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# Chinese Rituals for Muslim Ancestors

## *Southeast China's Lineages of Muslim Descent*

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### Abstract

This paper explores unique ritual traditions of descendants of Song-Yuan Muslim sojourners in Southeast China, and the mechanisms they apply to shape their own identity. Today, members of the lineages examined here are not practicing Muslims. Though they resemble their Han neighbors almost completely, many still preserve distinct traditions of ancestral worship, aimed at commemorating their forefathers' foreign origin. So far scholars have tended to address these communities in ethnic terms. Under current government policies, some Muslims' descendants were granted Chinese-Muslim minority (Hui) status. Therefore, the widely accepted approach interprets their unique traditions as evidencing an affinity with Islam. The present paper offers an alternative approach to the one focused on contemporary ethnic classification by studying the self-perceived identity of Muslims' descendants as part of the Chinese environment. Focusing on the worship system into which their "Islamic" traits were incorporated, it demonstrates that Muslim faith has marginal significance for establishing their identity, and that Chinese religion and culture actually play the central role.

### Keywords

descendants of Muslims – ancestor worship – identity – Hui – offerings – Fujian

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## 穆斯林祖先的中国式仪式：中国东南部的穆斯林后裔群体

### 摘要

该论文探索宋元时期中国东南部穆斯林寄居者后裔的独特传统仪式，以及他们用以塑造自己身份的机制。现今，该文中研究的家族成员已不再信奉伊斯兰教。虽然跟他们的汉族邻居几乎完全相似，不过许多成员仍然保存着一些独特的敬奉祖先的传统，目的是为了纪念他们祖先的异族血统。学者们迄今一般都倾向于用少数民族这个术语来称呼这些社群。根据目前的政府政策，一些穆斯林后代被归入中国-穆斯林少数民族(回族)身份，也表明了与伊斯兰教的近亲关系，这成为解释他们独特传统的被广泛接受的方式。该研究提供了一种不同的解释方式，研究他们作为中国环境下的一份子的自我身份认同。本文集中于具有“伊斯兰”特征的祖先崇拜，以此来表明穆斯林信仰对于建立他们的身份认同仅有边缘意义，而中国宗教与文化实际上发挥着中心作用。

### 关键词

穆斯林后代，祖先敬奉，身份，回族，祭品，福建

### Introduction

This paper is based on anthropological and historical research into lineages of descendants of Muslims in the coastal regions of Southeast China.<sup>1</sup> It examines the unique ritual traditions that developed among them since the early Ming, and analyzes the mechanisms they apply to shape their own identity.

The members of the lineages examined in this work are not practicing Muslims, but are rather descendants of Muslim sojourners who settled in the port city of Quanzhou in Fujian, during the Song (960–1279) and Yuan (1279–1368) dynasties. Since the fourteenth century, many of these merchants intermarried with local residents and gradually assimilated into the rest of the Han population. Today, although they resemble their Han neighbors in almost

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1 This work is part of a larger ethnohistorical project examining communities of Muslim descent in Zhejiang, Fujian, Guangdong, and Taiwan from the late Yuan period down to the present.

every aspect, many of them still commemorate their foreign origin and, in some cases, even claim a distinct identity.

With the political reforms of the late 1970s, profound changes took place in the official policy regarding the identification and labeling of ethnic minorities, and the preferential rights granted them. From the late 1970s, the Chinese government granted minorities economic and political privileges aimed at encouraging their integration into Chinese society and avoiding separatist aspirations. The main policy tenets were determined as early as the 1950s, but were vigorously implemented during Deng Xiaoping's reforms (Gladney 1995:242–245).<sup>2</sup> These changes included the granting of Hui 回 (the Muslim Chinese ethnic minority) status to several prominent lineages descended from Muslims in Southeast China during the 1980s and 1990s. Since the early 1950s, observance of Islam was the primary official criterion for Hui classification. However, the lineages examined in this work obtained Hui status without actually observing any Muslim rules or customs: recognition was solely based on family traditions and rituals attesting to their Muslim origin.<sup>3</sup> Since then there has been a growing tendency among members of communities of Muslim descent to reveal their Muslim heritage and nurture their unique family traditions and ritual practices (Gladney 1987; 1995:249–254, [1991] 1996:261–265; Fan 2001; 2003; 2004; 2006; Abt 2012; 2014b; Quanzhou Foreign Maritime Museum 1983; Chen Guoqiang 1990; Chen and Chen 1993). In examining their current efforts to emphasize their unique Muslim heritage, one cannot ignore the weight of the economic and political factors linked to belonging to a minority in China. The benefits that minorities receive obviously constitute an important incentive for accentuating the unique elements of their identity and emphasizing Muslim-related customs and ritual practices (Gladney 1987; 1995:254–266; [1991] 1996: 275–276, 284–285; Abt 2012:326–327; 2014b:748–755).

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2 As part of the Chinese government's affirmative action policies, some minority members are entitled to benefits such as government investments in infrastructure, subsidies, varied economic benefits for businesses, increased education budgets, higher priority for college admission, a larger representation in local government than their actual proportion in the population, and the right to have two children and sometimes more.

3 The Guo Family of Baiqi was recognized as Hui as early as 1957 since members of some sub-branches practiced Islam until the 1940s (Fan 2003:74, 77; 2004:10–11), even though the great majority did not maintain a Muslim lifestyle. Nevertheless, based on evidence they presented regarding their descent from Muslim immigrants, they were recognized as Hui by the PRC government. In the 1980s they were joined by other lineages of Muslim descent from Fujian, Zhejiang, and Hainan Island.

