states, it is important to understand how those mobile communities navigate between different registers and institutions.

The central episode for the formation of this post-imperial memoryscape is the Muslim Rebellion in northwest China that occurred between 1862 and 1877. Although it took place almost one and a half centuries ago, different forms of remembrance have begin to re-emerge around this episode of history. Rituals, historical fictions, conferences and meetings, academic publications, museums, exhibitions, touring programs,
anonymous tombs, monuments, performances, documentary projects and so on—all these “genres of re-collection” (Papalias and Papailias 2005)—have sprung up cross-regionally and transnationally regarding the re-imagination of the Silk Road among Sinophone Muslims both in China and Central Asia. One goal of this dissertation is to understand why the remembrances of the imperial past still matter today and how they have emerged under specific sociopolitical contexts.

1.3. Ethno-historio-graphy: The Hui Rebellions in 1862-1877

For many Muslims in Northwest China, the year 1877 saw the tail end of a dark period of violence and war. During the span of fourteen years, a series of local conflicts and regional wars broke out between Muslims, non-Muslims, and the Qing government in the northwestern region. Although those conflicts are now broadly categorized as the Muslim Rebellions in the official discourse of the PRC, their complex nature eludes simple definitions and descriptions.

The Tongzhi Hui Rebellions (Tongzhi huimin qiyi) between 1862 and 1877 provide the crucial historical link between the Hui Muslims in Northwest China and the Dungans in Central Asia. The rebellions took place during a systemic breakdown in late Qing society. After the First Anglo-Chinese Opium War (1839-1842), the Qing government signed a series of unequal treaties with the Western colonial powers in the following decades. China’s foreign debt grew, treaty ports opened, missionary activities increased, and the economic situation worsened across the vast Qing empire. Local uprisings fueled by economic frustrations, religious motivations and ethnic sentiments broke out across the land. In 1851, the Taiping Rebellion (1851-1864) broke out in southern China. The
rebellion was led by a converted Christian man called Hong Xiuquan, who established the God Worshipping Society in the 1844 and subsequently founded the Taiping Heavenly Kingdom (Taiping Tianguo). By the time the Qing government finally defeated the Taipings in 1864, the movement had left devastating effects on millions of lives across the empire. In Southwest China, Du Wenxiu led Hui Muslims in the Panthay Rebellion (1856-1873) against the Manchu rulers. Du established an independent regime called Pingnan Guo or the Pacified Southern Kingdom (1856-1872) with its capital in today’s Dali, Yunnan (Atwill 2005). This rebellion also failed in the end, which led to over a century of suppressed memories among the local Muslims (Armijo 2001). It was under such social turmoil that the Tongzhi Hui Rebellions swept across Northwest China.

In 1862, some local conflicts between Hui Muslims and the ethnically Han Chinese militias (tuanlian) broke out in southern Shaanxi province. At the time, a branch of the Taiping army tried to take over Shaanxi and advanced further northwest. With the permission of the Qing government, local leaders formed para-military organizations deal with local rebellions. Before long, a Qing government official named Zhang Fu was killed by enraged Muslims. Local conflicts escalated. The Shaanxi Muslims also formed military camps led by imams and charismatic leaders such as Sun Yubao and Bai Yanhu. Bai became one of the major Muslim leaders throughout the entire period of the Tongzhi rebellions, and was later remembered as the “Father of the Dungans” in Central Asia.

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3 Philip Kuhn (1977), an American historian of China and East Asia, called the Taiping Movement the “most gigantic man-made disaster” of the nineteenth century.
Between 1862 and 1863, armed combat quickly spread from southern Shaanxi to the provincial capital of Xi’an. Over a thousand Hui households fled into the city, seeking shelter. Most of the refugees were women and children who lived in terror and uncertainty. When the Hui scholar Ma Changshou conducted fieldwork in 1956 in Xi’an, he interviewed Mrs. Bai, an elderly Muslim woman who fled into the city during the Tongzhi era and survived until the 1950s. Born in 1863 to the south of Xi’an, Mrs. Bai witnessed unremitting violence as she grew up. Once inside the city wall, she and her family dared not go outside. One of her uncles sneaked out of the city to tend his crops and get some food, only to be executed at the West Gate. For those Muslims who stayed inside the wall, life was harsh. They had to be on alert day and night with knives and scissors by their sides. The purpose, according to Mrs. Bai, was to defend themselves and, if necessary, commit suicide before they were killed or “humiliated” by others (Ma, 1993:162-213).

Although the Shaanxi Muslims experienced some military success at the beginning of the rebellion, they were soon outnumbered by the Qing armies. In 1867, the Qing government appointed General Zuo Zongtang (1812-1885) to be the Governor-General of Shaanxi and Gansu. General Zuo started his political career and gained military fame during suppression of the Taiping and Nian (1851-1868) Rebellions. Impressed by Zuo’s cunning strategies and bravery, the Qing court ordered him to “pacify the rebellions” (pingluan) in the northwest. Zuo advanced into Shaanxi with an experienced army equipped with advanced weaponry. Ill equipped and internally divided,
the Shaanxi Muslims were forced to move to Gansu. As they retreated northwest, more Gansu Muslims were involved in the rebellions. But not all local Muslims supported the rebel groups. In fact, the divisions among the diverse Muslim communities in Northwest China were wide and deep. While some surrendered under General Zuo’s proposed settlement conditions and joined his army, some Muslim leaders such as Ma Qianling, Ma Zhan’ao, Ma Anliang defected. Other non-Muslim Han Chinese leaders such as Dong Fuxiang joined up with Zuo’s army during the process. Still, some Muslims kept fighting against the Qing army. Among others, Ma Hualong, a Jahriyya leader of the Sufi order in Gansu, lent his support to the Shaanxi Muslim camps in the 1860s. In 1869, the Qing army initiated a series of fierce military confrontations against the Jahriyya and Shaanxi Muslims in Jinjibu area, a Muslim stronghold led by Ma Hualong. Later, Ma capitulated to save the rest of his people but was himself brutally executed in public. After the fall of Jinjibu and other military defeats and surrenders, Bai Yanhu and the remaining Muslims who were still resisting the Qing force retreated further northwest into Xinjiang in 1873.

By then, the situation in Xinjiang had become extremely complicated. As early as 1864, some anti-Qing rebellions had already broken out in Xinjiang. Between 1862 and 1864, the Shaanxi and Gansu rebellions forced a large number of Hui Muslims to flee to Xinjiang. Animosity and mistrust continued to grow between the Muslim populations and the Qing troops in the region. When the rumor of the emperor’s order to kill or “washing away [all] Muslims” (xihui) spread across the region in 1864, it poured oil on the fire. The Hui Muslims in Kucha first rose up against Qing rule, followed by a series of

4 At that time, the Shaanxi Muslims also retreated to today’s Ningxia. But in the 1860s, Ningxia was administratively part of Gansu.
rebellions in Urumqi, Kashgar and other parts of Xinjiang. When the rebellions expanded, local Turkic-speaking Muslims became the dominant force. Among them was Ya’qub Beg, a military master of the Tarim Basin from 1865 to 1877. Ya’qub Beg was diplomatically astute. On the one hand, he strategically allied with the Hui Muslims. On the other, he negotiated with the powers of Czarist Russia and the British, two major colonial forces in Inner Asia at the time. By 1873, Ya’qub Beg controlled southern Xinjiang and established a strict Islamist regime in the regions under his control (Millward 2007). Therefore, when Bai Yanhu and other Hui Muslims fled into Xinjiang, they did not get wholehearted support from Ya’qub Beg. Rather than confronting the Qing armies directly, Ya’qub Beg resorted to diplomatic negotiations with the Qing government through British intervention. He also left some local defense measures in the hands of the Hui Muslims from Shaanxi and Gansu (Kim 2004). When the Qing armies took over Xinjiang in 1877, the remaining Hui Muslims had little choice but to flee into Central Asia, then under the rule of Czarist Russia.

The Hui refugees formed three groups and took different paths to cross the Tian Shan, also called Tengri Tagh or Mountains of Heaven. These mountains between China and Central Asia divide southern Xinjiang from the north, with the Tarim Basin to the south and the Dzungarian Basin to the north. The average height of these mountains is about 5,000 kilometers (about 16,400 feet). Their massive scale and formidable height make human crossing, especially in winter season, a daunting task.

The first refugee group moved out from the northwest of the Aksu region in southern Xinjiang in September 1877. By early November, 1,166 people arrived in today’s Karakol in Kyrgyzstan, to the east of Issyk-Kul, an endorheic lake in the northern
Tian Shan. Bai Yanhu led the second group of about 5,000 people through the snow-covered mountains in December. Many people did not survive the severe winter weather and high altitude. A third group of 3,314 people crossed the Naryn river and arrived in Tokmok at the end of December 1877. They settled down in Karaknuz, a place close to the Chuy River. Karaknuz was called In’pan by the survivors and is now officially called Masanchi, named after the legendary Magaza Masanchi (1885-1937). The last group, mostly those from Qinghai and Turfan, crossed the Tian Shan range to the south of Kashgar and arrived in the Fergana valley in February 1878. Among them, 1,179 people survived. Some settled in today’s Osh region and some settled in the Jambyl region in Kazakhstan. The total number of survivors who crossed Tian Shan from September 1877 to February 1878 was about 6,000 (Han 2006).

By early 1878, over fourteen years of Muslim Rebellions had come to an end. The human losses are hard to estimate but enormous. In Shaanxi alone, the pre-war population of about 11.9 million in 1861 dropped to 8 million in 1884, reduced by over 30% (Han 2006). The rebellions also left deep impressions on foreign observers and adventurers such as Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905). During his geological investigations in China between 1868 to 1872 (see below), he saw Shaanxi Province as a poverty-stricken backwater. As he observed and wrote in his posthumously published diary, Shaanxi was suffering from the aftermath of ethnic conflicts, military mobilization, and natural disasters. The local climate was hostile and environmental deterioration was widespread. The transportation system was dysfunctional. Peasants grew poppies for the opium trade. Urbanites were no better off than peasants. As von Richthofen pointed out,
the devastated social fabric in the northwest would take decades to repair (von Richthofen 1907).

Today, it is still not an easy task to define or recount what happened during the Muslim Rebellions. In China’s official Marxist-Leninist framework, the Muslim rebellions in the Northwest are one of several major peasant rebellions against the “feudal,” corrupt Qing government (S. Bai 2000). This view, however, has been challenged, modified and diversified thanks to rigorous scholarship on the complex nature of different movements in early modern China. For example, Jonathan Lipman cautions us not to simplify the Muslim Rebellions in the late Qing dynasty as concerted, well-planned peasant uprisings. Rather, Lipman uses many historical materials to reveal the complex nature of Muslim rebellions in their local contexts. He argues that the reasons and motivations behind the Muslim rebellions were highly diverse. Religious, ethnic, political, personal, and trans-regional factors should all be taken into account in order to understand such a complex historical phenomenon (Lipman 1998).

In addition to continued scholarly debates over the nature of the late Qing rebellions, memories of the past linger on. As Eric Mueggler has argued, traumatic memories do not easily fade away, especially among ethnic minorities who often become marginalized in modern national states. The past lingers on in the “spectral chains” that preserve and transmit the senses of loss and bereavement in such local communities (Mueggler 2007). In the case of Muslim minorities in Northwest China, Maris Gillette has paid special attention to the “structural feeling” of suspicion toward the state she perceived among Xi’an Muslims during her fieldwork in the 1990s and early 2000s (Gillette 2008). Jackie Armijo has also investigated the narratives of survival during the
Panthay Rebellion in Yunnan during the late nineteenth century (Armijo 2001). These narratives of survival and feelings of mutual distrust are an important feature of cultural memories among local Muslim communities in both North and South China. What I also observed in my own fieldwork has been a self-conscious refashioning of the past under present conditions.

For this reason, I want to highlight the “past-ness” of this project. The ethno-historio-graphy explores the more recent past as well as the imperial past. Before starting my fieldwork in Xi’an, I did not anticipate how my investigations would bring me into a world that was so entangled with the past. Nor did I realize the central place of historical memories in the formation of transnational connections as well as in the everyday life of my Muslim interlocutors. I began to pay more attention to the different narratives that my friends generously shared with me. Quite often, they would hesitate to give definite, easy formulations. For them, the complex shadows of the past still mattered. People mentioned the past not because they wanted to re-live it.

If you flip through a few pages of any book on the history of modern China, you will soon discover it is full of brutal wars, natural disasters and human loss. Certainly, no one wants to re-live these dark pasts. Most Muslim friends in Xi’an would tell me, with or without reservation, that the present time is best because most people can get a decent education, make some money, travel around, keep their faith and live in peace. So, why do people still tenaciously hold on to the past? The answers cannot be exhausted here. But at the very least, people see the past—whether good or bad—as part of their fluid identity, their raison d’être, their motivation and opportunity to re-connect to the world. The lingering shadows of the past also reflect their present anxiety, confusion or even
fear of something awful that might happen again. As the historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot put it, “the past is only past because there is a present (1995:15).” In other words, our relation to the past—or “pastness” as Michael Taussig has it (2010:46, 63)—reveals something about our present condition.

This section introduces an undercurrent in the post-imperial memoryscape, an alternative temporality that intersects and disrupts the national past. By highlighting the controversial nature of the Muslim Rebellions, I am interested in its lingering effects upon the present and the interstices such controversy provides for new connections to take shape. This does not provide an alternative historiography of the Muslim Rebellion between 1862 to 1877; rather, it is an ethno-historiography which attends to the recollection and use of the past in the present among the Sinophone Muslims whose identity and sense of cultural belonging are in flux.

1.4. Use of Terminology

1.4.1. Hui Muslims

Hui Muslims constitute the largest Muslim ethnic minority in contemporary China with a total population of about 10.5 million according to the PRC 2010 national census. Uyghurs are the second largest Muslim minority with a population of about 10 million, most of whom live in the far northwestern province of Xinjiang.5 Overall, Hui is a broad category that includes many heterogeneous groups both historically and contemporarily.

5 In total, there are ten Muslim ethnic minorities in the official nationality (minzu) categorization of PRC. According to the National Bureau of Statistics of China census
Before the Qing empire took over the “new territory” of Xinjiang in the eighteenth century, *huihui* was a generic term referring to all Muslims in China, regardless of their racial or linguistic features (Broomhall 1910; Jonathan Neaman Lipman 1998). Chinese historians and ethnologists such as Yao Dali and Ma Tong have further argued that the wide use of *huihui* or an emerging awareness of the Chinese Hui Muslims can be dated back to no later than the mid- or late Ming dynasty (T. Ma 1981; Yao 2007).

In the first half of the twentieth century, Hui people (*huimin*), including the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs, Kazakhs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, were regarded as one of the five major racial groups in China; the other four groups were Han, Manchu, Tibetan and Mongolian (Dikotter 1992). But strictly speaking, the ethnoreligious category of Hui nationality (*huizu*) only became official under the governance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) after 1949 (Gladney 1998).

Today, most Hui Muslims live in the northwestern and southwestern regions of Xinjiang, Qinghai, Ningxia, Gansu, Shaanxi, and Yunnan provinces. But one can also find disparate Hui Muslim communities, families and individuals in all provinces of China. Chinese ethnologists have identified this demographic feature as “large dispersion, (2011), the other eight minorities are: Kazakh (1,462,588), Dongxiang (621,500), Kyrgyz (186708), Salar (130,607), Tajik (51,069), Bonan (20,074), Uzbek (10,569), and Tatar (3,556). But there are also people with other ethnic backgrounds identify themselves as Muslims, such as the Han, Mongolian, Manchu, Tibetan, and so on (Atwill 2018; Q. Ma 2013).
small settlements” (da fenian, xiao juju), which means that Hui Muslims disperse widely but tend to live in small communities all over China.

Generally, Hui Muslims speak Sinitic languages based on regional dialects. Yet, recent studies also reveal a rich reservoir of languages invented by and widely used among the Hui Muslims throughout history. One important example is a hybrid language called “children’s script” or “minor script” (xiao’erjin or xiaojing) mixed with Arabic, Persian and Chinese (Ben-Dor Benite 2005; Feng 1982; Petersen 2017). Since no single language is specifically defined as a Hui language in the system of official categorization, Hui Muslims are also interchangeably called Chinese Muslims or Chinese-speaking Muslims.

This linguistic feature is different from some other Muslim minorities such as the Uyghurs and Kazakhs, whose ethnic identities are defined by their distinctive Turkophone languages. Interestingly, in Turkic languages, Hui Muslims are often called “Tungans” or “Dungans,” a term now officially associated with the Dungans in Central Asia (Dyer 1967; Jiménez-Tovar 2016). Both demographic and linguistic features reflect the diversity of Hui Muslims throughout history.

Moreover, the intra-religious diversity of Hui Muslims far exceeds what the official classification implies. Islamic traditions, beliefs and practices differ from one place to another, from one community to another, and even within a community itself. Most Hui in China identify themselves as Sunni Muslims, but there are also significant numbers of Shi’a and Sufi Muslims. For instance, Sufism from Central Asia has exerted a strong influence upon the communities of believers in Gansu since the seventeenth
century. In Hezhou prefecture, Gansu, the Sufi orders (*menhuan*) divide into different factions including Khufiyya and Jahriyya, both deriving from the Sunni spiritual order of Sufism Naqshbandi (Ha 2014; T. Ma 1981).

The Muslim community in Xi’an shares the features outlined above. They trace their history back to the seventh century when Islam was first introduced into China through the Silk Road. The local Muslims speak Shaanxi *guanzhong* dialect and “standard” Mandarin. In terms of religious factions, there are internal differences among Gedimu (*laojiao* or old religion), Ikhwani (*xinjiao* or new religion) and Salafiye (*baijiao* or white religion) (Gillette 2000; Q. Ma 2011). Although this dissertation is not a study of religion per se, the demographic, linguistic, and religious diversities within and among Muslim communities is important for understanding their relationship with the state, other ethnic and religious groups, and the diasporic societies across national borders.

1.4.2. **Dungans**

The Dungans (Russian: Дунгане; Dungane) are an officially recognized ethnic minority mainly living in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In 2010, the total population was over 100,000, with about 52,000 in Kazakhstan, about 58,000 in Kyrgyzstan, and around 3,000 in Uzbekistan (Jiménez-Tovar 2016:389). Many Dungans are descendants of Hui Muslims from Northwest China which includes Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai and Xinjiang. Today, the Dungans living in Central Asia largely differentiate themselves into three groups based on their places of origin and languages: Shaanxi Dungans, Gansu Dungans and Xinjiang Dungans, the last of whom are the least
well-studied. My interlocutors in this dissertation mostly associate themselves with either Shaanxi or Gansu, but some trace their lineage to Xinjiang and other ethnic groups such as Uyghurs, Kazakhs, or Russians.

Broadly speaking, there are four stages of migration from the late Qing empire to the twenty-first century (Dyer 1990; Yeoh 2015). The first two waves surged before modern nation-states came into full swing in Asia. The first wave took place at the end of 1877 and the beginning of 1878. The second wave occurred in 1881 when the Ili region was restored to China under the Treaty of Saint Petersburg, also known as the Treaty of Ili (Millward 2007:135). The two groups largely consisted of Gansu and Shaanxi Muslim refugees who survived the Qing army’s suppression of the Muslim Rebellions between 1862 and 1877. They also included Uyghurs and other local residents. It was these two waves of migrants who built the major Dungan villages in Central Asia.

The third wave of migration took place in the first three quarters of the twentieth century. It has been increasingly affected by the sociopolitical and economic conditions in different national states. The migratory trajectory did not have a definite time line since there have been frequent, small-scale border crossings between China and Central Asia.

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6 I use this triad differentiation based on the works of Hai Feng and Soledad Jiménez-Tovar. Hai (2014) argues that the Ili regionalect is an important part of the Dungan spoken language, indicating that the influence from Xinjiang has been substantial. Jiménez-Tovar (2016) uses this triad based on her field research among the different Dungan groups in Central Asia. But Wang Guojie (Guojie Wang 1999, 2005) have pointed out the influence of Muslims from Qinghai on the Dungans, thus proposing a Shaanxi-Gansu-Qinghai triad.

7 In particular, Shaanxi suffered from a great loss of population during the Tongzhi Rebellions. Before then, Shaanxi province was home to about 700,000 Hui Muslims; after the rebellions, “no more than 60,000” survived, over half of whom lived inside the city wall in today’s Xi’an Hui Muslim area (Dillon 2013:60).
until the early 1960s. The migrants include not only the Sinophone Muslims but also a variety of other ethnic groups such as Uyghurs, Han, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Tartars and Russians (Millward 2007). Such constant flows of migration came to a climax and a sudden halt in 1962, when many residents fled from the Ili-Tacheng region into the Soviet Union (D. Li 1999).8

Although sporadic and small-scale migration still took place after the Sino-Soviet border was officially closed, it was not until the 1980s that the fourth wave of migrants started to move more regularly across the borders. Since the 1990s, the Dungans, with other ethnic minorities such as Uyghurs and Kazakhs, have been playing an important role in Sino-Central Asian trade. Laruelle and Peyrouse (2009) identify four types of professions involved in the trade between China and Central Asia since the 1990s. Some conduct shuttle trade of a modest scale and mostly conducted through family ties in rural areas. Some participate in tourist industries such as “shop tours” and medical tours. There are also assistants, intermediaries and translators who are mostly youths working for Chinese entrepreneurs in urban areas. Also, more businessmen are opening stands in bazaars and creating niche markets in the shoe sector, the construction material sector and the transportation of commodities (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2009:106). In 2014, the

8 Up until the early 1960s, the Soviet Union had exerted great influence in the border region between Central Asia and the Ili-Tacheng region. According to the Soviet experts such as Li Danhui, most residents in the region then spoke Russian and highly identified with the Soviet Union. “Defense without border” (you bian wu fang) was the key characteristics that defined the lack of border control during that time. When the Sino-Soviet came to a dramatic half in 1962, many residents in the region chose to migrate to the Soviet Union. After the Ili-Tacheng incident, both the Soviet and the Chinese governments tightened their border control. Due to the closure of the borders, border-crossing became illegal and irregular. Only when the Sino-Soviet relations began to thaw in the early 1980s did people, goods and information started to flow more frequently along the Sino-Central Asian borders again.
Chinese government officially recognized the Dungans as “overseas Chinese ethnic minorities.”

To briefly sum up, we can see the growing influence of nation states upon the migratory patterns of the Dungans in different historical periods. Whereas the late nineteenth-century migration took place under shadows of the imperial and colonial powers, the twentieth and twenty-first centuries flows of Dungan migrants is enmeshed in the discursive and institutional frameworks of national states (Clifford 2013; Jo 2017; Xiang, Yeoh, and Toyota 2013)

1.4.3. Sinophone Muslims

In this dissertation, I use Sinophone Muslims to refer to the Hui Muslims and the Dungans in China, Central Asia, and beyond. As a backdrop, let me offer a most recent encounter through which the multiplicity and fluidity of the term “sinophone” might be grasped ethnographically.

On a cold evening in December 2018, my partner and I took the subway from Central Park to the very southern tip of Brooklyn in New York. We spent almost an hour on the way there as the sunset quickly gave way to complete darkness when we got to our destination—the first Dungan restaurant ever opened in New York, perhaps also the first one ever in the United States. I got to know the restaurant through a New York Times article “A House Built on Family and Dungan Food in Brooklyn” in August 2018. At the time, I was still in midst of writing my dissertation in Philadelphia. Realizing that this was a unique chance to see the Hui/Dungan relationship from yet another locality, I decided to try out the restaurant after submitting my first full draft. Perhaps with luck, as
I thought then, we could even talk to the Dungan family who migrated to the United States.

Photo 1.1—Front door to the Lagman House in Brooklyn, New York. Credit: Jing Wang, December 2018.

With the dim street light in the Sheepshead Bay Road, we saw from half a block away the name of the restaurant “Lagman House” (see Photo 1.1). Underneath the formal title was a line mixing English and Chinese characters:

Lagman House
DUNGAN CUISINE 回民拌面·抓饭·大盘鸡王
The Chinese characters were spelled out in the traditional form rather than the simplified form used in the mainland China. It also listed the major dishes offered in the restaurant: Hui people’s noodles, rice, and large-plate chicken. That evening, we ordered these dishes with their juicy, soft lamb stews from the equally multilingual menus written in English, Russian, and Chinese. I got the chance to talk to Ali, the son of the owner. A young man at his early twenties, Ali spoke fluent English, Russian, Kazakh, and Dungan dialect from his home village. Upon hearing about my research, he told me about his ancestry in Northwest China and his family’s settlement in Kazakhstan in the late nineteenth century. We also chatted about the reception of the *New York Times* article and how Ali and his family liked living in New York.

The use of multilingual signs in the restaurant title as well as in its menus intrigued me. Ali explained to us that they used “lagman” because very few people in the English-speaking countries knew about the Dungan cuisine. Lagman (noodles) is a commonly used Latinized term derived from *laghman* in the Turkic language (*la mian* in both Chinese and Dungan dialect). Ali and his family found the use of “lagman” rather than *laghman* or *la mian* more suitable for a restaurant situated in an ethnically and racially diverse neighborhood in Brooklyn. He went on to explain that “In Central Asia, we are known to the Kazakhs or other ethnic minorities as the Dungans,” and that “in our village [Dungan] dialect, we also call ourselves Hui people (*huimin*). So our noodles are either called *lagman* or *la mian*, it depends.”

This fluid switch between different linguistic registers suggests something pertinent to the discussion of Sinophone Muslims in this dissertation. Seen from the perspective of a Dungan family that immigrated from Kazakhstan to the United States,
the multiplicity of ethnonyms is intimately tied to their sense of place, diasporic history, and family stories. There is no single term that can sufficiently characterize the complexity of their self-identification. Nor do I attempt to do so with the use of Sinophone Muslims. After all, “Sinophone Muslim” is not an emic term my interlocutors use in their daily life. By problematizing Sinophone Muslim as a broad category, I do not mean to cherry-pick which concept is the most suitable for categorizing either Hui Muslims or Dungans. Nor is it my intention to confine my interlocutors to an academic jargon that they themselves do not use in everyday life. Rather, I see the term as a methodological invitation. The concept Sinophone is more than a theory; it is a method, like a corkscrew that opens bottles and lets the bubbles effervesce. It invites us to further complicate the meanings of both “Sinophone” and “Muslim” through history and ethnography. It also reveals the highly contingent and tactical moves involved in the use of the ethnonyms in different contexts.

Chinese scholars offer another way to identify the Dungans and their relationship with Hui Muslims in China, which is to identify the Dungans as a border-crossing or transnational nation/ethnic group (куајинг миңзу) (e.g. Ding 2011; Li 2015). As indicated briefly above, in the state’s official discourse, the Dungans are recognized as one of China’s newly established (2010) “overseas Chinese ethnic minorities” (хайвай шаошу миңзу хуарен хуай) (Barabantseva 2012). I use Sinophone Muslims instead of those terms for the following reasons. First, құаңжы миңзу is a politically charged term in China.

Ma Rong, a sociologist from Peking University who specializes in ethnic history and relations, has analyzed the difficulty in differentiating “nation” (миңзу) and “ethnic
group” (zuqun) in the Chinese context. Then, he extended this analysis to the border-crossing nation/ethnic group and warned against the potential danger of national disintegration after the fall of the Soviet Union (R. Ma 2016). Ma’s concern over the term *kuajing minzu* has led to heated debates on its use, translation and application in the political context of PRC. However, both the Dungans and Hui Muslims are not just border-crossing ethnic groups between China and Central Asian states. They are highly diverse groups and individuals whose diasporic connections extend across many different states. Comparatively speaking, my definition of Sinophone Muslims is not confined by national borders and does not suggest in any way that those internally heterogenous groups pose a danger to national disintegration.

In recent scholarship, the term Sinophone Muslims has been used to differentiate the Turkic-speaking and Sinic-speaking Muslims. For example, Soledad Jiménez-Tovar (2016), an anthropologist who studied the Shaanxi Dungans in Kazakhstan, used the term Sinophone Muslims to refer to Hui Muslims in China and Dungans in Central Asia. My use of the term is largely inspired by her research. But given recent developments in Sinophone studies, it is important, I think, to place ethnographic observation in dialogue with other fields, including literary studies and critical theory.

Shu-mei Shih, a scholar in comparative literature and Asian studies, has devoted considerable critical attention the Sinophone as an object of critical inquiry. In her article “The Concept of the Sinophone” (2011), Shih elaborates on the definition, historical background, and theoretical potential of the term. She conceives of Sinophone studies as a “multidirectional critique (2011:711),” and as an exploration of Sinitic-language cultures “on the margins of geopolitical nation-states and their hegemonic productions
In other words, the use of Sinitic languages among marginal, often mobile and transnational immigrant communities, is vital to the formation and (self)recognition of the Sinophone communities. She finds multiple examples in a diverse array of texts: Sinophone Malaysian literature, Chinese American literature, and Sinophone Tibetan literature, just to name a few. What gives rise to these literary hybrids? Shih situates Sinophone studies against the dark underbelly of modernity and globalization, namely continental colonialism, settler colonialism, and (im)migration. Toward the end of her article, she comes back to the question “what is Sinophone literature (2011:716),” a provocative gesture toward the Sartrian question “what is literature.” If what Sartre calls “abstract literature” is the brainchild of Christian cultures and related to immortality, Shih takes this kind of argument even further. She writes,

I view Sinophone literature as a situated literature in a given time and place but would emphasize what is missing in Sartre’s universalistic paradigm: geopolitical situatedness, a place-based practice. Each Sinophone work articulates its chronotope into being, a specific time-place conjunction that is the context of the public it addresses. In this model, writers of Sinophone literature exhibit “commitment to the place where one resides” and “situate themselves historically,” as Sau-ling Wong once wrote in discussing Asian American literature (“De-nationalization” 19-20)… In this way, the Sinophone can be considered as a way of looking at the world, a theory, perhaps even as an epistemology. (2011:717)

This paragraph, deeply influenced by existential philosophy and critical theory, informs us of at least four general perspectives beyond its literary implications: (1) the situated-ness of any literature ‘in a given time and place,’ or in a Bakhtinian sense, as a chronotope; (2) the inherent diversity and ambiguity of each Sinophone work, given its situated-ness; (3) literature as an embodied practice through use of languages and means of communication beyond the text itself; (4) since each work is addressed toward a
specific public, whether imagined or not, it carries political and ethical stakes which may affect both writers and readers.

What does this concept of Sinophone have to do with the use of “Sinophone Muslims” in ethnographic investigations? Shih briefly mentions scholarly debates over the scope of the Sinophone regarding the ethnoreligious minorities such as Hui Muslims (2011:711). Should the Hui Muslims be identified as Chinese-speaking Muslims in contrast to the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs? Or can we think of Hui Muslims as Sinophone Muslims who creatively hybridize Chinese, Arabic, Persian and other local languages as they travel across different historical, geographical, linguistic and religious registers? As a literary scholar, Shih does not give a definite answer to such questions. But anthropologists, historians and other social scientists have long been grappling with the thickness of cultural encounters. Concepts including but not exclusive to otherness, alterity, transculturation, glocalization, hybridization, mestizaje and creolization all suggest a certain exuberant creativity and diversity in the various forms of becoming (e.g. Fanon 1986; Gruzinski 2013; Haraway 2003; Robertson 1995).

Now if we look more closely, we can see different shades of implicit interpretation of Sinophone in Tovar’s use of the term. Here I quote some key excerpts from Tovar’s article (2016):

The Dungans are Sinophone [italicized by the author] Muslims who arrived in Central Asia during the last third of the nineteenth century. Dungans migrated into the Russian Empire as a result of the persecution started by the Qing army after the suppression of the Muslim rebellions in north-west China. Nowadays, they live in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. (2016:388)
Sinophone [italicized by the author] Muslims arrived only in the eighteenth century in Xinjiang. Originally, they came from other provinces of the Qing Empire, mainly Gansu and Qinghai. (2016:390)

Nevertheless, the word hui served as a general term referring to Muslims in the Chinese Empire, both the Turkophone ones and the Sinophone [italicized by the author] ones. Indeed, the use of the word hui as an ethnic category labelling Sinophone Muslims is an invention of the PRC’s ethnic engineering. (2016:396)

Since the expansion of the Qing Empire to what is nowadays known as Xinjiang, in the eighteenth century, the word Dungan was used by Turkophone Muslims to refer to Sinophone [italicized by the author] Muslims. This word has been used in Xinjiang since then. The origin of the ethnonym Dungan in the Russian language is debated. Apparently, the word is a phonetic adaptation that might be either from a Chinese term or from a Turkic word. (2016:396)

Quoted above are some major implications for the Sinophone in Tovar’s article. They include: (1) the Dungans who escaped from the Qing army in late nineteenth century into Central Asia; (2) the Dungans who live in the Central states today, as an ethnic group invented during the Soviet time; (3) the Chinese-speaking Muslims in the Qing Empire versus the Turkophone Muslims in today’s Xinjiang; (4) the Hui Muslims, an ethnic category invented in the PRC in the 1950s. The shared feature among those called Sinophone Muslims is the use of spoken and/or written Chinese languages (itself problematic and diverse) vis-à-vis that of the Turkophone Muslims. The disjunctures in the spectrum are historical and ethnic as well as linguistic. The use of Sinophone appears to us to be more of a spectrum varying in each of its elements than a fixed linguistic or ethnic category.

Here, I will identify some, if not all, structural resemblances between literary and ethnographic analyses. If Sinophone suggests a specific conglomeration of time and space, the historical and contemporary experiences of my interlocutors also presents a broad spectrum of embodied practices and discourses. Their relationship to the past is
manifested, performed, and transformed through their use of each *chronotope* experience, be it a commemoration ceremony, a public ritual, the reading of a novel, or a visit to ancestral tombs. These experiences reopen the past in order to re-enact it for the future. Each opening is moored in a sea of experiences and memories. Yet, just like the sea, these time-space conjunctions are constantly changing and historically contingent. For instance, the geopolitical influences from top-down, such as Sino-Central Asia diplomacy and soft power policies. Or the transnational flow of capital through financial systems and companies. Or, more mundane and perhaps much less noticed, cross-border travels, personal life stories, looming fears in everyday life, untold pain, and pragmatic tactics for personal development. While the Sinophone as a concept can be operationalized to direct our attention to the embodied activities and narratives, ethnography can further complicate what it means to be Sinophone or even challenge the concept itself.

1.5. Methodology and Elective Affinity

Between 2014 and late 2017, I carried out fieldwork for a total of fourteen months, eleven of which I spent in Xi’an. For short-term field trips, I traveled to Beijing, Lanzhou and Linxia in Gansu, Seoul and Gyeongju in South Korea, Almaty and Astana in Kazakhstan, and Dungan villages along the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border. Thanks to these multi-sited experiences, I came to see the Silk Road as a heterotopic field of discourses, whose uses have been constantly shifting and which cannot be monopolized by any single entity in a pluralized world.
As my fieldwork unfolded during the past years, I found the networks between the Muslims in Northwest China and the Dungans from some parts in Central Asia to be a particularly fascinating case for understanding the situation of Sinophone Muslims on the ground. Muslim subjectivities and ethnic/religious identity politics are thus two important dimensions upon which this project is nested. Yet my ethnography is not centered around the religion of Islam or religious communities per se. Rather, I am interested in the interstices, such as those between the past and the present, between the state representations and individual/community narratives, and between the transnational minorities and (inter)national institutions. For that reason, I will, without foregoing the religious and ethnic aspects entirely, focus theoretically more on the historical (dis)continuities, inter-spaces, and hybrid identities manifested through the stories of often marginalized mobile societies that exist in today’s powerful nation states. I argue that small groups such as the Sinophone Muslims are cosmopolitan subjects, who have been made by history but have also been making global history through and through. 

During my fieldwork, elective affinity played a critical role. Some friends would use the word “fateful coincidence” (yuanfen). Others use the term “predestination” (qianding or Qadar). Or to borrow from my friend Tao’s metaphor, it is like a “sleepy head meets a pillow” (keshui yushang zhentou). Whatever term might used, I have come

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9 There is a rich body of literature with discussions on cosmopolitanism and globalization (e.g. Appadurai 1996; Appiah 2010; Beck 2002; Beck and Sznaider 2006; Berg 2010; Cheah and Robbins 1998; De la Cadena 2010; Latour 2004; Hannerz 2005). Some scholars whose recent works touches upon the cosmopolitan nature of Muslims in Asia include Stewart Alexander (2016), Engseng Ho (2006, 2017), Wai-Yip Ho (2013), Magnus Marsden (2018), Hew Wai Weng (2014) and so on.
to realize that certain affects and sentiments are not merely peripheral to the fieldwork but rather an integral part of the fieldwork itself: they are both constraining and constitutive.

Among other factors, my own in-between-ness is an instrument that both impedes and facilitates the field experiences: A woman in her late twenties, a non-Muslim, a Han Chinese born in a coastal city in southeast China, a graduate student trained in an anthropology program in an American university, and a familiar stranger in her own country—all these reveal the constraints and privileges that I had to constantly reflect upon. This in-between-ness is a source for critical reflection, as in many cases of native and not-so-native anthropologists (Harden 2011; Narayan 1993). It also serves as a method for often unexpected encounters and discoveries. It is always a process of trial, explanation, denial, and re-access.

Some of these factors might be highly constraining given the political and social worlds my interlocutors and I inhabit. Due to the 2009 Urumqi riot, the Muslim minorities across China are more or less affected by the tightening hand of the state surveillance (Leibold 2016). For example, anti-terrorism campaigns and street posters have multiplied in the Muslim Quarter area since the 2010s. I have encountered instances when access was denied, and social contact failed. Some people became very cautious in talking about their faith in public or sharing their stories with me. After all, they saw me as a non-Muslim Han Chinese, educated in an American institution, who would eventually go off and write an ethnography about them in a different language.
But in this process I came to see how the in-betweenness of one’s position could potentially enable many dialogues. My interlocutors shared with me aspects of their everyday lives. I listened to their family stories and personal struggles over tea, lunches, dinners, day trips. They asked about my research and studies in the United States. Some cared for my safety in the field. Some gave me practical advice in navigating the social world I was not familiar with. Some friendships continue to grow as I am writing now. They kept—and continue to keep—me aware of the power of the past in mundane, diverse and diffused ways.

