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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sinicizing China's World Muslim City: Spatial Politics, National Narratives, and Ethnoreligious Assimilation in the PRC

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Abstract

The nation-state is as much a narrative and ideational project as it is a spatial-territorial one. In the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping's calls to "revitalize" China's traditional culture, "Sinicize" religions, and "rejuvenate" the Chinese nation reflect a broader effort to reframe the national narrative and strengthen Communist Party control. This article examines the implications of Xi's revisionist nationalism for China's fifty-five minority nationalities, in particular the Hui, one of ten Muslim minority groups. It does so by analyzing the rise and demise of World Muslim City (WMC), a development project in western China that mobilized Hui identity and traditions for economic and diplomatic purposes. WMC was facilitated by a multicultural national narrative and by a fragmented authoritarian political system that for many years fostered policy improvisation, and deviation, at the local level. Its suspension underscores the increasingly anti-Muslim, anti-religious tenor of PRC policy, as evidenced by the Sinicization campaign that was a proximate cause of WMC's demise. Its demise also highlights ongoing efforts to reassert CCP control over government, business, and the Party's own rank-and-file. The fate of WMC furthermore reveals the spatial dimensions of Sinicization, and of Chinese cultural governance past and present. To paraphrase theorist Henri Lefebvre, Sinicization entails "spatial practices" that impose Xi-ist "representations of space" on lived "representational spaces," from mosques and businesses to theme parks and luxury resorts.

Keywords: China; Ningxia; Hui Muslims; Sinicization; minority nationalities; spatial politics; Henri Lefebvre; Chinese Communist Party

The nation-state is as much a narrative and ideational project as it is a spatial-territorial one. Would-be builders of nation-states deploy narratives and categories of collective selfhood to justify their rule over diverse peoples and regions. Through the crafting of myth, history, and the law, regimes interpellate their member-subjects in hopes of securing their allegiance (Althusser 2001[1970]). Such projects are vulnerable to revision when changing conditions undermine the coherence of the

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national story. In the People's Republic of China, the Communist Party's abandonment of revolutionary socialism after Mao necessitated a reworking of its raison d'être that continues today. Pluralization spurred by economic reforms has posed new questions regarding ethnic and cultural criteria of membership in the Chinese nation. Xi Jinping's call to "rejuvenate" the nation by "revitalizing" its "excellent traditional culture" aims to settle these questions in unambiguous terms (Yang 2017).

This essay considers the implications of Xi's revisionist project for China's fifty-five minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu*), in particular the Hui, Sinophone Muslims generally regarded as the most assimilated of the PRC's ten Muslim minority groups.[1] It does so through an analysis of World Muslim City, a development project in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region that mobilized Hui (pronounced *hway*) identity and culture for economic and diplomatic purposes. Launched in 2009, for many years World Muslim City (hereafter WMC) enjoyed the support of top officials in Beijing and Ningxia. In its rhetoric and ambitions, WMC evoked central government initiatives to develop China's impoverished west and forge closer relations with the Muslim world. These initiatives created discursive and strategic openings for WMC's Muslim-centric agenda. The project was legitimated also by what in previous work I term "communist multiculturalism," an authoritative narrative and idea of China as "a multinational, multiethnic nation-state" in which "diversity is something to be celebrated" and "the so-called 'nationality question' has been resolved" (McCarthy 2009: 4). Backers of WMC advanced a complementary narrative that portrayed Ningxia and its large Hui population as central protagonists in China's growth story, indispensable to the nation's diplomatic and economic future. Today, WMC has more or less ceased to exist. Major subprojects have been shuttered or are in limbo.

The demise of WMC highlights the increasingly anti-Muslim, anti-religious tenor of policy and rhetoric in the People's Republic. In the last decade, communist multiculturalism has been supplanted by the pursuit of "ethnic fusion" (*minzu ronghe*) (Glasserman 2023). Calls for a more assimilationist minority policy predate Xi's tenure in office and intensified after violent ethnic clashes in Tibet and Xinjiang in the late 2000s (Leibold 2012). Under Xi Jinping, however, the shift toward ethnic fusion has been accompanied by efforts to reinterpret the Chinese past. More than other post-Mao leaders, Xi has sought to reframe narratives of Chinese history, including that of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which has been rewritten to position Xi in the "official firmament of era-defining leaders," alongside Mao and Deng (Buckley 2021). He has denounced "historical nihilism," interpretations of the past that draw attention to Party mistakes and contravene approved narratives. Xi's revisionist nationalism is manifested also in the campaign to "Sinicize" religions, a proximate cause of WMC's demise. Sinicization affects all five government-approved religions, including Daoism, the only one of the five that is indigenous to China. Yet it has especially targeted Muslims and Islam.