Among these practices is ancestor worship—a central element in the spiritual world of Southeast China's population. The prevailing belief is that the souls of the deceased possess characteristics similar to those of the living and share the same needs and desires. Therefore, every person is obliged to make offerings to his or her ancestors and to supply them with foodstuffs and other necessities, so that their souls will protect and ensure the wellbeing of the living person and that of their family.<sup>4</sup> Just like their Han neighbors, the descendants of Muslims strictly observe these rules of worship. Nevertheless, their ritual practices feature unique customs that reflect awareness of their ancestors' Muslim beliefs.

According to James Watson, funeral rituals and ancestor worship have throughout history been mechanisms for standardization and cultural assimilation into Chinese society. It was the uniform performance of that kind of ritual that expressed their belonging not only to their own descent group, but also to the wider Han cultural sphere (Watson 1988:13–14). Evelyn Rawski maintains that by the Qing period the symbolic significance of full and correct performance of rituals became increasingly important as a result of continuing contacts with foreign cultures. Anyone could become Chinese by adopting Chinese customs and conduct. She states that “adoption of Chinese surname exogamy, mourning observances, and correct performance of ritual had become crucial markers of membership in the Chinese cultural community.” Correct performance of rituals thus constituted a basic element in structuring Chinese identity in the late Imperial period and probably also centuries earlier (Rawski 1988:32–33). This paper examines the dual role of ancestral rites as both mechanisms of acculturation and markers of distinct identity.

I pursued my research by combining an analysis of a wide range of historical texts with ethnographic fieldwork, oral history, and documentation of ritual practices, aimed at analyzing the interrelations between a historical heritage and the contemporary religious and ethnic identity of Muslims' descendants. The fieldwork extended over six separate periods spent in the coastal regions of Fujian. During those trips I collected written material and visited ancestral halls, temples, cemeteries, private libraries, and local research institutions, conducting interviews and meetings with members of families of descendants of Muslims in villages, townships, and neighborhoods of Quanzhou. The foundations of this research were laid in an initial five-week visit to Quanzhou and several towns and villages in its vicinity in the summer of 2001. On that visit I was introduced to the major family branches of the Ding

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4 For detailed descriptions of ancestor worship, see Ahern 1973:89–244; Doolittle 1865:217–235; Freedman 1970:163–179; Hsu (1948) 1971:167–199; Wolf 1974:145–148; Yu 1987:378–380.

丁, Guo 郭, and Jin 金 lineages in Quanzhou, Chendai 陈埭 township south of Quanzhou, and Baiqi Hui Ethnic Township (Baiqi Huiizu Xiang 百崎回族乡). I returned for a longer period of four months during 2002 and conducted extensive fieldwork among the Ding in Chendai and the Guo in Baiqi. During that period, I focused on, among other aspects, small communities living in the more remote villages of Baiqi, and in Xiamen 厦门, Huian 惠安, and Jinjiang 晋江 counties, where I was introduced to other ritual practices that have not been discussed so far in other works. I conducted additional research trips to the region during fall 2005 and spring 2007, and made a final visit of two and a half months in 2009.

The purpose of my initial visit in 2001 was to learn firsthand about the ritual practices indicating affinity with Islam and to collect more materials regarding the foreign origin of the early ancestors, such as a pork taboo during ancestral rites, the use of ancient Quran manuscripts, the preservation of Arabic tombstones and inscriptions, genealogical evidence indicating Muslim origin, and oral traditions regarding the ancestors. Although I uncovered many unknown and fascinating cases of unique family traditions, early in my research it occurred to me that an analysis based solely on such a line of inquiry might elicit very limited results.

First, the above-mentioned practices exist in varying degrees of elaborateness. Some families have only scant remnants or memories of unique ritual traditions. My research did not reveal a significant Muslim or syncretic doctrinal or intellectual depth that could contribute further to achieving new meaningful insights. Second, I learned that the great majority of the communities of Muslim descent, Hui and non-Hui alike, do not take an active part in recovering and promoting the Muslim dimension of their heritage. While the special ritual customs do occupy an important place in their daily lives, their family heritage, and their identity, they perceive and interpret these customs in different ways that call for other models of examination and for asking different questions.<sup>5</sup>

In most instances, the evidence for affinity with Islam was published, written, or related to me personally by informants I term here as “professional promoters” or “spokespeople” of the Muslim heritage. They may be roughly divided

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5 It is important to note that there are groups of descendants of Muslims who are not recognized as Hui at all. Their approach towards their Muslim heritage is entirely different in nature from those who have recently acquired Hui identity. I have described at length such cases, namely Pu 蒲 family branches from Fujian and Guangdong, the Su 苏 family in Quanzhou, and the Guo and Ding sub-branches in Lukang, Taiwan (Abt 2012:41–42, 113–114, 264–269, 333–335; 2014a; 2014b).

into three categories. First, there are a very few individuals who, following recent political changes, have chosen to adopt Islam and pursue Islamic studies. The second group consists of cadres and party officials from among the family members who operate under current government policies concerning the Hui's special minority rights in order to represent the interests of their kinsmen. The third category is that of researchers, many of whom are local, including some who are themselves descendants of Muslims. Their efforts are entirely committed to recovering and reconstructing the Muslim historical background and the emerging Hui identity.<sup>6</sup>

The great majority of the descendants of Muslims I interviewed, albeit fully aware of the growing importance of the Hui identity discourse, do not share the same degree of enthusiasm as their official representatives or newly converted lineage members. They rarely express aspirations to recover their Muslim heritage and are far more actively involved in local ritual activities and in maintaining the social customs related to traditional lineage cohesion such as filial piety, ancestor veneration, genealogical recording, grave-sweeping, festival offerings, and temple worship.

Thus, my goal has been to explore the identity of Muslims' descendants within the local social and cultural setting. Rather than focusing only on those characteristics that bear an obvious affinity to Islam, I turned to examine the wider religious context of the ritual and worship activities of Muslim descendants, thus making this study equally significant for understanding the hegemonic Han Chinese identity and culture into which the Muslims assimilated.