### 1.6. Dissertation Structure

Overall, this dissertation has five chapters with an introduction, an interlude, and an epilogue. Chapter 1 offers a genealogy of the use of the Silk Road since the early twentieth century. My attempt is to trace how the Silk Road, as a cultural metaphor, was born and continues to be a by-product of colonial modernity. In this chapter, I will map the continuities and disjunctures embedded in official representations of the Silk Road in both pre- and post-1949 China. I argue that the use of the Silk Road reflects the long-lasting impact of colonial modernity in the contemporary. Its infrastructural logic is deeply embedded in the discursive power of colonial modernity and gets reiterated in different modes of modernity (e.g. socialist internationalism, late socialism, neoliberalism, state capitalism). Nation states have played a major role in determining the interpretation and perception of the past. But, I also argue that the Silk Road, as a heterotopic field of discourses, whose uses have been constantly shifting, contains more ambiguities to be unpacked in a pluralized world.
Chapter 2 maps the cosmopolitan desires in the city of Xi’an and offers a history of the Muslim Quarter and the residents’ connection to the Dungans in Central Asia. I highlight the multilayered temporalities underlying the ambivalence regarding the cosmopolitan imaginary of the Silk Road. I also explore how the post-imperial memory manifests in urban landscapes, local archives, and individual lives. Among various ways of remembering and forgetting, commemorative ceremony is a distinctive way of re-inscribing the past in the present. To remember through a commemorative ceremony such as a homecoming ritual differs from—yet is intimately connected with—individual memories. By interweaving historical accounts with life stories, I will show how a life can be, on the one hand, intimately connected to both collective and individual memories of the past and, on the other hand, profoundly shaped by the transformative forces that go beyond national boundaries. Through a collage of urban spaces, rituals, and personal connections, a post-imperial memoryscape takes form in which the Hui Muslims and Dungans have constructed a historical sense of a far-away “homeland” (laojia). By engaging with the urban landscape, the Sinophone Muslims insert new meanings into public spaces. They re-position themselves from the victims of ethnic conflicts in the past to desirable returnees.

Chapter 3 explores the practices of exhibiting traditions and museumizing memories. It reveals how the Hui Muslims and Dungans have been using their “traditional cultural heritage” to re-interpret and perform the past in China through public exhibitions and private museums. This chapter has grown out of my dialogues with the collector An Rushi, local imams and mosque committee members, and Dungan students and visitors. Also, I employ media materials from the Chinese government, local
brochures, news, and broadcasting programs as an important tool for reconstructing the political background of the early 2010s. Overall, the Sinophone Muslims highlight the inheritance of traditional legacy while downplaying the traumatic memories associated with imperial history. This tactical choice, on the one hand, conforms with the Chinese state’s civilizing discourse regarding the ethnic minorities, and its effort to incorporate the ethnic minority diaspora into the national imagination. On the other hand, I argue that this use of the past—both remembering and forgetting—reflects the creative agency of the Muslim individuals and communities. In other words, the Sinophone Muslims position themselves as both local guardians of a multicultural legacy and cosmopolitan citizens, who can facilitate transnational connections from below.

Chapter 4 explores the fluid boundaries between fiction and history. As the traumatic memory of Sinophone Muslims has never been widely discussed in official history accounts or commemorated in national rituals, novels have become the most popular channel through which to communicate that history with both Muslim and non-Muslim readers. Zheng Zheng (ZZ), a Xi’an-based writer, is my major interlocutor in this chapter. His historical novel Looking Eastward toward Chang’an (Dongwang Chang’an) (2008) is one of the few novels that have touched upon this sensitive subject matter since the 1980s. Another relevant and influential novel is The History of Soul (Xinling Shi) (1991) by the Chinese Muslim writer Zhang Chenzhi (ZCZ). While ZCZ’s novel focuses on struggles of the Jahriyya as well as the author’s own spiritual conversion, ZZ’s aim is to bring to light the suppressed history of the Shaanxi Muslims, and to “do justice to history where history fails” (in his own words). However, the reception of the book has been quite controversial. Based on my reading experience, interviews with ZZ and
readers, and an analysis of commentaries, I try to address several interrelated questions in this chapter. What were the author’s motivations to cross ethnic and religious boundaries in writing the novel? How should we understand the reception of the novel amidst the growing Islamophobia in China? How would the Chinese Muslims, especially those who have been heavily invested in their own historical narrative, relate to such literary/historical works? Where are the boundaries between fiction and history, or ethnography and novel, at a time when the Chinese states hegemonic discourse conceals much more than it reveals?

Chapter 5 goes back to the relationship between national states and transnational Muslim communities. More specifically, it traces how young Dungan students have moved through various community-based and/or institutional frameworks. Here, my field site shifts to Lanzhou, a city located about 700 kilometers northwest of Xi’an. This change of location was prompted by my acquaintance with the director of a Dungan program in China during a conference in Xi’an. Compared to the program in Lanzhou, Xi’an has a longer history of study programs, both short- and long-term, for recruiting students from Central Asia. However, given the size and rapid growth of the Lanzhou program, I find the latter as a better case for understanding the convergence of different factors in a relatively short period of time. With the help of the center’s director, teachers and other students, I learned about the program in greater depth, conducted interviews, made friends with Dungan students, and got in touch with some graduates who currently work in Central Asia. My ethnography shows that the flows of young Dungans are not simply a reflection of a one-way traffic or top-down projects orchestrated by the state’s ideological apparatus. Rather, these flows reveal a complex imbrication of personal
choices, local interests, grassroots organizations, national developmental policies, and transnational capital-driven incentives. For the Dungan students and their families, the limits in these educational programs are as prominent/great as the opportunities.
The “Silk Road” is a modern invention. This statement, while rhetorically highlighting the processes of the “(re)invention” of the Silk Road, does not exclude the fact that the Silk Road is both a new and old phenomenon. In a broad sense, the pre-modern Silk Road loosely refers to a wide variety of commercial, diplomatic, religious, and imperial networks between the East and West both over land and through waterways (J. A. Millward 2013; Hansen 2012b). Besides the debates over its scope and dates, these old routes also provide rich resources for historians and anthropologists to re-imagine the processes of early modern globalization. For critiquing the Eurocentric mapping of the
world, for example, Eric Wolf has highlighted the East-West interaction by mapping the long-distance travels of Marco Polo (1254-1324), Ibu Battutah (1304-1377), and Zheng He (1371-1433) along land and sea routes during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (Wolf 2010 and Wolf 2010:27). It is not the Wolfian project I am pursuing in this chapter, although the purpose is similar—to understand the use of the past, rather than merely the past itself, as a process. Hence, this chapter focuses on the history of the changing uses of the Silk Road concept in modern China. My particular purpose is to map the processes of both continuity and disjuncture embedded in the official representations of the Silk Road in post-1949 China. Attached to the current fanfare of the Silk Road vision, there is an often-overlooked pedigree.

The Silk Road has been invented and constantly reinvented since the late nineteenth century. My methodological approach is archaeological in the sense that I attempt to identify the “conditions of possibility” (Foucault 1970:xxii) that underly and surround the seemingly sudden emergence of the Silk Road. I have sifted through various materials—travelogues, diaries, newspapers, official statements, documentaries, scholarly publications, museum brochures, exhibition catalogues, government documents, and so on—produced in and beyond China from the 1870s to the 2010s. Those materials are supplemented by my interviews and informal conversations with scholars of the Silk Road, Chinese journalists, archaeologists, museum directors and staff, and the UNESCO heritage workers who have offered different interpretations of the Silk Road between 2014 and 2018.
1.1. Colonial Imagination and Nationalist Politics: 1877-1940s

The Silk Road is a by-product of Western colonial and imperial expansion at its peak during the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. It started as a geo-historical concept coined by the German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833-1905). In his formative years, Richthofen was a member of the 1860-62 Prussian expeditions to Asia, including Siam, Japan, Indonesia, Philippines and Burma. In September 1868, he arrived in China from California via Japan and started a four-year-long geological expedition, traveling through thirteen of the eighteen provinces in the Qing empire. In 1877, he coined the terms Seidenstraße/Seidenstraßen, meaning the Silk route(s). This neologism soon entered, through translation, into English as the “silk-route” in the Geographical Magazine in 1878 and later in other publications (Chin 2013:199).

This quick process of translating Seidenstraße/Seidenstraßen from German into English was not a mere coincidence. It was necessitated by the desire of the colonial and imperial powers—particularly German, British and American—to construct railroads connecting China to Central Asia along resource-rich locations along the way. During his

\[10\] In German, “Strasse” also means street while “Weg” means road or route. However, in the literature dealing with the historical origin of the Silk Road, this point is rarely mentioned and the translation of Seidenstraße/Seidenstraßen as Silk road(s)/route(s) has been widely used. It would require some expertise in German and the early translation from German into English to see what new layers of interpretive labor entered into the popularization of the term. Also, it may take some work to investigate how Richthofen interpreted both the Chinese and Greek sources he was using to re-map the routes between East and West. Whether there was anything that led him to use “strasse” rather than “weg” requires some further research. Special thanks to Dominic Boyer who first pointed out this linguistic nuance lost in translation.
trips in the northern provinces, Richthofen was commissioned by the European-American Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai to identify a viable railway line between the eastern and western regions of China and Central Asia. He also wrote reports to Germany containing his suggestions for the strategic locations for Germany’s expanding role in the Qing empire.

Here is how Richthofen pointed out the potential lines for railway construction stretching from Xi’an to the furthest northwest regions:

Little doubt can exist that, eventually, China will be connected with Europe by rail…As regards natural facilities, and the supply, at both ends of the line, of the populous, productive and large commercial countries, the only line which ever can come into consideration is that by Si-ngan-fu [Xi’an], Lan-chau-fu [Lanzhou], Su-chau and Hami. It is a remarkable coincidence that this whole road, including the Pelu [Beilu, “the northern route” around the Tarim Basin], is well provided with coal…(von Richthofen 1872; quoted from Chin 2013:210)

Richthofen identified major coal mines in Shanxi and Shaanxi, and based on local records and his own observations, he drew the first map of China’s coal mines. Rather than focusing on ancient caravans and ships, Richthofen’s coinage of the term Silk Road identified a commercial network dotted with strategic sites of coal mines and natural resources distributed through railways.

This early version of the Silk Road reflects what Timothy Mitchell identifies as the carbon infrastructure for the emergence of new geopolitical thinking. From a historical perspective, as Mitchell has argued, “political agency” is shaped by political attitudes and ideas as much as by the “different ways of organizing the flow and concentration of energy (Mitchell 2011:8).” The infrastructural “arrangements of people, finance, expertise and violence that were assembled in relationship to the distribution and control of energy (2011:8)” profoundly influence, if not determine, the potentiality and
limitation of the political agency by different states, organizations and individuals. Seen in this light, the Silk Road is one of those modern concepts born out of a colonial thirst for the control of the flow, concentration and distribution of energy as well.

The popularization of the Silk Road came several decades after Richthofen’s geologic neologism. Sven Hedin (1865-1952), a Swedish explorer and student of Richthofen, was one of the key figures in inserting the image of the Silk Road into a wider Western readership between the 1920s and 1940s. Throughout his lifetime, Hedin travelled across a vast region in Asia, spanning from Caucasus, Persia, Mesopotamia, Tibet, Central Asia, China and beyond. Given his extraordinary ability in writing up his travels and finding good publishers, Hedin, from an early stage of his career, aimed at markets both low and high. His works have been translated into thirty languages. In 1936, Hedin published Sidenvägen: En bilfärd genom Centralasien, translated into English two years later as The Silk Road: Ten Thousand Miles through Central Asia. The A German translation was reprinted “at least ten times” within a few years (Waugh 2007:7).

Between the 1920s and 1940s, Sven Hedin as well as other Western explorers like Sir Aurel Stein (1862-1943) contributed to the popularization of the Silk Road as a linguistic-visual trope linking the West to the East. One of the preconditions for Hedin and his contemporary explorers’ adventures to grip Western minds was an Orientalist fervor in Europe that lasted well into the twentieth century. It provided a fertile ground

11 For a complete bibliography of Sven Hedin’s works, see Daniel Waugh’s online publication at http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/bibliography/hedinb3.html.
for new adventures into other regions in Asia largely unknown to the emerging middle class in the West. As Edward Said has noted,

By the middle of the nineteenth century Orientalism was as vast a treasure-house of learning as one could imagine…Quite aside from the scientific discoveries of things Oriental made by learned professionals during this period in Europe, there was the virtual epidemic of Orientalia affecting every major poet, essayist, and philosopher of the period… Moreover, Orientalist studies apparently cover everything from the editing and translation of texts to numismatic, anthropological, archaeological, sociological, economic, historical, literary, and cultural studies in every known Asiatic and North African civilization, ancient and modern. (1978:51-2)

This sort of colonial imagination both fed, and was fed by, massive colonial expansion in Asia, Africa and other parts of the world throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Hedin’s passion as an adventurer along the Silk Road was also a product of his time. In his autobiographical work My Life as an Explorer (1926), Hedin recalled how he related to the great explorers and fiction writers of his time ever since he was a boy. “My closest friends were Fenimore Cooper and Jules Verne, Livingstone and Stanley, Franklin, Payer and Nordenskiöld, particularly the long line of heroes and martyrs of Arctic exploration… (Wood 2009:154; quoted from Hedin 1926).” Hedin’s personal taste reflected the curiosity and ambition of a rising, educated middle class man, eager to explore and conquer the unknown parts of the Orient.

Yet the Silk Road as a usable past did not interest Hedin much until the later stages of his life. In letters exchanged between Hedin and his teacher Richthofen from the 1890s to early 1900s, neither mentioned the Silk Road (2007:2). In fact, Hedin’s use of the Silk Road was prompted by and deeply intertwined with the transcontinental political situation in the early twentieth century. As mentioned previously, Hedin’s earlier
explorations and publications brought him great fame as an explorer of *terra incognita* in Asia. He was recognized by kings, viceroys, academia and printing houses across Europe and North America. Whereas his pre-1915 explorations were largely funded by the Swedish, British and German sponsors, his pro-German views at the outbreak of the First World War led to his tarnished reputation and dwindling support from the Britain empire (Hopkirk 1980). But the political constraints in Europe did not prevent him from pushing further the depth and scope of subsequent Asian expeditions.

So far, we have seen how the colonial imagination played a major role in the invention of the Silk Road. But it is important to point out the interaction between the colonial powers and nationalist politics. With determination and stamina, Hedin embarked on a series of Sino-Swedish expeditions between 1927 and 1935 (see Map 2.1). These expeditions were largely funded by the German government and Lufthansa financiers. One goal of Hedin’s mission was to conduct a meteorological survey for opening an airline route between Europe and China through Central Asia. Meanwhile, the Chinese Nationalist government (Guomindang, 1912-) politically supported Hedin’s expeditions in a strategic attempt to turn the Western explorers into useful resources for their own nationalist agenda (Jacobs 2014).
This combination of colonial interest and nationalist politics can be seen in the composition of the expedition team and the local politics it encountered. Xu Xusheng (1888-1976), a professor of philosophy and history from Peking University, acted as the co-director of the Sino-Swedish expeditions (Xu 1930). From 1927 to 1933, Hedin, Xu and their international team members endured constant obstruction and/or surveillance from the Xinjiang governor Jin Shuren (1879-1941), who opposed the Guomindang government. In 1933, Hedin expressed his concerns about the political situation in Xinjiang to a high-level official, Liu Chongjie, in China’s Nationalist government. Backed by Liu, Hedin soon submitted his “Plan for the Revival of the Silk Road” to the
Nanjing government (Hedin 1943; also see Chin 2013:214-5). With a symbolic victory of the central authority over the distant Xinjiang governor, Hedin and Hu led their team to complete the rest of their mission in 1935. Together, the team explored the possibility of constructing a motor-road between inland China and Xinjiang, the first one of its kind in the region. These Sino-Swedish expeditions have been lauded as the first instances in which Chinese and foreign scholars equally carried out scientific explorations, but as Jacobs has acutely pointed out, the significance of the event in its own day “derived more from the implications it carried for domestic geopolitics” than as an example of international scholarship (2014:52).

Between 1877 and the 1930s, the Silk Road emerged as a rich cultural repertoire in both colonial imagination and nationalist politics. It was not only an object of geohistorical knowledge but also a geopolitical signifier. As Tamara Chin has put it, the Silk Road was transformed “from an object of cartographic or geohistorical knowledge (Ptolemy’s Silk Road; Central Asian Silk Roads) into an urgent geohistorical memory (Chin 2013:216).” This discursive shift can be most vividly seen in Hedin’s opening lines from *The Silk Road* (1936). Hedin started the book with a narrative of the Chinese Emperor Han Wudi (156 BCE-87 BCE) and Zhang Qian’s diplomatic mission to Central Asia in the late second century BCE. By exalting the ancient Silk Road as a precursor of its modern rebirth, Hedin envisioned a motor road expanding across Central Asia and connecting Europe and China. Through Hedin’s collaborations with various European and Chinese agents, the historical memory of the Silk Road served as a pretext or a rationale to take action. This infrastructural thinking also lay at the foundation at Richthofen’s early version of the Silk Road in the form of coal mines and railroads. In a
sense, the Silk Road offered “a kind of geopolitical chronotope, that is, a condition or strategy for geopolitical thought and action, as well as a background context (Chin 2013:195).”

Richthofen’s *die Seidentrasse* and Hedin’s Silk Road diplomacy, which long predated China’s current political advocacy for a new Silk Road, thus set the tone for its later re-invention. Meanwhile, Northwest China and Central Asia emerged as a pivotal geographical area for the formative period of a Silk Road concept, which would re-emerge in the twenty-first century. In the following sections, we will explore the uses of the Silk Road that have evolved in China since 1949.

1.2. From the Bandung Conference to the Third World: Between the 1950s and the Mid-1970s

From the 1950s to 1970s, the Silk Road was conceived as a symbol of Asian-African unity by the post-revolutionary or newly independent countries after the Second World War. Although the Chinese government never officially included the term in its foreign diplomacy, the historical symbol was gradually normalized in the official discourses for China’s diplomatic and economic relations with the Third World countries in the 1970s. Rather than abandoning the previous colonial and nationalist discourses pertaining to the metaphor, the Asian countries and ruling parties uncannily resembled their predecessors in the use of the past.

On July 21, 1956, an article entitled “New Afghanistan” appeared in the *People’s Daily*, the CCP’s mouthpiece founded in 1948. Dr. Akram, author of the article, was
visiting PRC as a member of the Afghan Cultural Representative Group. “The Afghan
government participates in the regional agreements,” Dr. Akram wrote, “such as the
Bandung Agreement. We favor the idea that people from different countries in the same
region sharing the same goals collaborate and help each other in economy, sciences and
culture (Aksam 1956).” He reminded the Chinese readers that Afghanistan, like China,
shared the same spirit proposed during the 1955 Bandung Conference in Indonesia.

The Bandung conference was born out of the former Indian Prime Minister
Jawaharlal Nehru’s (1889-1964) proposal for Asian and African unity in 1947. As a
result, it was also called the first Asian-African Conference in 1955. For post-1949
China, the Bandung meeting was a landmark for its active participation on the world
stage. Besides the anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist rhetoric, the Chinese Premier at the
time, Zhou Enlai (1898-1976) proposed “seeking common ground while leaving aside
differences” (qiutong cunyi) and advocated the “Five Principles of Peaceful Co-
Existence” (heping gongchu wuxiang yuanze). Those principles have been held as the
official guidelines for Chinese foreign diplomacy ever since.

Dr. Akram, keenly aware of such political contexts in the 1950s, emphasized the
spirit of mutual respect among different countries in their international relations. He also
connected the ancient history of the Silk Road to the national development in the newly
independent Asian countries. In his article, Dr. Akram briefly introduced the ancient
history of Afghanistan and the city of Balkh as the “crossroads” of two most ancient
civilizations–Chinese and Indian–along the Silk Road. Then, he went on to describe the
current transportation system in Afghanistan, identifying its major forms of transport:
bicycles, buses, trucks, horses and camels. Railroads were non-existent then. A few domestic and transnational airlines were initiated.

Although the Silk Road was a term mentioned only in passing in the 1956 article, it began to gain recognition in China’s official media. Chinese politicians and news commentators found it a convenient metaphor for stressing the old and new connections with its neighboring countries in addition to Afghanistan. While the Silk Road was highlighted as a geohistorical memory, it also invoked the intimate ties to the infrastructural aspect of national development and trans-regional networks.

Here are a couple of examples. On September 29, 1961, “Song of the New Silk Road” appeared in the *People’s Daily*. “In the steep valley of the Himalayas/ The Silk made a broad road…” wrote Liu Lanshan (1919-2004), an editor from the Beijing People’s Literature Press. “From Nepal to China/From Beijing to Kathmandu/It cuts through the frozen rivers and snowy mountains/Constructing a New Silk Road (L. Liu 1961).” The lyrics praised the re-opening of the Sino-Nepal border in 1960 and the mutual agreement for constructing a motor road between Tibet and Kathmandu in 1961. The same metaphor was used in the report of the first Chinese trading team that crossed the Sino-Pakistan border in 1968 (*People’s Daily* 1969).

From 1956 to the 1960s, there were other similar experiments with the use of the Silk Road in China’s official discourses. Because of the deteriorating Sino-Soviet relationship in the 1960s, the Chinese government was especially eager to use symbols such as the Silk Road to refer to countries in the non-Soviet block. When it came to the relationship between Asian countries, geohistorical knowledge was often invoked as a
sign of friendship and shared history rather than ideological conformity with the Soviet Union.

This careful choice in official language was evident at the time of the Iranian visit in 1971. At that historical moment, China was in the middle of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). This ideology-driven movement wreaked havoc in China’s domestic politics, social and intellectual life, and economy. The slogan “Smashing the Four Olds” (po sijiu) reflected a desire to eliminate the old thoughts, culture, customs and habits that had “poisoned” (duhai) the people during thousands of years of China’s “feudal” past. Evoking the past in public could be a risky choice in the absence of any politically correct reference (i.e. a nod to the thought of Chairman Mao Zedong [1893-1976]). What distanced the official discourses in foreign relations from those in domestic politics was China’s strategic re-positioning vis-à-vis the Soviet Union, the West, and the Asian countries outside the Soviet Block such as Iran.

When the Iranian delegation arrived in Beijing in 1971, the People’s Daily editorial board crafted a Q&A article entitled “The Silk Road.”

Question: In recent receptions of the distinguished guests from Iran, the newspaper often mentioned ‘the Silk Road.’ What is it?

Answer: …At that time, the silk in the Han Dynasty [206BC-220AD] was often transported from the southern road [nanlu, referring to the road from Dunhuang through southern Xinjiang to Central Asia] to the Western regions [xiyu], then from Persia [Bosi] to Europe. Later, this road was called ‘the Silk Road’ by Western historians. The opening of the ‘Silk Road’ not only facilitated East-West trade. It was also an important thoroughfare for cultural exchange. Since then, China and Iran exchanged more ambassadors. In the Eastern Han Dynasty, Ban Chao went on an official mission to the Western regions. In 97 CE, [China] sent people to Iran. (People’s Daily 1971)
In this brief text, the relationship between Iran—known as Persia in the Han Dynasty—and China was traced back nearly 2,000 years, linked by the ancient Silk Road. ‘Western historians’ were briefly mentioned as those who coined the term, but the historical origins and meanings of the term were not extensively probed. The Sino-Iran relationship was mainly presented as the reincarnation of an ancient route of commodity and cultural exchange between East and West.

However, the significance of the Silk Road should not be over-emphasized during this period. In China, the reconnection between the East and West was largely subsumed under the “Three Worlds” theory developed by Chairman Mao in 1974. In this theory, Mao saw both the United States and the Soviet Union as First World superpowers. Japan, Europe, Canada and others comprised the Second World. China, argued Mao, stood together with other exploited nations from Asia, Africa and Latin America in the Third World. A quick comparison with another earlier Three-World model may be helpful here.

In 1952, Alfred Sauvy conceptualized the *Tiers Monde*, or the Third World.\(^\text{12}\) It emerged in the context of decolonization and the Cold War era. In Sauvy’s model, the United States, Great Britain and their allies belonged to the First World, the Soviet Union, China and their communist allies to the Second, and other “underdeveloped” and ideologically non-aligned countries to the Third World (Sauvy 1986). As Christoph Kalter has pointed out, the Cold War was both a “constriction and [a] facilitation” to the

emergence of the concept of the Third World in the West. With the limited intellectual 
and political choices at the time, the radical Left saw the Third World as a viable 
alternative to re-imagining the post-war world (Kalter 2016:20). Diverging from the 
Sauvy’s conceptualization, largely inspired by ideas of the Third World circulating in the 
1960s and 1970s, Mao’s theory derived from his re-interpretation of Marxist class theory 
and socialist internationalism. Mao thus moved away from the Soviet Union and re-
aligned China with the “developing” countries and oppressed classes in more 
“developed” countries. In a sense, this Maoist vision of the Three Worlds was a 
continuation of the Asian-African unity discourse of the 1950s. But it also put greater 
emphasis on China’s distancing from the Soviet Union and shifting toward a 
reconciliation with the West through a re-imagined world order.

To recapitulate, what I see in this logic of historical imagination is an 
infrastructural thinking inherited from colonial modernity between the late nineteenth 
century and the first half of the twentieth century. The use of the Silk Road has never 
been an enterprise dominated by a single entity or ideology. The investigation of the Silk 
Road enables us to re-evaluate “a complex field of relations or threads of material that 
connect [and] multiply in space-time (Barlow 1997:6).” Between the 1950s and 1970s, 
the geohistorical memory of the Silk Road was picked up by emerging states such as 
Afghanistan in the post-WWII Asia. These new national states, including the PRC, had 
multiple worlding practices to foster the inter-Asian connection. Undeniably, the 
temporality in the historical imagination of the Chinese state was still dominated by the 
linear, forward-looking gaze of communist modernity. But the CCP still strategically 
used the Silk Road to foster diplomatic and economic relations when other political
projects failed. As we move to the next section, the notion of a Silk Road born out of colonial modernity will help us to see the “infinitely pervasive discursive powers that increasingly connect at key points to the globalizing impulses of capitalism (Barlow 1997:6).” In other words, the infrastructural thinking embedded in the Silk Road imaginary derived its meanings from the historically contingent encounters powered by geopolitical re-alliances and capital flows.

1.3. Toward Reform: From the late-1970s to the 1990s

During this period, the historical metaphor of the Silk Road circulated back into the political and economic imagination in post-Mao China through its popularization by the Japanese. The changing geopolitical relationship between the United States and China in the 1970s provided a necessary condition for the opening-up and reform of the market economy in China. Local governments, especially those lacking preferential economic treatment and capital flows, turned toward the usable past for social and economic development.

In the 1970s, the processes of normalization between China and countries such as the United States and Japan began. In 1971, Henry Kissinger, the U.S. National Security Advisor to the Nixon administration (1969-1974) at the time, secretly visited China during his state visit to Pakistan. Since 1955, American troops had supported the southern Vietnamese army while the Soviet Union and China lined up with the Vietnamese communists in the north. But the Sino-Soviet relationship came to a halt in the early 1960s after a short honeymoon in the late 1950s. Meanwhile in the United States, the domestic disillusion and protests against the Vietnam War prompted American politicians
to seek alternative allies. Kissinger’s negotiation with the Chinese government was followed by Nixon’s official visit the next year. In 1972, President Richard Nixon visited Beijing and began the process of diplomatic normalization with the PRC.

At this particular historical conjuncture, the Silk Road was re-introduced as a Pan-Asianist metaphor by Japanese media workers to China. In the same year that Kissinger visited China, Japan, as a key ally of the United States in the Asia-Pacific region, also started to restore its diplomatic relationship with China. In 1972, the Japanese Prime Minister Tanaka Kakuei (in office between 1972 and 1974) visited China. The Chinese Prime Minister at the time, Zhou Enlai, hosted the welcoming banquet. Zhou expected over 300 Japanese journalists in attendance to introduce China to the rest of the world. Among the Japanese media groups received by Zhou Enlai was an NHK (Japan Broadcasting Cooperation). On Zhou’s invitation, NHK’s film director Hajime Suzuki first opted for the story of Marco Polo and later picked up the idea of the Silk Road because “during the most cosmopolitan periods of the Han and Tang dynasties in ancient China, the Silk Road closely connected China to the world (Jiangsu News 2014).” With support from the NHK administration, Suzuki tried many times to begin the project with different Chinese networks, but to no avail. The turning point came shortly after Mao’s death.

In 1977, after ten years of international isolation under Mao, Deng Xiaoping (1904-1977), as Deputy-Premier, started to re-direct China toward reform and “opening up” (kaifang). He sent delegation after delegation of Chinese high-level ministers, managers of state-owned enterprises, and provincial officials to Europe, the United States, Hong Kong, Japan and Southeast Asia. The major missions for the delegates were
to see the world realistically, to learn from various countries about their modernizing experiences, and to turn China from a backward country into a wealthy socialist nation. Technology, science, capital and management skills were among the most valued items on China’s wish list (Vogel 2013). The past was no longer an evil to be denied or abolished; rather, it became a lubricant for the wheels to turn faster.

In October 1978, Deng visited Japan. He oversaw the signing of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship and met with the Japanese emperor, politicians, industry leaders, and journalists. During his ten-day trip, Deng showed great interest in Japan’s rapid recovery from the war and its success in modernizing the economy (Vogel 2013:294-310). Upon visiting Nara and Kyoto, whose urban plans were originally modeled on Chang’ an (today’s Xi’an), Deng also had an intimate feeling of the affinity that the Japanese had for Chinese culture. Meanwhile, the NHK director Suzuki got help from his Chinese friend Chen Hanyuan, a CCTV journalist and producer, and boarded the special train on which the Deputy-Premier was traveling. Suzuki managed to talk to Deng’s secretary who passed on the NHK’s request to shoot scenes in the Silk Road region (NHK 2018). The permission came in late 1978. The planning and co-filming of the Silk Road series formally began in 1979 (People’s Daily 1979).

The NHK-CCTV co-produced documentary *Silk Road* (シルクロード or 絹の道) was an international hit. It was broadcast through the NHK’s global distribution network in 1980. In the first episode, the narrator Ishizaka Koji started his narration accompanied by Kitaro’s music, “The Silk Road begins in Chang’an… and ends in Chang’an.” This twelve-episode series was followed by a 1983 series which included footage from India, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Italy and so on. After the two
continent-based versions, the NHK continued to produce a maritime Silk Road series featuring India, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries in 1988. As Nagasawa Kazutoshi from Waseda University commented in 1992, this “Silk Road fever, indicated by indiscriminate publication of a wide range of books [before the 1980s], was heightened by the prominent NHK-TV series ‘Silk Road’ (Kazutoshi 1992:50-51).” Thanks to the NHK global media outlets, the three Silk Road series in the 1980s together created a Silk Road fever not only in Japan but around the world.

Interestingly, despite its international popularity in the 1980s, the CCTV-produced documentary of the Silk Road was little known among the general audience in mainland China. One major reason had to do with the underdeveloped media infrastructure in China after a decade of sociopolitical havoc. In 1982, the Ministry of Radio and Television had just become a separate entity charged with upgrading audio and visual broadcasting. The numbers of Chinese receiving sets—including both radio and television—was about 20 million in a country of a billion people (Womack 1987:25). The disparity between cities and countryside was also startling. In urban areas there was one television set for every 6.8 families but in rural areas, where perhaps 75% of the Chinese population lived in 1982, the ratio was 53:1 (Kenneson 1982). Such infrastructural impediments, together with the lack of professional training, adequate financial investment, and poor media programming, led to low ratings for the Silk Road series. The NHK invested about five million dollars in the documentary, but little funding was given to the editing and distribution of the Silk Road documentary in mainland China. To make matters worse, in 1980, state media workers had little idea of the documentary as a visual genre. Unlike the successful first Silk Road series in NHK TV, the shared materials from
the Sino-Japanese co-filming group were poorly managed by the CCTV staff (Jiangsu News 2014). The length of each episode in the Chinese version varied from eighteen to thirty-eight minutes. The airing time was uncertain due to the unstructured broadcasting schedule.

Thanks to the Japanese media network and the collaborative efforts of diverse Asian states, the histories of diverse Silk routes became an internationally acclaimed intercultural symbol. Despite its low domestic viewing record among the general public in China, the Chinese government in the early post-Mao era welcomed the notion of the Silk Road. For instance, Zhao Ziyang, the third Prime Minister of the PRC (1980-1987), embraced the historical metaphor of Silk Road during his visit to Italy in 1984. In Milan, the President of the Milan Business Association gave a welcome speech, saying that it was “time to open a new ‘Silk Road.’” In response to this historical reference, Zhao emphasized the Chinese government’s determination to carry out reform and opening up in the long run. The “fourteen cities along the east coast and Hainan island will provide preferential policies for foreign investment in economy and technology,” promised Zhao; “we will also set up a General Consul in Milan for facilitating mutual collaboration (Jiang and Ma 1984).” In 1994, Li Peng, the fourth Prime Minister of the PRC (1987-1998), praised the construction of a new railroad between China and the Central Asian states as a “Silk Road for the twenty-first century (Burdman 1997).” The idea was to strengthen China’s economic and political connections with independent states of the former Soviet Union. China’s goal was also to ensure border stability between Xinjiang and the Central Asian states. In short, the post-Mao CCP leadership adopted a diverse spectrum of policies and discourses to carry out the policy of opening-up to promote economic
reform. The strategic use of the Silk Road metaphor was one way of “using the past to
serve the present” (gu wei jin yong).

While the political aspect of the Silk Road was always highlighted, both the 1984
Italian visit and Li Peng’s 1994 Central Asian tour accentuated a key feature in the use of
the past in the post-Mao era—namely, the instrumentalization of history as economic
resources (Anagnost 1997). It reflected China’s eagerness to learn from the outside
world, import foreign products, borrow foreign capital, export its commodities, and
upgrade its own modern industrial bases.

The recurrent historical symbol, when mentioned in the national reports and local
policies, was often invoked for the development of China’s regional economy. Among
the first to jump on the bandwagon were the ethnic minority autonomous regions, inland
areas with less developed transportation and education systems in the land-locked
Northwest. For instance, multi-ethnic Gansu was one of the first northwestern provinces
to celebrate its cultural legacies from the ancient Silk Road. “Suitable to develop its
resources for tourism,” the northwestern province of Gansu would follow Beijing’s call
for reform and opening up in the new era (S. Wang and Pei 1984). The same went for
other northwestern provinces such as Shaanxi and Xinjiang (Y. Cao and Wang 1989; Jing
1990). While China’s priority and resources were tilted toward the eastern coastal areas,
provincial officials in the western regions explored alternative regional resources for
boosting their “political achievements” (zhengji).

One example can be found in the literature produced during the 1980s. Jia
Ping’wa, a Shaanxi-born contemporary writer known for his depiction of northwestern
urban and rural landscapes, captured the changing mentality in his native province. In his book *Deserted Capital* (1993), Jia used a quasi-ethnographic style to depict the urban space of Xi’an. Set in the city of Xijing (another historical name for Xi’an, meaning ‘capital in the west’), his stories were set in the year 1980. A new mayor, born in Shanghai and married to a woman from Xijing, assumes office two years after the reforms and so-called Open Policy (*kaifang zhengce*) have been inaugurated. Ambitious but lacking local resources, the new mayor seeks innovative ways to boost his political achievements in a conservative, basically clan-based milieu. A young man Huang Defu offers a quick solution:

Xijing used to be the capital for over twelve dynasties. The thick layers of cultural deposits are both an asset and a burden. Officials and people all tend to be conservative, which leads to Xijing’s economic backwardness in comparison to the east coastal cities. Previous mayors worked hard on comprehensive reform. However, their efforts often seemed futile due to the aging state-owned companies and the growing government deficit caused by rapid urbanization. Rather than depending on the long-term policy effects, it is better to focus on things overlooked by your predecessors, things like the cultural industry and tourism. (Jia 1993:3-4)

Inspired by Huang’s advice, the new mayor makes two decisions. First, he ensures that the city wall will be renovated and the moat cleaned. Second, he orders the transformation of three major avenues, each following a distinct style modeled after three historical periods of the Tang, Song, and Ming-Qing dynasties. The cultural and tourist industries boost the urban economy in the short run, but they also cause a sudden surge of migration into the city. Security becomes an issue. Moral decline seems inevitable. People begin to call Xijing “Thief City (*zei cheng*),” “Opioid City (*yan cheng*),” and “City of Underground Prostitution (*an’chang cheng*).” Dissatisfaction among urban residents grows like wild grass. According to Jia, “During reform and opening up, you
can have material wealth but it comes at a cost—spiritual loss; you cannot always have both in life (Jia 1993:4).”

By the late 1990s, the social and economic imbalance between the eastern and western regions in mainland China grew ever bigger, due to the economic and political preferential policies toward the eastern regions and large cities like Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou and Shenzhen. In 1999, the President Jiang Zeming (in office between 1993-2003) made an intra-party statement, announcing a national plan of developing the west in the city of Xi’an:

Sooner or later, we will have to develop the west. Without developing it, how can we ever achieve modernization at a national level? How can China ever be an economically strong country? If the United States had not developed its own west, how could it have ever been the way it is now? (Zeng 2010)\(^\text{13}\)

In Jiang’s speech, the reference to the West Expansion in the United States was one of the reasons that legitimated what became known as the Westward Development plan in China. Yet, instead of mentioning the internal colonization process in the United States history, Jiang Zeming emphasized the benefits of re-balancing the east-west divide within China. Soon after the statement in Xi’an, the Politburo in Beijing swiftly passed the “Grand Westward Development” plan (Xibu da kaifang zhengce) on January 13, 2000. This set the agenda for China westward project in the twenty-first century: infrastructure construction, resource development, environmental conservation, and cultural rejuvenation.

\(^\text{13}\) Zeng Peiyan, the author of *Retrospect* (2010), was born in 1938, graduated from Tsinghua University and joined the CPC in 1978. From 2001-2, he was Head of Leading Group for Western China Development, directly under the charge of State Council, Central Committee in CPC, and Politburo in China.
By excavating long-buried “thick layers of cultural deposits,” the Chinese government at both the national and regional levels has started to look at the past as a reservoir of economic resources since the 1980s. This political orientation has been intimately linked with economic incentives in the new “market economy with Chinese characteristics” (Zhongguo tese de shichang jingji). Or, to borrow from Rancière’s idea of political-economy, the hyphen between the two domains makes particular sense in an age of global capital flows and world-remaking politics (Rancière 1999). The past does not stand outside but rather in between the two elements. To invoke the past with all its associative meanings makes a simultaneously political and economic claim in a state-regulated market economy, a phenomenon also widely observed in other developing countries in Africa and Asia (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009a). This market-oriented logic has since dominated much of the common use of the Silk Road until today, though not novel in terms of the underlying infrastructural logic since its inception in the late nineteenth century.