Sinicization is a spatial endeavor: symbolic spaces and spatial symbols are media of its nationalistic message. Among other measures, it entails stripping religious and

[1]China's minorities vary in terms of cultural distinctiveness and strength of self-identification as ethnic collectivities (Harrell 1990; McCarthy 2009: 10–16). Among the more than eleven million Hui there is considerable linguistic, geographic, and sectarian diversity (Gladney 1991; Lipman 1997; Jaschok and Shui 2000; Erie 2016a; Stewart 2018; Stroup 2022).

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some secular structures of ostensibly "non-Chinese" elements, eradicating symbols of religiosity from the public realm, and incorporating CCP-centered imagery and rituals into activities conducted at religious sites. The campaign reveals how the discursive and the spatial converge in processes of nation-state (re)construction. In China, space—the built environment and the areas it demarcates—has long functioned as a means of communicating regime-approved norms and narratives. The Party's control over space and its meanings weakened after Mao, as authority over urban planning and property allocation was decentralized and partly privatized. Today, space again figures prominently in CCP efforts to define national identity and communicate "core socialist values" (Miao 2020; Stokols 2023).[2] A rejuvenated Chinese nation is concretized in amalgams of sand, gravel, and cement.

The effects of Sinicization go beyond minorities and religion, constraining regional development strategies, provincial diplomacy, and private capital. The shuttering of WMC underscores the shift in the regime's ethno-religious priorities, but it also reflects the push to expand CCP control over government, business, and the Party's own rank-and-file (Heilmann 2016; Koss 2021; Wang and Mou 2021). Previous accounts of WMC have tended to depict it as a project of the party-state (Ho 2013; Ptáčková 2020; Malzer 2020a; Sun 2022); however, this essay highlights the role of private and sub-provincial party-state actors in advancing the scheme—and in precipitating its demise. Several WMC subprojects ran afoul of land-use laws, and local authorities at times resisted efforts to enforce these. In this way, WMC illuminates the "fragmented authoritarianism" that for decades fostered local policy improvisation while also frustrating Beijing's efforts to ensure fidelity to its directives (Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988; Mertha 2009). As Nanlai Cao writes regarding an earlier campaign in Zhejiang Province targeting symbols of Christianity, understanding the events in Ningxia requires "taking into account the national context of a systematic and all-around project of rectifying local governance by the central government" (2017: 35). WMC's demise can be read as one plot point in the story of Xi Jinping's quest to defrag the party-state.

In what follows I first provide an overview of WMC and situate it within the context of Ningxia's developmental ambitions prior to the launch of Sinicization. Next, I address the aims and methods of Sinicization and Hui Muslim responses to it. In doing so, I draw on the insights of Henri Lefebvre and other theorists of the built environment to analyze how space and ideological narrative intersect in Sinicization and in Chinese state-building endeavors of the past. I then delve further into the case of WMC, elucidating the narratives used to promote it, its problematic trajectory, and its eventual fate. The final section returns to Xi's revisionist national project and its ethno-religious implications. My arguments and findings are based on qualitative, interpretive analysis of Chinese government documents, published interviews, news stories, press releases, videos, photographs, satellite imagery, websites, social media posts, court cases, and academic publications. These materials reveal Sinicization as a set of "spatial practices" through which Xi-ist "representations of space" are imposed on lived "representational spaces," from mosques and neighborhoods to theme parks and luxury resorts (Lefebvre 1991: 38–40).

[2]Consider the attention focused on Xiong'an New Area, the "city of the future" being constructed about 100 kilometers southwest of Beijing. Xi Jinping has called Xiong'an a "national project of millennial significance," and is said to be deeply involved in overseeing its construction (*China Daily* 2023; Stokols 2023).