### Ritual Practices of Muslims' Descendants in Fujian

In the ancestor worship of the Guo clan of Baiqi are preserved more traditions and customs attesting to their Muslim origin than in any other family of Muslims' descendants in Fujian. Baiqi is a cluster of villages (*xiang* 乡) within Huian 惠安 County to the east of Quanzhou that, apart from the central village called Baiqi, is composed of twelve more villages. Their earliest ancestor was Guo Deguang 郭德广 (born between 1308 and 1311), a Muslim trader, probably of Persian origin, who moved to Quanzhou from Hangzhou in the early

6 The following is a sample of locally published works dealing with the Muslim markers of these communities: Quanzhou Foreign Maritime Museum 1983; Chen and Chen 1993; Chen 1990; Huang 1983:177–199; Guo 1990:298–314; Zhuang 1993:93–107; Zhongguorenmin Zhengzhixieshanghuiyi 2002.

fourteenth century. In 1376, shortly after the Ming takeover, his grandson Guo Zhongyuan 郭仲远 (1348–1422) emigrated from Quanzhou and built his new home in Baiqi village, east of the city. At present, all Guos in the vicinity are his descendants (Baiqi Guoshi Huizu Zongpu 2000, 1:61–62; Chen 1984:102–107).

According to the Guo family's genealogy, in the early seventeenth century, "from the eighth and ninth generations [of the Guos in Baiqi], they totally abandoned the [Muslim] religion, probably during the middle of the Wanli reign period [1573–1620]" (Baiqi Guoshi Huizu Zongpu 2000:15).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, in their ancestor worship the Baiqi Guos still preserve some unique customs indicating their ancestors' Muslim identity. During rituals for all ancestors, all family members refrain from offering pork or products containing pork fat. Moreover, the immediate relatives of a deceased person abstain from eating pork during the first period of mourning after his death.<sup>8</sup>

The Guos also maintain a unique custom of Quran offerings. In two villages around Baiqi, I was shown several copies of old Quran manuscripts written in Arabic at least two centuries ago.<sup>9</sup> These books are important items in ancestor worship. Some of them are kept in a house in Dashan village, the site of the last mosque, which existed in Baiqi until the mid-1940s.<sup>10</sup> The villagers I spoke with did not know when the books were written, were unable to read them, and in fact lacked even basic knowledge of their contents. Baiqi inhabitants no longer use the Qurans within their original Islamic context, but rather due to the belief that they had special significance for their forefathers. The Guo in Dashan and neighboring villages use these Qurans in funerals and in rituals for the

7 The quotation is from an essay titled "Shi Hui Bian" 适回辩. See also Guo 1990:308–309. Several Guo households maintained their Muslim belief throughout the centuries. They mainly belonged to the fourth branch, residing in the remote villages of Xiandai 下埭, Liandai 连埭, Dashan 大山, and Ke Pu 克圃, which were relatively isolated from the central settlement of Baiqi Village. In their ancestral worship they preserved more unique characteristics featuring affinity to Islam than any other branch (Fan 2003:71–79; Abt 2014b).

8 Fieldwork, Baiqi. 2002. Similar reports arrived from Zhejiang, Taiwan, and Malaysia (Zhongguorenmin Zhengzhixieshanghuiyi 2002; Abt 2014b; Ma 2005:90–93). I discuss later the time-segments of mourning and their significance.

9 According to Chen Dasheng (1984:107), the most recent manuscripts were written in 1875 at the latest.

10 Until the 1940s, close to twenty family members, mainly from the fourth branch, still had some knowledge of the basic principles of Islam. A small mosque in Liandai remained intact until 1937. Afterwards it was removed to the smaller village of Dashan where a local *ahong* 阿訇 (a Muslim Chinese term originating from the Persian word for an imam or Muslim clergyman) served the tiny community until 1946. He used to recite Quran verses from a manuscript copy. After his death in 1946, Muslim activity in the mosque ceased completely. Even after the termination of activity in the mosque there remained several

early ancestors, held in Baiqi's main hall. They are displayed on an altar beneath the ancestral tablets or a portrait of the deceased (a concept that they call "displaying the Holy Book," *qing jing* 请经), together with incense sticks and other offerings. At funerals, they are carried facing up in the hands of the family member who walks at the head of the funeral procession (a concept known as "bearing the Holy Book on the palms," *peng jing* 捧经).<sup>11</sup> All the informants I talked with expressed their pride over their special heritage, though they noted that those items bear no Islamic significance for them. Their forefathers, however, had instructed them to continue using the books during funerals and in ancestor worship. Throughout Baiqi and in other Guo communities abroad, there were apparently other copies of the Quran, some of which were lost or destroyed during the stormy events that occurred after the Communist revolution, and most particularly during the Cultural Revolution.<sup>12</sup>

Another prominent Fujian family of Muslim descent is the Ding clan of Chendai, numbering approximately 30,000 members. Today it is one of the largest and most notable families of Muslim descent in Southeast China.<sup>13</sup> They have also preserved the custom of refraining from pork offerings on specific occasions, such as the ceremonies held yearly in their central hall in Chendai to commemorate their founding ancestor, and the ceremonies held twice a year, in spring and winter, in the eight halls for the heads of sub-branches. The community's elders, responsible for rituals held in two sub-branches' halls, attested:

Our ancestors did not eat pork, so we do not offer them pork in the ritual ceremonies. However, pork may be served for the souls of relatives of closer proximity [members of recent generations, who during their lifetime, did not comply with the prohibition of eating pork]. In most cases,

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elderly people who maintained the custom of refraining from pork at all times. For more on the Baiqi Guos and the partial revival of Islam among some of them, see Fan 2003:71–79.