1.4. Soft Power in the Global Era: Entering the Twenty-first Century

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, globalization and soft power surfaced more prominently than the Silk Road in China’s official discourses. I argue that this brief period provides the discursive and institutional preconditions for the marriage between infrastructural logic and nation branding using the metaphor of the Silk Road in the following decade.

Globalization (quanqiu hua), a term little used in Chinese official discourses in the 1980s and 1990s, began to circulate both among elites and common people in the
early 2000s. But the Chinese government has been actively seeking to be a global player in the post-Cold War world since the mid-1980s. In 1986, for example, the Chinese government began its application for membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO). The final decision of accepting China as a member state came more than a decade later on November 2011 in Doha, Qatar. The fifteen-year struggle signaled what the former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called an “event of historic proportions for the world trading system” (Schifferes 2001).

Beijing has also been institutionalizing its vision of globalization through various regional trade agreements and multilateral organizations. In June 2001, the leaders from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and China formally announced the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The SCO, born out of the former Shanghai Five Group (without Uzbekistan), aimed at enhancing economic exchanges and security collaboration among the member states. In November 2002, one year after China joined the WTO, the initial framework agreement of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) was signed in Cambodia. The agreement officially came into effect in 2010, which made the area under the ACFTA the largest free trade area in the world from the standpoint of population (Gooch 2009). Then, in 2010, the leaders of the BRIC—an informal acronym for Brazil, Russia, India and China—made it a formal institution in 2009, with South Africa joining the next year. Together, these global and regional networks mark China’s shift from a form of socialist internationalism to neoliberal globalization in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

With its growing global economic influence, the Chinese government has been increasingly grappling with its global image and nation branding. One guiding political
philosophy is “soft power” (ruan shili). It was first conceptualized by the American political scientist Joseph Nye Jr in 1990. Nye defined soft power as the power of attraction that “occurs when one country gets other countries to want what it wants (Nye Jr 1990:166).” The backdrop for Nye’s initial concern was the rising power of Japan—rather than China—especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall. By the mid-2000s, the apprehension toward China’s rise took center stage. Nye assessed the situation as a competition between the so-called Beijing Consensus and the so-called Washington consensus in the expansion of a neoliberal order. Although China’s soft power “still has a long way to go,” he warned that “it would be foolish to ignore the gains it is making (Nye Jr 2005).” By 2017, Nye noted—partly based on his several visits to China as a result of university invitations—that the Chinese government has expanded government-funded programs such as Confucius Institutes (CIs) for nation branding, but that it has largely left aside the question of political values (Nye Jr 2017).

To understand the adoption of soft power theory in China, we need to go back to the 1990s and see under what conditions it was interpreted in the first place. In the early 1990s, one of the first persons who introduced Nye’s notion of “soft power” into China was Wang Hu’ning, then a prominent political theorist from Fudan University in Shanghai. As a political philosopher, Wang was invited by President Jiang Zemin to work on behalf of the Chinese government. Since then, Wang has been considered one of the leading voices for three successive administrations. After Xi Jinping took office in 2013, Wang became a member of the Politburo Standing Committee and secretary of the CCP’s Secretariat. Given Wang’s deep involvement in the CCP leadership, his
interpretation of soft power has had ripple effects in terms of the Chinese government’s long-term ideological and political goals.

“As a part of ‘soft power’,” Wang wrote in 1994, “when political and military pressures are lessened, cultural conflicts and contradictions will surface, even in an amplified way… Therefore, in the post-Cold War era, the cultural factor becomes more and more important (Wang 1994:51-2).” Wang’s emphasis on the “cultural factor” preceded Nye conception by over a decade. In Nye’s analytical definition in 2008, culture is part of a state’s soft power resources. It can be divided into high culture and pop culture, which appeal to elites and masses respectively (2008:96). Culture also has to do with channels of communication. The “slow media of cultural diplomacy” works through art, books and exchanges and the “fast information media” moves through “radio, movies, and newsreels (2008:98).” While Nye’s later conceptualization of culture incorporates most aspects of soft power instruments, Wang’s understanding of the cultural factor has more to do with Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” (1993). In a sense, the implications of the “cultural conflicts and contradictions” in the post-Cold War era—as Wang saw them in 1994—shaped the ways in which the “cultural factor” has been used in China.

Overall, the Chinese state treats the “cultural factor” as a key element of soft power in a bifurcated way. Internally, it stresses the importance of national unity and cultural rejuvenation; externally, it aims at increasing the attraction of China’s image (Glaser and Murphy 2009:20). In 2007, the adapted version of “cultural soft power” (wenhua ruan shili) was officially written into the report of the 17th National Congress of the CCP (CPC News 2007). In the 18th National Congress in 2012, the year when Xi
Jinping was elected General Secretary of the CCP, cultural soft power was further elevated as one of five goals designed to establish a “moderately prosperous society” (xiaokang shehui). Externally, one of the most controversial soft-power projects by far is the worldwide expansion of the CIs.

Between 2004 and the end of 2017, the government-sponsored Hanban, i.e. the Office of Chinese Language Council International, has established 525 CIs and 1,1113 Confucius classrooms. The stated goals of the CIs are to promote overseas Chinese language programs, facilitate international cultural exchanges, and help construct a harmonious world.\footnote{Updated information can be found in the Hanban official website \url{http://www.hanban.org/confuciousinstitutes/node_10961.htm}, accessed on March 20, 2018.} While the CIs are relatively well accepted in Africa, Latin America and some countries in Asia, more critical voices have come from Western academia, media and think tanks. In the United States, Canada and Australia, CIs are often seen as an impediment to academic freedom (Peterson 2017; Sahlins 2015), or even as a potential threat to national security (Economist 2017; J. Nye Jr 2018; Walker and Ludwig 2017).

1.5. The Silk Road 2.0: Returning to a Global Past?\footnote{The idea of a global past was inspired by a conversation with Serge Grunzinski at the University of Pennsylvania campus on March 14, 2018. Grunzinski is a French historian specialized in Latin America and intercultural global history. His publications include \textit{The Mestizo Mind: The Intellectual Dynamics of Colonization and Globalization} (2013) and \textit{The Eagle & the Dragon: Globalization and European Dreams of Conquest in China and America in the Sixteenth Century} (2014).}

A common joke circulating among China’s journalists and officials goes like this, “if you want to get funding from the government for anything, you’d better make it part...
of the Silk Road.” Effective or not, the Silk Road has become a must-add in official reports, government policies, funding applications and other scenarios. Although the Silk Road has been a historical metaphor dispersed in various representations since the late nineteenth century, it is not until 2013 that this metaphor unfurled in an updated version. In an abbreviated form, I call it the Silk Road 2.0.

The implication of the Silk Road 2.0 as a geohistorical metaphor has its material and technological manifestations outside the state-centered framework. The most infamous example is the Silk Road website launched in 2011. As the first modern darknet market, it was initially used for trading illegal drugs and soon developing into a complex market of illegal commodities. In 2013, the Silk Road 2.0 was launched before its closure one year later. Another more benign yet no less capital-intensive example is the Silk Road, Inc., a U.S.-based human resource management software company. The company name Silk Road, Inc. may instantly remind us of the multiplicities of the “Inc.” in Jean and John Comaroffs’ *Ethnicity Inc.* (2009). I choose the Silk Road 2.0 over the Silk Road Inc. partly because of the former’s rhizomatic features and ramifying meanings. The version 2.0 means a creative reiteration based on the previous infrastructure, whether it be technological or historical. The serial number 1.0, 2.0, etc. also suggests the current version ephemerality and constant unpredictability, which may paradoxically feed into an elastic resistance against the co-optation by a single entity, be it an empire-like state or a multinational company.

One immediate precursor to the Silk Road 2.0 is the growing competition for economic and political impact in Asia between the United States and China in the twentieth century. Again, Beijing did not single out the Silk Road in the first place;
rather, Washington took the lead. In 2011, Hillary Clinton, the former U.S. Secretary of State, announced the “New Silk Road” initiative (NSR) in a series of talks regarding South and Central Asian diplomacy. In her remarks in Chennai, India on July 20, 2011, Clinton highlighted the historical connection between the “nations of South and Central Asia” through a “sprawling trading network called the Silk Road.” She called for a new Silk Road working like “an international web and network of economic and transit connections (Clinton 2011a).” Then, on September 22, 2011, Clinton reiterated this vision by highlighting the strategic position of Afghanistan in the NSR Ministerial Meeting in New York (Clinton 2011b). As a majority staff report in the US senate session stated in December 2011, the main purpose of the NSR initiative was to “transform Afghanistan into a hub of transport and trade, connecting markets in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia (Committee of Foreign Relations 2011).” In the report, ring road, railroads, gas and oil pipelines, electricity transmission lines (see Map 2.2) as well as legal frameworks and border control mechanism were key to the long-term economic development.
Map 2.2—A map showing the proposed route for the CASA-1000 transmission line. Source from World Bank, see http://projects.worldbank.org/P145054/?lang=en&tab=overview.

Frederick Starr, the chair of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute based in Washington D.C., is the plan’s chief architect. He has been promoting the “Big Central Asia” concept since the 1990s. In 1997, Starr also worked with Senator Sam Brownback in drafting a legislative “Silk Road Act.” But it was not until the 2010s that the US State Department began to re-assess the plan as the American troops were gradually retreated from the region. In an interview published in 2011, Starr reflected upon the historical background of what he envisioned as the Silk Road act,

Over two millennia, Afghanistan was the place where trade routes to India, China, the Middle East and Europe all converged. This is why Marco Polo crossed the
country en route to China, and why Arab travelers like Ibn Battuta crossed it on their way to India. Such trade along the misnamed “Silk Road” (in fact, every conceivable product was transported over it) produced immense wealth. Balkh, near Mazar-e-Sharif, was once among the largest and richest cities on earth. Medieval Arabs, who knew something about urban life, called it “the Mother of Cities.” Bagram once maintained lucrative ties simultaneously with ancient Greece and India, enabling it to flourish in opulent splendor. (Yuldasheva and Shukurzoda 2011)

Now, if we recall Dr. Aksam’s comment on Afghanistan in *People’s Daily* in 1956, there is an uncanny similarity between the ways in which Dr. Aksam and Dr. Starr’s talked about Afghanistan’s historical position along the Silk Road. Afghanistan was regarded as the crossroad between different civilizations. Given its strategic location, the trade flourished, and civilizations converged. Despite all the calamities the country went through, history seemed to harbor wealth and prosperity for the future. However, as noted by Central Asian experts Laruelle and Peyrouse, the 2011 NSR backed up by Dr. Starr’s historical vision aimed more at excluding Moscow from new geopolitical configurations than Afghanistan’s comprehensive economic prosperity in the long run (Marlène Laruelle and Peyrouse 2011).

While most of the US state remarks, senate reports or academic publications focused on Moscow, few had foreseen Beijing’s unprecedented take on the Silk Road. Wang Jisi, Dean of the School of International Studies in Peking University and a member of the Foreign Policy Advisory Committee of the Foreign Ministry of China, followed up on the NSR and published an influential article in the *Global Times* on October 17, 2012. In response to the US new geopolitical planning, Wang proposed a strategic re-balancing through “Marching toward the West” (*xi jin*) (J. Wang 2012). He argued that China had been developing its economic relations with the U.S., Europe, Japan and Four Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan) since
1978. The east coastal region has developed much faster than the western regions in terms of foreign trade and economic development. To change this imbalance, China initiated the “Grand Westward Development” plan in 2000. Given the current geopolitical situation, it is the time to improve the Westward plan through strategic re-balancing.

Built upon this historical review, Wang Jisi elaborated on the rebalancing strategy in four fronts. First, China needs to construct a “New Silk Road” which starts from east China through Eurasia toward South Asia, the Mediterranean and east coast of the Atlantic. Second, Beijing has to strengthen the commercial ties with and increase the economic aid to different countries to the West of China, establishing funding for cooperation and development. Third, it is critical to combat the splittism, religious extremism, terrorism and transnational crimes along the western borders. Lastly, the Chinese government should enhance the diplomatic relations with the countries along the Silk Road, learn about their national cultures, ethnicities and religions, and turn some of the economic advantage into political advantage and soft power. In his conclusion, Wang insisted that the “March West” proposal needed not be a written national foreign strategy. Rather, he framed it as a way of strategic thinking against the changing geopolitical landscapes.

Wang’s call for a Chinese version of the New Silk Road based on China’s existing national plans of reform and open-up, “Grand Westward Development” and “cultural soft power” was heeded by Beijing. On September 7, 2013, the newly inaugurated Chinese President Xi Jinping went to Central Asia for his first foreign state visit. He delivered a speech entitled “Promote People-to-People Friendship and Create a
Better Future” at Nazarbayev University in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The speech started with a historical reference to the Silk Road:

More than 2100 years ago, Zhang Qian from the Han Dynasty in China carried a peace mission and visited Central Asia twice. He opened the gate for the friendly interaction between China and Central Asia. He also started the Silk Road that went from the East to the West and that connected Asia and Europe…As the ancient Silk Road regains its vitality now, we should forge new patterns of development and cooperation in constructing ‘the Silk Road Economic Belt’…with a deepening understanding of each other’s history and culture. (Xi 2013)

Xi used the story of Zhang Qian, as mentioned in the Chinese historian Sima Qian’s Historical Records, to suggest a longstanding historical connection between China and Central Asia. Yet, also according to the Chinese records, Sima Qian himself never used the term “Silk Road” (sichou zhilu or silu) when he described Zhang Qian’s political mission. No economic motivation was mentioned in the original text. What Sima Qian did write was the term of “zao kong,” which literally means “chisel to open” (Sima 1982). Sima Qian’s commentary on Zhang Qian’s mission essentially credited him as the first official emissary sent by the Han emperor from the capital Chang’an to the Western Regions which lied beyond the Jade Gate Pass in the northwestern tip of today’s Gansu Province. Leaving aside somewhat anachronistic juxtaposition in his speech, what Xi essentially aimed at was to promote “new patterns of development and cooperation” outside and in parallel to the U.S.-dominated post-Cold War world order.

This evocation of a global past has been on ascendance since Xi’s proposal in Central Asia. Later in 2013, a “maritime Silk Road” initiative was proposed during Xi’s state visit to Indonesia. Zheng He, an admiral in the Ming Dynasty, was highlighted as a symbolic figure in the maritime routes. By early 2015, the National Development and
Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce co-issued the full proposal entitled the “Vision and proposed actions outlined on jointly building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” with a comprehensive map (National Development and Reform Commission 2015).

After the release of this document in 2015, I had an informal interview with a Xinhua journalist working to cover the reports of the Belt and Road initiative from Beijing. When I inquired about the official interpretations, he found the Silk Road “hard” to define but “vague” enough to use.

The journalist (J.): “Well, it is hard to define… Let’s call it a yuanjing.”

Me: “A yuanjing?”

J.: “Yes, more or less. Have you read the proclamation released by Xinhua early this year? In the title, it calls the Chinese state’s wish to build the OROB as a yuanjing that leads to various actions (xingdong). Well, if you literally translate the word of yuanjing, it means the scene that you wish or desire to see. In our English editions, we normally translate it as vision. So, you see, it is a vision.”

Me: “A vision?”

J.: “You may be confused, but almost everyone is kind of confused, too. It [OROB] is a very vague thing. What we think is excluded from the ancient Silk Road is now being included. Why? I don’t think it is too difficult to understand. Ever since President Xi took office, he has been trying hard to construct an image of China as a Great Nation (daguo xingxiang)...Perhaps because the image of the Silk Road is untarnished by negative associations. In China’s long history, the Silk Road is a symbol of openness and prosperity. Think about the Tang Dynasty

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16 If we read the English title of the document and of the forum, it is noticeable that the number “One” was intentionally left out from the previous English translation of the “One Road One Belt.” To advocate for pluralism and diversity, the Chinese government has carefully taken out the number One. According to official sources, this omission is to avoid a potential misunderstanding of China’s global influence as imposing or hegemonic.

17 The word yuanjing did not come into the mainland China’s political vocabulary until 2005. Before 2005, it was widely used by Taiwanese entrepreneurs.
and Zheng He, for example. We need something positive to position China in the world today. There it is.”

This journalist shared his confusion over the concrete meanings of the Silk Road with many analysts and observes both in China and abroad. But he also pointed out the use of the Silk Road depended on its vague-enough meanings in history. Calling it a “symbol of openness and prosperity” and emphasizing the positive image of China’s position in the world, his view reflected the underlying tone in the official reports of the Silk Road in China. In a sense, the projection of a global past into the present is part of the extended nation-building project in contemporary China.

Such trend was further elaborated by a more recent talk Xi gave in 2017. During his speech at the opening ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing on May 14, Xi opened his speech as follows:

Over 2,000 years ago, our ancestors, trekking across vast steppes and deserts, opened the transcontinental passage connecting Asia, Europe and Africa, known today as the Silk Road. Our ancestors, navigating rough seas, created sea routes linking the East with the West, namely, the maritime Silk Road. These ancient silk routes opened windows of friendly engagement among nations, adding a splendid chapter to the history of human progress. The thousand-year-old “gilt bronze silkworm” displayed at China’s Shaanxi History Museum and the Belitung shipwreck discovered in Indonesia bear witness to this exciting period of history…The Silk Road spirit has become a great heritage of human civilization. (Xi 2017)

The geographical scope covered by the initiative expanded to include Asia, Europe and Africa (see Map 2.3). Later in the same speech, the stories of Zhang Qian and Zheng He were complemented by other “great adventurers” such as Marco Polo of Italy and ibn Batutah of Morocco.
Let us recall for a moment Sven Hedin’s opening lines in *The Silk Road* (1936), it is not hard to see the same historical reference to Zhang Qian in both Hedin’s book and Xi’s talks. Both used the Silk Road as a chronotopic experience to call for political action. What differentiates the two statements, as in the latter case, is the evocation of a global past deeply shaped by colonial modernity but aspiring to emulate and transcend. Thus, one could see that, in the Xi’s 2017 talk, the spirit of the Silk Road was elevated as “great heritage of human civilization” that transcended temporal and spatial boundaries. In a sense, the re-imagination of a global past embodied in the Silk Road 2.0 is but a refraction of the contemporary economic and geopolitical landscapes.
1.6. Conclusion

This chapter offers a history of the Silk Road from its colonial inception in the late nineteenth century to the rhizomatic ramification in the twenty-first century. Built on Tamara Chin’s conceptualization of the Silk Road as a geohistorical memory and a chronotopic experience, I argue that the use of the Silk Road reflects the long-lasting impact of colonial modernity in the contemporary. Its infrastructural logic is deeply embedded in the discursive power of colonial modernity and gets reiterated in different modes of modernity (e.g. socialist internationalism, late socialism, neoliberalism, state capitalism). Besides, nation states have played a major role in determining the interpretation and perception of the past. However, it is my purpose to show how a wide variety of individual, local, and transnational programs—academic, political, artistic, and technological—have profoundly impacted the national narratives of the Silk Road in modern China. Adam Nobis and other scholars stressed that multiplurality is embedded in a wide spectrum of the Silk Road discourses around the world (e.g. Guo and Guo 2010; Frankopan 2016; Ni 2016; Nobis 2017; Nobis and Kruszelnicki 2013; Peyrouse 2009). My intention, rather than proposing a new concept of globalization through the Silk Road histories, is to focus on excavating the shifting planes underlying official representations of the Silk Road in a relatively short span of time. It highlights both continuities and disjunctures between the near past and present. It also identifies some threads of the diverse cultural and geopolitical imaginaries that transgress national boundaries. Just as history itself is always full of ironies and contradictions, the use of past cannot be a self-containing, coherent, homogeneous project either.
Chapter 2

Mapping Cosmopolitan Desires in Xi’an

Xi’an, literally meaning Peace in the West, is one of the biggest cities in Northwest China. It is located in the Guanzhong Plains of Shaanxi province, the transitional zone sitting in the agro-pastoral belts between East and West China. Qinling or the Mountains of Qin stand to the south of the city, stretching across about 1,000 miles in an east-west axle. This gigantic reservoir of diverse flora and fauna serves as a natural watershed between South and North China. It also divides between the Yangtze River basin to its south and, to its north, the Yellow River basin and the Loess Plateau. Several major waterways, railways and highways cut through mountain ridges and make Xi’an more than a regional hub for communication and transportation. Given its strategic location, convenient transport system and surrounding land fertility, the ancient city then under the name of Chang’an used to be the capital for over ten dynasties.

Immersing oneself in the contemporary city of Xi’an is a mixed experience of navigating between the past and the present. This sense was immediately heightened
when I just started doing my fieldwork in the summer of 2015. I took the flight from Shanghai to Xi’an in August and arrived in Xi’an-Xianyang International Airport. On my way to the luggage claim, rows of large-scale posters decorated the hall, ranging from the highspeed railway, the Tang Paradise theme park, the terminus of the Silk Road, to local cuisine and hotels. A couple in their mid-thirties walking by my side exchanged their comment, “the airport looks much modern now. Look at those paintings [they were referring to the copies of the classic tomb paintings of the courtesans, officials and emperors]. They look so royal (huangjia fengfan)!”

The airport shuttle to the downtown area took about forty minutes. New tall residential and commercial buildings were being constructed outside the old city wall rampantly. The construction cranes could be seen constantly on the way into the city. Once the bus got into the city enclosed by the walls, the competition for height seemed to give way to the horizontal intensification of commercial space. Many tourists walked on the streets in the humid summer afternoon. The closer one got to downtown near the Bell Tower, the more one could see the stores and shops along the streets. Massive shopping malls, Starbuck cafes, movie theatres, large massage clubs... The arch on the top of the South Gate was still under renovation then (as I learned from a taxi driver the other day, the municipal government were finishing up the underground pass for the west-east traffic). The walls enclosing the constructing site were painted with ambitious logos such as “Writing the Legend of a City” (shuxie yizuo chengshi de chuanqi) and “Constructing the Starting Point of the Silk Road” (dazao sihzou zhilu qidian).

Such extensive display of cosmopolitan desires in the urban spaces preceded the BRI. The “discovery” of the Silk Road heritage from the ancient Chang’an did not occur
overnight. The formation of this multi-layered landscape reflects the nationwide desire to become “wealthy and strong” (fuqiang) in the post-Mao China (Osburg 2013). Since the 1980s, the historical association between Chang’an and the ancient Silk Road has been refashioned as part of the city’s cosmopolitan heritage. Besides the economic policies, media and communication networks also contributed to a tourist boom in Xi’an in the 1980s. For example, the first Sino-Japanese coproduction of the Silk Road documentary series portrayed Xi’an as the beginning point of the Silk Road from China to Europe (see Chapter ONE). Thanks to the popularity of the documentary series through the NHK’s international broadcast network, Xi’an started to attract more foreign tourists as well as domestic tourists. According to the provincial record, the annual growth rate of the number of the foreign tourists between 1979 and 1988 was 35.97% (Zhou 1988:20). Such desires to boost economy through history has also been well captured in the literary works published in the 1990s (Jia 1993; Y. Wang 2006; Barme 2013).

In 2011, the provincial government of Shaanxi announced its plan to transform Xi’an into a cosmopolitan metropolis (guojihua da dushi) again and to “rebuild the glory of the Tang capital of Chang’an (B. Zhang 2011).” By 2012, slogans such as “one of the four ancient capitals in the world” or “the terminus of the Silk Road and a melting pot of cultures and religions” were mushrooming in the street posters, museum brochures, tourist websites and souvenir shops. The municipal government has also been actively supporting and promoting large-scale urban projects and spectacles. By the summer of 2015, the discourses of the Silk Road and slogans of a cosmopolitan metropolis had already been bombarding the official newspapers and TV programs. As a Shaanxi-based
photographer Mr. Hu half-jokingly commented to me in 2013, “Xi’an is indeed full of history; maybe, it is both blessed and doomed by the heavy burden of history.”

However, the lived sense of history could drastically vary from one site to another. This chapter maps the cosmopolitan desires in Xi’an through participant observation, daily conversations, and archival research. The disjunctures in spatial representation, historical memories, and daily experiences surfaced most strongly when some—not all—of local Muslims and non-Muslims brought the entangled histories of disparate urban sites into their re-imagining of the Silk Road. Their stories complicate and add new layers to the official narratives, making me aware of both their willingness to participate in the national projects and their anxiety over the implications of the geopolitical projects in the long run.

1.1. The Muslim Quarter

Entering from the West Gate in Xi’an, one walks along the broad West Avenue toward the east. One will see the shops and stores on both sides of the avenue. Sometimes, the sellers play music so loud that their intention to attract consumers is not well rewarded. On top of those buildings sit the Qing-style big roofs. This architectural design, anachronistic and syncretic, is endorsed by the local government to beautify the city and attract the tourists with a historical flavor. The West Avenue is one of the major arteries inside the city wall, each named with four directions respectively. The four major avenues divide the square-shape space into four unequally distributed sections with their intersecting point in the Bell Tower. The Bell Tower was initially constructed in 1384, located to the east of the North Avenue. In 1582, it was moved to its current location,
next to the Drum Tower along the West Avenue. Since then, the two wood-and-brick towers in the classic Chinese style have become the temporal and spatial symbols of center in the urban life.

Before the use of mechanic clocks in the early twentieth century, the towers served as the clocks for the urban life. In the morning, the Bell Tower would ring to remind the people of the time of the day while the sound from the Drum Tower would signal the end of a day. The two structures were also the highest buildings inside the city wall, visible to all residents and travelers from four directions. It is only until the construction of the high-rises and skyscrapers in the 1980s and 1990s that the urban skyline was radically transformed. However, thanks to the municipal government’s zoning regulations in protection of the urban heritage, buildings inside the city wall are still not allowed to exceed the height of the Bell Tower. Urban residents today, no longer arranging their time around two towers, still regard those two towers as the landmark center for commuting in all four directions. Besides the shuttle buses on the ground, the city’s first subway line runs right through underneath the Bell Tower with its entries open in four directions. The tempo of public transportation commuting replaces the times marked by the towers. The latter, stripped off its original function, are transformed into urban spectacles and museums.

The Muslim Quarter or Huifang as the locals usually call it, is integral to the urban fabric in Xi’an. The Quarter is centrally located to the north of the West Avenue and to the northwest of the Bell Tower. In general, the urban Muslim communities in Xi’an can be geographically divided into those living in the Muslim Quarter (fangnei)
and those outside the Quarter (fangwai). It is an area with about 31,000 permanent residents and an increasing number of migrants from different ethnic backgrounds. The area is famous for one of the oldest mosques, the Grand Mosque, in the country, besides a wide variety of over ten mosques (including women’s mosques) in the Quarter. Since the 1990s, the Muslim Quarter has also been known for its halal cuisine and ethnoreligious cultures. But its infrastructure—such as the expanding housing projects, sewage system, dilapidated alleyways and shrinking schools—has also been a constant concern among the residents as well as the local government and urban planners.

This differentiation of fangnei and fangwai comes from Ma Qiang’s work (2011). But it is also an emic term long used by the local Muslims as a way to differentiate among themselves. Ma Qiang saw the Muslim Quarter both as a geographical and cultural concept. The boundaries between the two are blurred and constantly shifting. Outside the Muslim Quarter, there are mainly two domestic sources of Muslim communities and, increasingly, multiple sources for the presence of Muslims from other countries. One major Muslim community in Xi’an largely live in the Xincheng District in the northern part of the city. Many are descendants of the Sino-Japanese War refugees from the neighboring province Henan during the 1920s-30s. After 1978, many new Muslim migrants from both at home and abroad have come to the city for studying, doing business, or working in state-owned companies and private enterprises. For the college students and business people from other Muslim countries, they tend to live close to the universities or in the southern part of the city where there are growing Muslim communities and new mosques being built in recent years. For a comprehensive bibliography on urbanization and Chinese Muslims, see Introduction in Inside and Outside Hui Quarter (2011).

The Quarter also receives many Muslim migrants from other provinces. Uyghurs, for example, have a dispersed presence in the city. When I conducted my research between 2013 and 2017, I learned that many mainly live in the Muslim Quarter or surrounding areas as temporary tenants. Salars, another Muslim minority mainly living in today’s Qinghai and Gansu, also work as assistants or run their own stores or restaurants in the area. Overall, the Muslim Quarter is a traditional but highly diverse urban Muslim community during the constant processes of transformation and renovation.

For the discussion on the topic of housing in the 1990s, see Maris Gillette, “Housing, Education, and Race” in Between Mecca and Beijing (2000:22-67). For the preservation projects from the 2000s to 2010s, see Imanaka, “Tourism and Urban Renewal: The Case
The history of Muslims in Xi’an—or Shaanxi more broadly—reflects the longue durée inter-Asian connection between China and Central Asia. In the Tang Dynasty (618-907AD), Chang’an used to receive Buddhists, Jews, Christians, Muslims and people of different faiths across Asia. Islam was officially recognized by the Tang Emperor Gaozong in 650AD. One century afterwards when the Tang empire was almost toppled by a Sogdian-descent general, the Abbasid Caliphate offered its assistance by sending about 22,000 mercenary soldiers through Central Asia (Frankel 2016:574). After the Tang army resumed its rule, the Muslim soldiers stayed on and intermarried with the local Chinese women. It is common today to hear the Muslim residents in Xi’an claiming their ancestry way back to this Arab-Persia-Central Asia-Chinese mixture. Some would also argue that the history of the Muslim Quarter itself started in the Tang Dynasty.

Others, while acknowledging the long presence of Muslims in the city, see the formation of the Muslim Quarter differently. For example, Liu Lang, born in the Quarter in the late 1980s, often reminded me of the “basic historical commonsense” (jibe de lishi changshi) he saw often lack in the tourist brochures. We used to visit the two oldest mosques—the Grand Mosque and the Big Study Street Mosque—near his family house. “In the Tang Dynasty, where we stand now was part of the Imperial City.” Lang would

21 To manage the diverse foreign population in the capital, the Tang court set up a special administrative branch called fanzhang si. Fanzhang was the title of the representative leader elected among the foreign residents living near the West Market. As such, Fanzhang often assumed multiple responsibilities of translation, managing religious affairs, and representing the interests of foreigners when negotiating with the Tang officials. Information from the staff of the TWMM with special thanks to Shi Yanxin.
throw his question at me, “I’m not denying that we [Muslims] have been living in the city throughout history. But why would the Tang emperors allow a large size of foreign soldiers to live so close to the heart of their power?” Then, he would cite from the local records to show that the oldest mosques were mostly likely constructed in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644AD), a period which saw the rapid assimilation of the Hui Muslims into the mainstream Chinese society. Such local debates were far from being settled.

Yet, despite the conflictual narratives of the community’s formative period in the present location, the long-standing presence of the Muslims and their involvement in the urban history are hardly disputable. During the Mongol’s rule, Marco Polo (1254-1324AD), the son of an Italian merchant, recorded that the city still had “some Christians, Turkomans and Saracens” conducting business related to silk and gold (Polo 1926:248-9). Even the decline of the overland Silk Road after Mongol’s rule did not prevent the internal migration and mixing of people, albeit in a more limited scale but in no less innovative ways. The scripture hall education or *Jingtang jiaoyu* was invented by a Shaanxi Muslim Hu Dengzhou (1522-1597AD). It remained the major form of Islamic education in China before the first half of the twentieth century (Petersen 2017). During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912AD), the Manchu rulers invested heavily in fortifying Xi’an as its military and administrative base for governing the northwestern region.22 Before the

22 The Qing government invested heavily in fortifying Xi’an as its military/administrative base for governing the northwestern region. There used to be a sizable Manchu population living inside the so-called Manchu city (*man cheng*) with the current city wall, a “city within city” (*cheng zhong cheng*) known among the locals. After the 1911 nationalist revolution, the Manchu city was dismantled and many Manchus in the city were killed. For more details, see Wu Bing, “The Historical Development of the Names of Streets and Lanes in Xi’an” (2008). For the knowledge of the Manchu presence/absence in the city, I first encountered those stories from Liu Lang. A Hui resident himself, Lang constantly reminded me of the multi-ethnic, multi-religious
outbreak of the Muslim Rebellions in 1862, Shaanxi had a fairly large Muslim population. But after the rebellions, the entire demography in Shaanxi changed. Most Muslim survivors could only be found in the Muslim Quarter in Xi’an while the Hui villages and towns were mostly demolished in the 1860s and 70s (Ma 1993b:197). This drastic demographic change in the later-imperial Qing Dynasty, together with all its remnants and memories, provided a basic contour for the ethnic composition in Xi’an in the twentieth century. In 1956, the Muslim population in Xi’an was about 19,300, a number that grew slowly during the following decades of political turmoil (Ma 1993a:162). By 2010, Xi’an has 65,276 Hui Muslim residents, whose number far exceeds 10,840 of the Manchus, the city’s second largest ethnic minority.

Today, the Muslim Quarter has become one of the busiest districts in the city. For many visitors who travel to the city, two must-see sites are the Terracotta Warriors Museum in the eastern outskirts and the downtown Muslim Quarter. If the Terracotta

connections between the Muslims and non-Muslims in the city. He took me around the area amidst hot summer, cold winter and smoggy days. As an amateur historian himself, Lang’s love for the shadows from the past and their lingering impacts on the present has been one of the most precious gifts I have received from the fieldwork in Xi’an. Later, I also received a copy of a Xi’an city map during the late Qing Empire. It was generously given as a gift by a local imam YJ.

23 According to the local record, there was about 700,000 to 800,000 Hui Muslims in Shaanxi before 1862 (Zhu 1934:34). According to a Xi’an-based Muslim Ma Guangqi’s estimation, the number could have been about a million (C. Ma 1993a:214).
24 According to the Sixth National Census in 2010, Xi’an is home to 52 nationalities out of the total 56 nationalities in China. The non-Han minorities only consist 1.13% of the total urban population. Among all the minority population, the Hui Muslims form the largest minority communities in the city. Other ethnic minorities also include Mongol, Zhuang, Tujia, Tibetan, Uyghur, Miao and so on. Over half of all ethnic minorities live in the Lianhu District, a sub-municipality diverse in demography and bustling with tourist industry (Xian Municipal Bureau of Statistics Intranet 2011).
Warriors represents the face of a militarily powerful and politically unified millennial state, the Muslim Quarter increasingly offers a luring image of a cosmopolitan, multicultural nation bustling with business and movements. Since 2013, the Quarter has been increasingly celebrated by the local government and tourist bureau as one of the living testimonies to the cosmopolitan spirit of the Tang Chang’an and the Silk Road. The presence of local Muslim residents, halal cuisine and the Grand Mosque in the classic Chinese style attracts millions of visitors from home and abroad each year. The Muslim Quarter, once dilapidated and little mentioned in any local brochure, is now a favorite tourist destination in Xi’an (see Photo 1.2).
My access into the field started with a much less glamorous street not far from the mostly visited tourist area in the Muslim Quarter. It was a late summer afternoon. I walked in a quiet street in the Muslim Quarter (see Photo 1.3). The heat, accumulated on the surface of the cement ground, drove some homeless cats to take rest in the shade at the entrance to the Big Study Street Mosque. According to the stele inscription in the mosque, the original site was built in 705AD, known as the first mosque ever built in the area. But it was not until during the reign of Ming Emperor Hongwu (1368-1398) that the mosque got its current name as Qingzhensi, a common name for mosque or masjid. Next to the mosque stood a 50cm by 70cm wooden-framed poster of a young girl, wearing a white veil (gaitou) and looking upward in her silent pray. The background in the photo was the image of the al-Ka'bah (tianfang) in Mecca. Behind the poster was a joint space of a local souvenir shop and a Muslim-run travel agency.
The water was boiling in the pot on the low, square table surrounded by a wooden sofa and two bamboo chairs. During my stay in Xi’an between 2015 and 2016, this joint space became one of my hanging out places in the Quarter, thanks to the hospitality of the shop owner Sun Jianshe and the agency manager Tie Ming. Sun Jianshe spoke fluent Arabic and used to work for China and Saudi Arabia related businesses. His clients were mostly local Hui Muslims who wanted to purchase some decorative calligraphy works for their new apartments, relatives’ weddings and so on. Others also came to buy items such as the incense. There were other objects Sun bought from other Muslim countries, like a small carpet in the Persian style, some key rings from Malaysia and two or three silver plates from Pakistan. In contrast to the eclectic style of Sun Jianshe’s shop, the travel agency looked more like an informal office space. Tie Ming worked as a manager there.
He was at his late forties, jovial and polite. As we chatted, Tie Ming put some dry green tea leaves into a glass, poured the hot water, and placed the glass on the table in front of me. “Please help yourself.” He smiled, “I’m really glad that a non-Muslim like you becomes interested in our history and religion. You know, since 911, time has changed for Muslims, not just us but, I mean, many Muslims around the world. We really need to spread some zheng nengliang (positive energy).”

At first, I was a bit surprised by Tie Ming’s initial reference to the party line. “Positive energy” or zheng nengliang in Chinese was not invented by Sun. In 2012, the leading CCP officials started to promote the “positive energy” as a metaphor for upholding socialist core values while respecting difference and embracing diversity.

Later, I learned that he used to work in a local bureaucratic department for over twenty years. The job itself was relatively easy. “But one has to deal with lots of guanxi, personal network, you know. And you have to be careful with what you see and hear.” Tie Ming explained. Like many of his generation, he found a job in a local work unit (gongzuo danwei). He became accustomed to the working environment and was very familiar with the lifestyle of his Han Chinese colleagues.

However, such familiarity with the institutional life in local-level bureaucracy did not mean that Tie Ming completely identified himself with the state ideology. Rather, when I became curious about what he meant to spread “positive energy” as a Hui Muslim, he leaned backward. His gaze swayed slowly between me and the tea leaves soaking in the glass, moving the focus on the positive energy to that on Hui Muslims. “When you people [Han Chinese] talk about Huizu, you are actually talking about an invented ethnic category. Huizu is a category based on the Soviet model of ethnicity. You
learn that from history textbooks. Before that, we were simply called huimin or huihui.