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World Muslim City and Ningxia's Developmental Agenda

In March of 2018, workers in the city of Yinchuan, capital of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, began dismantling the domed roof of a large gazebo in the city's central business district. The gazebo stood at the center of the Sino-Arab Axis, a grand boulevard built to celebrate trade and diplomatic relations between China and the Arab world. After removing the structure's bulbous top, over the next several weeks workers constructed its replacement, a concave, octagonal double roof curving down from a central point before rising at the eaves. They also straightened the gazebo's supporting columns to eliminate pointed arches between them. Several hundred meters to the east, arched metal pergolas were replaced with slope-roofed versions in the "hanging mountain" (悬山, *xuanshan*) style. Nearby, a sculpture of a crescent moon was swapped out for one resembling a giant *bi*, a donut-shaped jade disc associated with ancient Chinese funerary rites (see figure 1). Thousands of such *bi* have been unearthed at burial sites dating to the Neolithic era, at the dawn of Chinese civilization (Sun 1993). When asked why these structures were being "rectified" just a few years after being installed, city officials explained that "transforming the original Arabic-style landscape into [one] that reflects Chinese cultural elements" would create a more "festive, peaceful, united and harmonious atmosphere" (*Sing Tao* 2018).

These modifications to the Sino-Arab Axis—subsequently renamed "Unity Road"—signaled the suspension of WMC, a US$3.6 billion development project of which the Axis was one component. WMC was a grand endeavor championed by state and private actors in Ningxia, one piece of a broad effort to capitalize on growing ties between China and the Muslim world. Through the use of savvy framing, Hui "entrepreneurs of the national past" (Zhang 2021) promoted this development scheme as a way to transform a provincial backwater into a "strategic fulcrum" of the Silk Road Economic Belt and "bridgehead" for Sino-Arab cooperation (Ma, Bai, and Peng 2014). WMC illustrates the leeway long granted to provinces and localities to improvise within broad policy parameters set in Beijing, and to deploy every resource at their disposal to spur growth. In Ningxia, for many years this meant mobilizing Hui Muslim identity and tradition.

Ningxia (pronounced *ning-hsia*) is a province-level "minority autonomous region" situated near the geographic center of the People's Republic of China. Its location is analogous to that of South Dakota in the United States, and like South Dakota, parts of Ningxia are badlands, parched and sunbaked terrain where

Figure 1. Sino-Arab Axis structures before and after rectification. Photograph at left by HT Kou Shi Xin Fei, April 2017. Huitu. Photograph at right by Zheng Jue, December 2018. Huitu.

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Figure 2. Map of China with Ningxia indicated. Source: TUBS, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

cultivation is all but impossible (see figure 2). Ningxia is the smallest of China's mainland provinces in terms of area, and its population of seven million is also small by PRC standards. By way of contrast, neighboring Shaanxi Province is home to almost forty million people. Just over one-third of Ningxia's population is Hui. Designation as a minority autonomous region offers some limited benefits for Ningxia's Hui inhabitants, though nothing approaching actual self-rule.

Although cartographically central, Ningxia is indisputably peripheral. It is considered the gateway to China's northwest, a region known for its aridity and underdevelopment. Like the rest of the northwest, Ningxia is poor. Climate is a culprit: a UN report from the 1970s described the Xihaigu region in southern Ningxia as "unfit for human habitation," despite its being home to hundreds of thousands of people (Ai, Fang, and Xie 2020). In the last four decades, the government has relocated over a million Xihaigu residents to new settlements where water and economic opportunities are more plentiful. Because of its isolation and sparse population, Ningxia proved advantageous to the Chinese Communists in their revolutionary struggle during the 1930s and 1940s. Parts of Ningxia overlap what Joseph Esherick (2022) calls the CCP's "accidental Holy Land," the Shen-Gan-Ning border region to which the Party retreated at the end of the Long March, and where it overhauled its approach to revolution.

From its beginnings, WMC was promoted as a means to alleviate Ningxia's backwardness and isolation. Supporters in government, business, and the non-profit sector claimed that it would "strengthen cultural exchange and economic

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cooperation between Ningxia, China, and Muslim countries" and enhance the autonomous region's "position for [China's] opening to the west" (Ningxia People's Government 2013: 26–27). In this way, WMC aligned with national development initiatives of the early twenty-first century, specifically the "Going Out" strategy aimed at internationalizing the Chinese economy; the "Open Up the West" campaign, a massive infrastructure project throughout China's interior and west; and the Belt and Road Initiative. Ningxia's own "going out" strategy called for "building a frontier open to the Muslim world," in part by encouraging governments and firms in Muslim countries to "go in," that is, invest in the autonomous region (Ningxia People's Government 2011: 32–34, 75–79). Urban redevelopment in Yinchuan, spurred by the "Open Up the West" campaign, reflected these objectives (Malzer 2020b). In 2011, Yinchuan officials approved plans for a new central business district (CBD) about 8 kilometers north of the old city center, in a rural suburb. As envisioned, Yuehaiwan CBD would feature sleek skyscrapers and art-filled public spaces where residents and visitors could relax and enjoy the city's cutting-edge skyline. The Sino-Arab Axis and several other WMC endeavors were intended as key elements of the district and were among the first CBD projects completed. Like other Yuehaiwan structures, these are built on converted rural land; the Axis bisects an area that until 2010 was the site of a village.[3]