- 11 Ding 1993:330. Similar evidence is reported from among the Guo family in Malaysia (Ma 2005:91); Gladney (2004:169) mentions a different phrase: *kai jing* 开经, "the opening of the holy book."
- 12 I saw Qurans in Dashan 大山 and Ke Pu 克圃 villages. See also Chen 1984:107; Gladney (1991) 1996:288.
- 13 The family's founding ancestor, Ding Jiezhai (丁節齋 1251–1298), emigrated in the mid-thirteenth century from Suzhou to Quanzhou for trade purposes. Due to violent unrest at the end of the Yuan era, his great-grandson Ding Ren'an 丁仁庵 moved to the village of Chendai (Zhuang 1993; 1996).



though, we refrain from serving them pork at ceremonies held during general holidays.<sup>14</sup>

The Dings point to a section in their family genealogy addressing the preparation of food offerings for ancestors, with instructions to serve them different kinds of vegetables, seafood, sheep, and beef—an unusual custom in Fujian where pork is the most common meat: “On the anniversary of their [the ancestors’] deaths an entire ox must be used in the course of the ritual ceremony” (Zhuang 1996:193; Gladney [1991] 1996:270). In this unique family custom, it is not only the tradition of pork taboo that marks the special identity of the Dings but also the disregard for the widely prevalent custom of avoiding the consumption of beef in southern China due to its important role as a draft animal. Discussing this practice during ancient times, Vincent Goossaert terms it the “beef taboo” (*niu jie* 牛戒). He maintains that the rise of this social practice correlates with the advent of pork as the major meat for both daily consumption and ritual use since the Song period. While the popularity of beef avoidance grew constantly in the late Imperial period, it also became a marker of identity differentiating between the bulk of the Han Chinese population, and ethnic or religious groups that were not fully integrated into local society. Chinese Muslims were those most identified with the beef-eating custom (Goossaert 2005). Currently this custom is largely ignored, although pork is still consumed far more than beef. At present the Chendai Dings emphasize the preservation of the pork taboo, which resonates with the heritage of their early Muslim ancestors. In the genealogy, it was the use of beef that was emphasized.<sup>15</sup> Similar customs of ancestor worship are also preserved among the several thousand members of the Jin 金 family, living in Quanzhou.<sup>16</sup> Jin family members proudly note their ancestors’ high position during the late Yuan, their foreign Muslim heritage, and their newly acquired Hui

14 Jiangtou 江头 neighborhood, Chendai, September 2002; Gladney (1991) 1996:261–274. Apparently there are substantial discrepancies between the ideal or traditional customs and their actual implementation. This is especially true regarding the worship conducted in secondary halls or small family shrines. No pork taboo is in fact observed there. See also Sai 2001:105–116.

15 Sai Yukari (2001:107–108) reports that beef has become quite common in Fujian, although local restaurants tend either to serve the more popular pork dishes exclusively, or to focus on beef.

16 The Jin are descendants of a Muslim general, Jin Ji 金吉, who was employed by the Yuan Mongol rulers. In 1333 he was dispatched to Quanzhou, where he joined the thriving Muslim community. He and his son, Jin A-li 金阿里, soon became notable figures among the city leaders (*Qingyuan Jin Shi Zupu* 1555:30a; Abt 2014a:24–32; So 2000:125–127).

status. However, they have adopted local religious beliefs and practices over many generations and currently feel no actual ties with Islam.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the very knowledge of the family's foreign ancestry plays an important role in their identity. The pork taboo, similar to that upheld by the Ding and the Guo, is an important component of this identity.<sup>18</sup>

Quite a few researchers from China and abroad referred to these customs and their significance in their studies of the communities' Muslim origins. Rosey Wang Ma reports similar findings among a branch of the Baiqi Guo (pronounced there as *Koay*) in Penang, Malaysia. Her interpretation was that "the village people observed these rituals as an inherited tradition of their clan, and not as a religious obligation. . . . This age-old ritual is still preserved and practiced, without a religious reason; and those who observe it do not ask for an explanation" (Ma 2005:90–93). This statement is indeed true regarding Muslim religion. However, it does not take into account the rituals' role within the practice of ancestral worship, where their significance actually lies. On the one hand, in the view of the Muslims' descendants, these customs provide important evidence for the Muslim origin of the lineages in question. Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate later, those seemingly Muslim customs were also cast into a ritual framework that typically belongs to these communities' culturally ingrained *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984:169–175).

### Ethnic Identification and Ritual Canonization

Since the early 1980s, these ancestral rituals, bearing Muslim characteristics, have played a central role in the official Hui definition of these lineages. The Dings of Chendai are arguably the community of Muslim descent whose members were most active in recovering their ancestral heritage. In the early 1980s a handful of the town's elders founded the Jinjiang County Muslim Association (Jinjiangshi yisilanjiao xiehui 晋江市伊斯兰教协会). These family members were part of a group of fifteen students, members of Fujian lineages of Muslim descent, who were introduced to Islam during the late 1930s. They were selected and organized by representatives of the Association

17 Over the courtyard entrance of one Jin household I was shown Arabic inscriptions, one of which reads "a blessed Muslim family." However, the inscriptions were placed there in 1979 by a Chinese researcher of the history of Islam in Quanzhou. The residents cannot read the texts, and none of the family's younger generation remember their exact content.