Ethnically speaking, you cannot tell a Hui from a Han Chinese. We are only different by religion. But this is an important difference... Hui Muslims used to suffer a lot because of this difference. Historically, many think that Hui Muslims are full of rebellious spirit (pan’ni jingshen), hard to be ruled (hen nan guan). Well, I don’t think it is really because of religion. Politics is the real problem. Hui people would be rebellious if they were treated unfairly. We are an enduring people.”

What “politics”? What kind of “rebellious spirit”? Why did Tie Ming emphasize this question of endurance through history and political turmoil in that particular moment?... Such questions surfaced more as I hanged out in the area, encountered different people, and asked about their ideas about the Silk Road initiative associated

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25 Tie Ming’s characterization of the Hui-ness is not a singular case. Among both Muslim and non-Muslim residents I encountered in China, the question of “rebellious spirit” often emerged when discussing historical events as well as contemporary ethnic-cultural scheme of difference. In his discussion of the Qing multicultural policies toward Sino-Muslims (Hui), Lipman (2006) noted that this representation of a “fierce and brutal people” had its roots in both the longstanding assimilationist model preceding the Qing Empire and the mixed approach toward its ethnic Other during the Qing Empire. He argued that such ambiguous recognition of the Hui not-so-radical difference was key to the maintenance of imperial multicultural order. This association between rebelliousness and repression also reminds us of many anthropological discussions on the wildness of Indians in settler colonial states. For example, Taussig (1987) investigated how the “wildness” of Indians has been at the core of the colonial project. Rather than simply representing the Indians as wild savages, the “colonially construed image of the wild Indian was a powerfully ambiguous image, a seesawing, bifocalized and hazy composite of the animal and the human (1987:82).” In more recent works on indigeneity and sovereignty, Simpson (2014) further pushed the logic of settler colonialism by turning the representation of illegality on its head. She argued that “indigenous ‘smuggling’ was a refusal of settler dominion over territory, an assertion of the integrity of earlier agreements between sovereigns as well as an assertion of these rights (2014:129).” I find this reversion or rather inversion of Indianness in the late liberal states deeply rooted in its settler colonialist history a fascinating counterpart to the (mis)recognition of ethno-cultural difference in the late socialist state of China. This topic may be further addressed in a separate article on the theme of ethnicity and sovereignty in China.
with the city’s growing cosmopolitan desires. The answers were quite mixed. Muslim friends like Tie Ming and others were cautious in discussing the policies toward ethnic minorities in the Northwest, especially given the turbulent history, collective memory, and a growing sense of insecurity after 9/11. In the next sections, by juxtaposing different voices and concerns together, I will continue to map the multilayered temporalities underlying such ambivalence regarding the cosmopolitan imaginary of the Silk Road.

1.2. Ambivalent Desires

During those typical days in early spring, the city was often smoggy and grey. People walked on the street with their masks on. As a northwestern city, Xi’an relied its heating system mainly on coal transported from the northern part of Shaanxi and the neighboring province of Shanxi. The emission from burned coal mixed with the increasing emission from cars and other sources of air pollution, which jointly created smog in the city throughout winter and most of spring. People tried to stay inside as much as possible to avoid the smog.

During those times, I could sit longer times in Sun Jianshe and Tie Ming’s joint place since there were fewer people coming by. We drank tea and chatted about the history of the Muslim Quarter and how it became commercially successful after the reform and open up. We also talked about the Silk Road and the Muslim regions along the way. Sometimes on Fridays, a couple of Muslim students from countries like Algeria or Turkey would join us in those conversations after praying in the mosques nearby. When some Muslim friends knew that I was interested in the history of the Silk Road, they would proudly claim that Muslims merchants were among the most important
mediators in the history of ancient Silk Road. They would also remind me that the current 
Silk Road project passed through many Muslim countries and regions in Central Asia, 
Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. More than once, occasional customers or passers-
by, upon hearing our conversations, would join us for tea and carry on the conversations.

One conversant Dawud caught my attention. Born in a southern town in Shaanxi, 
Dawud was not a local resident in Xi’an. While echoing with others’ praise for the 
Muslim participation along the Silk Road, he expressed mixed feelings toward the state’s 
domestic politics toward Muslim minorities in historical representations and the growing 
Islamophobic feelings toward Muslims in the media.

“If you look at the history of Muslims in China, it entails a long process of 
interaction among different ethnic groups and religious minorities along the Silk Road. 
There were Persians, Arabs, people from Central Asia as well as Han Chinese, 
Mongolians and Tibetans…” Dawud was very eloquent when he started to reflect on the 
history of Muslims and the contemporary politics of representation. “However, in the 
traditional Chinese view of history, we are often taught in the textbooks that China has 
been a unified country since Qin Shihuang [the first Emperor of Qin Dynasty (259BC-
210BC)]. He unified language and measurements and started the system of prefectures 
and counties (junxian zhi) all over China. Gradually, different ethnic minorities have been 
either assimilated or have become a distinct ethnic minority. In both situations, we have 
been taught that all ethnic minorities are part of the big family of Zhonghua minzu 
(Chinese nation) under the rule of a centralized government. But history is much more 
complicated than what’s shown in TV or newspapers.”
Dawud’s articulation partially came from his cosmopolitan experience of living in different places. Growing up in a small city, he went to college and worked in Beijing after graduation. In the early 2000s, he met his wife who came from Gansu Province further northwest of Xi’an. The couple became tired of the fast pace in Beijing and tried to look for new alternatives. Opportunity came when a regional university in Malaysia started recruiting master students from China. They applied and got accepted into the fully-funded master program in engineering and human resource management respectively. After four years in Malaysia, they decided to come back to China with their half-year-old son. The place they chose for settlement was neither Dawud’s hometown nor Fatima’s home province. Rather, they opted for Xi’an in 2012.

From Dawud’s perspective, the history and social life in Xi’an made him feel at home. Urbanization in the past thirty years has drastically changed the outlooks of many Chinese cities, particularly in the urban areas historically inhabited by ethnic minorities. For example, when Dawud was working in Beijing, he witnessed the dismantling of community relationship in the Ox Street (Liang 2006). “The big mosque in the Ox Street functioned like a living fossil without Muslims participating in the everyday religious activities and social connections.” Although most of them were closed or transformed into community factories, work units or warehouses. For Dawud, the Muslim Quarter still managed to keep its social and religious ties through kinship and historically preserved urban infrastructure. Gradually, they made friends with some Muslim residents like Tie Ming and became known in the area for their active engagements in local Islamic philanthropy.
As Dawud talked about his view of history and life trajectory, he brought up the issue of anti-Muslim sentiments. Unlike Tie Ming’s use of the official language with an emphasis on “positive energy,” Dawud tended to be more straightforward in sharing more “negative news” (fumian xinwen) to express his concerns. For example, he talked about the headscarf ban and alcohol ban which had taken place in the first half of 2015 before I started my fieldwork.

A headscarf ban took place in April 2015 on the campus of the Shaanxi Normal University in Xi’an. Ten Muslim students—nine were women and one man—were studying Quranic verses in Arabic in a school cafeteria when Liu Jianjun, the head of Student Affairs Department found them. The school authorities identified their study of Quran as “religious activities” (zongjiao huodong) and issued a headscarf ban stating that Muslim woman students should not wear headscarves in a public space. After this incident got viral in Zhihu.com, a Q&A site similar to Quora, one university instructor Li Chenzi put up a post under his real name, revealed his ethnic identity as an ethnic Manchu, and defended the university’s decision, saying that "neither [school] departments nor teachers asked students to take off their headscarves. We only required that they wear headscarves in a traditional ethnic fashion, rather than in a religious way (H. Chen 2015).” One student under anonymity told the Global Times that the school in fact tried to ban headscarves all together among the female Muslim students on campus regardless of their ethnic identities including Uyghurs, Kazakh and Hui. Being one of the most influential normal universities under the direct administration of China’s Ministry of Education, Shaanxi Normal University exerted far-reaching influence in the northwestern region by accepting students from all ethnic backgrounds. In 2014, the
university had 3,723 students from 47 ethnic minority groups, accounting for 14.1% of the total student population. Although the details regarding the content of the ban continued unresolved, the headscarf ban did raise critical questions such as the boundary between ethnic and religious definitions and the regulation of religious activities and symbols in public spaces such as schools. The fact that young women and men were involved in the incident also raised questions about whether and how Muslims in the city should make their voices heard in public spaces.

Unlike the headscarf ban carried out by a university, the other controversial incident is about the alcohol ban march (jinjiu youxing) in May 2015. According to Dawud and later some local residents and the report from the Xi’an community in 2Mulism.com, the march to ban alcohol in the Muslim Quarter was initiated by the administrative committee members and imams from a small local mosque in the Muslim Quarter. After the evening prayer (Isha, between dusk and dawn), a small group of the community elderly, religious clergy, and Muslim residents marched out on the narrow lanes on the southwestern part of the Muslim Quarter. They held a banner of “For the sake of the next-generation Muslims, resolutely ban the drinking and selling of alcohol” and shouted the slogan of “Halal forbids alcohol/Selling alcohol is not halal.” The leaders

26 According to China’s Education Law, religious activities are forbidden in secular spaces such as public schools. But the state’s national security and anti-terrorist campaigns in public spaces complicate the definition and regulation of ethnic and religious issues. In the case of Shaanxi Normal University, “black robes and veiling” are considered as a religious sign while ethnic way of veiling has some body parts like ears and necks exposed.

27 2Muslim.com is a Chinese Muslim website in mainland China. It was one of the largest and most influential websites in China. In December 2016, the entire website was permanently shut down by the Chinese authorities due to a message issued by several overseas students asking the Chinese President Xi to step down.
of the group talked with the street vendors and shop owners, explaining the reasons for banning alcohol. Photos were taken and circulated online as evidence of a “successful” anti-alcohol campaign. But the same images were interpreted very differently online. Calling it an intrusion of individual freedom in public space, some netizens lamented the submission of the national law (guofa) to the religious law (sharia, or jiaofa). Some criticized the government’s preferential policies toward ethnic minorities while some even expressed their fear of the city’s being taken over by Muslims under the new Silk Road policies. In an unsettling comment, netizens called the city “Xi’an-stan’ (Xi’an sitan).

Such news became quickly known among the Muslims through their informal networks of social media groups and word-of-mouth communications such as Friday Jumah in different mosques across the city. Both the alcohol-ban march and the university headscarf ban were little mentioned in the mainstream Chinese media outlets. But the widespread discussions online pushed the presence of Muslims in Xi’an to the frontline in public discussions and social media. Dawud was not reticent about the repercussions and implications of these local incidents. In fact, for him, the public reaction was not simply a local phenomenon by itself.

Being tech-savvy and fluent in English, Dawud followed Tariq Ramadan in his Facebook page and often listened to Hamza Yusuf in YouTube through VPV across the censorship system. In the social media platforms, he followed the Shanghai-based Imam Bai Runsheng and his program “Plain Words” (da baihua) which preached Islamic virtues in Mandarin Chinese. In his view, many misunderstandings toward Islam was manifold. Closely following the world news all the time, he used the then ongoing 2016
American presidential campaign: “I personally think that Western media, or you can say media in general in many other places, is often quite misleading and ignorant. Look at what is happening now in the United States. Isn’t it curious that so much media attention is given to a candidate like Donald Trump? He’s such a boaster and bigot, unreliable and untrustworthy. Perhaps it is because there is a general lack of historical understanding and common sense among politicians everywhere. Such lack easily leads to ignorance and misunderstanding of Islam and Muslims around the world, too.”

For Dawud, the question of Islamophobia in the West was not a theoretical question but a real problem that influenced them directly or indirectly. He saw the spilling-over effect of a growing suspicion and fear toward Muslims through the magnifying effects of global media and right-wing movements. Particularly, the discourse of Islamophobia often divides diverse populations Muslims into a black-and-white framework of “good Muslims” versus “bad Muslims.” This moralistic discourse does not simply affect the ways in which the American media often characterize different Muslim populations; it is further strategically employed by different states around the world, especially in non-Muslim-majority countries, to justify their domestic policies against certain groups of Muslim minorities (Mamdani 2005). For example, in the case of China, this divide-and-rule policy has been increasingly applied to Hui Muslims and Uyghurs in Xinjiang (Clarke 2017; Lams 2016; J. A. Millward 2019). However, with the 2015 incidents such the headscarf ban and the online debates over the alcohol ban, Dawud was worried that even the line between the “good” and “bad” would further blur.

While nodding at Dawud’s comments on the global circulation of Islamophobic discourses and its implication for the Muslims in China, Tie Ming seemed to be more
reluctant in talking directly about the CCP policies on Muslim minorities. Oftentimes, he preferred to talk about Xi’an Muslims’ unique status in the making (and thus remaking) of the Silk Road. “If the [Chinese] government wants to successfully rebuild the Silk Road today, it has to work with the Muslim countries along the way. …Our language, our religion, our cultural heritage have many things in common. We [Hui Muslims] can be very good mediators (hen hao de zhongjianren).” While Dawud was worried about the Islamophobic discourses around the world, Tie Ming liked to mention the “unfair” Qing policies toward Muslims and how Hui Muslims in Northwest China used to suffer a lot during one of the worst ethnic conflicts in the Qing history. Rather than the “good” versus “bad” Muslim dichotomy, the “rebellious spirit” of Hui Muslims against the “unfair” policies was juxtaposed with the role of “good mediators” along the Silk Road.

Sitting there and listening to their conversations, I became curious as for why Tie Ming hardly mentioned the collective memories of ethnic policies in the post-1949 era. “Yes, there was the religious reform in the 1950s and the Cultural Revolutions in the 60s and 70s.” Tie Ming turned to me and explained, “I grew up in those periods. They were hard times, for sure. Mosques were closed down. Religious activities were forbidden. We knew so little about the outside world. All was about class struggle and fighting people’s enemies…. But everyone was suffering, you see? It was not specifically targeted toward the Muslims. Buddhists, Christians, Daoists, scholars, officials, Han people (hanmin)… Everyone tried their best to survive the worst times.” His answer, at first, surprised me. It seemed that more recent memories of political turmoil were bracketed while the imperial history before the twentieth century had left a distinctive mark on the interpretive framework of local history. Following this lead, I began to explore how such post-
imperial memory manifests itself in the urban landscapes and the archives of local Muslim history.

1.3. Gate between Closure and Opening

Names often tell us much about the history of a place. The history of the West Gate in Xi’an and its surroundings reveal a history of alternation between peace and violence. Locals have another name for the West Gate: they call it *Andingmen*, meaning the Gate of Peace and Stability. The gate was part of the large reconstruction work on the city wall in the 1370s, at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). The name suggested the Ming rulers’ wish to fortify the city as a strategic stronghold against the military attacks of the nomadic forces from the northwest. It is little doubt that the Ming emperors were gravely concerned with such possibility because their predecessors were the Mongols whose rule had once spanned across China, Inner Asia, and Europe. Besides rebuilding the city wall, Ming Taizu, the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, also ordered to officially change the name of city into what we call it today—Xi’an, meaning Peace in the West. In spite of the Ming emperor’s will to stabilize the west, the northwest China of which Xi’an has always been a strategic entry has seen many violent episodes throughout history.

Another gate on the western side of the city wall bears witness to the violence in the modern era. A ten-minute walk from the *Andingmen* straight to the north will take you to a smaller gate. It is the Little West Gate or better known as *Yuxiangmen*, named after the famous General Feng Yuxiang’s taking over the city in the late 1920s. In fact, the period saw the most horrible natural and human calamities in the modern history of
Shaanxi. In the late 1920s to early 1930s, Northwest China saw a horrifying famine spreading across Gansu, Shaanxi and neighboring provinces. Millions died of hunger after serious droughts. In early 1929, Edgar Snow (1905-1972), a twenty-three-year-old American journalist, embarked on his first journey to the Northwest China, hoping to search for “the glamour of the Orient (Snow 1968[1938]:214).” What he saw along the way transformed the young soul. “But here for the first time in my life I came abruptly upon men who were dying because they had nothing to eat. In those hours of nightmare I spent in Suiyuan [a part of northern Shaanxi on the edge of Mongolia] I saw thousands of men, women, and children starving to death before my eyes (1968:214).” Later in his life, Snow would comment on his experience in Shaanxi as an “awakening point” that prompted him to cover news like the furnaces and gas chambers of the Nazis during the World War II (Snow 1958:3).

After his first trip, Snow went back in 1936 and traveled from Xi’an to Yan’an in Northern Shaanxi. When Snow left Xi’an, his memories of the city stayed with him:

We left Sianfu [Xi’an] before dawn, the high wooden gates of the once “golden city” swinging open and nosily dragging their chains before the magic of our military pass. In the half-light of predawn the big army trucks lumbered past the airfield from which expeditions set out for daily reconnaissance and coming over the Red lines. (1968[1938]:54)

After passing the old wooden gates, Snow followed the “Red lines” and met with the Communist leaders such as Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, and Zhu De in Yan’an. His work *Red Star Over China* (1968[1938]) based on his 1936-1937 travel soon became a bestseller, telling the then little-known stories of the Chinese Communist Party to the world. However, the airfields described by Snow can no longer be seen in today’s Xi’an. A commercial complex and a heritage museum stand upon the old airfields, leaving no
trace of a site once providing for the civil and military use of air transportation in the entire northwestern region during the Republic era. The wooden gates, renovated and painted red, now open to further northwest.

While the West Gate opens to a history of the communist revolution in Snow’s works, the closure of the gate invoked a particularly poignant history among the local Muslims in Xi’an. Around the same time when Snow first traveled in Northwest China, Ma Guangqi, a Hui Muslim who lived in the Muslim Quarter in Xi’an, was doubly affected by the famine of his time and the memories of past violence. Ma Guangqi reflected upon the history of Islam in Shaanxi and, in particular, the hardships during the Muslim Rebellions. According to Ma’s memory, when the ethnic conflicts broke out in Shaanxi in 1862, most Muslim residents in Xi’an did not directly participate in the armed conflicts. As a center of Islamic teaching and trade networks, the Muslim Quarter was heavily surveilled by the local government (Ma 1993a:213-6).28

During the conflicts, the West Gate was closed. Ma Jinbang, a cart-driver who was born in 1883, remembered in the 1956 interview, “Shortly afterwards, the Commander of a Thousand (Qianzong) Ding Tai from the Gold-giving Bridge (Sa’jinqiao) in the Muslim Quarter had to close the gate (Ma 1993a:201).” For the Muslims in the city, the closure carried both symbolic and strategic meanings. It prevented the Muslim residents and refugees from going outside. The gate also drew a boundary between them and the rebels. However, life was still very hard for those who

28 Ma Guangqi’s text was not rediscovered and published until 1956, when Ma Changshou and Feng Zenglie visited and interviewed his son Ma Jizhao for writing a comprehensive report on the 1862-1877 Hui Rebellions.
decided to take a reconciliatory and submissive gesture inside the city. Ma Guangqi recalled how the Hui Muslims in Xi’an survived through the 1860s and 1870s:

We were confined within the city wall and suffering from hardship and humiliation. We endured in silence. Never had it been in history that we had suffered so much. We could not go outside the city wall to make a living; what we could do was to search for a living inside the city. We were the encaged birds at others’ whim and the entrapped fish that could hardly swim out of the pond. (Ma 1993a:215-6)

As Ma’s text revealed, in the aftermath of the Muslim Rebellions, the remaining Muslims in Xi’an struggled to be recognized as “good Muslims” through their diligence in work, observance of Islamic practices, and strategic engagement with the local government. In 1875, Xi’an Muslims saw a loosening in the policy. Ma Jinbang, a cart driver, recalled the names of the first Hui families who got the permission from the government (guanjia, meaning the house of officials) to trade horses, a common business among the Hui Muslims in Northwest China. “Ma, Jin, Liu, Mu, Lan and Mi, six families got outside the wall,” Ma Jinbang told the ethnologists Ma Changshou and Feng Zenglie in 1956, “That marked the lift of the ban against the Hui inside the city (Ma 1993a:201).”

Such traumatic memory associated with specific sites in the city has been passed down through survivors’ stories and commemorative rituals in the Xi’an Muslim community. May Seventeenth (5/17) ritual is one such example. As Ma Guangqi recalled, the ritual was started during the 1860s by the refugees who settled inside the city:

On May 17, 1862, the Muslim people (mu’min) in the He’wan and Pu’shang villages were already slaughtered. The enemy [the Han tuanlian] wanted to take advantage of their military success and kill the Muslims inside the city wall. Thanks to the protection of Allah (Zhenzhu or literally translated as the True God), it saw thunder and rain. The heavy rain was unpredictable: it sometimes poured and sometimes stopped. The fire ball kept rolling around. The governor Ying was terrified. He kneeled down and prayed to the heaven: “The Heaven spares the Hui! I dare not have the idea to cleanse the Hui.” It was said that the
ferocity of the thunder and bolt that day had been unprecedented. The next
morning, Ying summoned the old Imam Liu and conserved with him in person.
Ying asked Imam Liu to soothe the Hui inside the city wall so that they would
calm down and return to their own business. At the same time, Ying sent an
official report to the court, identifying the Hui in Xi’an city as “good Muslims”
(liang hui). Afterwards, the conviction of the Hui in Xi’an as “good Muslims”
became a long-lasting verdict acknowledged by the government. The Muslims
inside the city wall survived. Therefore, the May Seventeenth ceremony [in the
lunar calendar] became our (wu jiao ren or the people of our religion) important
commemorative ritual. Every year, the mosques would hold ceremonies to
remember the deceased. The ritual was first started by one mosque which was
attended by the refugees from the southern and western areas outside the city
wall. Many of those refugees were related to the deceased. They wanted to
remember them. Other mosques followed the ritual until today.

This story documents the miraculous survival of the Muslim community inside the city
wall. It has been later widely circulated among the Hui residents in Xi’an, in the local
historical accounts as well as in the literary elaboration of historical fictions.

Such presence of the past in the individual and collective memories is not a
singular phenomenon. Erik Mueggler, in his tracing of the memories of the Great Leap
Forward in a Yi ethnic community in Yunnan, noted that the trauma lingered on like in
“spectral chains” (Mueggler 2007). The suppression of so-called superstitious mortuary
ritual and the ensuing famine due to the Great Leap Forward (1950s-60s) left many local
households bereft of their beloved ones without a cathartic outlet. Mueggler described
such feelings of loss and bereavement as a “constitutive absence” (2007:51) that never
really healed. After the reform and open up, the ghost stories emerged as an alternative
“strategy of memory” (Lee and Yang 2007:9). Through those stories as well as revived
mortuary practices, the community members traced their “everyday puzzles and
afflictions…through elliptical links of blood and love back to this violence, bringing it,
without speaking of it, to the present (Mueggler 2007:51).”
Similarly, in the cases of Ma Guangqi and other Xi’an residents, the scars from a violent period in the late nineteenth century ran deep and continued to haunt them both in everyday life or whenever new disasters hit or regimes changed. In the 1960s and 1970s, the 5/17 ritual was halted due to the political turmoil. After the Cultural Revolution, the Muslim community in Xi’an resumed the ritual. Gillette observed that the 5/17 rituals were mostly held in the Gedimu or the Old Religion mosques in the 1990s and joined by more mosques in the 2000s (M. Gillette 2008). The mosques coordinated the times so that the neighborhood could arrange their attendance accordingly. Each family affiliated with a specific mosque would send a representative. During a typical ritual process, religious leaders (ahong) and their students (manla) would give Qur’anic recitation and lead short prayers (surah) while the mosque would provide food for the collective gathering. Stories of survival and hardship circulated among the Muslim residents, reminding them of the traumatic memories passed down like in a chain contained with the local community and mosques.

Whereas rituals are important to the preservation of traumatic memory, the lived experiences of Hui Muslims who act as mediators and liaisons between China and Central Asia are key to the reinvention of diasporic connections from the past. In the next section, I will show, on one hand, the reconnection of the Sinophone Muslim communities reflects the tenacity of the lingering memories of violence in the past. On other hand, the post-socialist conditions in China and Central Asia are instrumental to the diasporic reconnection among the Hui Muslims and the Dungans. They have been actively utilizing a mixed language of kinship and business to strengthen their transnational connections.
1.4. Searching for Roots and Visiting Kinsmen

As Tie Ming started to bring up the topics of past sufferings and contemporary politics, he recommended An Rushi to me, “Come next time! You must see my friend Rushi, if you want to know more about our history.” After a couple of visits and with Tie’s introduction, I met with Mr. An in his place.

Even a curious tourist might easily overlook a building in the northeastern corner of the Muslim quarter. The building was six and a half story tall, one of the highest brick-and-concrete architectures in the periphery of the Quarter. It towered over the often two- or three-story houses nearby. At the front gate of the grey building, an elaborately painted Chinese-style cornice stood out above the rolling doors. The cornice extended out for about half a meter and stops just before the messy high-voltage wires that transmit electricity in the area. In the middle of two separate rolling doors, a stone slab showed the inscription of the “Xi’an Hui Muslim Quarter Museum” in three different languages: Chinese, English and Arabic. But this was not the only entrance to the building. There was a second entry located on the northern side of the grey structure. It had a much smaller gate that only allowed one person to enter each time. Above the gate was a wooden plaque with the engraving of “Silk Road & Chinese Dungan Museum,” only written in Chinese calligraphy. This grey building with its tripartite name was where Mr. An displayed his collection and received various guests. We met for the first time in this building.

When I was waiting for Mr. An at the front gate of the building, I noticed more details of its surroundings. The front gate faced a local police station across the street.
There was a poster featuring an armed policeman attracted my attention. Issued by the Xi’an Anti-Terrorist Propaganda Department, the poster advocated for a shift toward the real-combat (shizhan) mode of anti-terrorist campaigns. Some shops nearby were run by the Hui residents, but many others were rented out to Muslim migrants and non-Muslims. For example, next to the building stood a small shop run by a Uyghur family. They mainly sold the naan, an oven-baked flatbread found in typical Uyghur cuisine. Several similar shops could be found in other parts of the Muslim Quarter. In recent years, thanks to the growing tourist industry, the naan has become part of the popular “small delicacies” (xiaochi) in the area. The local Hui residents usually produce and consume a small, round bread called tuotuomo. It is an essential ingredient to the lamb stew (yangrou paomo), one of the most famous halal cuisines in the city.

Mr. An met with me at the front gate. He was wearing a simple white cotton shirt and black pants. After a brief greeting, Mr. An apologized for keeping me waiting as he was meeting upstairs with a documentary filmmaker from the local TV station; they were discussing about the possibility of making a documentary featuring the Dungans and Hui Muslims along the Silk Road. As I was previously told by Tie Ming, An Rushi is a well-connected person in the local Muslim community. He used to be a businessman. Now at his seventies, he is dedicated himself to the common cause (gonggong shiye) through his connection to the Dungans in Central Asia. Mr. An introduced me to the documentary filmmaker, gave us a quick tour, and invited us for a simple dinner in a nearby halal restaurant.

After our first encounter, I frequently visited Mr. An in his small museum. I also attended the community events which hosted the Dungan visitors in local mosques and
restaurants. We chatted about the history of Islam in China and, particularly, about the Muslim Rebellions in the late Qing Dynasty. Quite often, he brought some friends over for tea or for dinner. Sometimes, I also went with Liu Lang with whom I met in the travel agency. Lang and I were of the same age. With his major in Chinese literature and history, Lang was attentive to historical details and often brought up memories his grandparents and parents shared with later generations. It was through those long conversations that Mr. An gradually shared his life story and engagements with whom he called “our kinsmen” (*wo’men de qinqi*).

Born in the 1950s, Mr. An grew up in the Chang’an county in the southern suburbs of Xi’an. Chang’an county has been historically inhabited by both Han Chinese and Hui Muslims. In our first encounter, Mr. An put a lot of emphasis on the origin of his family name. “Our family name An came from the descendants of the Persian and Arabic merchants who came into China along the Silk Road during the Tang Dynasty. It’s been in use since then.” The point for Mr. An to stress the origin of his family name is more than debating over the question of ancestry; it suggests, first and foremost, a historical consciousness of his own ethnic and religious identity. This emphasis on ancestry and family lineage is not unique among the Chinese Muslims. In the *Graves of Tarim* (2006), Engseng Ho showed the importance of tracing the ancestral lineage in the Hadrami society dispersed around the Indian Ocean throughout centuries. It is by identifying

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29 Contemporary historians also argue that names such as An and Shi came first from the Sogdian from the Central Asia rather than Persian or Arabic merchants (Hansen 2012a; Rong 2000).
certain family names, sites of burial grounds and other shared markers of identities that the Hadrami descendants claimed their rights to lands and other resources.

Although Mr. An traced his family name back to over one thousand years ago, the story of the An family, as he remembered it, mainly took place in modern China from the late Qing dynasty. The An family, first settled in the southern Shaanxi Province, prospered from the caravan business (mabang) during the Qing Dynasty and into the early twentieth century. Tea, silk, herbal medicine, opium, and other commodities were carried by boats from Shanghai along the Yangtze River to Han River, and then transferred to the port cities like Ankang and Xunyang along the Wei River and the Yellow River in the south of Shaanxi Province. Later, those commodities were carried by the caravans waiting there for their next destination—the northwestern city of Xi’an. The city stood both as a regional hub of commerce and trade and a strategic stronghold with a sizeable Manchu city. With their accumulated wealth and resources, the An family moved closer to the city and continued with their business.

However, the latter half of the nineteenth century saw a particularly painful period of wars and losses that engulfed millions of lives in China. In Northwest China, the Muslim rebellions broke out in today’s Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai and Xinjiang between 1862 and 1877. Some survivors eventually escaped into the Central Asia. When Marshall Broomhall, a determined British missionary, traveled to China in 1891, he brought the attention of his English-speaking readers to the “great rebellions of the last fifty years” in the first book written in English about Islam in China (Broomhall 1910). Based on his missionary work and extensive contact with the Chinese Muslims in the Northwest, Bloomhall was convinced that “Islam is no negligible quantity to the Chinese
Government” (1910:xv). In short, in Broomhall’s view, Islam in China was still a problem for the Qing government decades after the 1862-1877 rebellion. While various local or nationwide grassroots movements were all symptoms of the systemic breakdowns of the Qing Empire, the lingering sociopolitical damage in turn added fuel to the collapse of the already crumbling empire.

Amidst the chaos during that period, the An family, like many other Muslims in the northwest, became refugees in their homeland. They abandoned their family houses and ran for their life. Families were split and scattered. According to Mr. An, those who had the old business connection moved down south to Hubei, an adjacent province where no large-scale anti-Muslim suppression took place. Some stayed in the South and never came back. Some members in the An family survived and later moved back to Shaanxi. Meanwhile, they were witnesses to over a decade-long tension and violence. Many Muslims had to disguise their identity by adopting the same life styles of local Han Chinese, namely eating pork and drinking alcohol. Many moved toward northwest into Gansu, Qinghai and Xinjiang provinces with a large and diverse local Muslim population.

Such stories were abundant as Mr. An grew up in Xi’an. Relatives and friends often came to visit his family from Hubei, Gansu, Ningxia and other parts of Shaanxi. “Those stories filled my childhood memories.” He would tell me, “They are like refugees, elusive yet unforgettable. I was too young to fully understand their meanings. But, as you can tell, I have already been very interested in them from an early age.”

Indeed, as interested and motivated as he was, Mr. An started collecting books, personal life stories and objects related to the history of Hui Muslims in Northwest
China. The impulse to collect first grew in the late 1970s when Mr. An worked in the state-owned factory in the northern part of Xi’an. The factory specialized in the heavy machinery production, a subsection of heavy industry that Xi’an started to develop in 1958 with the financial and technological aid from the Soviet Union. After the Sino-Soviet honeymoon ended abruptly in the early 1960s, the factory continued to operate in steel production, mining, infrastructure construction, and other heavy industries. Between 1967 and 1976, the Cultural Revolution affected the economic activities nationwide, including the heavy industry in the Northwest. But when Mr. An was recruited into the factory in the late 1970s, he was to see the beginning of economic revival.

Mr. An seized the chance as the wind blew in the direction toward reform and opening up. At first, he mainly worked to deal with metallic materials. Later, he moved upward to work within the factory’s Youth League Committee (tuanwei, or YLC) which was closely tied to the administration of the CCP over key economic resources in the name of national interests. As he climbed up the ladder, Mr. An had more time and resources to pursue his own interests in the fugitive memories of the past. He would often work nonstop for a few weeks, accumulated time slots for paid holidays, and used those days to travel around.

In 1979, he visited the battle ground in the southern part of Shaanxi Province where his father used to fight during the Civil War between 1945 and 1949. He reminisced that episode with a sense of determination even after forty years. “My father mentioned the place many times when I was a kid, but that was the first time I visited it. People around me all listened to those stories again and again. But they never went to revisit the place then. I wanted to see for myself those places where battles were fought
and where Hui Muslims were forced to leave.” When I asked why he was so persistent to recollect those shadowy memories, Mr. An paused for a few seconds and looked at me, responding in a calm and undisturbed manner: “Why do I want to know them? I’ve been living peacefully with Han Chinese neighbors all my life. But what happens in the past is tragic…I just want to figure out what happens in the past.”

After 1989, Mr. An quitted his factory job and decided to establish his own company. This transition from an “iron rice bowl” to an “ocean” of a market economy made his family a little worried. But he persisted. The provincial Nationalities Affairs Commission started to establish the ethnic companies affiliated with the state. Mr. An’s colleagues and friends suggested him to take that opportunity—to explore the market by partially utilizing the resources provided by the state. Mr. An, having worked in the YCL for about ten years by then, smelted the opportunity in the air. Thanks to his knowledge of heavy machinery and management skills, the company soon became a commission agent for a Japanese mining and smelting company. The commission was to sell mechanical diggers and to supervise infrastructural construction. At first, most of the company’s commercial activities were conducted in Northwest China. After the “Open Up to the West” program was announced in 1999, new business opportunities emerged.

Since the early 2000s, the direction of Mr. An’s business investment shifted further northwest west as Beijing promoted more official and commercial ties with Central Asia. The year of 2002 is identified as a turning point in Beijing’s Central Asian foreign policy (Karrar 2012). Before 2002, Beijing adopted a gradualist policy; after 2002, more rigorous measurements were taken to deepen and broaden China’s regional connection with Central Asian states, which included anti-terrorist campaigns and large-
scale infrastructure projects. For example, in May 2004, the President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev visited China after a series of high-level business meetings in negotiation for the transnational railway and telecommunication infrastructure. The heads of the two states formally announced the establishment of the China-Kazakhstan Cooperation Committee (CKCC). With the official inauguration of the CKCC and a series of formal documents signed in 2004, the level of collaboration deepened particularly in the areas of infrastructure, transportation, energy and financial investment.

Mr. An’s business was a part, albeit infinitesimal, of the Sino-Kazakh exchange at more local and individual levels. In February 2004, Yerlan Atamkulov, the head of Kazakhstan's National Railways, visited Beijing before Nazarbayev’s presidential visit the same year. Atamkulov and his team discussed with their counterparts in Beijing about the plan of constructing a transnational railway that started from the Chinese border of Xinjiang, through the vast territory of Kazakhstan, and finally extended to the Caspian Sea (MacWilliam 2004). Shortly after, the former Prime Minister Sergey Tereshchenko (in office 1991-1994) and his entourage went to Xi’an and visited the heavy machinery business and state-owned companies. A group of high-level officials in Shaanxi Province and local businessmen received the group. This visit, together with his contact with the Dungans after the collapse of the Soviet Union, led to Mr. An’s decision to open a small branch of his company in Kazakhstan. He hired some Dungans as translators and workers

30 In 2003, China and Kazakhstan sent diplomatic delegations to each other and kept high-level correspondences in preparation for the President Nazarbayev’s state visit the next year. More information can be found in the official document entitled “On the relationship between China and Kazakhstan” from the government website http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/8198/34578/34579/2582712.html, last accessed on Jan 20, 2019.
for his company in Kazakhstan. As a Hui Muslim from Shaanxi, he could communicate with the Shaanxi Dungans since a large part of their spoken dialects was phonetically similar.

Besides doing business, Mr. An became more involved in the Hui-Dungan connection since the mid-2000s. In 2007, Mr. An was invited to attend the Central Asian Dungan Association (CADA) meeting in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The CADA claimed to represent the Dungans in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, three countries where most Central Asian Dungans live. During the conference, he became the CADA representative in China. Since then, he has helped facilitate a wide range of transnational activities which included official visits, educational programs, cultural exchanges, medical tourism, company investment, and even agricultural technology transference. After 2007, he withdrew his business from Kazakhstan and devoted more time to cultivating his role as a “liaison person” (*lianluo ren*).

The end of the Cold War did not only give more chance of transregional trade that the Xi’an Hui entrepreneurs like Mr. An looked for. It also paved the way for the reconnection between the Hui Muslims and the Dungans in the early 1990s.

On December 27, 1991, the Soviet Union officially ceased to exist. Faced with the changing flags in the Soviet Union, the Chinese government responded swiftly. On December 27, 1991, Qian Qicheng, the later Foreign Minister (1988-98), sent notices of acknowledgement of independence to the members of the Commonwealth of Independent

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31 An official bio of Qian Qicheng can be found here in the People.cn website with the link of http://en.people.cn/data/people/qianqichen.shtml.
States (CIS). Within five days from January 2 to 7, 1992, China established diplomatic relationship with all five Central Asian states. By June 1992, the Chinese government had resumed diplomatic relations with all the independent states from the former Soviet bloc.

Wang Guojie, a historian in Shaanxi Normal University, is credited as the first Chinese scholar who “discovered” the “Shaanxi Dungan village” in the former Soviet Union. Born in 1944 in Xingping County, Shaanxi Province, Wang studied Russian language from 1963 to 1968, undisrupted by the Cultural Revolution. In 1979, he applied for the graduate program in the Shaanxi Normal University, one among the first group of people who attended college after the Cultural Revolution. While he was majoring in the Russian/Soviet history, he stumbled upon a paper which changed his later course of research. In the paper, the author mentioned the Shaanxi and Gansu Hui Muslims who left China in 1877 had finally settled in Czarist Russia and later the Soviet Union. In 1990, one year before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Wang got a rare chance to go to Saint Petersburg as an exchange scholar in the St. Petersburg Normal University. During his relatively short stay, he kept looking for the location of the Dungan villages and made his way to Masanchi (In’pan or Karakunuz) 4,000 kilometers away from St. Petersburg. There, Wang met the enthusiastic villagers who spoke a similar Shaanxi dialect but with more archaic vocabulary and heavily mixed with Russian and Kazakh languages. Upon his return to Shaanxi, he claimed that he had “discovered” a “Shaanxi village” in which the local Dungans still kept the Shaanxi dialect and cultural tradition since the late Qing dynasty.