WMC was not a single city but a multi-sited endeavor, with subprojects dispersed around Yinchuan and in rural Yongning County, just south of Yinchuan's urban core. There were, in fact, two iterations of WMC, for reasons I address later in the article. The original version, referred to here as WMC 1.0, was launched in 2009 and entailed plans for thirteen subprojects and a price tag of 800 million yuan (US$117 million). WMC 2.0, launched in 2012, promised twenty-three subprojects and a budget of 23 billion yuan, roughly US$3.6 billion. A formal groundbreaking ceremony in July of 2009 was attended by a slew of Ningxia officials and dignitaries from Bahrain, Turkey, Oman, and Kuwait (Bai 2009). The presence of these dignitaries underscores WMC's early reliance on foreign Muslim support. A portion of the funding for the thirteen original subprojects was provided by donors and investors from Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and other Muslim countries. Kuwait in particular was a major source of capital. Funds for educational and charitable subprojects came from Kuwait's Ministry of Religious Endowments and Islamic Affairs, its Zakat Bureau, and the Asian Muslim Committee of the Kuwaiti International Islamic Charity Organization. Land for charitable and educational subprojects in Yongning was provided free by the county government (Zhao 2015).

As this list of funding sources indicates, in its initial incarnation WMC sought to combine the pursuit of profit with philanthropic beneficence. The thirteen original subprojects emphasized culture, education, and charity along with retail and leisure. They included plans for the "World Muslim Folk Culture Street," a pedestrian mall consisting of retail shops and exhibition pavilions showcasing the arts, architecture, and handicrafts of dozens of Muslim-majority countries;[4] a "One Thousand and One Nights" theme park; a "Muslim folk village" to house Hui villagers displaced by urban

[3] As in other Chinese cities, Yinchuan's urban expansion involved demolishing villages and relocating their inhabitants to apartment blocks. Some villagers stayed put as their communities were swallowed up by new construction, becoming urban villages (*chengzhongcun*) (Malzer 2020b: 361–63).

[4] WMC sought interest from small proprietors as well as major investors. See He Jun, "200 African Investors Will Make Their Fortunes in Ningxia World Muslim City," *Muslim Market* (website), 18 Apr. 2011,

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redevelopment; a vocational school specializing in Arabic language instruction; and new facilities for the Ningxia Muslim Orphanage. Also planned was a World Islamic History Museum, the second floor of which would comprise a mosque (Zhou and Luo 2010). All but a few of these subprojects were slated for construction on 3000 *mu* (494 acres) in Yongning County (Liu, Wang, and Tang 2011: 101). Stylized renderings of what WMC 1.0 would look like at completion depict a leafy enclave, surrounded on three sides by a man-made lake, featuring shops, museums, parks, homes, the college and the orphanage, and at the center of the enclave, a towering mosque.[5]

With its eclectic mix of endeavors, WMC promised to "create a friendly cooperation platform for … trade and cultural exchanges between Chinese Muslims and Muslims in other countries and regions around the world" (Tan 2010). Showcasing Islamic identity and traditions was integral to this goal, and subprojects drew on a variety of aesthetic themes and styles. No one version of Islam or Islamic aesthetics predominated; representations ranged from the (pseudo)traditional and obvious (e.g., faux minarets adorning shopping malls) to the modern and abstract. Some structures sought to convey overtly religious meanings. The four-sided exterior of the (never built) Quran Mosque and World Islamic History Museum, for example, was to be fashioned in "the shape of four open volumes of the Quran," with 114 decorative windows in its domed roof symbolizing the Quran's 114 chapters. The structure as a whole would be supported by five pillars, an architectural allusion to the five pillars of Islam.[6]

The Ningxia International Hall, built as the permanent site of the China-Arab States Expo, exemplifies a more abstract approach to Islamic aesthetics (see figure 3).