18 Gladney (1991) 1996:262, 278; fieldwork in Quanzhou, 2002, 2007.

for Rescuing the Nation (Zhongguo huijiao jiuguo xiehui 中国回教救国协会) from Beijing, in an attempt to promulgate Islam in the region. In 1939 they joined a special program of Islamic studies at Chengda Normal School (Chengda shifan 成达师范), a well-known school of Islamic studies in Guilin, Guangxi Province. Upon their return to Chendai some of them attempted to instill Islamic values among the rest of the Ding but when the Communist revolution began their activities completely ceased.<sup>19</sup> When the reforms came into force in the 1980s, some veteran members decided to resume the practice of Islam and tried to nurture a new generation of local Muslims. One of their first activities was to organize scholarships for around twenty students, members of the Ding of Chendai, for studies in Muslim centers in different cities in northern and western China. A few outstanding students were even sent to study in Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Malaysia, where they studied Islam and Arabic, along with other subjects. On their return, they became the main nucleus of the local Hui Association and began cultivating the Muslim heritage among the Ding. They were the members of the association who planned and established an exhibition of their family heritage displayed in Chendai's main ancestral hall in 1985 (Abt 2012:106–112; Gladney [1991] 1996:285–286; Fan 2003:79–80). In the early 1990s the association also initiated the establishment of a new mosque, adjacent to the hall in Chendai, intended to serve the Ding who had readopted the Muslim faith. In 2000, an *ahong* from Gansu Province was sent to the mosque; together with members of the Hui Association, he oversaw the religious activity of the tiny Chendai Muslim community. During a visit in 2001, he showed me the small collection of Muslim-Chinese scriptures and antique items exhibited in the ancestral hall, indicating the authentic Muslim origin of the Chendai Dings. The association members envisioned the *ahong* as a spiritual leader who would help revitalize the Muslim heritage in Chendai. In practice, the *ahong* achieved very few of his original goals. He led weekly prayers in the mosque and, as he claimed, twenty to thirty worshipers joined him every Friday. Nonetheless, most were foreign businessmen from Muslim countries.<sup>20</sup> In the summer of 2002 the association also organized an Islam and Arabic class in the mosque. On a visit to the site during one of the classes, I met about ten students aged twelve or thirteen from different villages around Chendai. Three young students who returned from Saudi Arabia and Syria were teaching them Arabic and Islam as well as English and computers. In their activities, the young

19 Interviews in Chendai, August 2002, April 2004. See also Huang and Guo 2001:14–21; Huang 2000:179–181; Fan 2003:79–80; Masumi 2006:134; Aubin 2006:246–255.

20 Interview with Ahong Ma 马阿訇, Chendai, September 2001.

members of the Hui Association are spearheading attempts to reintroduce Islam. It seems, however, that the Muslim activists' influence on their relatives is currently rather limited.

In recent decades, local cadres seeking to benefit from the special minority rights, a handful of newly converted Muslim activists, and local scholars have been active in selecting, highlighting, and transforming their distinct family rituals into a semi-official ritual canon defining their newly acquired ethnic identity. This process peaked in the mid-1990s with the performance of new rituals conducted by the Chendai Ding lineage, in which the affinity to Islam was further emphasized. The largest rite took place during the spring of 1997, at the time of the Tomb-Sweeping Festival (Qingming 清明), when worship around the graves normally takes place. However, that time was also selected since it coincided with the Muslim festival marking the end of the Ramadan fast (Eid al-Fitr). The rite combined several symbolic markers related to their Muslim heritage with grave-sweeping. Instead of the regular offerings, paper sheets with Quran verses were burned. The whole event was presided over by an *ahong* who recited verses from the Quran. All the participants wore white caps and were encouraged to fast during the preceding Ramadan month, or at least to abstain from pork during that period (Gladney 1995:259).

In the late 1980s Dru Gladney ([1991] 1996:286) summarized his findings regarding the resurgence of Islam writing: "This possible revitalization of a new Islamic identity for the Hui in Chendai is important to watch as it becomes increasingly relevant for them in their altered social context." In a later article from the mid-1990s he further stated, "These lineages have always maintained a Hui identity that, in conjunction with recent events, only now is beginning to take on a decidedly Islamic commitment" (Gladney 1995:259).

I strongly contest the assertion that Hui ethnic identity existed among these lineages prior to the 1980s. As Fan Ke demonstrated, up until the 1980s, the widely prevalent view among the Guo and Ding was that they were simply Han who practiced Islam. In fact, up to the early 1950s, many of them were not familiar at all with the term *Huizu* (Fan 2012:932–945). Moreover, the aforementioned public rituals do not constitute sufficient evidence for the existence of such ethnic sentiments in the present. From the perspective of a decade later, it transpires that these practices concern only a limited circle of Ding members, and the rituals have not become common practice among the Chendai Dings. The last ceremony held at their ancestral burial ground in Lingshan on the outskirts of Quanzhou, in 1997, was a symbolic act, apparently performed only once, on the occasion of an international conference attended by scholars, official representatives of Muslim countries, and guests

from Ding branches overseas. Since then the Dings have not participated in such rituals.<sup>21</sup>

### Chinese Rituals for Muslim Ancestors

Eight years later, in 2005, the traditional Qingming festival in Chendai remained the major ritual event commemorating the lineage's ancestors. The Qingming rituals include gathering around the ancestral graves, making offerings, cleaning the graves, and renewing the inscriptions. The festival attracts thousands of Ding members from China and abroad. These rituals are performed by the Dings with all the local characteristics, though here too pork is avoided. In the rituals I witnessed, no other Hui-related customs were incorporated.

Several months later, in the middle of the Ramadan month in Chendai, only ten Muslim activists gathered in the local mosque for the evening prayer and the communal meal to break the fast. All of the residents in the vicinity showed indifference towards the activity taking place in the mosque. In fact, the Bodhisattva Guanyin's birthday celebrations in the neighboring temple attracted far more attention.

Although the descriptions of Muslim resurgence appear relevant only to a small minority of Southeast China's Muslim descendants, this certainly does not imply that renewed interest in Islam should be lightly dismissed. Despite its limited scope, the phenomenon has already had important indirect economic and social effects.<sup>22</sup> The latest developments have also led to a growing interest from Chinese and overseas Muslims. The fostering of the historical Maritime Silk Route heritage and the nurturing of ancient relics attesting to the former existence of a prosperous Muslim community in the region have attracted the attention of businessmen and diplomats from the Middle East. This interest has resulted in flourishing cultural and tourist ties, as well as trade

21 A documentary film edited by Chen Dasheng in 1985 shows a yearly Muslim pilgrimage to the ancestral graves in the outskirts of Quanzhou. However, the participants were apparently Muslim residents of Quanzhou, members of the Ashab Mosque community, and not the Chendai Dings. Chen Dasheng (film editor), *Islamic Culture in Quanzhou*, documentary produced under the direction of the Committee for the Protection of Islamic Historic Relics, Tourism Bureau of Jinjiang County.