Yet, off the official and academic records, there are more stories of personal involvement to be told. On the one hand, the Dungan village leaders and local officials
like Husei Daurov played a key role in creating the post-Cold War bond with the Shaanxi Muslims. Husei Daurov and An Rushi both used a language of kinship to characterize their relations. While most Dungan descendants could remember neither the family names nor the places of origin, Husei Daurov claimed that his ancestral family name was An, the same family with Mr. An. His full name is Husei Daurov Shimarovich, but he usually prefers himself to addressed as An Hu’sai in China. This mixed language of kinship and business proves critical to the formation of transnational connection between the Hui Muslims and Dungans. When it comes to the political economy of identity, as Comaroffs argued, people tend to either to use “the language of blood or business, or a creole of both” to “constantly find new, often ingenious ways to partake of the identity economy” (2009:149).

Besides the Chinese family name, Husei Daurov has accumulated several titles over the past decades—Chairman of the Dungan Collective Farm of the Zambyl Oblast, President of the Dungan Association of Kazakhstan (DAK), and a member of the Sino-Kazakhstani interstate council of entrepreneurs. It is during the transitional period between the late 1980s and early 1990s that the Dungans in Kazakhstan had their “first” contact with Shaanxi. In 1991, the first government delegation of six people from Shaanxi Province visited Kazakhstan. Husei Daurov helped with the arrangement. About 1,000 people attended the meeting. This is the “first meeting after the two sides were separated for 129 years (Foreign Affairs Office in Shaanxi 2015).” Quickly following this historic “first meeting,” the first Shaanxi Dungan village delegation consisting of eight people visited Shaanxi in return in 1992.
At that time, the Dungans, like many other peoples in Central Asia, were experiencing the drastic changes brought by the perestroika, *glasnost* (opening) and the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Rashid, a Dungan trader at his forties, told me during my stay in a Dungan village near the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border in August 2017, 

…we used to live a pretty good life in the Soviet era. Dungans are good farmers. Our produce like fruits, garlic and onion were widely exported and sold in markets. Also, there was really no idea of a national border. We freely visited our relatives in villages along the Chu River. But when perestroika came and later the Soviet Union collapsed, things were changed.

The social changes were also documented by the linguist Svetlana R.K. Dyer during her visit in the Dungan villages after the collapse of the Soviet Union. She noted three major changes in their life. With the disintegration of the *kolkhozes* (collective farms in the former Soviet Union), a “fervent religious revival” swept across the Dungans in every village. They were busy building mosques and offering religious classes. Besides the resumption of their religious life, each Dungan family benefited economically due to the collapse of the collective farms. They rent the land directly from the state, worked diligently on the land, and enjoyed a relatively high living standard by selling “fruit and vegetables at the markets throughout Kirghizia and Kazakhstan.” The third change was a growing interest in China. While the elder Dungans wanted to look for their “long-lost relatives,” the young people wanted to study Chinese for doing small business with China (Dyer 1990:322-3).

In 1993, the Vice President of the Soviet Dungan Association Ibrahim appeared in the Spring Festival gala broadcasted by the Shaanxi Provincial Television Station. In the old photos shared by Wang Guojie, Ibrahim wore a black fur coat and a Russian-style brown fur hat while Wang acted as an invited guest and a translator, dressed in black suit
and an Austrian-style black dresser hat. In the early 1990s, the state-owned broadcasting was the major news outlet in urban life. The state had a monopoly over all entertainment broadcast programs in China. During the traditional festival seasons, the viewing rates for national and provincial Spring Festival gala were high. The appearance of the Dungans in the Shaanxi spring festival program made a small splash among the Shaanxi Hui Muslims, especially within the Xi’an Muslim community.

Later in the year 1993, a small Dungan group and the Hui Muslims in Xi’an performed the first homecoming ritual. They knocked at the West Gate. “We are back” were repeated in the old Shaanxi dialect. Some Muslim residents in the Quarter accompanied them and witnessed the whole process. This homecoming ritual was repeated many times, according to local Hui residents and Dungan interlocutors, in the next two decades. But after the Economic Silk Road Belt was announced in 2013, this ritual was re-enacted at a larger scale.

On June 11, 2014, a delegation of Dungan people visited Xi’an. It was the first joint delegation of Dungans from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to visit Shaanxi in the name of “searching for roots and visiting kinsmen” (xungen xingqin). An official ceremony was held at the West gate of the city wall. The Dungan group knocked on the West gate, repeatedly saying “We are back” (wo’men huilai le). During this homecoming ritual, the elderly Dungan and Hui pushed their bodies against the West Gate, their hands touching and knocking on the gate (see Photo 1.4).

Cameras held by the local journalists were rolling on. A report entitled “Dungan People Traveling along the Silk Road” soon appeared in the local Party periodical
Contemporary Shaanxi. Echoing China’s President Xi Jinping’s call for the revival of the Silk Road in Kazakhstan in 2013, the report portrayed the Dungans as the “bridge” (qiaoliang) between China and Central Asia. “Living in twenty-eight places along the Silk Road,” as the journalist Zhang Guoning passionately lauded it, “the Dungan people are the mediators along the Silk Road Economic Belt.” Husei Daurov, the head of the Dungan delegation who traced his lineage back to the An family in Shaanxi province, told various journalists, “Our village elders have passed down this [ritual] to us. They kept telling us to knock on the West Gate when we go home.”

Photo 1.4—The homecoming ritual in Xi’an in 2014, source from the online archive of the Shaanxi Islamic Association at http://www.xaislamic.org/newsitem/276618421.

This invocation of the imperial inheritance in a public ritual is key to the formation of a Sinophone Muslim diaspora between China and Central Asia in the post-
Cold War era. Unlike the 5/17 ritual held in local mosques attended by community members, the homecoming ritual can be seen as part of institutional mechanism to remember the past and, quite often, thereof work toward a common future (Connerton 1989; Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012). In a sense, this ritual is a “commemorative ritual” as elaborated by Paul Connerton. Connerton argued that “the past and recollected knowledge of the past…are conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances (1989:4).” By “(more or less ritual) performances,” he referred commemorative rituals and bodily practices through the notion of habit-memory. Whereas personal and cognitive memories were much discussed during his time, the performance or habit-memory lacked theoretical engagements. By reclaiming the importance of habit-memory from an interdisciplinary perspective, Connerton made it clear that commemorative rituals are “distinctively social-performative” (1989:35) and instrumental to the formation, sustaining and transformation of social memory.

To be effective, there are three central features in a commemorative ritual, namely, formalism, performativity and re-enactment of prior, prototypical actions. As a formalized language, a ritual can be conceptualized as a speech act. As such, the utterance itself performs a certain role rather than simply conveying a certain meaning. When the Dungans proclaimed “We are back,” the pronoun “we” in the utterance performed the role of initiating a community; this pronoun “we” was repeated by all Dungan participants as a speech act of solidarity. For the Dungans who made that simple but formalized claim, a sense of communitas was created between them and the Hui Muslims who were present in the same place. As such, “performative utterances are as it
were the place in which the community is constituted and recalls to itself the fact of its
constitution (Connerton 1989:59).”

Besides formalism, performativity constitutes another important feature in a
commemorative ritual. Like a rhetorical device, the performativeness in a ritual usually
finds its realization in the bodily practices such as “set postures, gestures and movements
(Connerton 1989:59).” Knocking is indeed a simple gesture, but it powerfully conveys an
idea of homecoming without explaining why or how. In fact, that is exactly where the
power of performativity lies—a set of limited, simple movements exclude many restraints
inherently in the spoken or written language. Moreover, such bodily movements are also
easy to be repeated and remembered.

Thirdly, a commemorative ritual is also a re-enactment. It is a crucial element that
distinguishes a commemorative ritual “from all other rituals by the fact that they
explicitly refer to prototypical persons and events, whether these are understood to have a
historical or a mythological existence (Connerton 1989:61).” Here, the Shaanxi Dungans,
in particular, identified Bai Yanhu (1830-1882AD) as their hero and one of the most
important forefathers. Born in 1830 in Shaanxi, Bai Yanhu became one of the Hui
generals during the Muslim Rebellions. Between 1862 to 1877, Bai’s name as a rebel
leader became widely known among the Muslims and the Qing armies. In the winter of
1877, he led over 2,000 people crossing the Tianshan mountains in Xinjiang into the Chu
River region. Bai Yanhu died at his early forties in Bishkek, today’s Kyrgyzstan (Guojie
Wang 2005). According to Husei Daurov, himself not a direct descendant from the Bai
family, to knock at the West Gate and to say “We are back” was the last wish of Bai
Yanhu when he was dying. By this reference, Daurov and Bai’s descendants validated the commemorative ritual by re-enacting what their forefather had ordered them to.

As such, the ritual of homecoming performed by the Dungans at the West Gate creates an affective space in which the diasporic desires are embodied, performed, and public remembered. When Connerton was discussing different modes in the rhetoric of re-enactment, he advocated for the “idea of bi-presence” (Connerton 1989:70) that connects the death with the living through the form of ritual. Inspired by Levy-Bruhl’s explication of the masks in different rituals, Connerton argued that a commemorative ritual through gestural rhetoric is to re-represent, or in other words, to “cause to reappear that which has disappeared (1989:70).” Those who wear the mask “become” their ancestors re-presented by that mask. Two temporalities coalesce in one act, now and here. If wearing a mask is itself an act to re-unite with the spirits of the dead in the present, to knock at the West Gate required by their ancestors is also a gestural statement to become someone from another temporality and another locale. Together, the Dungans and Hui Muslims in Xi’an showed that they belonged to the same ethnoreligious community despite of the long separation.

1.5. Conclusion

It is through a collage of urban spaces, rituals, and personal connections that a post-imperial memoryscape takes shape in the city of Xi’an where the Dungans claimed to be their “old homeland” (lao jia). In other words, the urban site where the ritual of homecoming is performed offers a space in which the meanings of past are constantly contested and remade. By engaging with the urban landscape, the Sinophone Muslims
insert new meanings into the public space. They re-position themselves from the victims of ethnic conflicts in the past to the desirable returnees through the bodily interaction in situ.

While the local government’s branding of Xi’an as a cosmopolitan city (guojihua dushi) as if the imperial past could magically unfold itself unto the present, the layered history of the Muslim community in Xi’an echoes more with what Humphrey and Skvirskaja defined as the “post-cosmopolitanism city”:

The co-presence of cosmopolitanism and its opposite, ethnic violence, in the same city over time...The idea of the post-cosmopolitan city that we advance here implies a certain incompleteness embedded even in radical shifts and designates a wider range of processes and experiences that challenge the concept of multiethnic ‘togetherness.’ …In the post-cosmopolitan city earlier links and boundaries are not forgotten; cosmopolitanism can shrink and attenuate, it can also mutate and transform into nostalgia for a city that is no more. (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012:6)

According to Humphrey and Skvirskaja, cities feature prominently in the post-cosmopolitan formation of sociality. Often in such cities, there are different layers of temporalities and co-existence of multiethnic communities. Networks and connections are established over time whereas periods of inclusion and seclusion might alternate due to the changing socioeconomic and geopolitical factors. For example, Humphrey looked at the city of Odessa in today’s Ukraine and explores its “urban assemblages” which contains both hospitality and animosity in the late Russian Empire (Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2012:8). Magnus Marsden further complicates Odessa’s “incomplete” process of urban fabric by tracing the migration of the Afghan Hindu traders and their generational relationship with the Muslim merchants between different post-socialist states and Muslim Asia (Marsden 2018). From those historical and ethnographic
accounts, we can see that “earlier links and boundaries” still matter even though the degree of openness and tolerance change over time.

In other words, a post-cosmopolitan city is like a palimpsest, a paper on which earlier writing is removed to make room for new writing. The word palimpsest derives its contemporary form from *palimpsestus* in Latin, meaning to be “scraped again.” Thus, a palimpsest means that the paper is never a tabula rasa to start with. There have been hidden stories or sites, just like the scrapped off parts from the previous layer. Their vestigial marks, however thin or minimal, co-exists with the new layer of inscription. When this process of inscribing and scraping is repeated multiple times, both old and new marks are mixed together over time.
Chapter 3

Exhibiting Tradition, Museumizing Memory

In the last chapter, we discuss how the connections between the Hui Muslims in China and the Dungans in Central Asia have been precipitated by the sociopolitical and economic changes in both China and Central Asia from the 1980s to the 2000s. Stories of people like Tie Ming, Dawud, An Rushi and Husei Daurov reflect the post-cosmopolitan nature of the multiethnic urban history and its impact on the individual lives and community memories. The use of a language that mixes kinship with business is one way to promote the transnational connections, albeit often in limited scales.

In this chapter, I explore specific ways in which the “tradition” (chuantong) has been used by the Sinophone Muslims to re-interpret and perform the past in China. I will discuss the increasing importance of memory work, together with the valorization of tradition, in engaging with the past. In the process of promoting the Hui-Dungan relationship, the local Muslim community in Xi’an have been actively using a discourse of tradition in the public exhibition and private museum. They highlight the inheritance
of traditional legacy while downplaying the traumatic memories associated with the imperial history.

This tactical choice, on the one hand, coalesces with the Chinese state’s civilizing discourse of the ethnic minorities and its effort to incorporate the ethnic minority diaspora into the national imagination. On the other hand, I argue that such use of the past also reflects the creative agency of the Muslim individuals and communities. By doing so, the Sinophone Muslims position themselves as both local guardians of multicultural legacy and cosmopolitan citizens who can facilitate the transnational connections from below.

1.1. From Suzhi to Chuangtong

Since the 1990s, a diverging path between a suzhi discourse and a chuantong discourse has gradually seeped into the everyday life among the ethnic minorities in late-socialist China. Tradition (chuantong) is no longer a stigmatized word for many Muslim residents in Xi’an. Rather, it has been creatively re-interpreted by individuals and communities as traditional cultural heritage (chuantong wenhua yichan) to reinterpret their past and envision the future.

Suzhi or quality implies an ongoing state effort to improve people’s educational and physical qualities as a modernizing project. Its root could be traced back to the early twentieth century when the social Darwinism and eugenics were introduced into China. After 1949, the suzhi discourse became part of the post-imperial social projects that the PRC applied to improve the quality of its citizens (Anagnost 1997). In particular, the national minorities (shaoshu minzu) have often been characterized as having “low
quality” (*di suzhi*), indicating their lack of education or histories of “feudal” (*fengjian*) past manifested in the religious practices and folk customs (Schein 2000).

Hui Muslims are not exempt from this state ideology. In Gillette’s work during the 1990s, she observed how the Xi’an Hui Muslims had internalized the *suzhi* discourse while exploring alternative pathways to modernity through new consumption patterns, renewed faith in Islam, and Arabicization (M. B. Gillette 2000). By Arabicization, it means adopting the Middle East architectural style in mosques, Qu’ranic education, and the use of Arabic in shop names and so on. Although the root of Arabicization in Xi’an dates back to the early twentieth century, the use of Arabic elements to cultivate religious subjectivities and consumption patterns only took off in the 1980s. As Gillette argued, turning to Arabicization for improving the quality of the Chinese Muslims through an alternative path of modernization posed a subtle challenge to the state’s *suzhi* discourse.

Based on my field observation in the 2010s, the *suzhi* discourse is still a powerful ideology used by the local Muslims and non-Muslims alike. While the Muslim Quarter is famous for halal cuisine and Islamic architecture, many Chinese tourists would use the “low quality” of Hui Muslims to explain the “poor service” in some local halal restaurants. When I chatted with some imams and community leaders about their vision for the community, they also tended to emphasize the importance of young people’s education so that the overall quality of the community could be improved. In one conversation I had with a local Arabic teacher on a rainy afternoon in 2016, he pointed to the narrow alleys with a heavy traffic jam and malfunctioning sewage system, complaining, “Look at this by yourself. I really hate to say this but we still need to
continue improving our people’s suzhi. Although people are getting richer, this place hasn’t changed that much.”

While the suzhi discourse is still an internalized ideology predicking upon a tradition-modern dichotomy, chuantong or tradition has been increasingly valorized as cultural heritage and economic resources. As Richard Smith observes, the question of tradition has been a central concern regarding China’s modern path since the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912 into the twenty-first century (Smith 2015:4-5). In fact, the meanings of tradition have long been contested in modern China through different sociopolitical and cultural movements. During the New Culture Movement (xin wenhua yundong) in the first half of the twentieth century, the Confucian tradition was denounced as the root cause of China’s backwardness by the Chinese literati such as Hu Shi (1891-1862) and Lu Xun (1881-1936). Tradition was interpreted as antithetical to China’s quest for modernity through science and democracy. Later during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s, the slogans such as “Smashing Four Olds” (po sijiu)—ideas, cultures, customs, and habits—portrayed anything traditional as outdated, feudal, and belonging only to the exploiting class. Such animosity toward tradition also severely impacted different ethnic minorities and religions in China, which included Muslim minorities and Islam.

After 1978, the question of tradition resurfaced in scholarly works and popular imagination. As the ideology of class struggle faded into the background in the late-socialist regime, the CCP increasingly sees the revival of Chinese traditional culture as an alternative to boost nationalist ideology. Moreover, local governments tap into traditional cultural heritage as a source of economic development. Both the governments and local
entrepreneurs turn local traditions into cultural heritage for attracting more tourists or gaining political recognition. In a sense, tradition and modernity are regarded no longer mutually exclusive. Rather, as Smith and his colleagues argued, “terms such as ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ can …[be seen] as fluid categories that existed in a vast crucible of cultural choices—choices made available by the times, made imperative by the circumstances (Qian, Fong, and Smith 2008:2).”

It is based on this contingency of “cultural choices” that the Hui Muslims come to see their inheritance of the imperial past differently in post- and late-socialist conditions. It is undeniable that the suzhi discourse is still being reproduced through state institutions and ideologies in the mundane realities. Yet, many Hui have also come to see their Muslim identity as being simultaneously traditional and modern. For example, Li Hao, born in an intellectual Hui family and a college student in a local an art institution, talked about his love for art design as compatible with his faith. “The best art always blends in modern and traditional elements. I designed the logos for the Shaanxi haji delegations in the last couple of years. Many inspirations came from our own Islamic tradition…” Fatima, a Muslim woman at her thirties, reflected on her choice of wearing a headscarf a few years ago. Living with her husband and son in Xi’an, she came from what she called a “very traditional” Hui family in another northwestern city. She used to study in Beijing and spent a few years in Malaysia before settling down in Xi’an. Her experience of moving between different worlds made her see veiling as a positive sign of being a modern Muslim while acknowledging her family tradition.

Besides the individual life choices, many local business owners also actively brand their tradition in the tourist industry. Liu Ping, President of a local business
association, managed to transport the business model of the Muslim street to an adjacent town, about 40 miles to the northwest of Xi’an. The latter has become one of the most successful tourist destinations in Shannxi province thanks to its promotion of traditional Guanzhong culture through a composite package of architecture, customs, and cuisine. The little Muslim street had a small mosque in the center. Its imam was hired from a nearby province. Lang and I visited his business during a one-day trip. After the Zuhr prayer after midday in the mosque, Liu introduced his business ideas, “The mosque was the first thing the village head had promised us. Our tradition is to live close to a mosque and do business in the neighborhood (yi si er ju, yi fang er shang)… I want more people from around China to know and enjoy our halal food (qingzhen shipin). Our next step is to develop based on a corporation model and establish branches in Beijing and Shanghai.” In a sense, Liu’s claim reflects the dialectical process between the commodification of culture and the incorporation of identity through a re-interpretation of tradition versus quality (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009a).

When it comes to the revival of tradition in the Hui-Dungan connections, this interpretations of tradition in everyday life also provides the running background for the creative cultural choices in public exhibitions and private museums.

1.2. Exhibiting Tradition

After spending three years in Central Asia in the 2010s, An Rushi returned to China for the preparation of the Kazakh and Dungan Pavilion in the World Horticultural Expo in Xi’an. Husei Daurov, the President of the Dungan Association in Kazakhstan, worked closely with him during the process of preparation. They brought to Shaanxi a
group of Dungan **xiangdang**, meaning “people from the same place” in the Shaanxi dialect. During its opening, the Dungan Pavilion was officially named as the “Pavilion of Shaanxi Village in Central Asia” (**Zhongya Shaanxi guan**). It featured the traditions and customs preserved by the Dungan people over the past centuries. Wedding scenes, traditional clothes, Dungan cuisines, architectural styles, interior decorations, songs and nursing rhythms were brought to life in the pavilion.

One of the central performances was the wedding scene. A Dungan couple dressed up in their wedding gown and suit. The “groom” came from the Dungan village in Kazakhstan, spoke Shaanxi dialect in his home village, and studied Mandarin Chinese as a graduate student in the Shaanxi Normal University. His wife, the “bride,” came from another Dungan village in Kyrgyzstan and could only spoke Russian and Mandarin. An Rushi told an anchoress in Shaanxi Provincial TV station during a subsequent interview, “People, no matter they are Hui or Han, regardless of their ethnicity, are curious to see the Dungan traditions during the Expo. They want see how they managed to preserve the Shaanxi dialect, traditional architecture, interior decorations, crafts, cuisine, wedding rituals, songs and even nursing rhythms since the Qing Dynasty.”

Situated in a World Horticultural Expo, the exhibitionists and organizers tried to show neither the history of religion nor rebellion. “Tradition” in the forms of corporeal performances and architectural arrangements helped introduce the Dungans as an “authentic” Hui diaspora to a largely Han-Chinese audience. Most people came with smartphones and cameras for capturing the moments of performance in audiovisual forms. Women’s clothing styles, dining customs, dialects, and physical appearances in the exhibition followed an established scheme of representing ethnic minorities and folk
traditions in late-socialist China. Based on her fieldwork in Guizhou among the ethnic minorities in the 1980s and 90s, Louisa Schein developed the concept of “internal orientalism” to describe the predominantly Han Chinese “male urban sophisticates” gaze into the peripheral cultures mainly represented by rural women of ethnic minority backgrounds (Schein 1997:70). Dru Gladney later applied the notion of internal orientalism to understand the Chinese state’s representation of Hui Muslims (Gladney 2004). Since the 2000s, this logic of representation has also been extended to the “overseas Chinese ethnic minorities” of which the Dungans are considered a Hui diaspora in Central Asia (Barabantseva 2012).

But there is more. The use of tradition can also indicate a willingness to shape their own ethnic identities in the hyphenated form of political-economy. A typical wedding scene of the contemporary Hui Muslims in Xi’an hardly contains all those “traditional” elements (Gillette 2000:192-220). The traditional Dungan wedding scene reminds us of a similar example when the Herero women addressed in the traditional costumes, which turned out to be a mixed form influenced by Christian garments and Victorian-style clothes (Hendrickson 1996). The bride gown, hairstyle, and songs in the Dungan wedding are also a hybrid of the Hui and Han Chinese-style dresses in the Guanzhong Plains in the late Qing empire. As the Comaroffs argued, “in deploying their ‘tradition’ to this end [to partake of the identity economy], they have become thoroughly modern, if each in their own ways. Or…they pass by the modern and leap directly into the Pomo…” (2009:149).” The point here is not whether the Sinophone Muslims are modern or postmodern. Rather, by highlighting the “traditional” styles, they actively engage with the gaze of the Chinese state by offering a hybrid form of Chinese-ness and
Muslim-ness. By doing so, the Dungans linked their past to the historical imagination of modern Chinese nation without claiming their political allegiance to the contemporary Chinese state. For the Hui Muslims, the performance took on new meanings as well. It reaffirmed their collective memory through the presence of people and the materiality of settings and objects from afar.

This quasi-ethnographic exhibition in 2011 may also remind us of an uncannily resembling case in a different historical and social background—the exhibit curated by Franz Boas with the help of George Hunt and his Kwakwak’awakw friends in the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago. As the “Blueprint of the American Future,” the Chicago exposition held a section of anthropological display of the indigenous cultures of the Pacific Northwest in the North America (Rosenberg 2008). One year after the fair, it was to be the four hundredth anniversary of Christopher Columbus’s “discovery” of the New World. To set up the stage, Boas and Hunt collected artifacts from the indigenous peoples. A replica of a Kwakwak’awakw village was constructed on the site. Hunt organized seventeen Kwakwak’awakw performers to be part of the exhibit, performing ceremonies, dances, clothing styles, and other traditional arts. The reception, though, was divided. The Canadian colonial officers and missionaries were furious toward the indigenous people’s “uncivilized” hamatsa performance, fearing that might undermine the government’s efforts of presenting Canada as a modern, civilized nation. Some critics worried about the entrenchment of the stereotypical representations of the Indigenous

32 To honor the indigenous efforts to reclaim their cultural heritage, Kwakiutl is now replaced by Kwakwak’awakw. Kwakiutl used to be extensively used in the anthropological texts and settler colonial systems of knowledge. This name shifting is also noted as part of the returning of histories by James Clifford in his introduction to Returns (2013:10).
peoples throughout the Western colonization of the New World. But George Hunt and the Kwakw’awakw performers from Fort Rupert viewed it otherwise. They saw the artifacts, architectural replication and performances as authentic proof of their cultural persistence against the centuries-long colonization (Raibmon 2000).

By comparing this example of the 1893 anthropology’s public engagement with the 2011 exhibition of the Dungan tradition in Xi’an, we can see some interesting parallels across time and space. Both expos took place during a time when each hosting city and respective country underwent profound changes. Chicago, a city of just over one million population then, went through a period of reconstruction after the 1871 Great Chicago Fire. In hope of renewal and expansion, the city competed with New York and St. Louis to host the expo. Less than a decade later, large numbers of European immigrants and people from other parts of the United States relocated to Chicago, making it one of the largest and most dynamic cities in the world (Gibson and Jung 2005). In the case of Xi’an, the vision for re-asserting its significant place through national rejuvenation and globalization has been a central motif since the beginning of the twentieth century. The idea of a world expo—no matter it is the 1851 London exposition, the 1893 World Fair in Chicago, the 2010 Shanghai World Expo, or the 2011 World Horticultural Expo in Xi’an—is essentially a modern one (Auerbach and Hoffenberg 2008; Hubbert 2017). It is intricately linked to the development of global capitals and world cities, though with very different speeds and networks.

The other dimension linking the 1893 exhibit to the 2011 is the complicated question of representing minority traditions in the margins of modern states. In the exhibit curated by the father of modern anthropology in the United States, Franz Boas
was acutely aware of the colonial influences upon the indigenous groups in the Americas. But he was also an active advocate for the social role of anthropological knowledge in public life. By staging a traditional form of indigenous culture in a world fair, Boas and his longtime collaborator George Hunt tried to carve out a space where the Kwakwak’awakw performers could show both their cultural resilience and adaptation to the modern world (Raibmon 2000). The project was inevitably an oxymoron in its own design and execution, as envisioned by Frederic Ward Putman who was in charge of the overall anthropology display in 1893. But the Kwakwak’awakw performers nevertheless creatively responded to colonialism given the limited resources.

The Kwakwak’awakw case also keeps reminding us of the creative agency in the individual and group self-representation. When we turn our attention to the Dungans in 2011 Xi’an expo and shortly to An Rushi’s private museum, it is thus important to see the complexity of (self)representation. The process of internal orientalization renders the Dungans an extension of the Hui ethnic culture in China, hence legitimizing the Chinese state’s claim over the overseas ethnic minorities at large. Yet, the Sinophone Muslims actively participate in the identity economy through performing their hybridized ethnic traditions. Those alternative voices and strategies often emerge, paradoxically, in the interstices between hegemonic discourses and personal endeavors.

1.3. Museumizing memory

What I observed from Xi’an in the 2010s reflect a convergence of memory work and the tradition discourse among the Hui Muslims through their collaboration with the Dungans. In his work of the ethnic politics in late-socialist China, Ralph Litzinger used
the concept of “memory work” for understanding the empowerment of the local Yao ethnic community. “The practices of remembering and forgetting,” he contended, “have been a constitutive element of Yao cultural politics (Litzinger 1998:226).” Particularly, he highlighted some representational tactics deployed by local Yao officials, intellectuals and religious experts. One key strategy was to erase the discourse of class struggle typical in the Mao era to embrace the potentially civilizing potential of the capital. Another important strategy was to make their cultures knowable through objectifying the specific folklores, customs, beliefs, dresses and so on. By locating those practices in their historical contexts, Litzinger argued that the Yao people did not mimetically reproduce an “ideology of progress” by renouncing their past (1998:233). Rather, they used past—mostly certain fragments of an “unsettled past” (1998:243)—to re-imagine and adjust their relationship with the state and the market.

After the 2011 Expo, the mosque administrative committee (siguanhui) in a local mosque proposed to An Rushi that they would like to provide space for preserving and displaying the collection. However, the proposition did not go far. The imams and the mosque administrative committee soon realized that the mosque was “inappropriate” (bu heshi) for such an exhibition. According to the Ethnic and Religious Bureau, the mosque is mainly a space designated for religious activities. The PRC policies on religion formally dictate that the officially recognized religious activities can be performed in private homes and religious venues (State Council 2018). Such laws and regulations resemble some aspects of the French Laïcité which formally separates the church from the state. The contour of the French secularism has been contested and transformed in the recent decades, largely thanks to the public Islam in the French society (Fernando 2014;
Yet in China, the Islamic expressions in public spheres, though have been on the rise thanks to the rising awareness and new media, are still being curbed and monitored.

To home the objects in a private museum (si’ren bowuguan) was more appealing at the time. Just one year before the World Horticultural Expo, the Xi’an Municipal government issued a series of official documents to promote the development of museums in the city (Xi’an Museum Information Department 2012). The documents and subsequent conferences expressed the government’s eagerness to transform Xi’an into a “museum city” (bowuguan zhi cheng) with the supportive policies of tax reduction and financial subsidies. By turning to the cultural heritage as economic resources, the provincial government wanted to justify the status of the city as a cosmopolitan hub and a booming tourist destination in the Northwest. Politically, the elevated status of the provincial city would also add credit to the governing officials. Such credit is especially important in boosting their political achievements in a merit-based bureaucratic system.

For the Muslim community in Xi’an, the official support provided a good opportunity for expanding and exhibiting the Dungan collection in a permanent location other than a mosque. With the support from the locals and the Dungan counterparts, An Rushi set out to establish a private museum. To meet the minimum requirements, he built another one-and-a-half level atop of his existing house, making the total space over 450 square meters. Over 2,000 pieces of objects, large and small, were in display in the expanded building. Over half of the entire collection were gathered locally in Xi’an and from other parts in Northwest China. A miscellany of objects—an ox bone with some Quranic texts, wooden plaques with the Shahada (the testimony) in Arabic calligraphy,
photographs which recorded the rites of passage in the life of a Hui Muslim, articles for daily use such as mirrors, water kettles and bamboo baskets—were scattered in different floors of the building. Another part of the collection came from the 2011 Expo as well as from the collector’s years of living and traveling in Central Asia.

Still, upon my first visit to the place in 2015, I was struck by the apparently chaotic installation of objects. There were no small plaques explaining the acquisition or the name and place of origin of the objects on display. Most objects were exposed directly in the air without a temperature or humidity control system. The lights were dimly lit. More objects were scrambled in the back of the storage room. Everything seemed to be waiting to be reshuffled. As An Rushi passionately talked about how he had accumulated those bits and pieces from here and there, I could not help but thinking of Walter Benjamin’s experience as a fervent book collector. Here is Benjamin who reflected on his habit: “Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories (Benjamin 1999:22).” Indeed, during my many visits to his museum, An Rushi kept changing the organization of space and the placement of objects.

Despite all the changes, the idea of preserving the Hui and Dungan traditional cultural heritage has been highlighted as An Rushi guided various visitors through the exhibitory spaces. While the 2011 Expo only re-enacted some traditional elements in the Dungan culture, the collected objects in the museum are organized around three broad themes: the history of the Islam and the Silk Road, the everyday life in the Muslim Quarter, and the objects, customs, and domestic setting of Dungan people. Yet, a significant difference between the expo and the museum is the surfacing of individual and
collective memories in the latter, though the art or strategy of memory work still awaits more analysis. To see into how those three themes are represented in relation to tradition and how the memory works in this setting, let us follow a group of Dungan visitors on a day in August 2016.

It was a hot summer afternoon. The rolling door was opened. An Rushi stood in front of the museum. He wore a white T-shirt, black pants, and a pair of comfy cloth shoes. He received in his museum a group of over twenty people: fifteen Dungan teachers from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan who participated in a summer program hosted by a local university, two undergraduate Dungan students who were studying in Xi’an, several Xi’an Hui calligraphers, painters and photographers, a cultural geography Ph.D. student Yang, and me.

On the first floor, people were greeted by the projection of a small-size 3D image of a camel walking in the desert toward visitors. “It is recently sponsored by the local government to show the history of the Silk Road.” Mr. An explained to the amazed visitors. On the upper side of the northern wall, an oil painting depicted the Emperor Taizong meeting with an Arab ambassador in the early Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD). This painting showed a popular myth of origin which legitimized the first presence of Islam and Muslims in China.³³ On the southern wall, a couple of prominent historical figures—

³³ To read a detailed and more elaborated account of the founding myths in China’s Islamic tradition, see Israeli, R., 2001. “Myth as memory: Muslims in China between myth and history” (2001).
the Yunnan governor Sayyid’Ajall Shams al-Din (Sai Dianchi)\textsuperscript{34} under the Mongol’s rule (1271-1368 AD) and Admiral Zheng He in the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644 AD)—were placed side by side to illustrate the development of Islam in China through the thirteenth to mid-seventeenth century.

Besides historical figures and myths of origin, maps were essential to the installation. There were two large maps on the first floor. One was a well-preserved wooden board with the gilded image of the Ka’bah in the middle. The same pattern could also be found in the prayer hall in the Grand Mosque in the Muslim Quarter.\textsuperscript{35} As a relic dating back to the Ming Dynasty, the plaque showed its beholders an image of how the Chinese Muslims in medieval China imagined the world from an Islamic perspective. Next to the image of Ka’bah was a replica of the mountain-and-water-style scroll painting originally made some time between 1524 and 1539AD in the Ming court.\textsuperscript{36} The route stretched from the Jiayu Pass in the Hexi Corridor to Mecca under the Mongol rule, marking over two hundred sites of towns, cities, barricades, fortifications, deserts, rivers and mountains. In front of those two maps stood a set of clay statuettes, a caravan carrying merchants and goods from the west and a team of boats and horses transporting

\textsuperscript{34} Jacqueline Armijo wrote her doctoral thesis on this fascinating topic. The thesis was entitled \textit{Sayyid’Ajall Shams al-Din: A Muslim from central Asia, serving the Mongols in China, and bringing civilization to Yunnan} (1997).

\textsuperscript{35} Special thanks to Mr. Ma, the director of the Shaanxi Islamic Association, for showing me the painting in the Grand Mosque in the summer of 2018.

\textsuperscript{36} Lin Meicun, a Chinese historian and archaeologist specialized in West China and Central Asia, published by far the first paper on this map (M. Lin 2014).
commodities from the east. The maps and corresponding miniatures, as Mr. An remarked, revealed the important role of the Muslims “who traveled along those paths.”

Among the paintings and figurines representing both the famous Muslims and commoners who traveled along the Silk Road, a wooden sculpture caught my attention. The 15-inch-tall sculpture was placed on top of a glass case underneath the portraiture of Sayyid’Ajall Shams al-Din and Admiral Zheng He. The sculpture was made from one piece of wood into the shape of an anonymous Hui man who kneeled down praying. The figure, with a sword on his side, seemed to be in a destitute condition. His stern face with hallowed cheek contrasted drastically with the two glamorous figures above. Spotting me look at the sculpture, An Rushi’s son explained to me it had been a gift from a local Hui artist. The artist used a realist approach to depict a Hui Muslim who fled and fought his way during the 1862-1877 Muslim Rebellions. Since the sculpture was made in the 1950s, it looked old and rusty.

Later, when I inquired about the reason behind this juxtaposition, An explained that he did not want to omit an “important chapter in our history.” Yet, neither did he want to make it too explicit. Rather than presenting a coherent narrative, he preferred to play a low key (di diao) by simply placing the anonymous sculpture next to those “famous men in history” (lishi mingren).

The second floor mainly featured the everyday life in the Muslim Quarter. Rows of photographs were hung on the plastered beams and walls. The pictures, taken by the local Hui Muslim photographers, addressed various subjects—the mosques, the Islamic holidays like Ramadan, and community activities such as giving an Islamic name to a
newborn baby (*qu jingming*), attending the Friday Jumu’ah, visiting ancestral tombs, or performing Nikah during a wedding. Some visitors sat down next to an old wooden bed frame on which a miscellany of daily objects was displayed. A water kettle for ablution, a tin plaque with the Chinese characters of halal food (*qingzhen shipin*) from a family restaurant in mid-1990s, a small mirror with the upper part in the onion shape, a bamboo basket for carrying fruit and vegetables. Most items come from family members, flea markets or gifts from friends. They have long ceased to be commodities and have lost the commercial or use value thereof. Telling of the disorderliness of the collection itself, those objects resist any easy interpretation in an orderly fashion. For example, the commercial licenses from the 1980s to 90s reflect the impact of the economic reform in the Muslim Quarter. But they are also mnemonic signs of the tightening regulation of the state intervention into the everyday life.

If more attention were given to each object, there might be a sea of stories to be excavated. But for our purpose here, we can say that the objects scattering on the second floor do not form a coherent narrative other than reflect a wide array of social life in the local community. What matters is the fact that they are collected and displayed in the same place. It makes us think of the Borgesian story retold in the preface to *Les mots et les choses* (Foucault 1966). Reflecting upon a Chinese encyclopedia consisting of fantastic and weird animals, Foucault put forth his concept of heterotopia. It is a place or space of otherness; or as Walter Russell Mead put it, it is “where things are different—that is, a collection whose members have few or no intelligible connections with one another (Mead 1995:13).” Despite the lack of obvious connection with each other, the collection of daily objects reasserts its value in the present precisely by resisting a
coherent, hegemonic narrative as usually exhibited in a state-run ethnic museum. They remind us of a myriad of forgotten voices and the impossibility of exhausting the meanings of the past.