Figure 3. The Ningxia International Hall, Yinchuan, September 2017. Xinhua/Alamy.

https://web.archive.org/web/20110426011101/http://www.muslimmarket.net/news_view.asp?id=663. On the exhibition pavilions, see Tan 2010.

[5]Renderings are on archived pages of WMC 1.0's defunct website: https://web.archive.org/web/20111114082515/http://www.mslcity.com/custom.asp?id=1 (accessed 16 May 2024).

[6]The Quran Mosque is described at: https://web.archive.org/web/20111114074159/http://www.mslcity.com/common_view.asp?id=11 (accessed 16 May 2024).

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Located in Yuehaiwan CBD at the western end of the Sino-Arab Axis, when the hall opened in 2015 its interior featured geometric designs typical of Islamic art along with characteristically Chinese elements, such as dragon motifs and liberal use of the color red. The hall's exterior is encased in an asymmetric, gauze-like steel mesh meant to evoke "the hats and veils of the Hui people" and the checkered head coverings (*keffiyeh*) worn throughout the Arab world (Ningxia Guoji Huitang 2015). The Sino-Arab Axis similarly combined Chinese and Islamic elements, though in a more representational fashion. The boulevard, just over 2 kilometers long and 90 meters wide, runs east to west through the middle of Yuehaiwan CBD. Between the roadways lining its northern and southern edges are walkways and plazas interspersed with fountains, sculpture gardens, and decorative pavilions. Sections of the Axis showcased Chinese culture, featuring oversized replicas of porcelain vases and bronze *ding*, a type of ritual cauldron that was "the preeminent symbol of state authority and divine power" in ancient China (Childs-Johnson 2012: 164). Other sections displayed a variety of Muslim cultural forms and objects: Mughal domes, Moroccan arches, giant oil lamps straight out of Disney's "Aladdin," and so on.[7]

In its aesthetic and thematic borrowings, WMC followed the lead of a separate enterprise, China Hui Hometown Culture Park, a Muslim theme park also located in Yongning County. The original WMC site is in fact just across the road from the theme park, in the same township. Launched in 2002 in the Hui village of Najiahu, Hui Hometown Culture Park garnered attention for its striking Islamic architecture (see figure 4). Structures within the park evoked global Muslim landmarks like the Taj Majal. Other exhibits stressed the indisputable Chineseness of the Hui, making the case, observes Kyle Haddad-Fonda (2016), that "the Hui have always been integrated

Figure 4. The Golden Ceremonial Hall, Hui Hometown Culture Park, Yongning. Photograph by Takeafancytoraining, December 2019. Huitu.

[7]Images of the boulevard before and after rectification are at https://baike.baidu.com/item/团结路/50108383 (last accessed 16 May 2024).

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Figure 5. Main gate of the Najiahu Mosque. Photograph by Wu Dao Sheng, 2015, Wikimedia. Accessed February 14, 2024, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:.jpg.

into Chinese society." For years the theme park was practically a required destination for foreign Muslim delegations touring Ningxia. A stop at the park was typically combined with a visit to the historic Najiahu mosque, a brick and wooden structure known for its colorful tiled roof and upturned flying eaves (see figure 5). In 2009, China's State Council designated Hui Hometown Culture Park a "National Model Unit of [Ethnic] Nationalities' Unity and Progress" (Yin 2015).

Sinicization as Spatial and Ideological Practice

Through the first half of the 2010s, Ningxia's Muslim-centric development strategy appeared to be paying off for the autonomous region. During that period, thousands of dignitaries and investors from Muslim countries visited Ningxia to attend trade forums and conduct business. Ningxia's global ambitions got a boost in 2012 when the State Council approved the creation of the Ningxia Inland Open Economic Pilot Zone and the Yinchuan Comprehensive Bonded Zone, which offered tax advantages for foreign trade and export-oriented industry. The Ningxia Halal Food International Trade Certification Center opened in the city of Wuzhong in 2014, part of a push to increase the autonomous region's food exports to the Muslim world. In 2013 and 2015, Yinchuan hosted the first and second China-Arab States Expos, each of which drew over seven thousand attendees. The 2015 Expo resulted in the signing of 163 cooperation projects between Chinese and foreign firms, valued at over US$25 billion (Li and Zhu 2016).