22 The case of the village of Xin Dianzhen 新店镇 near the city of Xiamen, where the Ding family comprises 74 percent of the population, provides a good example. The official recognition of the village as a Hui minority settlement in 1983 transformed the villagers' living conditions and economic situation beyond recognition (Abt 2012:325–327).

relations and financial investments in joint ventures with local Hui members in the Quanzhou region that have brought significant economic developments to the Hui communities (Gladney [1991] 1996:284–285).

However, while affinity to Islam has drawn the most scholarly attention, most studies so far do not discuss the ritual practices and spiritual world of the tens of thousands of descendants of Muslims who pay little attention to customs related to Islam. Therefore, I turn my attention to the social and ritual institutions that coordinate activities that are more relevant to most members of families of Muslim descent.

### *Foreign Ancestors and Local Ghosts*

During my first visit to the region in 2001, a local Hui activist, a member of a small group of newly converted Muslims of the Chendai Dings, took me to visit a recently restored ancestral hall dedicated to his earliest ancestors in the neighborhood (former village) of Pengtou 鹏头 in Chendai, where I was also presented with a genealogy compiled specially for that event. My companion's main objective was to point out the physical and textual evidence attesting to the Muslim origin of his ancestors. It was the Chinese Ghost Month (*gui jie* 鬼节) and the streets were teeming with worshippers carrying offerings to temples and domestic shrines. The deafening sound of firecrackers was heard throughout the town and every street corner featured the burning of paper offerings to hungry ghosts.

The Ghost Festival is dedicated to redeeming the entities known as *gui* 鬼, a term that is often translated as “hungry spirits” or “ghosts,” and is used to describe the souls of unknown deceased who are not kin members. Unlike people's attitude towards familiar ancestors, who are perceived as meriting ritual offerings because of their honored status, attitudes towards *gui* combine awe and contempt. The *gui* are alien strangers and as such are potentially dangerous. They are condemned to continue roaming this world restlessly, suffering hunger and forced to harass the living to supply them with food. By doing so, they may bring disaster to the homes of those they visit at random. The Ghost Festival is held throughout the entire seventh month of the lunar calendar. During that period the whole community adopts the hungry spirits and presents food, drink, and paper offerings to satisfy their needs.<sup>23</sup>

23 For an elaborate historical study of the Ghost Festival see Teiser 1988. For contemporary practices of the festival see Weller 1987. For more general descriptions see Doolittle 1865, 2:91–106; Wolf 1974:169–175, 178–179.

Adjacent to the newly restored hall in Pengtou is a shrine to Guan Yin, where Buddhist nuns conducted rituals and prayed for the redemption of souls.<sup>24</sup> The ancestral hall itself was the focus of preparations for the Ghost Festival, and family members were busy in the inner courtyard assembling paper houses, lighting incense, and carrying baskets of food offerings that included pork. When I inquired about it, everyone said they saw no contradiction between these activities and the family's Muslim heritage. I was curious to learn more about the religious activities that the majority of the Ding lineage members were clearly occupied with. However, my companion, who continued walking ahead at a quick pace while urging me to follow him to the newly restored hall, only muttered that I "should not pay any attention to these unimportant superstitious practices." Unlike him, the other local residents who were taking part in the festivities were simultaneously cooperative in discussing their Muslim origin and heritage, as well as chatting about the preparations taking place right then, in the hall, toward the mid-month's *pudu* 普度 (universal passage [of the hungry ghosts out of the realm of the dead]) rituals (Teiser 1988:8; Weller 1987:42; Cohen 1988:191, 193).

I had similar encounters during the following year's Ghost Festival held in Kepu 克圃 village in Baiqi. Residents of this rather remote village proudly display various practices and physical remnants attesting to their Muslim past (pork taboo during ancestral rites, tombstones, and copies of the Quran, as described in detail above). However, during my visit the village was thronged with ritual activities related to the Ghost Festival. Outside every house in the village stood a decorated table, piled with food offerings for ghosts. I was surprised to see that the chief items placed on the tables were packages of dried pork meat. When asked about the pork taboo practiced in the families' rituals, the respondents replied dismissively: "They aren't the souls of our ancestors, just foreign ghosts, so there's no problem presenting them with pork." The Guo in Kepu and the Ding in Chendai share the general population's attitude toward the *gui*. Being strangers, the *gui* are given items that cater to their different needs. Arthur Wolf reports that in Taiwan many families place cigarettes and beer alongside paper offerings. One of Wolf's informants told him that this is because the ghosts are like thieves and criminals: "they all smoke and drink" (Wolf 1974:178–179).

24 In the Ghost Festival each community or family performs rituals individually. In addition, the festival has a Daoist and a Buddhist version. Individuals and communities may also enlist the help of Daoist or Buddhist clergymen to save the very same souls, only this time they do it according to either Daoist or Buddhist concepts of salvation. See Cohen 1988:190–194; Teiser 1988; Weller 1987:90–124.

Encounters such as those described above made me realize that, by focusing on the Muslim traits, not only would my research remain confined to the perspective of contemporary ethnic politics, but that I might also miss out on crucial details related to the wider religious and cultural context underlying the family rituals of Muslims' descendants.