When the group reached the third floor, we saw the Dungan collection preserved from the 2011 Xi’an Expo. Four Russian Realist-style oil paintings leaned against the southern wall, featuring Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, and a landscape painting of Central Asian farmland. The entire westside wall was transformed into an exhibitory space for the Dungan traditional garments. Two dummies stood in front of the wall, mimicking a wedding scene. The groom model wore a Western-style black suit and the bride model a traditional Dungan wedding garment. It reminded us of the very scene in the 2011 Expo, except that the bride and groom were performed by a wedded young couple then. Next to the traditional dresses, there was a large piece of domestic furniture—the *kang*. It is a specific form of bed, widely used in a common household in northern China. More than a bed for sleeping, a *kang* can also be used as a platform for eating, working, and receiving guests. As a central furniture in a household, a *kang* is a symbol of the family and a place for sharing food and living together. The *kang*, made of bricks and concrete, was reconstructed for the 2011 expo in the style of the domestic space in a typical Dungan household (see Photo 1.5).
Photo 1.5—A Dungan vocalist was sitting on the kang and holding a recorder. The framed embroidery piece on the backwall was the ‘Painting of Nostaliga (si xiang tu).’

There up on the wall behind the Kang, another image caught visitors’ attention, especially the Dungan women in the group. At first sight, it was a piece of rectangular embroidery with an almost childish representation of an idyllic scene of flowers and birds. On a second look, one would notice the difference. A square was placed in the middle, surrounded by rivers and mountains. Several human figures stood at a distance from the center and looked toward the square. The rivers and mountains they crossed along the way were also part of the picture. “It is a work called ‘Painting of Nostaliga (si xiang tu).’ The square shape, here, it represented Xi’an.” An Rushi turned to the visitors, “This original piece was made by the illiterate Hui Muslim women who fled with their families from Shaanxi over a hundred years ago.” Some elderly Dungan women stood in
front of the embroidery and portraiture, gently stroking the embroidery as if to feel a living piece of testimony of the past.

To the right of the embroidery was a small portraiture of Bai Yanhu, the man who led the group of Shaanxi Hui Muslims to their settlement in Central Asia. In a time when photography was a rarity, this portraiture was based on the Qing government official poster of Bai Yanhu as a criminal, a wanted man even after his death. One Dungan student Abu told me that in Masanchi, a major Dungan settlement along the Chuy river, the Dungan villagers also put up the same painting of Bai Yanhu in the town hall.

The fourth floor, or rather the height of a mezzanine, served as a storage space. The visitors only passed to see some Soviet style uniforms, a Siberian fur overcoat, some traditional Qing-style clothes hanging on two coat stands outside the storage room in the corridor. They did not stop and proceeded to the next level.

The fifth floor was brightly lit and newly decorated. The room imitated the style of a prayer hall in a mosque. A Persian-style carpet on the floor led the visitors’ gaze from the floor to the wall on the western side of the room. There we saw an elaborately decorated niche in the form of a mihrab facing the direction of Mecca. Several Dungan women took off their shoes before they stepped on the carpet and slowly approached the wall. The niche was surrounded by wooden boards with Quranic inscriptions in Arabic calligraphy. Whereas the mihrab-shape structure was newly made, the decorated boards were original pieces salvaged from different mosques in Shaanxi and in some surrounding provinces. On the eastern side of the room, one could find some dilapidated wooden door panels from which those boards were peeled off. Other religious objects on
display included wooden clappers (*bangzi*) used in minaret and ox bones with Arabic inscriptions. Like other objects, they were all placed on open shelves, just like those one would find in the open shelves of a common household.

Toward the end of the visit, the Hui calligraphers and painters shared some of their works with the Dungan teachers. Photographers took pictures of all visitors against the background of two maps in the museum office on the top floor. On the left side, there was a modern map of the Silk Road extending from the eastern tip of Africa to East Asia. On the right side hung a municipal map of Xi’an dated as 2001. The Silk Road might be a catchy title in the official reports and media coverage. But, after all, for the Muslim community in Xi’an and the visiting Dungan group, it was not until the 1990s and 2000s that their old ties were revived and their “traditional cultural heritage” recognized.

### 1.4. Performative De-politicization

The curatorial engagement with traditional cultural heritage is key to understanding the (self-) representations of minority groups in the post-imperial memoryscape in China. Benedict Anderson argued that modern museums, together with the “museumizing imagination (Anderson 2016[1983]:181),” is an indispensable part of the colonial project. In Southeast Asia, an increasing number of native-born European descendants or creoles tried to rule the state through technologies such as the census, the map, and the museum. Sacred sites were included in the maps and archaeological reports stored in the museums. *Objets d’art*, previously neglected by the colonial rulers, were put into museums, catalogued, photographed, and exhibited in the secular space of the museum. Thanks to the print capitalism, the images of historical monuments, religious
sites, and other art objects were infinitely reproduced and circulated in tourist brochures, stamps, postcards, textbooks and so on. Such “infinite quotidian reproducibility,” as Anderson put it, “revealed the real power of the state (2016[1983]:181).” In other words, exhibition and museums in the post-colonial contexts reflect a deep entrenched power structure of the colonial state in Southeast Asia.

Yet, Anderson’s fine-grained critique does not fully capture the history of private museums in China. Situating the Hui Muslims’ memory work in the post-imperial context, I argue that museumization of cultural memory allows the Muslim individuals and communities to explore an alternative way of engaging with the past and foster transnational networks.

First, this form of empowerment has to do with the history of private museum in China. The history of private museum reflects the modern transformation in China since the late nineteenth century (X. Song 2008). In 1898, Kang Youwei and some Qing officials and intellectuals supported a political reform project to transform the Qing court. The idea of establishing a modern museum was included in the reform plan. After the project was soon aborted, an industrialist Zhang Jian (1853-1926) established the first private museum—Nantong Museum Park—in 1905. After the fall of the Qing dynasty in 1912, several private museums or exhibition rooms were established by prominent academics, intellectuals, and collectors in hope of facilitating social transformation. After 1949, however, the state nationalized all museums as part of the propaganda work.

It was not until 1982 that the Chinese state began to change its attitudes toward private collections outside the state institutions. As the number of collectors and the scale
of art and antique markets continued to grow in the 1980s, there was an increasing demand for transforming private collections into private museums (M. Song 1989). “Household museums” (jiating bowuguan) began to emerge in cities like Shanghai and Beijing in the 1980s (Shi 1998). In 1993, Beijing Municipal Bureau of Culture approved the application of four private collectors to open private museums. It marked the beginning of the local governments’ approval of the private museums. In 2002, the “Law of the People’s Republic of China on the Protection of Cultural Relics” was officially amended to approve private museums nationwide. Four years later in 2006, the Ministry of Culture issued Management Methodology in Museums, laying out a specific set of rules and procedures to manage private museums. In the same year, a real estate developer Fan Jianchuan invested through the Jianchuan Real Estate Group to establish a cluster of museums in Chengdu, the largest private museum in China by far. His museum complex dedicates to some of the politically sensitive issues often untouched by the state-run museums, such as the red memory (hongse jiyi) during the Cultural Revolution and the post-disaster remembrance of the Wenchuan Earthquake in 2008.

From Zhang Jian to Fan Jianchuan, we can see that private museums and exhibitions have offered alternative spaces for commemorating the past vis a vis the state management of cultural practices. Private capital and the entrepreneurial voluntarism play a critical role in giving voice to the otherwise unspoken or unaccounted-for past (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009a; Koga 2016). In the case of An Rushi, he worked in a state-owned factory in the late 1970s. While being a fervent collector, he became an entrepreneur in the 1990s. In the next decade, he started building up the Hui-Dungan networks through his business. In the early 2000s, Mr. An worked toward the
establishment of a private museum. This trajectory, when juxtaposed with the history of private museums, shows how the Hui Muslims have been actively shaping the memoryscape in post-socialist China by resorting to their own collective and individual memories of the past.

Among various strategies of memory work in public exhibitions and private museums, the discourse of tradition plays a crucial role. It has diverged from the *suzhi* discourse since the 1980s and become a semiotic as well as performative field. The Hui Muslims and their Dungan counterparts creatively use a discourse of tradition in different settings, presenting themselves in public as the guardians of multicultural legacy rather than historical victims.

It is worth noting that the tactical engagement with the tradition discourse is also ideologically constraining. From the perspective of the Chinese state, the meaning of tradition is still largely confined by the Sinocentric nationalism. Traditional Chinese culture, as portrayed in State Ministry of Culture or overseas Confucius Institutes, often refers to the Confucian traditions. The general Han Chinese audience also tends to view the Han folk customs more favorably (Carrico 2017). To cater to this orthodox rendition of tradition, the minority groups and individuals often adopt accommodative positions through highlighting the influence of “traditional Chinese culture” upon their cultural heritage.

By performing a language of tradition, An Rushi would also emphasize this point. “Xi’an is the beginning point of the Silk Road. It is also where Islam first started to prosper in China. It is a place where different cultures co-exist (*gezhong wenhua gongcun*
Through these presentations, I want to let people see a tolerant, multicultural existence...and to better remember and understand our history.” Regarding himself as a mediator and culture preservationist, An highlighted the intercultural traces between the Han Chinese and Sinophone Muslims in his collection.

One caution is that this call for the “tolerant, multicultural existence” through a de-politicized version of tradition differs from the depoliticization tactic that often plagued the discourse of tolerance. Based on the analysis of the Simon Wiesenthal Center of Tolerance (MOT), Wendy Brown warned that the politics of tolerance could often be achieved through depoliticizing strategies (2008). The MOT was established by the Simon Wiesenthal Center in 1993 in Los Angeles. It claimed to promote tolerance and to help visitors understand the history of Holocaust. However, the MOT organizers centered the Holocaust in the tolerance discourse while essentializing difference to “engender intolerance (2008:143)” and to equate “anti-Semitism and challenges to Israel (2008:148)”.

Now if we recall the exhibition and museum practices in Xi’an, we can also see a depoliticizing effort to present the history of the Sinophone Muslims’ contribution to the Chinese society while keeping their own faith and tradition. So, what makes the Hui Muslims’ interpretation of their traumatic history plausible if not distinctly different from the MOT discourse of tolerance and depoliticization?
One way is to turn to the contexts which produced those curatorial practices. If the MOT strategically uses the discourse of tolerance to depoliticize tolerance itself, then the social fabric in which such practices could thrive should be scrutinized. Brown situated the MOT’s depoliticization in the American political culture—or rather, in her own words, “the basic cloth of contemporary American (un)political culture (2008:145).” It is this coalescence between the specific museum practice and the general depoliticized culture that naturalizes the MOT’s approach to situate the Holocaust history in the American society.

In the late-socialist China, the social fabric has been interwoven differently. Depoliticization through tradition can be understood as a performative gesture to accommodate the authoritative discourse. When Alexei Yurchak re-visited the life of the last Soviet generation, he observed a “performative shift” across different social strata (2006). The authoritative discourse becomes ritualized and hyper-normalized. Ordinary citizens observe those codes, and at the same time, destabilize the meanings of those ritualized codes through performative acts. What matters is the mask-versus-truth paradigm as eloquently argued by James Scott and Slavoj Žižek. Rather, inspired by Judith Butler’s take on performativity, Yurchak argued that “the performative reproduction of the form of rituals and speech acts actually enabled the emergence of the diverse, multiple, and unpredictable meanings in everyday life (2006:50).” In this sense, to repeat official discourses in one’s own speeches and acts do not preclude the possibility of producing new meanings; rather, in the late socialist context where
authoritative discourse still reigns, the performative repetition opens more room for creative accommodation depending on different contexts.\textsuperscript{37}

See from this perspective, let us attend to the specificity of the depoliticizing strategy in the memory work of the Hui Muslims and their resort to tradition in strengthening transnational networks. In the official discourse, the history of the Muslim Rebellions between 1862 and 1877 is set in the framework of class struggle and peasant rebellions against the feudal Qing government (e.g. Bai 2000; Ma 1993a; Han 2006). Yet, the Chinese state continues to grapple with the imperial inheritance in terms of historical memory, nation-building, ethnic composition, religious diversity, and territorial disputes. By adopting this official formulation, the Hui Muslims eclipse the definition of the Muslim Rebellions. Performance of the Dungan tradition in the world expo sends a positive message of inheriting the imperial legacy in the public space. The curation of cultural artifacts, personal items, and various maps and images in the private museum, though in a quite idiosyncratic way, provides more nuanced shades to understanding the

\textsuperscript{37} There is some resemblance between the Hui performativity and the stiob as described by Boyer and Yurchak (2010). Stiob is a comic act to overidentify with the sociopolitical system in which such act is performed and received. In other words, stiob is “a particular mode of parody that imitated and inhabited the formal features of authoritative discourse to such an extent that it was often difficult to tell whether it was a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two (2010).” In the case of Hui, their performative act is less a parody in the sense of its comic nature. It is more a performative act to open more possibilities. Thus, the public showing of sincerity and support is actually quite important to the success of such strategies. For example, the ways in which people talk about ‘Love Country, Love Religion’ is a performative act. The imams would explain it by quoting suras from Quran and patriotic lines from the official documents. It’s not a question to discern whether they mean it whole-heartedly or half-heartedly; they want to show their support for the system in order to be able to practice Islamic doctrines and mainstain good relations with local officials. Thus, I see such performativity more of a necessary tactic to accommodate to the authoritative rule in late-socialist China.
Muslims’ active engagements in China’s relations with Muslim Asia without disrupting the existing authoritative framework (remember the gazes from Marx, Engels, and Lenin in the realist-style paintings!). By conforming to the official discourse in the Chinese context, the Sinophone Muslims are thus able to remember their past and explore new business opportunities across national boundaries.

Yet, the use of past is far from being settled. Although An Rushi submitted his application in the early 2010s, the private museum is still not officially approved by the local government in 2018. Confiding about his worry and anxiety in some conversations, An noted the closure of the Uyghur store next to his building and interpreted as a sign of tightening ideological control over Muslim minorities in Northwest China. His museum continues to receive various guests and visitors, but only open to people through personal networks rather than to the swathes of tourists who visit the Muslim Quarter on a daily basis. To see how the wider implications of the past, we will turn to the par-a-site of historical fiction (lishi xiaoshuo) in the next chapter.
Chapter 4

Ethnic Unity or Islamophobia: Reading Fiction as History

Through a thorough understanding of the past,
We can better understand our present;
By deeply knowing the past,
We can also foresee our future;
Looking back is—
Moving Forward.
--By Chen Zhongshi, 2008

While the (self-)representation of the Sinophone Muslims through a discourse of tradition has gained much popularity in China’s official reports, a historical fiction about the Muslim Rebellions has caused much controversy among the Chinese readers since the late 2010s. In 2008, Zheng Zheng, a Shaanxi-based Han Chinese writer, published *Looking East Toward Chang’an (Dongwang Chang’an)*. It is based on the history of the Muslim Rebellions in Northwest China between 1862 and 1877. The book brings back to
life the stories of some major historical figures during the late imperial China. One hero is Bai Yanhu, a Hui Muslim who was originally born in Shaanxi and later became known as the “Father of the Dungans” in Central Asia. Zuo Zongtang, another major hero, was a Qing General of Han ancestry. General Zuo, responsible for defeating the Muslim “rebel armies” (*pan jun*), is often associated with the reclaim of Xinjiang from Czarist Russia.

Despite its controversial topic, the fiction’s interpretive framework largely follows the official ideology of class struggle and peasant revolution. While many Muslim friends I talked to welcomed Zheng’s work, online commentaries went rampant. Readers challenged the historical sources while debating about the nature of minority governance. What is the moral lesson from historical fiction? Who is the traitor? Who is the true patriot? Should the Chinese government welcome the Dungans or be cautious about the “rebellious nature” of the Muslim minorities in general?

In a sense, a historical fiction like *Looking East Toward Chang’ an* has become a social site of historical recollection. We start this chapter by asking: Why does a contemporary novel based upon the imperial history would elicit very different reactions among its readers? How does an anthropological study of historical fiction reveal the relationship between literature and history, fiction and memory in the post-imperial memoryscape? In this chapter, we move from more concrete forms of remembrance (exhibition, museum, ritual) to the para-sites of historical narratives (mainly historical fiction). I am most interested in how the novel is being continuously read, remembered, or criticized as history.
1.1. Forgotten Stories

In 2017, I went to visit Zheng Zheng through the introduction of Fatima, a Muslim woman active in local Islamic philanthropy and audio programs. Zheng lived with his wife in a small Soviet-style residential apartment in the outskirts of the city. That was a hot summer morning. He stood in front of his apartment, using an old-style cellphone to guide me finding my way from the subway station to his apartment. Wearing a white sleeveless top, black cloth pants and dark brown sandals, Zheng looked just like any other elderly Chinese man you might encounter in a street in Xi’an. But once we were inside his small apartment, I was struck by a delicate balance between the smallness of the living space and the richness of his book collection. We sat down in his study surrounded by books.

On his desk, there were two books with deep blue covers. Spotting my gaze at those two books, Zheng smiled, “I’ve been working on excavating the stories of Xiaowen Emperor (BC203-BC157), the second emperor in the Han Dynasty, from the book of Historical Records. He’s a good ruler but largely overshadowed by his successors.”

As I later learned, Zheng’s passion for the unrecognized partially had to do with his own family stories. Zheng’s father used to be an underground communist party member during the civil war (1945-1949). After 1949, his father’s involvement in the underground activities in Southern Shaanxi during the civil war was largely forgotten. Worse still, such involvement was used against his father during the political movements. His father was condemned as a rightist (you pai fen zi) whose reputation was not recovered until the 1980s. Because of his family background, Zheng was fascinated with
Knowing me as a Han Chinese, Zheng opened up by admitting a lack of knowledge in the history of Hui Muslims in China. Even though he grew up frequenting local halal restaurants, Zheng had not known so much about Hui Muslims in the city. “It is a stereotype we always have. If you ask about the best cuisine in Xi’an, people recommend you go to Huifang [the Muslim Quarter]. But once they are satisfied with food, they start denigrating Muslims.” For him, the lack of social interaction between the Han Chinese and Hui Muslims in the city led to distrust and stereotyping. Moreover, Zheng believed that a long-ingrained Han-centric nationalism breeds a sense of superiority and a lack of self-reflection on the history of China from a more inclusive perspective. He mentioned, for example, although the local government has been filling the street posters and state media with the images of the Silk Road, little is actually mentioned in reference to the Muslim merchants or Islam.

Zheng first became interested in the history of Muslim Rebellions as early as 1974. In 1974, two years before the Cultural Revolution ended, he and Chen Zhongshi (1942-2016), one of China’s most acclaimed contemporary fiction writers, were assigned a task to write about the history of a village in the southern Shaanxi. Between the 1970s to 2000, both worked in the Shaanxi Propaganda Department, a party-led government bureau in charge of media communication, cultural activities and thought works (sixiang gongzuo). They went to in the village and spent two years co-writing for the assigned task. During the time of investigating the local history, Zheng recounted how he got to know about the Muslim Rebellions in the village:
During our time in the village, there used to be an old rich person in that village. He made his wealth during the Muslim Rebellions. When he was doing business in Hezhou [today’s Linxia in Gansu Province], the local rebellion broke out. Many fought or fled for their life. Since he did business with Hui Muslims, some Muslims entrusted him with their fortune. He promised that he would return all their fortunes once they came back. However, what he really did was to take all the money and kill those Hui businessmen. Soon, he got back to Shaanxi and started doing business with the British in the fur trade… I looked into the local archives and realized the severity of the killings at that time. According to local records (difang zhi), Shaanxi used to be home to about one million Hui Muslims; after the rebellions, over 800,000 Hui Muslims either fled away or died from war and hunger. Most of those who survived were the Hui Muslims in the city of Xi’an. Those are significant numbers… From then on, I kept digging into archives and wanted to figure out what happened to those people.

As it turned out, the story was not just about the traumatic experiences of the Hui Muslims and their subsequent fleeing from China into Central Asia. The historical tragedy involved the imperial Qing state’s minority policies, inter-ethnic conflicts, and great human losses where the conflicts took place. For Zheng, the history of the Muslim Rebellions over a hundred years ago became a history of violence that implicated Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

Zheng’s interest in the history of Muslim Rebellions coincided with a growing interest in the history of Muslims in China after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For the Chinese government, to revisit the history of Muslims in Northwest China was to re-emphasize the multi-ethnic unity of the Chinese nation. Ethnologists and historians convened in conferences, such as the Seventh National Conference on Hui History in Xi’an in 1992. Academic works, built upon the archives collected in the 1950s and 1960s, were published in the 1990s (see Li 1998; e.g. Ma 1993a; Ma 1993b).

Besides the academic meetings and publications, an influential literary work on the Muslim Rebellions came out as entitled History of the Soul (xin ling shi) (C. Zhang
It is a historical fiction based on the author’s adept interweaving of Chinese historical archives, Western historiography of Islam in China, rare documents preserved by the Muslim descendants, and his own experience of tracing those stories. Zhang Chengzhi, a Hui Muslim born in Beijing in 1948, offered a historical narrative of the Jahriyyas’—a Sufi order in Northwest China—participation in the anti-Qing rebellions. While acknowledging the atrocities of the Qing government, Zhang elevated the Jahriyyas’ struggle as heralding a new age of revolutions in the twentieth century. Since the publication of *History of the Soul* in 1991, intense debates have emerged around the topics of the nature of the Muslim rebellions and its relationship to the revolutionary history (e.g. Choy 2006; Garnaut 2006; Xu 2002).

Well aware of the ongoing debates among historians, literary critics, writers, and readers, Zheng embarked his own journey of writing a historical novel on the subject matter after his retirement in 2000. To go deeper beyond official archives, he went on self-funded trips to follow the paths of Hui Muslims who set off from Shaanxi in the late nineteenth century. During four to five years of preparation for his writing, he followed the numerous paths of the Muslim refugees from Shaanxi to places such as Zhangjiachuang and Pingliang in the neighboring provinces of Gansu, Ningxia and Qinghai. In towns and mosques, Zheng Zheng talked with many Hui Muslims who still spoke some altered versions of the Shaanxi dialect. Some also used the village names in Shaanxi for their new settlements in Gansu and Ningxia provinces. Moreover, Zheng participated in the homecoming rituals of the Dungans and interviewed the descendants of Bai Yanhu for his opening and concluding chapters.
However, Zheng’s identity as a Han Chinese writer also had imposed some limitations when it came to the descriptions of religious motives and collections of documents written by Chinese Muslims. He observed the religious prayers in the mosques in the Muslim Quarter and consulted with Muslim scholars on the specific use of words. For example, Zheng worked closely with a Hui scholar Ding Xu in Xi’an. Mr. Ding, the author of *Xi’an Huizu Dialect Dictionary* (2016), went through the manuscript meticulously and fixed the specific terms used by Shaanxi Hui Muslims. Together, they reconstructed a vivid narrative based on local records, religious terms, and regional dialects. In a sense, the novel *Looking East Toward Chang’an* is also a hybrid work: it is a collaborative, semi-ethnographic work based on the rapport Zheng Zheng has built with the Hui Muslims in Shaanxi and other parts of Northwest China over the years of his writing.

Besides, the approval of publishing the novel also depended heavily on the state censorship system. It took Zheng five years to revise the drafts based on the feedback from a pool of readers, including the Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs (BERA), and the Propaganda Department in Shaanxi Province. Upon its publication, the novel was acclaimed as a formidable literary effort to promote ethnic unity. However, the ideological restrictions also limited the power of the story as it takes a different turn among the readers.

While Zheng Zheng and I were chatting about the publication and reception of his work, Zheng brought up his shared interest with his longtime friend Chen Zhongshi. Both have a Balzacian ambition to use historical fiction as an active engagement with history. On the first page of the novel, Chen wrote for his friend: “Through a thorough
understanding of the past/We can better understand our present/By deeply knowing the past/We can also foresee our future/Looking back is/Moving Forward.” Sharing a similar taste in literary style and deep knowledge for local history, Zheng saw Chen’s lines as a succinct recapitulation of his own intention in writing a historical novel.

Chen Zhongshi, Zheng’s colleague and friend since the 1970s, won the Mao Dun prize in 1997 thanks to his historical fiction *White Deer Plains* (1993). In the novel, Chen explored the social transformation of the Chinese nation through a mythical origin rooted in a small village in Shaanxi. Chen interwove the stories of two fictional families against the backdrop of the modern transformations in China between the late Qing Dynasty and 1949. Chen’s story is set in the countryside of the White Deer Plain, less than twenty miles from Chen’s home village and not far away from the city of Xi’an. According to the local legend, the White Deer plain was protected by the spirit of a mythical white deer. Two major families derived their family names from the two-character name of “white deer”—the Bai (White) and the Lu (Deer). Bai Jiaxuan, the head of the Bai family, is a typical, unbending Shaanxi peasant who insists on the orthodox patriarchy of peasant society. Lu Zilin, the head of the Lu family, appeared as a narrow-minded revenge-seeker who kept competing with the influence of the Bai family. The children from two families, however, did not follow the peasantry paths of their parents. They became deeply involved in the transformation of Chinese society through political participation.

On the cover of his novel, Chen borrowed from Balzac and wrote—“A novel is no less than the secret history of a nation.” Indeed, the Mao Dun committee—the most prestigious literature prize in China since 1982—saw *The White Deer Plain* as an epic
representation of the modern Chinese nation (Wang 2006:18-20). Shortly after winning
the prize, Chen was elected as the President of the Shaanxi Writers Association and later
the Vice President of the Chinese Writers Association. He held both positions until his
death in 2016 while I was doing the fieldwork.

Shortly after 2008, Looking East Toward Chang’an entered the competition for
the Mao Dun Literature Prize. But it did not go far in the end. This result surprised
neither Zheng Zheng nor many Muslim readers whom I spoke with. For Zheng Zheng,
the “sensitivity” (mingan xing) of his choice of topic lied not in its general framing of the
rebellions as “peasant rebellions” (nongmin qi yi). In fact, such framing has been
recognized by the state-endorsed Marxist discourse of modern Chinese history which
brackets various grassroots movements all under “peasant rebellions” against a “corrupt,”
“feudal” Qing dynasty (Farquhar and Hevia 1993; Weaver and Fei 2002). What surfaced
as disturbing and potentially disruptive force in the historical fiction is rather the inability
of the “authoritative discourse” (avtoritetnoe slovo), defined by Bakhtin, to prevent its
readers from perceiving or interpret the contents and historical backgrounds otherwise.

To better understand how history is re-imagined in fiction and the controversy
such literary texts incur, a contextualization of the author’s social background and his
writing practices is not enough. While contemplating the implications of the death of the
author, Foucault pointed out that the author functioned in each different context to
demarcate the boundaries and exclude the proliferation of meanings. In contrast,
discourse is an act, “a gesture fraught with risks,” open to critical examination and even
unexpected appropriations (Foucault 2003:382). To map the discursive field generated by
a certain discourse and to trace its historical formation, we need to turn to reading as an
anthropological method. “Staying closer to the text (including the text of criticism),” a method Penelope Papalias advocated in *Genres of Recollection* (2005:177), will take us closer to the fault lines in historical discourse. As Papalias argued, a close reading of historical fiction would “open up ways to…challenged the role of history itself as ultimate authority on the collective traumas of the past (2005:143).”

### 1.2. Looking East Toward Chang’an

The novel opens with a semi-ethnographic description of the first homecoming ritual of the Dungans at the West Gate in Xi’an in 1993. Two direct descendants of Bai Yanhu, walking in front of the group, knocked at the West Gate. The ritual was performed as a fulfillment of Bai Yanhu’s last wish before he died in 1882. Then, the readers are taken back from the late twentieth century to the 1860s in Part I, accompanied by Parts II&III. Each part is named after a key location as the rebellions took place and spread out.

Part I, titled “Six Village Town” (*Liucunbu*), depicts the historical background and the factors that contribute to the outbreak of the Muslim rebellions in Shaanxi. Mei Jintang, a local rogue in Shaanxi, went to Hezhou (today’s Linxia) in Gansu province years in the 1850s. He betrayed and killed a Hui Muslim who entrusted him with his son and properties. Later, Mei returned to the Six Village Town outside of Xi’an and used the money he illegally obtained to form a local gang.

Meanwhile, Shaanxi was in a precarious situation in the early 1860s. The Taiping army, Nian army, and peasant soldiers from Sichuan were all trying to take over the province. The Qing government commissioned an official Zhang Fu to train local militias
(tuan lian). Some local officials started recruiting Hui Muslims, thanks to their abstinence from drinking and smoking opium, in militias to fend against other peasant armies. Besides officially organized militias, Mei Jintang and other local gang leaders quickly seized the chance and transformed their illegal organizations into legally sanctioned militias. The formation of local militias served as the starting point of the disaster in Shaanxi.

Another factor was the long-entrenched discrimination against the Hui Muslims in the late Qing society. As local militias unevenly treated the Muslim soldiers, some broke away and decided to fend themselves while escaping. They tried to buy some bamboos for defense but were overcharged by the local peddlers. Two parties got into a fight. A Muslim was killed in the brawl. The remaining Muslims appealed to the local court. Due to the discriminatory laws against the Muslims in the Qing penal codes, the peddlers were exonerated. Rumors of mass killing started to spread around. Local militias, previously gangs coveting the land and wealth of Hui merchants and farmers, went after the innocent Muslim families. As retaliation, some Muslim fought back and killed some Han Chinese villagers.

As the conflicts escalated, Zhang Fu went with Ma Bailing, a respected Muslim in Xi’an, to negotiate with the fighting Muslims. Yet, Zhang refused to acknowledge the fault of local militia and insisted to wipe out what he thought as bad Muslims. Upon the discovery of Zhang’s secret plot, local Muslim leaders were outraged. They responded proactively, captured Zhang and killed him. This act of killing a Qing official changed the nature of ethnic conflicts between the Han militias and Hui Muslims to the betrayal and rebellion against the Qing government.
Against this historical background, the author interwove the life story of Bai Yanhu into the escalation of historical events outlined above. Bai Yanhu was a young Muslim born in southern Shaanxi. He was the third and the youngest son in the Bai family, a talented student in the scripture hall education but later becoming more interested in martial arts. In Part I, he was portrayed as a pious young Muslim man, courageous, kind-hearted, just, but sometimes a bit rash in decision-making. When Mei Jintang’s son and his gang were pestering local Muslim herders, Bai Yanhu fought against the gang and saved a Muslim girl Ma Yulian who later became his life companion.

As Bai Yanhu tried to escape from Mei’s retaliation, he was saved by a peasant Han family who treated him well and equally. However, as the family head Yang Shenghua attempted with his fellow peasants to change the unbearably high taxation system in the village, Yang was tricked by the government and the entire family publicly executed. Bai Yanhu had a narrow escape from death and swore to revenge for his Han Chinese brother one day. After returning to his hometown, he and his Hui friend joined a militia organized by a local gentry (xiang shen) for making a living and learning some military strategies. As he witnessed the bamboo incident later, Bai Yanhu became further disillusioned with the government. He decided to join the Muslim rebels and killed the official who executed his Han Chinese brother Yang Shenghua. He also punished one of the early Muslim leaders Ye Fuxiang when the latter was caught killing innocent people and raping Han women. Ye ran away and started working for the Qing government in suppressing the Muslim rebels.
Thanks to his formal military training, Bai Yanhu soon stood out among others as a capable leader. Together with other Muslim leaders in Shaanxi, Bai deployed a flexible, guerrilla-style to fight, trap, dodge, and evade the Qing army. This style also became Bai’s signature military strategy for the entire duration of his fight. After one battle, Bai returned to look for Ma Yulian, the girl he saved from Mei’s gang, and asked for her help to form a women’s battalion. Ma accepted Bai’s invitation and went with her father, a Muslim medicine man, to join the camp.

When the Qing court in Beijing finally received the reports from Shaanxi in June 1862, Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) used it as an opportunity to ostracize a high-ranking official Sheng Bao. The Empress sent Sheng Bao to Shaanxi as the Commander-in-Chief of local military movements. Sheng Bao, grudgingly obliged, passively attended to the local conflicts without much intervention. At the same time, the Shaanxi Muslim leaders got in touch with General Chen Decai (d.1864) who led the Taiping Army in an attempt to overtake Shaanxi. Although Chen was forced to leave because of the failing status of the Taiping Rebellion in the south, this alliance between the Christian-initiated and Muslim-led peasant armies proved to be sporadically effective in the next episode.

As a result, the Shaanxi Muslims quickly gained an upper hand and took over the Six Village Town. However, the casualties could hardly be overlooked at this stage. It was not only the participating militias and armies Han, Hui, and Manchu armies who were killed in the battlegrounds but also more civilians regardless of their ethnicity or religion lost their lives in 1862. Many refugees escaped into the city of Xi’an at the beginning of the regional wars. The author notes the significance of the May Seventeenth
ritual as a day of survival in the novel. The story finds direct references from the memoir of Ma Guangqi (C. Ma 1993a) and other historical texts.

Part I interweaves together the official records from the Qing court, local historical records, oral histories, and the author’s own interpretation. This mixed style creates a sense of authenticity but also, as we will see later, lends itself to be criticized more as history than as literature.

Part II is entitled “Dongzhi plateau” (Dongzhiyuan) named after a loess plateau sandwiched between two major rivers in the eastern Gansu Province. It stretched about 50 miles from south to north and 20 miles in the east-west axis. The loess plateau used to be a regional hub of transportation and a strategically important highland between Shaanxi and Gansu.

The narrative follows the flight of the Hui Muslims from Shaanxi to Gansu. After the failure of Shengbao, Empress Cixi appointed another Manchu general Dorongga (1818-1864) to oversee the suppression of the Muslim rebellions in Shaanxi. Dorongga, a cunning strategist, deployed various ways to pursue his political and military campaigns. Upon his arrival in Xi’an, Dorongga impeached the Shaanxi provincial governor Ying Qi who was later banished to Xinjiang. Dorongga also coerced the gentry and businessmen in Xi’an to “donate and sacrifice” (juanxian) for the cause of more military deployments in the northwest. Besides direct battling, he also used Hui Muslims like Ye Fuxiang to sow discord among the Muslim leaders.

At the same time, the Muslims in Shaanxi began to form the Eighteen Camps (shi ba da ying) outside of Xi’an. Bai Yanhu further rose in influence through his military
feats and religious righteousness. Sun Yubao, a Hui Muslim leader at the time, was unwilling to join the Eighteen Camps and later surrendered to Dorongga. The superiority of Dorongga’s armaments and the internal factions among the Muslim leaders resulted in the military failures of the latter in 1863. Dorongga took over the headquarters of the Muslim rebels in Weicheng. Bai Yanhu and others decided to flee to Dongzhi plateau.

By documenting their flight from Shaanxi, the author switches the temporal scale in the narrative. The refugee migration is linked to the history of Islam in China since the seventh century AD:

> It is the first time and the last time that over 100,000 Muslims tried to escape from their homeland in such a massive scale… Their ancestors came from Arabia (*dashi guo*) in the Western regions (*xi yu*) along the Silk Road through Central Asia to Xi’an. Thanks to the tolerance of the Tang emperors, Muslims integrated into the Chinese land. They started to explore and settle down in Shaanxi and Gansu while living harmoniously with the Han Chinese. They are the descendants of Muslim fathers (*huihui baba*) and Chinese mothers (*hanren nana*). The hot blood between the Hui and Han kins is flowing in the veins of those descendants…. For Bai Yanhu, as young as he was, he was through many disasters and hardships. Deep inside him was much sadness, melancholia, anger and hatred. He witnessed more than enough hypocrisy, meanness, cruelty and calculation. All this was imposed by the government (*guanfu*) and local militias led by people such as Feng Yuanzuo, Mei Jintang, Ying Qi, Sheng Bao, Dorongga. It was also imposed by those like Ye Fuxiang and Sun Yubao. While riding his horse, Bai Yanhu thought through all those events in the past year… (Zheng 2008:211)

In this quotation, the author shifts from an omniscient point of view to the third-person perspective. The first part conforms to the official historiography by giving a synoptic history of Islam in China in relation to the Silk Road. Like in the official discourse, the harmony between the Hui and Han is stressed as a historical fact. But by recognizing some Muslims as traitors, the author also tries to create a sense of shared historical responsibility between the Han and Hui actors.
As Shaanxi is portrayed as the historical homeland, the theme of homesickness shortly emerges in Part II. Away from their home, the Hui Muslims suffered from *mulian*, a mood of loss and disorientation spreading like a disease among the refugees and soldiers. The best cure was soon discovered: a combination of the Qinjiang folk opera and the Islamic incantations.

While the Muslim refugees under the leadership of the Eighteen camps moved to Dongzhi plateau, Dorongga was trapped by the second waves of attack from other peasant rebels such as the Taiping army, the Nian army, and Sichuan rebels. In 1864, Dorongga died in Shaanxi after a major battle in the Zhouzhi town. His death and the collapse of the Taiping movement (1851-1864) led to a temporary weakening in the Qing government’s power in Northwest China. The Shaanxi Muslims were able to settle in the Dongzhi plateau for the following few years.

During the stay in the loess plateau, the Shaanxi Muslims got logistical support from the Jahriyya order led by Ma Hualong (1810-1871) based on the nearby Gold-accumulated Town (*Jinjibu*). With the weakened military pressures from the Qing army and support from Ma Hualong, Bai Yanhu and Ma Yulian got married. But shortly after their marriage, Bai led his soldiers back to Shaanxi to fight against the provincial Qing army in an attempt to prevent them from attacking those living in the Dongzhi plateau. The author notes that some internal frictions among different Muslim leaders continued to deepen during this period, which would lead to the final disintegration of the Eighteen camps in Part III through a relentless, long-term military campaign initiated by General Zuo Zongtang (1832-1870).
By giving much space to the depiction of Zuo Zongtang, the author takes another controversial move. As a Han Chinese official fighting for the Qing government, Zuo has been vilified as a butcher (kuaizishou) against the Muslims in the post-1949 historiography in China. Yet, in some accounts, Zuo has also been glorified as a patriotic general (aiguo jiangling) who reclaimed Xinjiang under the Qing rule. In the novel, the author traces the rise of Zuo Zongtang from his youth.

During the Taiping movement, Zuo Zongtang succeeded in taking over some strategic strongholds from the Taiping army in South China. Thanks to his military acumen and the Hunan army from his home province, Zuo quickly climbed up the political rank and became a second-tier duke (bojue kejingbo) in the Qing court. Because of his military success against the Taiping movement, he was commissioned as the General Governor of Shaanxi and Gansu in 1886 to “pacify” (pingding) the northwestern regions. But Zuo did not march his army northwest until the next year when the Qing court finally appointed him as the Commander-in-Chief of all Manchu armies stationed in Shaanxi and Gansu.