### *The Muslim Neighbors of Guanyin*

The Nangong 南宮 temple, devoted to Guanyin and other local deities, is located in the Jiangtou 江头 neighborhood of Chendai next to two ancestral halls dedicated to the founders of the local Ding lineage branch. The temple was built over five hundred years ago and is one of the largest in Chendai today.<sup>25</sup> It serves thousands of worshippers from the entire region—members of the Ding family as well as members of other families with no Muslim roots. Nevertheless, most of the temple's staff, members of the managing committee, and the main temple donors belong to the Ding lineage. All the people serving in the temple during my visits between 2002 and 2007 were also of the Ding lineage.

Examining the activity taking place in the Nangong temple helps to establish a more precise and realistic viewpoint on the place Islam occupies in the lives of the Chendai Dings. First of all, it reveals the dominance of Chinese folk Buddhism in their religious life. Nonetheless, the temple's beadles and masters of ceremonies are definitely aware of their families' unique historical heritage. It turned out, furthermore, that several of the Nangong attendants are those in charge of conducting worship in the adjacent ancestral halls. The temple's master presented me with a book of Ding family instructions, permanently preserved in the (Buddhist) temple. The manuscript is a manual containing precise instructions for offerings in the neighboring ancestral halls; these include the pork taboo and the related rituals.<sup>26</sup>

However, the Nangong temple's ritual masters' interpretation of their unique customs differs from that given by their family's official representatives in the public rituals of the 1990s. Their abstention from offering pork is actually not based on Muslim religious belief, but rather on the principle shared by all observers of Chinese ancestral worship—satisfying the needs and desires of the dead. In this case, the descendants assume that their ancestors would not have relished pork.

25 It was originally called Yinguang si 印光寺 (Li 2005:129–130; Wang 1993).

26 Nangong Temple, 2002. The manual's title is *Chendai Dingshizu Jiangtou Xiaozong Jisi Gongpu* 陈埭丁世族江头小宗祭祀公谱.



This fits well with evidence presented in ethnographic accounts of ancestral offerings. In the conclusion to his account of his fieldwork in Taiwan among communities of Fujian origin, on the concept of “the soul” (*linghun* 靈魂; “soul” is only a partial rendition of this complex Chinese term) in popular Chinese religion, Stevan Harrell (1979:526–527) writes:

It is the *ling-hun* that gives a person his or her individuality. The *ling-hun* of the deceased exhibit individuality, as do those of the living. Consider the following kinds of evidence . . . when offerings are made to individual ancestors on their death-day anniversaries, anyone who remembers the ancestor personally will try to include the ancestor’s favorite foods in the offerings. . . . Ancestors are not necessarily pleased by standard offerings, but retain individual preferences.

Referring to customs of offerings to ancestors, Arthur P. Wolf (1974:177) maintains that:

the intimate nature of the relationship is reflected in the efforts many families make to respect the personal tastes of individual ancestors. When an ancestor is known to have been particularly fond of certain dishes, these are commonly included in the offerings made on the anniversary of his death day.<sup>27</sup>

These seemingly Muslim customs were cast into the ritual framework of the widely prevalent ancestral cult. Even the periods of time during which they abstain from eating pork are actually based on time-periods that according to Chinese belief serve as stations on the soul’s journey through the underworld, from the moment of death until its reincarnation (a belief of Buddhist origin). To this day, some Muslims’ descendants maintain the pork taboo during the first week of mourning. Some abstain from pork for forty-nine days, and in the past there were some who observed the taboo for a hundred days. According to common belief, a week is the minimal period in which the soul can be reincarnated. If in the first week the soul did not exit purgatory, the intermediate phase immediately following death, it then enters another seven-day phase. This process can repeat itself seven times, up to a total of seven weeks (forty-nine days). The intermediate phase is accompanied by elaborate rituals, imbued with Buddhist elements; during each of the seven weeks, offerings are presented to a specific god that heads one of the seven different courts of the underworld. An additional offering ritual, for another god-judge, takes place

<sup>27</sup> See also Thompson 1988:90; Ahern 1973:173.

one hundred days after death (Teiser 1993:117–118, 121–122). Hence it transpires that despite their unique character, the context and time-frame of the offerings made by Muslims' descendants are based on fundamental beliefs of Chinese popular religion.

Moreover, all commentators so far, when referring to the Muslims' descendants' pork taboo, have ignored the fact that close relatives' abstention from eating pork in the first days of mourning is customary among the general population of Southeast China. In the interregnum between the time of death and the banquet marking the end of the funeral, when the deceased is still making his or her way through the realms of the underworld before completing a full transformation into an ancestral spirit, the close relatives must not consume any meat. In his work about rituals of death and fertility in Taiwan, Stuart Thompson (1988:86, 96, 99) states that according to a prevalent belief, "it is said to be very filial for descendants to refrain from eating pork prior to burial. . . . [To eat pork] would be tantamount to depriving the deceased of urgently required reconstitutive flesh. The descendants abstain so there will be all the more for the deceased."

The Baiqi Guos stress another unique custom indicating their affinity to Islam. To mark the end of the mourning period, at the end of the week they make a special ritual meal of pork. This custom also demonstrates the influence of traditional Chinese mourning customs on the rituals performed by the Guos. Stuart Thompson (1988:90n55, 92, 96, 99) mentions the symbolic lifting of the restriction on descendants eating pork at the banquet held after returning from the funeral. This act marks the transformation of the deceased from (near-) ghost to (near-) ancestor.

Although I found no evidence to support this conjecture, one can imagine that upholding the pork taboo and its related customs was relatively simple for descendants of Muslims, who were able to preserve the memory of their forefathers, while the ritual practice would be appreciated by their Chinese milieu.

It may be assumed that this kind of intense and deep integration into the local community was typical of Muslim communities that had been isolated from the larger concentrations of Muslims that formed along the land routes towards Central Asia. Raphael Israeli maintains that alongside the mainstream institutionalized Islam in China, different variations of Muslim communities developed, which he calls "syncretic communities" or "marginal communities." These communities also adopted ideological aspects of the Chinese culture, not only its external and material features. Being physically remote or cut off from the rest of the Muslim population in China, they gradually strayed from their origins and abandoned their religion (Israeli 2002:104–105).

The Fujian cases presented in this paper fit well into this pattern. Thus, it is revealing to examine other marginal communities of Muslim descent that

underwent similar processes of acculturation, and that under current political and social circumstances are experiencing a resurgence of their Huiminzu identity. The case of the Hui community of Dragon Village in Northwest Yunnan, recently described by Kevin Caffrey, is of particular interest to this study. Since 1999 the villagers saw the emergence of a vibrant revitalization project aimed at reinstating their Hui heritage. As in Chendai, the process was spearheaded by a rather small group of zealous young Hui, in this case *ahongs* sent from the large Muslim center of Shadian in southern Yunnan, to reinstall Islam among the Hui of Dragon Village. Their activities included establishing a mosque and introducing the locals to Islamic teachings and rituals. In both cases they faced the challenge of reintroducing Islamic practices among communities that are only nominally Hui but maintain a wide array of religious practices that are deeply rooted in local ritual traditions. The different perceptions of the current Hui resurgence in Chendai held by those I term “official spokespeople” and by the general population are echoed in Caffrey’s description of the stark difference between the approach of the young Shadian “born-again Muslims” and of the vast majority of the population, who pay little heed to the actual theological aspects of the revitalization project but are motivated by more practical concerns, like access to material and symbolic resources (Caffrey 2014:18, 19, 20–21).

However, the process that took place in Dragon Village was far more effective in terms of transforming the ritual and religious landscape and the consequent effect it had on traditional social networks. Examining the differences between the Fujian and Yunnan cases may shed more light on the role of external agents in a process involving history, memory, and current identity formation. In Fujian the main force behind the revitalization movement was the local government’s policies and its official agents. The government defined certain criteria for recognizing the Fujian communities of Muslim descent as Hui, among them proof of authentic Muslim origins. The local leadership as well as the government agencies were quite satisfied with achieving that. Paradoxically, once these criteria were met, both the local lineage leaders and government officials were less enthusiastic about promoting the actual revitalization of Muslim orthodoxy. The attempts to reintroduce Islamic belief were limited in scope, and were initiated by a few activists who lacked a supporting power base in the near vicinity. Moreover, the non-Islamic traditions that dominate the ritual activities of the Fujian communities are mostly founded on internal lineage ritual networks. Unlike the case of Dragon Village, reinforcing their newly acquired Huizu identity did not require the Fujian communities to sever traditional social links with other communities. Dragon Village’s inhabitants were Hui to begin with. The process they underwent twenty years later was of

a different nature. In this case it was not the preferential government policies that motivated the populace to revive their Muslim heritage, but rather the prospects of investments and development funding by wealthy Hui from the large and powerful Muslim center in southern Yunnan (Caffrey 2014: 17, 22, 23). The young *ahongs* whom the Muslims of Yunnan sent to Dragon Village “were committed to the cause of Islam as they understood it, and all understood Huiness to be primarily a matter of Islam, regarding any ethnic or historical elements it might have as secondary in importance” (22).

### Conclusion

In light of the evidence presented above, I conclude that the ritual traditions and beliefs shared by tens of thousands of lineage members in the vicinity of Quanzhou—those celebrating the Ghost Festival, worshipping at Nangong temple, participating in the Qingming rituals and conducting communal offerings to the deceased—represent more authentically the way in which Muslims’ descendants perceive their family heritage. It turns out that the rituals and symbolic acts indicating the Muslim origin of their ancestors are typical of the Han cultural sphere and of the local social habitus. Thus, the focus of my inquiry is not the Muslim ancestors, but the (Chinese) rituals performed on their behalf. This study may therefore supply interesting insights into the religious world and the ritual conventions not only of Muslims’ descendants, but also of Han society at large. For beyond what it reveals about the traces of Islam among Muslims’ descendants, the findings presented here also furnish insights into ancestor worship in general, as reflected in the Muslims’ descendants’ perspective. They also offer an illuminating example of the distinctive nature of popular Chinese religion (and of the ancestor worship of which it is an important feature). Its highly flexible and receptive nature allows the performing of acts that ostensibly match a foreign doctrine but still fit well with its own fundamental principles.

This paper may also contribute an additional dimension to James Watson’s and Evelyn Rawski’s discussion regarding the role of ancestral rites as mechanisms for standardization and acculturation into Han society (Watson 1988:13–14; Rawski 1988:32–33; Frankel 2011: 98–104). This issue has received considerable attention from anthropologists and historians of China during the last few decades. Viewing the adoption of Chinese ancestral veneration by lineages of Muslim descent in this perspective, I argue that the ritual canon that dominates the routine practices of the general population is not that promoted by official representatives and Hui activists, but rather the one shared by the majority of the Han Chinese population: a tradition based on the Confucian ethics reflected

in the detailed instructions included in the thirteenth-century *Zhu Xi's Family Rituals* (*Zhuxi Jiali* 朱熹家礼) and on concepts originating from Popular Buddhism that profoundly influenced Chinese popular religion. Hence, the rituals of ancestor worship conducted by Muslims' descendants play two simultaneous roles: they denote their foreign origin and their uniqueness, while at the same time they express their belonging to wider Chinese society.

Finally, the current resurgence of Muslim heritage in Southeast China has been largely interpreted in ethnic and political terms and presented as an outcome of current government policies. This paper suggests that the newly acquired Hui identity is but another, contemporary, variety of employing Chinese mechanisms for asserting distinctiveness. I suggest that the adoption of principles and terms derived from the contemporary Chinese discourse regarding ethnic identities in fact reaffirms the Muslims' descendants' integration into the local society and culture.

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