With both the political and military power concentrated in one hand, Zuo finally set off from the south with his Hunan army and the newly purchased armaments. Before his arrival in Shaanxi, he set up a set of strategic principles including “slow advancement and fast battlement,” “from Shaanxi to Gansu,” “Kill first and capture later,” and “do away with the Nian army before attacking the Muslims.” All those principles would play out later in various plans and battles. As it turned out, Zuo accepted the surrender from other peasant groups in northern Shaanxi and began to concentrate his forces against the Muslims in the Dongzhi plateau. In the spring of 1869, the Hui Muslims withdrew further
to Gold-accumulated Town, thus bringing the readers to Part III “Gold-accumulated Town” (*Jinjipu*).

Ma Hualong, the Jahriyya leader, refused to evacuate from the town and decided to stay for defense. Bai Yanhu and other Shaanxi Muslim leaders tried to slow down the Qing armies from outside, but of little avail. As the prolonged besiegement became more brutal, Ma Hualong surrendered to Zuo’s army and sacrificed all his family as the hostage in exchange for peace. He was executed in public. None of his family survived except one younger son who was saved by Bai Yanhu. The rest of the Jahriyya followers and residents in the town were relocated to some most destitute places in Gansu.

It is worth noting that the author does not go much into the detail of the Jahriyya history or the life history of Ma Hualong. Zhang Chengzhi, the author of *The History of Soul* (1991), offers a very different rendition of the Muslim Rebellions. In Zhang’s version, the Jahriyya Muslims are the true spiritual leaders of the Muslim Rebellions in late Qing dynasty because of their jihadist spirit to sacrifice for the liberation of the oppressed. In *Looking East Toward Chang’an*, the Shaanxi Muslims—especially Bai Yanhu—are the major characters in the historical narrative. In terms of Jahriyyas, Zheng Zheng focuses much on the assistance that Ma Hualong generously lent to the Shaanxi Muslims. Zheng briefly dwells upon the history of the Qing government’s unfair treatment of the Jahriyyas, known as the New Teaching (*xinjiao*) in late Qing China. The fall of Ma Hualong and the punishment imposed upon his family and followers are largely presented in Zheng’s novel as the result of the divide-and-rule policy adopted by the Qing government toward the diverse Muslims communities based on their religious affiliations and political alliances.
After the defeat of the Jahriyyas, Zuo Zongtang kept pursuing the Shaanxi Muslims on the run as the latter tried to seek help from local Muslim leaders. Zuo carried out the divide-and-rule strategy to isolate the potential convergence of Muslim rebels and local leaders. In Hezhou, the Muslim leader Ma Zhan’ao (1830-1886) decided to surrender after a few initial military success against Zuo’s army. The city of Hezhou was spared from war and slaughter. The conditional surrender also earned Ma Zhan’ao and his sons some significant political promotions in the official rank. From late Qing dynasty to the Republic era before 1949, the Ma family became one of the important warlords in Northwest China. But the surrender of Ma Zhan’ao meant that Bai Yanhu and other surviving Muslims—including those from Shaanxi and Gansu—could not find refuge in Hezhou. They turned toward Xining in Qinghai province.

As described in the novel, faction and disintegration did not only take place among intrafaith groups but also within the Shaanxi Muslim camps. The decade-long conflicts and flights exacerbated the problem as people were longing to settle down and to be free from the military pressures. Cui Wei (1833-1893), another major Hui leader from Shaanxi, decided to surrender after a fierce besiegement in Xining. One of Cui’s underlings escaped and joined Bai Yanhu. By then, Bai Yanhu was the only remaining Muslim rebel leader from Shaanxi who was still on the run. He led those who stayed with him into Xinjiang.

The situations in Xinjiang were very complex. In the novel, the author does not go into details about the situations in Xinjiang. After the Muslim Rebellions broke out in 1862, some uprisings were initiated by the Hui Muslims in 1864. Then, Yaqub Beg (1820-1877) took control of Xinjiang before Zuo Zongtang’s army marched in. Liu
Jintang (1844-1894), Zuo’s right-hand man, defeated Yaqub Beg’s army and gained control of Xinjiang. Since it is impossible to bypass Xinjiang and directly land the characters in Central Asia, the author dedicates the last chapter (out of 40 in total) to briefly touch on the paths of Bai Yanhu and the remaining Shaanxi Muslims in Xinjiang.

In December 1877, Bai Yanhu ordered those who were still following him to cross the Tianshan Mountains. The novel ended with the Epilogue “Idhn” (Kouhuan, or divine wish/permission). It is often used before one’s death or in circumstances requesting permission, granting repentance and so on. Bai Yanhu died in July 1882 at the age of forty-one in Central Asia. “Long-haunting depression, melancholia in a long-distance from the homeland, deep pain due to the loss of kinsmen, tumultuous life, fifteen years of fighting” cost him dearly. Before his death, Bai left his last wish for his descendants to go back to Xi Sheng (Shaanxi) and knock at the West Gate, a wish fulfilled in 1993 in the Preface “Return” (Huiguì).

Throughout his work, the author slides between the role of a writer and that of a historian. After reading and comparing those different voices, I asked Zheng about his own position. He responded, “I am essentially a writer… who’s interested in excavating history. My task is to stand on the river banks and carefully observe the ebbs and flows of the river.” By comparing the historical process to a river, Zheng imagined himself as a writer who can simultaneously “observe” and “excavate” history through writing. By foregrounding Bai Yanhu as the major hero, Zheng centered the Shaanxi Muslims as the agents of the anti-Qing peasant movements. Yet, his foregrounding also pushed other historical figures —such as Ma Hualong and Yaqub Beg—into the background of historical imagination.
1.3. Reading Fiction as History

Ever since Beijing’s advocacy of the Belt and Road initiative, the stories of the Dungans as the diasporic Hui Muslims in Central Asia have been widely publicized in different media outlets in China (G. Bai 2014). Zheng’s novel, despite his own intention, has caused fierce debates and met with harsh criticisms online. The most intense debates gather around two interconnected issues: the nature of historical writing and the portrayals of historical figures like Bai Yanhu and Zuo Zongtang.

One of the most long-lasting and widely known online commentaries with the contents of the book started in the Tianya Bulletin Board System (BBS), one of the most popular online forums in China (L. N. Cao and Tang 2013). On October 22, 2012, a post appeared entitled “Critique on the Historical Fiction Looking East toward Chang’an.” Since then, Pinghu Yueman (P.Y.), the author of this post, has been constantly updated the content and responded to questions and comments following this subject. P.Y. started his post as follows:

Since the reform and opening up, it is important to strengthen the connection between China and the outside world, including the connection with the Shaanxi Villages in Central Asia. Such is part of our national interest. In literature, a representation of the Shaanxi villages in Central Asia is necessary, too. The problem lies in the writing of historical events in relation to our national interest. Since the novelist writes about history, shouldn’t he introduce a more comprehensive historical background and respect historical facts? Should he follow the principles of respecting national sovereignty and safeguarding territorial integrity while critiquing those who go against such principles? If you cannot find a single positive answer to these questions in his novel, how could such a book be praised and venerated? How could such a writer be regarded as a “writer full of strong social responsibilities?” (Tianya Post on Oct 22, 2012)
While acknowledging the Hui Muslims a “great,” “patriotic” ethnic minority, the biggest critique P.Y. had against Zheng’s novel was the evaluation of Bai Yanhu vis a vis Zuo Zongtang in the name of “national interest.”

What Zheng intentionally avoided in the last chapter about Bai’s activities in Xinjiang becomes a site for contention. As a fervent supporter for the Han-Chinese General Zuo in the late Qing Dynasty, P.Y. had previously written a long post about the General Zuo in 2010, praising him to be a “true national hero” who contributed to the stabilization of Xinjiang and the territorial integrity of China. P.Y. differentiated the Han Chinese General Zuo from the “extremely corrupt Qing dynasty” and portrayed the former as one of the greatest defenders of the “survival space of the Chinese nation (Tianya Post on November 2, 2012).” In contrast, Bai Yanhu, the Shaanxi Muslim rebel leader, was condemned as a “sinner who betrayed the common interest of the Chinese nation” because he fought with Yaqub Beg in Xinjiang against General Zuo’s army before they finally fled into today’s Central Asia.

For P.Y. and the followers/commentators in this series of blog posts, the novel “completely distorted” General Zuo’s contribution to defending China’s national sovereignty and territorial integrity. Although the book “uses minzu (ethnic groups) as its flag,” P.Y. argued, “it puts the so-called minzu problem over and above the life and death of over half of the Chinese territory, which is absolutely wrong.” Interestingly, P.Y. did not spare the contemporary Chinese government from his criticism. Given the fact that the book “could pass very strict publishing censorship, enter various award competitions supported by the government such as the Mao Dun prize, and get reprinted four times as a bestseller,” P.Y unleashed his anger in the post, “how can we possibly demand others to
respect China’s national sovereignty and territorial integrity? (Tianya Post on November 9, 2012). A most recent comment by a follower of this post series, wrote on October 24, 2017, “Who on the earth is this bastard Zheng Zheng? How could he confuse right and wrong like that?”

Besides the defense of Zuo Zongtang as a Han Chinese general who contributed to sovereign integrity while the Manchu-ruled Qing government failed, a new type of comments regarding religion entered into debates in 2013. Unlike P.Y.’s Han-centric criticism in the name of the “Chinese nation,” the Muslim rebellions in the late Qing dynasty have been increasingly interpreted through the perspectives of religion and “cultural clashes” (wenhua chongtu).

T.T., one follower of the post series, first discussed the role of religion in early 2013. Comparing Islam to Buddhism, T.T. referred to Islam as “violent” and “cruel” (xionghen canren), particularly when combined with politics. T.T. wrote,

In the Shaan-Gan Tongzhi Hui rebellions, the erroneous ethnic policies carried out by the Qing government were the most important factors. So was the poor performance of governance of the Qing government. But if we look at the characteristics of Islam (huijiao, or the religion of Muslims), the wish to defend their religion through jihad (shengzhan, or holy war) and resistance further exacerbated the conflicts. After the rebellions began, Hui people slaughtered common Han people. They massacred and used jihad to force the Han people to believe in their religion. Those were very violent acts...If religion were taken advantage of by the extremist forces, the movements like Taliban is easily understandable. Currently, China’s ethnic policies are good. On the basis of ethnic equality, some small preferential policies toward the ethnic minorities are not impermissible. The Han Chinese, as the majority of the total population, could live peacefully with other ethnic minorities. But now we have to reflect how our grassroots cadres have been using ways of pacification, compromise and constant concession to carry out those policies. This has worsened the ethnic problems in China. Given the essential features of Islam, we have to be more vigilant. (Tianya Post on Feb 3, 2013)
He agreed with the blogger P.Y. that the Qing government had to be blamed for the systematic breakdowns in late-imperial China. Yet, in T.T.’s view, the biggest cause of the Hui rebellions in the Qing dynasty lied in the “violent” nature of the Muslims who used ideas such as “jihad” to defend their religion. He went further to associate the historical events in China with contemporary politics in the Middle East. In his post, the extremist movements like Taliban were no different from the Hui rebellions given their interpolation of religion into politics. Following that logic, T.T. went on lamenting upon the “ways of pacification, compromise and constant concession” in today’s multicultural governance in China. Differing from P.Y. who emphasized that the Han Chinese General Zuo was a quintessential Patriot, T.T. suggested that General Zuo was still too “soft” (wenrou) and not harsh enough toward the Muslim “rebel armies.”

Six months after T.T. posted online, T.S., another follower of the posts, stressed the “cultural conflicts” as the root causes of ethnic conflicts. The role of the Qing government was minimized. The ethnic differences based on religious beliefs were essentialized as ethnoreligious stereotypes. The “religious taboos” (zongjiao jinji) such as pork taboo and civil disputes in everyday life, according to T.S., led to the abominable bloodshed. This equation of “cultural conflicts” with religious differences reminds us of Samuel Huntington’s “clashes of civilizations.” By dividing the world into different major civilizational blocks defined by religion and culture, Huntington’s vision has exerted a profound influence in the post-Cold War world with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the hegemonic power of the United States. Since 9/11 and particularly the emergence of the European refugee crisis, an Orientalist imaginary of a monolithic Islamic civilization prone to radicalization and thus incompatible with modernity has
been promulgated through swathes and circulation of global media reports of the Islamic societies. It is thus no surprise that we find in a follow-up comment to T.T.’s argument, a commenter A.B. blamed all faults on the Muslims and claimed that “the origin of the Muslims and their religion’s incompatibility with our Chinese civilization” were the real causes of “national disasters” (Tianya post on August 5, 2015).

Besides the commentaries on the Tianya BBS, other similar comments also appeared in personal blogs, popular media platforms, and social media such as Weibo (a microblogging platform similar to Twitter). Albeit anonymous, the readers’ interpretations and comments reflect a general tendency to treat a historical fiction like Looking East toward Chang’an as history rather than literary construction of the past. Indeed, the boundaries between history and fiction can be very slippery in the post-imperial remembrance of the past. Historical fictions open a narrative space in which popular imagination regarding certain historical events and figures is stirred. In a sense, historical fiction constitutes a kind of “multi-directional memory work” (Rothberg and Yildiz 2011). It allows writers and readers to actively participate in re-imagining the inter-ethnic relationships and subverting the official ideology, although such participation might also lead to more controversies regarding both historical and contemporary events. While the readers’ reactions mostly mediated through virtual spaces suggest strong disapproval of Zheng’s literary effort, the reception of Zheng’s work among the Hui Muslims has been quite different.

While I was following the trajectories of An Rushi and other Muslims’ recollections of the past, the novel Looking East Toward Chang’an (2008) came up multiple times during conversations over tea and dinner. During one of my visits to the
travel agency in 2016, another manager Yahyaa, a well-educated man at his thirties recommended the novel to me when he knew that I was learning about the historical connection between the Hui Muslims and the Dungans. “The work tells a lot about our history. And it’s written in our language, too.” Yahyaa particularly appreciated how the novel created a sense of authenticity by using “our language.” Besides the language, Yahyaa also commented on the popularity of the novel in the Muslim Quarter since its first print in 2008. I became curious about how the novel used a language that resonated with the Muslim readers. Meanwhile, I could not help but wondering if it was also because of my own ethnic identity as a Han Chinese that Yahyaa enthusiastically recommended the book.

Later as I learned from Zheng and local imams, the novel Looking Toward Chang’an became known among the Muslim residents through the May Seventeenth commemoration. In 2009, the imams in the Muslim Quarter, instead of hosting a feast after praying, gave out many copies of a book to each family in attendance. “Even today, if you visit some families,” one imam in a local mosque told me in 2016, “they may not have read the book but definitely keep it in an important place at home.” The historical fiction, traveling as a gift from the mosques to private domestic spaces, created a link in remembering the past between the older and younger generations.

During my fieldwork, I conversed with different Muslim friends whose age ranged from the twenties to seventies. Their knowledge of the Muslim Rebellions and Hui-Dungan historical connection varied a lot. For the elder generation, they tended to be more familiar with the stories of the traumatic past and usually attended the May Seventeenth ritual annually. Some, like Mr. An, also had family histories related to the
descendants from the Muslim Rebellions who used to be re-settled in the adjacent provinces. But among the younger generation, the collective memories of the past have lost its stronghold. Due to the lack of social resources, many young people move out of the Quarter for education or work. Several young Muslims told me that they either “have never participated in a local ritual” or “haven’t heard about the [May Seventeenth] ritual for some years.” A local photographer Lai En at his late twenties is among one of those who never participated in such a ritual. Yet, when we were chatting in his studio, Lai En shared a copy of the novel with me. His grandparents got one novel and took it home in 2009. “They never read it,” Lai En said when he opened the book, “it is not necessary for them. They knew those stuff by heart while growing up in difficult times. But for us, reading helps a lot.”

The reading, circulation and commentaries on the historical fiction constitute a para-site of remembrance complementary to the collective rituals and other more salient sites of historical memory. In Victor Turner’s words, the differences between the kinesthetic and aesthetic qualities in ritual and literature respectively do not prevent two from being mutually elucidating (Turner 1992). Rather, as a cultural product, the role of literature—more specifically, historical fiction—is a para-site for illuminating the broader social and political contexts in which such literary genre is produced and interpreted. As George Marcus pointed out, a para-site is a “transgressive but principled trope” (2000:8) that resonates with Michel de Certeau’s conceptualization of the tactical in the politics of everyday life. Everyday practices, for de Certeau, including “(talking, reading, moving about, shopping, cooking, etc.) are tactical in character…” (de Certeau
Practices such as writing, reading, sharing, and commenting on literary works become a key element in the politics of everyday life.

Constitutive of the very system in unpredictable directions, a para-site is thus a powerful trope beyond the cynical reason. This “unpredictability of cultural, reflective work” (2000:8) leads us to a more general abstraction of “the Parasite” in Michel Serres’s work:

Or rather, to those points as operators, as sources of relations. And that is the meaning of the prefix para- in the word parasite: it is on the side, next to, shifted; it is not on the thing, but on its relation. (Serres 1982:38)

This feature of the para-site vis a vis the system alerts us to see various forms of para-site from a relational perspective, to see through the thick and thin of para-sites as being part and parcel of the never-stable system under constant transformation. Or, in Marcus’s words, we can thus see the para-site as a “space of excess or surplus in a subject’s actions but is never fully controlled by him or her (2000:8).”

As such, historical fiction constitutes often an overlooked para-site of remembering the past. According to Paul Connerton, a society typically has two ways of remembering—inscription and incorporation (1989). While the latter is to remember through embodied practices such as commemorative rituals and clothing, the former is a practice of remembrance across different societies through inscribed information retrievable from an external source. Although historians are considered as the quintessential inscribers of social memories, we can actually trace the genealogy of such agency to more literary and poetic expressions outside the professional discipline of History (like Homer’s Iliad, Walter Benjamin’s Storyteller, and Taussig’s story of the blind black Colombian poet).
In *Genres of Recollection* (2005), Penelope Papailias investigated the role of historical fiction and its archives as a contested space for historical re-collection in postwar Greece. She offered a fine-grained analysis of *Orthokosta*, a work written and published by a Greek writer Thanassis Valtinos in 1994. Papailias noted how the Greek literary authors considered themselves as accountable historians by writing histories long neglected or forgotten. The Greek readers in the post-war era also developed a specific sensitivity in their approach to literature: they tended to treat literature as *history*. This shared experience through writing, reading, and social interpretation confirm what the literary critic Roberto Echevarría understood of novels as a “given kind of document endowed with truth-bearing power by a society at specific points of time (Echevarría 1998).” Given the restricted rights of speech, both the Greek writers and readers considered literature as an alternative—and, quite often, politically important—site of the country’s past.

Similarly, literary works also offer an alternative site of historical recollection in China. Literature has long been a medium to express one’s position in politics, though often indirectly, in the canonical Chinese literary tradition (Li 1980). It was also a politically charged field for shaping modernity in China in the first half of the twentieth century, spanning from the May Fourth Movement to the Yan’an talk by Mao Zedong in 1942 (L. H. Liu 1995). Shortly after the Cultural Revolution, literary trends such as “searching for root” literature dealt extensively with suppressed, traumatic memories from previous decades (Barme 2013; Ji 2015). In a sense, history and fiction converge to become becomes a potentially subversive site of remembering the national past.
This partially explains why people like Yahyaa and Lai En saw Zheng’s work as an effort to document their history. Yet, despite the official recognition and endorsement from the Xi’an Muslim community, the work has continuously been faced with many harsh criticisms online. Due to the ongoing controversies, the fifth edition of the novel was banned in 2015. I purchased a copy for reading and sharing thoughts with friends in 2016, only to realize that it was a pirated version.

In sum, historical fiction can be a powerful tool to bring the public attention to the traumatic memories in the late imperial China, which is often eluded or bracketed in the official discourse. It also contributes to a renewed interest in the traumatic history among the younger generations of Muslims who are more accustomed to mass printing and open to new media technologies. Yet, the controversies elicited through the multi-directional reading practices reflect the essentializing discourses of cultural and religious differences toward the Muslim minorities in China. The discrepancy between the official ideology of ethnic unity and the state-led nationalist and secularizing programs toward ethnoreligious minorities rips open a contentious space in which the past can hardly be settled.
Governance through Language Programs: Learning Chinese among Dungan Youth

Bakyt, born in 1995, comes from a Dungan village in Kyrgyzstan. “My family story is a bit complicated,” he smiled when I asked whether he was a Gansu or Shaanxi Dungan. “My grandparents told us we were Gansu Dungans. Their grandparents fled from Gansu and arrived in Kyrgyzstan in the late 1870s. Then, they moved back to Ili in Xinjiang. It was not until in 1962 that they migrated from Ili to Kyrgyzstan again. But I really don’t know that much about history.”

In 2012, he and one of his cousins went to Bishkek. They tried to learn Chinese from a Kyrgyz man who had done business in Shanghai for five years. After four months, Bakyt passed the HSK Level-3 examination, a Chinese language test for non-Chinese speakers. Not long after, the Western University (WU) initiated a study-abroad program. The initiative aimed to attract the Dungan students from Central Asia—mainly Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan—to enroll in a four-year undergraduate program
with a focus on the Chinese language education. Bakyt and his cousin learned the news from the Dungan Association in Kyrgyzstan and decided to apply for the program. He was accepted as one of the first thirty-seven Kyrgyzstan’s Dungan students into the program.

“At 9:20pm, I mean Beijing time, on August 31, 2013, our flight landed in the Urumqi Airport.” Bakyt clearly remembered the exact time of arrival after they flew across the border between Kyrgyzstan and China. “I didn’t realize there was a time difference until I saw the clock in the airport. It was my first time traveling so far away from home. My family were worried about me. They packed up everything for me from tooth paste to shoes. I had four pairs of shoes in my luggage!” He laughed as he recalled the miscellany of items that had traveled with him. On the same flight from Bishkek to Urumqi, there were over twenty young Dungans traveling together with Bakyt. Their next connecting flight was bound for Lanzhou, Gansu.

1.1. Golden City

Lanzhou, the capital city of Gansu Province, is located about 700 kilometers away to the northwest of Xi’an. Lanzhou is layered with overlapping temporalities. In 86 BC, the Han empire (206BC–220AD) stationed its army in today’s Lanzhou and named the place Jincheng, a “golden city.” This name still has its contemporary echo in terms of the military presence, economic composition and tourist slogans in the urban landscape. In the early twentieth century, Lanzhou saw the first wave of modernity through militarization; now, it is one of the seven headquarters of PRC’s military regions, in charge of the entire Northwest’s military affairs. The city’s economy relies much on
heavy and petrochemical industries most of which are state-owned enterprises (SOEs) such as PetroChina and Sinopec. Having studied in Texas for several years, I had this curious first impression of Lanzhou as being quite Texan. Cheap oils, huge cars with decorative animal skulls, broad and dusty streets, long sunny afternoons, and restaurants with great meat dishes. In the streets of Lanzhou, I saw large posters juxtaposing the name of Jincheng with Lanzhou. Those messages often made one wonder if there was indeed such a seamless continuation of historical legacy merging into the present. But the past is hardly so.

Built on the southern banks of the Yellow River, Lanzhou serves as a further entry into the rest of Northwest China. To its south stand the Qilian Mountains, also formerly known as the Ferdinand von Richthofen Mountains. The mountain ranges divide Gansu from the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, leaving many passageways in the middle to allow people from southern plateaus into the Hexi Corridor. Located to the northwest of Lanzhou, the Hexi Corridor runs parallel to the northern ridge of the Qilian Mountains and leads into Xinjiang and Central Asia. Cities and towns in the Corridor include Jiuquan (an aerospace city) and Dunhuang (an UNESCO site of Buddhist relics along the ancient Silk Road). In recent years, the provincial government in Lanzhou has been promoting its status as a most important section of China’s Road & Belt Initiative.

Gansu, with Lanzhou as its capital city, is a dynamic region. It is an intersectional ground among different natural landscapes, cultures and geopolitical spheres throughout history. Although the Chinese intellectuals like Gu Jiegang tended to see Gansu as a peripheral region in itself; historians like Jonathan Lipman argue that Gansu is not an “edge of cultural China” as defined by William Skinner’s classic mapping of China’s
macro-regions. Thanks to the region’s geography, Gansu constitutes meeting ground for the intermingling of different political and cultural identities throughout history. “The Tibetans, Salars, Chinese-Speaking Muslims, Mongols, and Mongolian-speaking Muslims all had cores and peripheries arranged very differently (Lipman 1998:14).” For that reason, any single perspective would be insufficient for understanding those multi-directional interactions on the ground.

Besides its historical and strategic significance, Lanzhou is also home to a diverse population with some growing urban Muslim communities. People, goods, money and ideas move back and forth along the Hexi Corridor, connecting Lanzhou to other regional hubs such as Xi’an, Xining, Linxia, Yinchuan and Urumqi. According to the 2010 National Census, Lanzhou had about 2.5 million permanent residents whose ethnic identities include Han, Hui, Mongolian, Dongxiang, Mongolian, Tibetan and thirty other minority groups. While 90.57% of the permanent residents were Han Chinese, the percentage of ethnic minorities had risen slightly to 9.43% in 2010. Muslims accounted for about 6% of permanent residents in the city (Gansu Statistics Bureau 2011). Compared to its neighboring cities and towns such as Linxia (known as “Little Mecca of China”), Lanzhou is not recognized as a regional center for religious pilgrimage. Rather, it is widely regarded among both Muslims and non-Muslims as a regional center for trade, work and study both religious and secular subjects (see Photo 1.6).
It was amidst the summer breeze of August in 2013 that Lanzhou received a group of Dungan students, one of them being Bakyt and his friends. Between 2013 and 2017, more young Dungans would arrive in the city, seeking to learn Chinese in local universities and colleges. Among them, the language program in the WU has been one of the most influential.

**1.2. Eating the Dungan Meal**

“Our program is playing the Dungan card (*da donggan pai*) and eating the Dungan meal (*chi donggan fan*).” Director Zhang Weiguo put it humorously, as we were having a light lunch in a student cafe on campus. Zhang was born in a remote county
about 500 kilometers to the southeast of Lanzhou. He got his PhD degree from linguistics in South China and returned to work in Lanzhou to be close to his family. At first sight, Zhang looked sturdy and reserved. But once familiar, he became open and reflective in our conversations.

I first met Director Zhang in China’s Huizu Association annual conference in Shaanxi Normal University in mid-July 2017. During our panel, Zhang presented the plan of building a digital archive of the Dungan language. Toward the end of his presentation, he asked the attendees to circulate his call for papers in a conference that would be held in Lanzhou in late September 2017. “Our university currently has the largest number of the Dungan students from Central Asia. We welcome everyone in the conference who’s interested in our program and in subjects related to the Dungans.” He seemed quite motivated, “I will go to Central Asia in mid-September for recruiting more students. Everyone is most welcome to visit our center in Lanzhou.”

By late September, Director Zhang was back from Central Asia. His center started preparing for the 5th Annual Dungan conference. We sat in a student-run café on campus. I started to inquire more about the program.

Me: So, I heard this program was started quite recently, in the 2010s?

Zhang: Well, there are some different versions. Here is what I know. Back then [in the 2000s], one of the mining companies from Lanzhou established a factory in Kyrgyzstan. Unfortunately, someone in the company killed a local horse. You know, the locals really value their horses. So our provincial government had to treat this incident as an emergency and looked for someone competent in foreign affairs. After some searching efforts, they found the person…from our university… She did a good job in Kyrgyzstan. The dispute was settled. While she was there, she got to know the Dungans—a group of fellows who originally came from Northwest and could still speak Chinese. There was another officer who went with her. He worked in the Overseas Office in the provincial government. He reported the whole incident to the National Overseas Office in Beijing…
Me: When did they go to Kyrgyzstan?

Zhang: When they went there, I believe it was a winter, very cold, either in 2010 or 2011. The Road and Belt Initiative was not in the air. What was advocated officially was “Open Up to the West”... After that report was issued, Beijing sent some officials to Gansu for investigation. They also came to our university and inspected the general conditions of the foreign students on campus. In 2012, the National and Provincial Overseas Offices authorized our university to establish the ‘Chinese Language Education Base.’ Our program started to accept Dungan students in 2013. But I don’t think that we knew much about the Dungans before that incident in Kyrgyzstan. Lanzhou University, perhaps, knows much better since they have a good research center. Shaanxi, Xinjiang and Ningxia also have had more contact the Dungans. But we knew very little before the incident.

As our conversations went on, it became clear that, unlike the centrality of historical memories among the Shaanxi Hui Muslims, the “discovery” of the Dungans in Zhang’s narrative appeared to be a side story from the transnational connection between Gansu and Kyrgyzstan. More specifically, it was more of a result of the national policies and economic transformation which predated the BRI.

Since the reform and open up in 1978, the economic development in East China has far outpaced that in the western regions. Southeast China, Special Economic Zones (SEZ), and large metropolitan areas such as Beijing and Shanghai have most flows of capital, information, technology, and people from both home and abroad. The overseas Chinese have contributed significantly to China’s export-oriented market economy through investment, technology transference, and foreign remittance (Aiwa 1999; Gungwu Wang 2009). Regions such as the Northwest lags behind in terms of economy, infrastructure and ecology. In 1999, for example, Gansu was ranked as the sixth poorest province in mainland China. Its annual GDP was a little above 13.5 billion dollars, similar to those in provinces like Xinjiang and Inner Mongolia. On the contrary, Guangdong was ten times of Gansu’s GDP size and ranked highest in mainland China.
Beijing has been trying to re-balance the widening gaps between East and West since the late 1990s. Such concern was intensified after General-Secretary Jiang Zemin, Deng’s successor between 1993 and 2003, proposed the “Great Western Development” (xibu da kaifa) plan in June 1999. The initiative was quickly approved in the Politburo Standing Committee in November 1999. By January 2000, the State Council created a leadership group led by Premier Zhu Rongji (in office between 1998 to 2003) who was known for his pragmatism, strong work ethics, and personal charisma. After this initiative was passed as a legislative plan during the Tenth National People’s Congress in 2004, the imperative for leadership from top down to promote a new national policy was under full swing.

Provincial leaders were eager prove their “political achievements” (zheng ji) not only by the measurement of the annual GDP but also by the degree to which they helped advance the process of “Opening Up to the West” (xiang xi kai fang). The “West” included both the Western countries and the further western regions in Central Asia and beyond. As a result, Gansu government established relationship with other regional governments in Japan in 1991, Taiwan in 1992, Russia in 1993, and some Western countries between 1997 and 2001 before China joined the WTO. In November 2004, the Gansu government organized a delegation to visit Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. During the trip, they met with the leaders in the Dungan Associations in both states. A joint group of Dungans from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan visited Gansu in 2005. By July
2012, the Vice Governor of Osh, the state with the highest concentration of the Dungans in Kyrgyzstan, signed a memorandum of friendly relationship with the Gansu government.

Since 2000s, more Chinese companies, both private and state-owned enterprises (SOEs), have been expanding the scope and volume of foreign investments beyond China. The political, economic, social, and environmental impacts of those investments have been found and analyzed in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and more (e.g. Armony and Strauss 2012; Ferguson 2006; Lee 2018; Lin 2011). For China’s SOEs to operate on the ground in Central Asia, many questions emerged along every step: who to employ in overseas branches? How to communicate with the local officials, workers, and residents? What corporate social responsibilities should be taken in an international setting? When miscommunication did happen, like the one in the winter between 2010 and 2011 with the Gansu company, the provincial governments often would turn to well-connected individuals, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and/or local research institutions and universities. But the pool might be often small or far from enough. This acute shortage of intermediaries to facilitate the transnational flows of capital is also one of the driving forces behind the creation of the Dungan program in Lanzhou.

In short, the Dungans in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have been playing a mediatory role between China and Central Asia not only in small trades but also at the regional government level since the early 2000s. There has been, on the one hand, a growing political incentive among the local officials in western provinces such as Gansu to establish international connections through diasporic communities. The demand for
bilingual or multilingual personnel, on the other hand, has been growing thanks to the capital flows and infrastructure investment between China and Central Asia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Kyrgyzstan</th>
<th>Kazakhstan</th>
<th>Uzbekistan</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>W</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>37</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
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<td>2014</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.1—Countries of Origin of the Dungan students at WU, from 2013 to 2016. Courtesy of Director Zhang, September 2017.

Moreover, we can tell from the demography of the Dungan students at WU that the regional factors also influence the ways in which people and resource flows. Between 2013 and 2016, two hundred Dungan students were enrolled in total (see Table 3.1). In terms of countries of origin, the Dungan students mainly come from three Central Asian states. Among the two hundred students, 120 students came from Kyrgyzstan while 67 were from Kazakhstan and only 13 from Uzbekistan. The lowest ratio of students from Uzbekistan is partially due to their relatively small size of the Dungan population.\(^{38}\) The Uzbek Dungans have also been more assimilated into the mainstream society than the

\(^{38}\) In 2009, the population of the Dungans in Uzbekistan was about 3,000, who mainly live in Tashkent, Ferghana Valley, and Tashkent region. For more information, see the introduction of the Dungan Cultural Center of Uzbekistan at [http://www.dungane.kz/assotsiatsii_i_obyedineniya/dunganskiy_kuljturniy_tsentr_uzbekistana/](http://www.dungane.kz/assotsiatsii_i_obyedineniya/dunganskiy_kuljturniy_tsentr_uzbekistana/), last accessed on Jan 17, 2019.
Dungans in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Jiménez-Tovar 2016). As for the differences between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, there are several factors that jointly contribute to the imbalance.

Firstly, some SOEs from Gansu have significant amount of investments in Kyrgyzstan, which creates more need for intermediaries competent in translation and other forms of communication. Since 2005, the Gansu companies have been investing in the foreign contract projects. Most companies involved are the state-owned companies specialized in energy and heavy industry sectors. By the first quarter of 2015, Gansu has agreed upon the investment commitments of over 140 million U.S. dollars in Kyrgyzstan, with the actual fulfillment of 1.79 million U.S. dollars (Ministry of Commerce 2015). The continuous investment from Gansu to Kyrgyzstan demands a growing need in translators, local managers, legal assistants, and workers with basic skills.

The second reason has to do with the inter-provincial difference in Northwest China. Since the 2000s, Shaanxi has been the major destination for most young Dungan students to pursue both longterm degrees and short-term certificates. According to what I learned from the Hui Muslims in Xi’an and the Dungan students and parents, the young Dungans study in over ten colleges and universities in Xi’an. The number of Dungan students constituted about half of the Central Asian student population in Shaanxi. Since Xi’an has the third largest number of educational institutions in China, it is easier for the Dungan parents and their children, mostly not on government fellowships, to choose a program that cater to their budgets and needs.
Besides, we need to take into consideration the extensive networks built over two decades of exchange and reconnection between the Central Asian Dungans and the Hui Muslims in Shaanxi. For example, the Dungan association leaders introduced their youth to study in Xi’an over the past twenty years. Their connection with the local Muslim communities also facilitated the students’ transition from Central Asia to China. For instance, as the representative of the Central Asian Dungan Association in China, Mr. An has helped some Dungans with school recommendation and, in some cases, acted as the guardian for those who were still under eighteen years old.

The differences between the diasporic connections among different regions thus contribute to different patterns of student recruitment strategies. The Dungan program in WU relies on local agencies in Central Asia for student recommendation. The applications mainly come through two kinds of organizations—the local Dungan Associations and the Overseas Chinese Associations in Kyrgyzstan (OCAK). For example, Zhang primarily works with two associations in Kazakhstan. One is the Dungan Association of Kazakhstan (DAK) and the other the Kazakh Society Dungan & Charity Foundation (KSDCF). Both associations, based in the Dzhambul region, are officially recognized by the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan (APK) which aims to promote ethnic unity, ensure religious diversity, and combat extremism. The OCAK is a non-governmental organization established by its current President Hu Yumei in 2004. Throughout twenty-years of residence in Kyrgyzstan, Ms. Hu and her colleagues have pooled up resources and created a multi-ethnic association including Han, Hui, Kyrgyz, Kazakh, Uyghur and other ethnic minorities identified as overseas Chinese. It also helped establish the first overseas Chinese language school in Kyrgyzstan. When the Dungan
program in WU started to recruit students, the OCAK also became one of the local liaison organizations.

Apart from the local recommendation networks in Central Asia, the WU also sends an admission team to conduct face-to-face interviews with the prospective students. “This is to ensure the basic quality of our students.” Director Zhang explained, “When we got applications of the first sixty Dungan students in 2013, we accepted all without careful selection. After all, we trusted our recommenders.” This situation changed when some students started to drop out of the program. Several students could not follow the pace of study and change their universities. A couple of students returned to their home countries and started their own businesses. In June 2017, forty-five out of sixty students successfully graduated from the program. As a preventative measure to reduce attrition rate, the university administrators changed the process of admission. First, students and/or their families initiate applications, sending a package of their HSK exam scores and previous transcripts to the local agencies. Then, the agencies recommend a list of candidates based on their academic performance. Later, a three-person admission team would travel to Bishkek and Almaty, review the application materials, and interview the recommended students traveling from different places. Director Zhang said with an emphatic tone, “This significantly improves the quality of our students the next year. From 2014 on, our attrition rate has been reduced significantly.”

Although the language programs in Shaanxi and Gansu have quite different histories, such differences have been diminishing since 2013. One line from the program brochure well captures the central goals, i.e. to “train people through practice-based international Chinese language pedagogy so that they can teach Chinese, conduct
business and facilitate cultural exchanges in Chinese language abroad.” The combination between state policies and capital flows, together, prompted the growth of such programs in educational institutions across different provinces in northwest China. Gansu is not the only case; other provinces such as Shaanxi, Ningxia and Qinghai also have an edge in claiming their advantage for attracting young Muslims from Central Asia as well as other Muslim countries along the Silk Road.

Homecoming or returning to one’s ancestral home is one of the appealing ways to establish and maintain relationship once lost. But it is not the only way. Educational infrastructure, state funding channeled through designated programs, active collaboration with local non-governmental institutions or individuals, plus strong incentives from the Sinophone Muslim communities are all key to the formation of new connection between China and Central Asia. But, have there been difficulties they encountered while learning Chinese? What are their goals and aspirations?

1.3. Learning Chinese and Beyond

On June 17, 2017, forty-five among the sixty Dungan students, the first group accepted into the WU program in 2013, graduated. Bakyt was among one of them. “We were all dressed up,” Bakyt recalled the day of graduation, “many people attended the ceremony. Some were our parents. Some were local officials.” Indeed, as the first Dungan graduates from the program, they received much attention from the Gansu provincial
government as well as regional and national media coverage. After the jovial graduation ceremony and media spotlight, the Dungan graduates set off in different paths.

Bakyt originally wanted to continue studying in a graduate program in China. But he had to change his plan because of a specific policy issued in 2017. According to that policy, international students who stay in China over four consecutive years on a Chinese government fellowship is not eligible to apply for another fellowship program until a year later. “I don’t want to add extra burden to my family, so I decide to wait.” Bakyt went back home and looked for jobs. He lived with his brother’s family and worked as a translator for a Chinese railway construction company in the border region of Kyrgyzstan. Several other graduates also returned home and waited for next year’s opening for application.

Among those who tried to continue their study of Chinese language, Arman impressed his Chinese teachers as diligent and persistent. I got into contact with Arman through the introduction of his teacher Ms. Li. “Arman is a very good student,” Ms. Li commented, “you can tell he really likes learning language. We still keep in touch through WeChat [a popular social media platform in China]. He would sometimes ask me about how to teach Chinese as a foreign language.”

During our first chat online, Arman told me about his reason to study Chinese in Lanzhou in 2013. “I went to Lanzhou because it is easier to study the language in a local setting. And there are many Muslims in Lanzhou…But I was a bit upset on those days

39 Media outlets that reported about the Dungan program in WU included Xinhua News, People’s Daily, ChinaNews, China Daily, Dagong News based in Hong Kong, Dungan Newspaper in Central Asia, Gansu TV and Radio Broadcast Station, and Gansu Daily.
during graduation when I realized how much is still to be improved.” After graduation, Arman did not get a fellowship due to the same policy that prevented Bakyt and several other students to pursue a master’s degree. He returned to his hometown Osh, the second largest city of Kyrgyzstan. There he attended some training programs for teachers who gave lessons on language learning while trying to apply for a master program in 2018. After some unsuccessful applications, he finally got accepted into a Chinese language education master’s program in southeast China. The new program, however, is not specifically designed for Dungan or foreign students. It is designed for those who aspire to become professional teachers in teaching Chinese language. “Most of my classmates now are Chinese,” Arman told me over Skype, “I have to work really hard to keep apace with them (gen shang ta men).”

But this is not the first time that Arman encountered difficulty in learning Chinese. “In fact, my biggest obstacle at the beginning was to study Chinese together with other Dungan students.” Arman mentioned in one of our conversations, “those who speak a mother tongue (mu yu) eighty percent similar to Mandarin (pu tong hua). They spoke so fluently from early on that other students and I just became so shy to speak at all.” As Arman was recalling his experience, I noticed that he switched between “we” and “they” when talking about different language capabilities among the Dungan students. For those who come mostly from the Dungan villages, they tended to speak Chinese more fluently thanks to the similar linguistic features between the Dungan language and regional dialects.

Such differentiated language experiences have been found in other return migrants as well. In her study of the Korean legacy migrants’ linguistic experiences, Ji-
Yeon Jo observed the highly uneven linguascape of using and learning heritage language among the diasporic migrants. Jo pointed out that the “local linguascape” could impact the ways in which heritage language is inherited, passed down, and maintained. “Diasporans who live within or close to coethnic communities tend to have higher heritage language maintenance than do those live in ethnically isolated areas (Jo 2017:127).”

When comparing the cases of Bakyt and Arman, we can see how the “local linguascape” affects their linguistic experiences respectively. Around the same age of Bakyt, Arman had a different language experience than Bakyt. Unlike Bakyt who grew up in a Dungan village, Arman spent most of his time in an urban environment. Arman’s parents, self-identified as Dungans, do not speak the Dungan language which partially resemble the regional dialects in Northwest China. Rather, he grew up speaking Russian and Kyrgyz while knowing some basic Arabic for Qu’ranic recitation and prayer. In general, for students like Arman, the lack of exposure to the Dungan “mother tongue” in the urban environment makes them feel under pressure of speaking and listening abilities. When it comes to the learning of written ideograms, Arman noted, “it is almost equally difficult for everyone.”

Arman’s experience of learning Chinese attests to the facility and difficulty faced by many Dungan students in the program. Yara, a Dungan student I met in the program, shared her story of studying Chinese in Lanzhou. She was born in Astana. Her father came from a Dungan village. Her mother grew up in the city. Like other girls, she likes Coca Cola, fast food, cosmetics, Western songs, and urban fashions. For Yara and other young women, the difference between city and countryside in their home countries is
substantial. They commented, “The city is modern while the countryside is old, outdated.” But they also realized the traditional aspect in the village life. Language, for example. Yara used to date a Dungan boy from a Dungan village for about two years. She got to learn much Dungan language while studying Mandarin Chinese in the program. The learning of two Sinitic regionalects mutually reinforced each other, as Yara thought, and helped her communicate with the locals in Lanzhou more smoothly since the “dialects sound not that different.” When it came to the written language, the differences disappeared. It would take every student a long time to write and read properly. Oftentimes, they used Russian as aides for remembering the meanings of the Chinese characters, words or phrases.

This internal linguistic diversity among the Dungan students subtly challenges the assumption that all Dungan students could easily learn Mandarin Chinese because of their diasporic history and language. According to the teachers in the program, the international program in WU has over half of its students from Central Asia, including the Dungans and other students of different ethnic backgrounds. Among them, the Dungan students generally adapted quickly in learning Chinese. Although Russian is the common language among most students from Central Asia, it is usually the Dungan students who manage to speak Chinese more fluently. Linguistically, the spoken Dungan language shares similar pronunciation and grammar with the dialects in Northwest China. Linguist Svetlana R.-K. Dyer identified the Dungan spoken language as variants from Gansu and Shaanxi dialects. But recent studies from Xinjiang also suggested that the Ili dialect—a mixture of Turkic, Russian and Shaanxi-Gansu dialects—be a more accurate source of the Dungan spoken language (Hai 2014).
Thus, compared to other foreign students, most Dungan students are more receptive to both the Sinophone and Turkophone languages. But such receptivity does not guarantee the same linguistic acquisition process for everyone. In the comparative cases of Bakyt, Arman and Yara, the differences in urban and rural environments play an important role in determining their familiarity with the Dungan spoken language. In turn, this linguistic conditioning may later affect their experiences of learning Mandarin in China.

Although language acquisition is the major goal among the Dungan students, they had different post-graduation choices besides studying or teaching Chinese. In Table 2 below, twenty-five graduates went back to their home countries. Seventeen pursued further studies in China. One tried to apply for a master program in Europe. Eighteen started their own business right after graduation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Career Choice (including intended jobs/programs)</th>
<th>Further study in China</th>
<th>Further study outside China (Europe)</th>
<th>Work in China</th>
<th>Teach Chinese language in Central Asia</th>
<th>Working, Doing business &amp; cultural exchange in Central Asia</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Numbers</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2—Career Choice (including intended jobs/programs) among the first group of Dungan graduates. Year of acceptance: 2013; Year of Graduation: 2017; Originally Accepted: 60; Graduated with Degree: 45. Courtesy of Director Zhang, September 2017.

For those who keep pursue studying Chinese, most rely on government fellowships. But not all students have to rely on a specific kind of Chinese government fellowship. Some students actually managed to enter another program with a fellowship
provided by the Silk Road Education funding for students from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states. In 2013, President Xi made a major commitment to the member states of the SCO, stating that China would provide 30,000 government scholarships over the next ten years (Xinhua 2013). This commitment has come into effect since then. More study is needed to assess the actual quality of those fellowship programs in China. But during my fieldwork interviews, I often heard about comments on the poor design of the program curriculum and a lack of care for academic performance of their graduate students. One teacher mentioned in passing, “they just want to meet the official requirements and let anyone graduate with a degree, any degree.”

Arman and Bakyt also reminded me that, while some did want to become Chinese language teachers someday, they also had to take up other jobs for making a decent living or going through the transition. Multilingual ability enables the young Dungans to seek more opportunities in corporations invested in Central Asia by the Chinese state or private funds. Some graduates, including Bakyt and Arman, found either longterm or temporary jobs in the Chinese companies, mostly in the overseas branches in Central Asia or Russia. Petroleum and construction companies are eager to hire the Dungan students after they graduate from the language programs in China. Mahdi, for instance, has been working in a chemistry lab in a Chinese petroleum company in Bishkek after graduation. “Although chemistry was not my major,” he told his teacher back in Lanzhou, “my familiarity with Chinese language helps me communicate easily and learn faster in the new company.”
Besides studying, teaching or working in companies, some young Dungans I talked with wanted to do small businesses on their own. In class, students often professed a strong interest in comparing the quality and prices of different products like chocolate and cellphones. “Sometimes they would make a joke and ask us,” Ms. Li, a teacher in the program commented, “whether Ma Yun [the owner of Taobao and Alibaba] is a Hui Muslim since his family name is Ma. They want to be a successful businessman like him.” Although Ma Yun is not a Hui Muslim, his story of commercial success is not only read in news and bestsellers but also taught in the course of “Chinese Language in Trade and Commerce.” With their newly gained language skills, cultural knowledge, and personal networks, the Dungan students often talked about possible business opportunities between China, Central Asia, Russia and Turkey. Clothes, toys, halal food, cellphones and other small commodities of daily use are popular choices for small-scale businesses.

Petty trade has long been a major means of living not only for the Dungans but also among the transnational communities such as the Uyghurs and Kazakhs (J. A. Millward 2007; Marlene Laruelle and Peyrouse 2017). Some Han Chinese merchants have also been involved in the crossing-border shuttle trade (Yeoh 2015). For example, during my visit to Kazakhstan in 2017, I met with Zakir, a Dungan man who travelled extensively between China, Central Asia, Russia, and Turkey. Born in a Dungan village in the 1980s, he is now living with his family in Almaty. He owns several electronics stores in Almaty as well as Moscow. “I started from Urumqi and later moved to other cities in China. We buy all sorts of stuff from China and sell them here, you know, like
Since we speak Chinese, they [the Chinese] tend to trust us more [than the Indians or the Pakistanans].”

But it is not only the linguistic familiarity with the Sinophone languages that puts the Dungan merchants in a relatively advantageous position. Since the 2000s, Uyghurs’ relative advantage as a cross-border minority has significantly diminished due to political suspicion from both Chinese and Central Asian states. In the 1990s, Uyghurs and Dungans gradually took over many businesses in the local *barakholka* (flea market) in cities like Almaty. The connection was mainly maintained through familial relations with Xinjiang. From the mid 1990s, such small-scale shuttle trade based on ethnic kin ties gave way to large-scale, top or intermediate level state-orchestrated development projects. People who benefited from such shifts were mostly government-related entrepreneurs, the Dungans, the Han Chinese and other ethnic nationalities such as Kazakhs.

In comparison to the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs, the Dungans have been regarded as a “‘politically correct’ minority” who are “not suspected of Islamist activities and do not elicit the reprobation of either the Chinese or the Central Asian governments (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2009:110).” Furthermore, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office (OCAO) has taken more proactive steps to engage with the overseas Chinese ethnic minorities since the early 2000s (Luova 2006). This creates a discursive and institutional space for the Sinophone Muslim minorities such as the Dungans to apply for visas and travel between China and Central Asia. Nevertheless, some Dungan students have also begun to feel some uncertainty as they found it harder to apply for a Chinese visa with longer waiting time and more requirements.
In the previous chapters, we have seen how the post-imperial memoryscape constitutes a key to the transnational connection among different Sinophone Muslim communities. This last chapter, however, shows how historical remembrance fades into the background. What surfaces is a new form of transnational network encouraged by the state, driven by the capital flows, institutionalized by the academic institutions, and co-participated by various local organizations and individuals. As Elena Barabantseva argued, the category of “overseas Chinese ethnic minorities” is an extension of the Chinese identity over the national territory of PRC (Barabantseva 2012:79-81). Tovar also pointed out that the main goal for the Chinese government to identify the Dungans as a Chinese diaspora was to expand its influence abroad through ethnic engineering (Jiménez-Tovar 2016). By exploring the formation and development of the language programs in a Chinese university in Northwest China, I agree with Barabantseva and Tovar’s observations but also try to complicate the picture by introducing more actors into the picture. As for the Dungan youths whose age range from sixteen to twenty-four, they rarely mention the distant past so much as the present and the future.
After a hundred years
Nobody knows the place,-
Agony, that enacted there,
Motionless as peace.
Weeds triumphant ranged,
Strangers strolled and spelled
At the lone orthography
Of the elder dead.
Winds of summer fields
Recollect the way,-
Instinct picking up the key
Dropped by memory.
——Emily Dickinson
“The Forgotten Grave”

The Chuy (Dungan: Чүй; Kyrgyz: Чыый; Kazakh: Şuw) river flows through the flat valley region between the southern Kazakhstan and northern Kyrgyzstan. The Chuy Region (Чыый) in Kyrgyzstan and the city of Shu (Şuw) in the Jambyl Region in
Kazakhstan get both their names and water for livelihood from the river. A wide network of canals divert water from the river for the irrigation of the fertile land nearby. To the north of Chuy river in Kazakhstan, Masanchi (Масанчи) and Sortobe (Щёртюбө) are known for being the Shaanxicun or Shaanxi Dungan villages. To the southwest of the Chuy valley, Alexandrovka (Александровка) is one of the largest Dungan villages in Kyrgyzstan established by the Gansu Muslims in 1881. If we travel further west in Kazakhstan, there is Dunganovka (Жалпак-Төө), a village established by the Qinghai Muslims over a hundred years ago.

In the summer of 2017, I went to visit Masanchi and Sortobe after attending a conference organized by the Zhenghe International Peace Foundation in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The theme of 2017 focused on the Dungans. It reminded the attendees of the 140\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the border-crossing. Between the 1870s and 1880s, the Muslims fleeing from the Qing army took refuge under then the Russian empire and settled down along the Chuy river. Some later migrated to other regions and further to Uzbekistan. While about 20-25\% Dungans living in cities such as Almaty, Bishkek and Tashkent, most Dungans still live in clusters of rural villages (Wang 1999:36). The conference attendees included Kazakh officials, Dungan organization leaders, scholars, journalists, Hui imams and entrepreneurs. People came from the Central Asian states, China, UAE, Saudi Arabia, the United States, England, Malaysia and Indonesia. After the conference, a group of over forty people—including a group of Hui dancers from Yunnan—traveled to the Dungan villages near the Kazakh-Kyrgyz border.
On the day of our arrival in the Masanchi village near the border, it was a hot summer afternoon. The shuttle buses were stopped at the check point about twenty miles away from the border. Four Kazakh soldiers in camouflage jackets, armed with guns, got on the bus to check our papers, a pass issued by the Kazakhstan embassy specially for the Chinese citizens who came to visit the Dungan villages in Kazakhstan. “There used to be no such papers,” Mr. Ma, a Hui Muslim from Xi’an, told me after the soldiers got off the bus, “when we [some Shaanxi Hui Muslims] came here to visit the Dungans in 2013, there was no border check.” Another man, overhearing our conversation, confirmed, “Yes, but they have it now. Actually, they just started it last year.”

As the bus came close to our destination, we saw large stretches of land dotted with green patches from which villages emerged. Large courtyard houses made from mud, brick or steel and concrete, varied from one site to another. Masanchi, originally named as In’pan or Karaknuz, is one of the first Dungan settlements in the 1870s. Together with Sortobe, two villages are largely populated by the descendants of Shaanxi Hui Muslims. Today, this area still has a high concentration of the Dungans in Central Asia (Jiménez-Tovar 2016).

A welcoming feast was followed by a reception consisting of talks, performances, and a local museum tour in the village town hall of Masanchi. Without much difficulty, we communicated with the local Dungan young men who accompanied us as translators and guides. Most of them spoke Mandarin, some more fluently than others. As we chatted, several people told me that a considerable number of young men in these villages used to or were currently studying in the cities like Xi’an and Lanzhou, the latter being
the provincial capital of Gansu in further northwest to Xi’an. A number of them also studied or did small businesses in cities like Urumqi, Guangzhou, Beijing, Yiwu, and Shanghai.

After the re-opening of borders between Central Asia and China in the late 1980s, the Dungans, like Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz and Han Chinese, participated in the shuttle trades mainly along the borders between Xinjiang and Central Asian states in the 1990s. It was also from early 1990s that many young Dungans from the villages manifested a growing desire to learn mandarin Chinese for doing business with China. As early as 1990s, some Dungan students began to study Chinese in Xi’an either through a limited number of fellowships sponsored by the Shaanxi government or funded by their parents. Since 2013, Lanzhou has also been actively promoting its strategic position along the Silk Road through university-based language programs (more see Chapter SIX).

As the day drew to the end, we scattered around in small groups and lodged in the different family compounds. Together with several other attendees, I stayed with one of the event organizers, himself a converted Chinese Muslim and now working in the Middle East, in a simple local house close to the town hall and town mosque.

Early next morning when the sky was still dark blue, the men got up to pray in the village mosque. Later, after the breakfast, they decided to visit the local cemetery in a small group. Since that I was with the group and that the organizers knew my research project, they invited me in for the brief visit. One of the village heads, spotting me in the group, handed me a scarf. “Normally, the Dungans are quite conservative about having a
woman enter their cemetery, you know.” The organizer explained to me, “but if you put
the scarf on, that should be fine.” So I did.

By the time we entered the cemetery behind a big mosque located between
Masanchi and Sortobe, the sun was already high. Wild grasses were dry and golden,
standing still, as if setting an unchanging stage for this small group of visitors (see Photo
1.7). I was being at a distance from behind a group of seven men in the same white hats
sitting in the middle of golden field facing the mountains in the east. Five of those men
were Hui Muslims from China while the other two were Dungans from the nearby
villages. They were performing Du’a, quietly praying in the name of Allah. The past of
agonizing border-crossing between China and Central Asia in the late 19th century, whose nature is still being heatedly debated in the shadows of national discourses in China, is just like the deceased buried in the fertile soil before them.

After about ten minutes, they stood up and came out from the field, staying silent until the rest of us walked together toward the monument in front of the mosque. The monuments, placed on grey pedestals, were built of three pieces of red marble, each with a black stone slab of inscriptions. But if you walked up closer, you’d discover another layer of inscription behind the black stone slabs. It turned out that the monuments were originally erected in the early 1990s. After the independence of the Central Asian states, there was a time of religious revival among the Dungans. When the Australia-based linguist Svetlana R. K. Dyer visited the Dungan villages for the third time in 1991, she saw that many mosques were being built, including the one next to the monument (Dyer 1991). Although the original monument’s text from the 1990s was covered by a new layer, the head of the stone stele bearing a crescent and a Qu’ranic verse still told off some of its previous connotation. The black inscribed slabs were later installed in the 2010s. From left to right, it wrote,

To the great Kazakh people and all those who helped the Dungan people during the hard times—sincere gratitude;

Together we will always remember the great deed of our grandfathers who gave us the most precious—a right for life;
And here is Bai Yanhu, who wasn't famous for his wealth or the name of his family. Now he is becoming a hero of the people.\(^{40}\)

Mr. An, a Hui Muslim from Xi’an who you would meet in Chapter THREE, stood next to me and lowered his voice, “Until today, no one knows the exact location of the Dungan leader Bai Yanhu. His family buried him secretly. They did so to protect his tomb.”

Indeed, the exact location of his tomb remains a mystery today. Only is his name engraved on the monument outside the cemetery as a reminder of his stories. Meanwhile, the name and images of Bai Yanhu are placed visibly in the town hall of Masanchi as the founding father of the Shaanxi Dungan villages in Central Asia. In a detailed ethnographic investigation of the Dungans in the late nineteenth century, the Russian sinologist Φ.B.Poyarkov detailed the Dungans’ veneration for their leader and the reason for his mysterious burial:

Bai Yanhu will forever live in the heart of the Dungans. They have many tales and legends of his heroic stories. In long winter nights, the elders would tell their descendants about Bai’s feats and battles against the Qing army. Women even sang nursery songs in praise of their leader when cuddling their babies to sleep. We should note that the place of his burial, as mysterious as any great legendary figure in ancient times, is entirely unknown to most Dungans. Only a very selective few, those who were closest to him and who enjoyed special status and respect in the community, knew his burial location. According to the Dungans, they did so to prevent the Han Chinese to dig up his grave and rob the bones of their most beloved leader…(Poyarkov 1901:30-31)\(^{41}\)

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\(^{40}\) Chinese translation by Sussan Khabi, a Dungan youth now pursuing his master degree in Xi’an, Shaanxi. English translation by Svetlana Borodina, my colleague at Rice University in Houston, Texas.

\(^{41}\) Poyarkov’s ethnography was translated into Chinese by Lin Tao and Ding Yicheng and published in 2009. The excerpt was translated from Chinese into English by the author of this dissertation.
Even after Bai Yanhu died in Bishkek, he was still in the most wanted list of the Qing government who was pressuring the Russian government to extradite his body back to China. Bai’s family and other community members, afraid of their hero’s body being disinterred, sent back and faced with the same fate as some other rebel leaders, secretly buried him and never left any tombstone or even a single trace on the ground.

1.1. Unidentifiable Grave and Ambiguous Migrants

In the ocean of memory, graves are powerful anchors for the remembrance of ancestral lineages and past histories. In *The Graves of Tarim* (2006), Engseng Ho has given a lucid exposition of the centrality of the grave in relation to mobility amongst the long-standing Hadramawt diaspora across the Indian Ocean. While acknowledging the debates between Sunni and Shia traditions concerning the legitimacy of consecrating a saint’s grave, Ho’s intervention offers an anthropological perspective into understanding the grave as a crucial space for the lives of migrants and their descendants. The grave of Adeni, a descendant from the family of the Prophet, together with other smaller genealogies centered around the saintly graves, constituted a rich landscape from which discourses and practices of the diasporic lives organize social dynamics, draw inspiration and create meanings in a fluctuating world. By characterizing the “silent presence” marked out by the text on the gravestone as an “absence” (Ho 2006:3), Ho defined the

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42 Ma Hualong, the leader of Jahhriya and one important leader during the 1862-1877 Muslim Rebellions, was executed by the Qing Government. His head was cut off and shown in a tour around the Muslim-inhabited regions as a sign of warning.
diaspora as “a society in which the absent are a constant incitement to discourse about things moving (Ho 2006:19).” This point is helpful for us to understand the impulse behind the visit in the Dungan cemetery where the graves with tombstones indicated the bodies of migrants buried underneath. There, the visitors from afar joined with the local descendants and temporally created a silent yet corporeal presence of once lost kinship in the presence of the absent.

Yet, what if there were no identifiable grave? In Ho’s definition, a grave is an anchoring point of departure. It is “a productive starting point because it is a particularly dense semiotic object, a compound of place, text, person, and name (Ho 2006:24).” With presumably a body tied to a name engraved on a tombstone in the form of a text, a grave is a composite space which has generative power for the world of the living. Descendants born in other places continue to perform pilgrimage in a given site of burial. Linear genealogies have been created around the figures in the graves to legitimize who belongs or who has the right for inheritance of ancestral possessions such as land. But how about the absence of a grave? There is no identifiable location with a name carved into a solid matter—either a marble, a granite, or just a simple piece of stone. What if the exact location of his tomb remains a secret?

Unlike the Hadramis who follow a Sufi order known as Alawi way, the Dungans’ religious affiliations with different sects of Islam also affect their funeral practices. Since the Dungans in Central Asia originally came from different parts in Northwest China, they had different sectarian affiliations such as Qadim (Gedimu) and Jahriyya
In the first half of the eighteenth century, Naqshbandi, a major Sunni spiritual order of Sufism, spread through Central Asia into northwest China and quickly became localized religious sect. As a result, the enshrinement of the Sufi saints and pilgrimage to their mausoleums have ever since remained a Sufi practice among its followers throughout China and Central Asia (T. Ma 1981). But most Shaanxi Dungans followed the Qadim tradition in the 1860s and 1870s. Qadim, also known as laojiao or Old Doctrine, is a Hanafi school of the Sunni tradition. It focuses on the strict observance of the five basic duties of Islam but also adapts to local cultural and customary practices. These religious differences may partially explain the relative ease of the Islamic burial of Bai Yanhu’s body without an identifiable grave.

Still, the stories and myths around Bai Yanhu are powerful enough to spark controversy in the post-imperial memoryscape in China. Since this dissertation largely focuses on the experiences of the Dungans’ return in China and the often-overlooked roles played by the Hui Muslims in the making of the Sinophone Muslim diaspora, I start with the absence of an identifiable Dungan grave in the Central Asian border region and move on to highlight its powerful presence in the re-imagination of the Silk Road through its generative absence.

\[43\] In the 1860s and 1870s, Ikhwan (Yihewani) and Salafi (Salafeiye) had not reached the Muslims in the Qing Empire yet. Ikhwan was introduced by a Gansu Dongxiang imam Ma Wanfu after his pilgrimage to Mecca in 1886. Salafi movement became known in China not until the 1930s.
We will delve more into the details of such controversies in Chapter FIVE. Here, let me give a quick example. In the historical fiction *Looking East Toward Chang’an* (2008), the author Zheng Zheng portrayed Bai Yanhu as one of the leading heroes during the Muslim Rebellions between 1862 to 1877. Toward the end of the novel, the author reconstructed the last scene at Bai’s deathbed:

... 

The people in In’pan asked for his [Bai Yanhu’s] permission (idhn, or *kouhuan* in Chinese) and for his last wish for their descendants. He [Bai Yanhu] said intermittently, “I, I can’t go back! One day, you, or your descendants, when going back to Xi Sheng (Shaanxi), wrap some soil from Xi’an and knock aloud the big iron ring at the West Gate for me. That’s my idhn. Otherwise, never expect that I will be satisfied.”

... 

The forty-one-years’ life of tumult ended for Bai Yanhu. When an imam solemnly stood again in front of his kang⁴⁴ and started the prayer of repentance (salaat al-tawbah, or taobai in Chinese), two drops of tear came out from Bai Yanhu’s already dried eyes. The tears slowly flowed down his gaunt cheek. 

The last drop of the lamp oil was burned out. The light twists were full of flames, shimmering, flickering, becoming smaller and smaller, flashing, darkening down. Suddenly, the flames exploded into bits and pieces, flying all over, slowly and gently, coming down...

The light, finally, died out (Zheng 2008:427-8). 

The dying scene of Bai Yan was re-enacted through words. The origin of the last wish to knock at the west gate was re-emphasized through Bai Yanhu’s “own” voice albeit it in a fictionalized form. This re-adaptation of historical memory in a novel does not prevent it being perceived as part of “long sealed and forgotten” history among the Hui Muslims.

⁴⁴ *Kang* is a traditional bed warmed up by the coal on the bottom. It is commonly seen in northern China and also replicated by the Dungans in Central Asia.
For the same reason, the story of Bai Yanhu has also been regarded as history among many Han Chinese readers and criticized as such. Bai Yanhu, as the Father of Dungans and a Shaanxi-born Hui Muslim, has continued to be seen a hero, a killer, a jihadist, or a traitor depending on the different interpretive frameworks.

This multi-layered attitudes toward the Sinophone Muslim diaspora in contemporary China remind us of the “ambiguous” returnees conceptualized in Return: Nationalizing Transnational Mobility in Asia (Xiang, Yeoh, and Toyota 2013). Acknowledging the “essentially ambiguous” nature of return, Xiang and others analytically identified three types of returnees—the desirable, the victims, and the ambiguous in the post-colonial Asia (2013:11-14). For those highly skilled or rich in financial resources, the states would further facilitate their mobility by constructing necessary infrastructure such as the Special Economic Zones (SEZ). For those already marginalized in both the receiving and sending countries, they may sink even lower and become the victims in the states where they travel. Between the “desirable” and the “victims,” there is the “ambiguous” who are often low-wage laborers or unskilled migrant workers such as the Philippines in Hong Kong, Singapore, and the Middle East. They are necessary for the economic development in both states but are undesirable due to the social stigma and political stereotypes. Although the contemporary Asian states would take different approaches to those categories of returnees, they tend to form the “coalescence.” It means that the power of states is enhanced rather than weakened through the administering of the different types of returnees who travel in the interstices.
Indeed, the ambiguous nature of the migrants could be traced further back to the colonial era. When Engseng Ho conceptualizes the concept of the inter-Asian mobility, he noted a key difference between two modes of traveling—the armed colonialist expansion and the diasporic movement without self-armed protection. He wrote,

When we disaggregate trade from its protection, and follow their mobilities separately, we are able to identify an important contract: the European trading companies brought along their own protection, by putting guns on ships, whereas the established pattern of Inter-Asian trade was to have merchants buy protection from local potentates, paying customs taxes where their goods came to shore. Whether protection traveled with trade or not had profound consequences for shaping Inter-Asian space and history (Steensgaard 1973)….Not bringing their own protection meant that mobile societies across the Inter-Asian oceans became parts of other societies, articulating with them in orange of ways such as in these examples. (Ho 2017:919)

As we can garner from the examples of various diasporic communities such as the Jews, Chinese, Armenian, Hadrami, and others, traveling without protection often poses a question of precarity among the mobile individuals, families and other small groups (e.g. Anderson 1983; Safran 1991; Wang 2009).

If mobility without protection rendered the diasporic communities vulnerable in the Inter-Asian spaces during the colonial era, the emergence of the new national states in Asia in the first half of the twentieth century did not significantly improve the situations. Rather, it has led to a series of sovereignty issues over territory and national citizenship, which results in the national border control and contentious minority politics. In the case of the Sinophone Muslims who travel between China and Central Asia, their ambiguous status and the inter-Asian geopolitical context can hardly be ignored.
Economically, the scale and intensity between China and its neighboring Central Asian states have grown exponentially since the first decade of the twenty-first century. Infrastructure, resources and energy projects are the major areas of investment (Karrar 2012; Pantucci and Petersen 2013). In terms of political collaboration, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), established in 2001 with five members of Russia, Kazakhstan, China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, incorporated two more full members of India and Pakistan in 2017. Though criticized by the Western observers as largely a nominal organization in resolving regional problems, the SCO in fact becomes a convenient platform for strategic exchanges and an effective tool of border control, both of which mostly exist at the official levels. After Xi Jinping announced his proposal of building the Silk Road Economic Belt in 2013, for instance, the Silk Road initiative was quickly incorporated into the working agenda of the SCO.

Among other agendas, a particular thorny issue for the inter-Asian connection has been the border control and anti-terrorist campaigns. Since the 9/11 but especially in recent years, the member states of the SCO have all increasingly tightened their own the border security through strategic partnership. In China, Beijing has strictly monitored the border crossings in fear of potential associations with suspicious terrorist acts, particularly after the 2009 Urumqi Incident (Leibold 2016). Due to Beijing’s heavy-handed domestic anti-terrorist campaigns in Xinjiang, the militant attacks initiated by the East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) started to take on a more transnational dimension (Clarke 2017). Instead of attacking Chinese cities such as the Kunming Train Station killing in 2014, the ETIM aimed to attack overseas sites with lower security
levels. One of the most recent attacks took place in late August of 2016 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. A suicide bomber rammed a van filled with 220 pounds of TNT into the Chinese embassy. The bomber died on the site. Three employees of Kazakh nationality were injured (Philips 2016). Since 2016, it has become more difficult for the Kyrgyz nationals—including the Dungan students and businessmen whom I talked with—to obtain visa from the Chinese embassy and consulates.45

In Central Asia, different states have also carried out their own anti-terrorist campaigns in recent years. According to the Pew research center, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan were added to the 2014 list of the “countries with the most extensive government restrictions on religion,” which already included China, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in 2013 (NW, Washington, and Inquiries 2016). In Kazakhstan, for instance, the state has been trying to quash the practice of Salafism within its national borders. In September 2016, the Kazakh government in Astana called a halt to sending religious students abroad and summoned back 300 Kazakh citizens who were studying at religious institutions abroad (Stratfor 2016). This official policy to curb its transnational religious network was confirmed by an imam in a mosque in Masanchi, who used to study seven years in Pakistan in the 2000s. Although his certificate was still officially acknowledged by the state, other who wanted to study in Pakistan were banned. As a side effect, some

45 Such trends are also noted by international scholars such as Raffaello Pantucci, director of the international security studies at the Royal United Services Institute, see https://apnews.com/cd7fdd84e95143a88f87d566ac5185b5/rising-uighur-militancy-changes-security-landscape-china.
mosques in Dungan villages with imams previously trained in Pakistan become new regional centers of religious studies.\footnote{Special thanks to as Jacqueline Armijo who shared with me her observation during our visit in Sortobe in 2017. Jacqueline Armijo studies Islam in China. Her research topics include the Yunnan Hui Muslims, Chinese Muslim women, China-Gulf relations, and the Hui diasporic community in Dubai.}

As both the Chinese and Central Asian states tightened their own border controls, how do the Dungans position themselves as to be recognized as a Sinophone Muslim diaspora in China? How to remember/forget the traumatic histories in late Qing empire that shaped the diasporic connections among the Dungans and Hui Muslims today? How do they construct a sense of “homeland” in the post-imperial memoryscape in China? What are the tactics and strategies that they adopt in different situations? … These are the questions that we have explored in this dissertation, with a focus on the discourses and practices of the Sinophone Muslims in China.

We also followed the co-evolving trajectories of the Hui-Dungan interaction in the following chapters. It is not a religious pilgrimage mostly marked by the Saints’ burial sites and urban markets, like the histories of the Uyghur nation (Thum 2014) and the Hadramawt society (E. Ho 2006). Nor does it involve only the Dungans as a mobile diaspora between China and Central Asia. Rather, I want to draw your attention to multiple actors such as the Hui Muslims, the Dungans, Han Chinese, state institutions, transnational companies, and their interactions/disjunctures at different contexts. It is very likely that some discourses, practices or institutions would change in the following years depending on the inter-state relations, economic situations, and particularly the
political campaigns of the Chinese government in Xinjiang. Nevertheless, a part of that future is also intimately linked to the politics and poetics of the Sinophone Muslim diaspora in times of promise and uncertainty.

1.2. Questions for Future Research

Epilogue is a tentative conclusion that opens itself up to more questions. If Xi’an is one of the starting points of the Silk Road and Gansu Province as an important area for the Muslims, how about the rest of the region in Northwest China which has an incredible diversity of Muslim population? For example, Jahriyya, identified as Hui Muslims, is a Sufi order established in the 18th century in Northwest China. Many Jahriyya Muslims live in today’s Ningxia and Gansu provinces, the rest dispersed all over China. Its followers are an active force in transnational trade and pilgrimage between China, Central Asia and the Middle East. They also used to and still comprise a significant portion of the Dungan ancestry. The struggles of Jahriyya followers and their relationship with the Chinese authorities has never been easy since its inception.47 Would religious factions make a difference when it comes to the patterns and motivations of transnational networks? How would Jahriyya Muslims remember, commemorate, and understand their

47 For more historical accounts for the Jahriyya history, see Ma Tong’s A Brief History of Chinese Islamic Sects and the Sufi Orders (1981); also see Lipman’s Familiar Strangers (1998) and Matthew Erie’s China and Islam: the prophet, the party, and law (2016). Ha Guangtian’s most recent work on Jahriyya is forthcoming.
past today? What kind of role would popular novels such as Zhang Chenzhi’s *The History of Soul* potentially play in mediating memory and trauma?

We cannot forget, of course, not just the Chinese-speaking Muslims with different religious affiliations but also the Turkophone Uyghurs in Xinjiang. Uyghurs today are becoming ruthlessly dispossessed in comparison to other ethnic minorities of the Islamic faith. Historically and contemporarily, they have always been playing an indispensable role in the trade routes and pilgrimage sites between China, Central Asia, today’s Turkey, Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the Middle East. Among the Dungan ancestry, the stories from the ordeals in Xinjiang have perhaps been least told. Chinese Muslim scholars such as Hai Feng have acutely pointed out that Xinjiang dialects can still be found among today’s Dungan population (Hai 2014). Soledad Jimenez-Tovar also notes that Dungans differentiate among themselves based on their places of origin, i.e. Shaanxi, Gansu (including today’s Ningxia and some parts in Qinghai) and Xinjiang (Jiménez-Tovar 2016). How would the region’s national governments’ so-called anti-terrorist campaigns and, in particular, the re-education camps in Xinjiang affect the ways in which the transnational Muslim minorities relate to the Chinese state? What long-term effects such political campaigns may exert upon their choices of life opportunities such as trade, education and pilgrimage?

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48 Zhang Chengzhi’s *The History of Soul* tells the Jahriyya history in a highly personalized style. Thanks to Zhang’s formal training as an archaeologist, he is adept in using historical archives and original sources in multiple languages.
Another question also begs for more critical attention. For those Muslims who move across national borders and oftentimes live on informal economies, how would they deal with the growing suspicion and/or antagonistic attitudes in different locales? As scholars of former Soviet states have observed, the root of Sinophobia in those regions has run deep due to the antagonism during imperial times and the anti-China propaganda campaigns during the Soviet times (Billé 2014). With the expansion of the Road and Belt project, Sinophobia in Central Asia fueled by nationalistic populism and Pan-Turkism has also seen a new turn in the first two decades of the twenty-first century (Peyrouse 2016). Meanwhile, Islamophobia in China has also been on the rise since 9/11, particularly after the 2009 Urumqi and 2012 Kunming incidents. Under such circumstances, the effects of “familiar strangers” may make life more complicated for those who speak several languages and have multiple connections. Would the shadows of the past ever go away? Or would those shadows be remembered and reinterpreted to meet the challenges of the present?

Moreover, the issue of gender and sexuality has emerged as a fascinating field for exploration. As suggested or shown in different chapters, Muslim men seem to enjoy as well as suffer from mobility. The issue of masculinity becomes an important aspect in men’s cultivation of selfhood, Muslim subjectivity, and transnational movements. This being said, Muslim women play an equally important role both in the past and present. How to, for instance, understand the relationship between narratives of home, survival and women’s historical role in times of turbulence? What unique contribution have the Muslim women made to preserve the local cultures and Islamic heritage over a century?
With more young Muslim women in Asia aspiring to change their life through mobility, education and faith, what kind of new challenges would they face both at home and in foreign lands? What kind of new inter-spaces, hybrid identities, and other tactical choices do women and men make to cross disparate registers?...Last but not least, given the refugee crises around the world, what can we learn from the stories of other communities of historical refugees? The questions cannot be exhausted in this dissertation. But I wish I can pursue them further in future projects.
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