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Given these trends, the demise of WMC just a few years later appears puzzling. It begins to make sense, however, when placed in the context of the Sinicization campaign, announced in 2016. Sinicization—in Chinese, 中国化 (*zhongguo hua*)—is a nationwide policy that primarily targets religions, though it affects other endeavors as well, from architecture to social work. As explained by Xi Jinping, the policy seeks to "merge religious doctrines with Chinese culture … [and] contribute to the realization of the Chinese dream of national rejuvenation" (*Xinhua* 2016). To these ends, Xi has exhorted party-state officials and religious leaders to "uphold the principle that religions in China must be Chinese in orientation and provide active guidance to religions so that they can adapt themselves to socialist society" (quoted in Madsen 2021: 1). Religious groups are expected to incorporate Party-centered rituals and symbols, including Xi's image, into their liturgical practices and sites of worship. In theory, "basic beliefs, core doctrines, and ritual systems" are to be preserved so long as they are "compatible with socialist society and in line with the spirit of Chinese culture and the progress of the times" (Central Committee 2018). The aim of Sinicization is not to eliminate religions but to ensure they are ordered to their *summum bonum*, the CCP.

Yet there is no question that Sinicization seeks to squelch a variety of trends and practices. The campaign takes particular aim at ostensibly "foreign" markers of religiosity that in recent decades became increasingly visible in public spaces throughout the PRC. With regard to Islam, these include "signs of 'Saudification' and 'Arabization' that have emerged in architecture, clothing, religious etiquette, interpretation of classics and the use of Arabic in Islamic venues," which Party leaders insist "must be resolutely contained and actively and correctly guided" (Central Committee 2018). Displays of personal piety have come under attack, and Muslims have been harassed for wearing headscarves, growing beards, and fasting during Ramadan. In this way, the Sinicization of Islam is intertwined with "de-halalization" (去清真化, *qu qingzhenhua*), an Islamophobic, social media-driven effort to curtail Islamic branding practices and pressure Muslim citizens to comport themselves in appropriately "Chinese" ways (Erie 2016b; Yusupov 2021).

In Ningxia and elsewhere, the most obvious effects of Sinicization are architectural. Local governments across the country have forcibly removed domes, minarets, and Arabic writing from the exteriors of mosques, schools, and businesses (Stroup 2019; Yusupov 2023). Cadres in planning, construction, and religious affairs bureaus are required to "strictly supervise" the construction and renovation of Muslim religious venues to ensure they "highlight the Chinese style" (Central Committee 2018). One challenge for officials and adherents is the lack of clarity concerning what terms like "Chinese style" and "the spirit of Chinese culture" denote. This vagueness is more of a feature than a bug; as with Zero COVID, it may exacerbate the tendency of local officials to go overboard when implementing the policy, so as not to appear insufficiently committed to its goals. This lack of clarity, argues Weishan Huang (2021), indicates that Sinicization is concerned less with tradition than "traditionalism." Drawing on Edward Shils' distinction between the two, Huang explains that whereas tradition is malleable and subject to interpretation, "traditionalism" transforms cultural heritage into something "sacred and therefore unchangeable and exclusive" (ibid.: 65). Fidelity to actual Chinese traditions is largely beside the point. Instead, Huang argues, Sinicization is a "political campaign that assigns Chinese tradition as the modern nationalist identity." In the words of the Central Committee (2018), the campaign aims to "guide" adherents "to establish a correct view of the motherland, nation, religion,

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history, and culture, and strengthen their recognition of … the Chinese nation, Chinese culture, and the Communist Party of China."

So far, Sinicization has been less severe than the state terror inflicted on Uyghurs in Xinjiang, which appears aimed at eradicating Uyghur identity and culture (Roberts 2020; Zenz 2019). Sinicization seems to imply the possibility of inclusion within the body politic for Chinese Catholics, Protestants, Buddhists, Daoists, and (some) Muslims who comply with its stipulations. Many mosques and churches remain open even as their rooflines are rectified. Still, the campaign has been wrenching for believers, whose houses of worship have been damaged or destroyed by a state that previously approved their construction. For many Hui, Sinicization is experienced as a betrayal by a regime that had long encouraged their connections with the global *ummah*.[8]

Some Hui have openly resisted the campaign. In August of 2018, hundreds of Hui in Ningxia protested for weeks against plans to demolish the grand mosque in the village of Weizhou, completed just two years earlier (Stroup 2019). Their protest was partly successful: the mosque still stands, though in 2019 its domes were removed and replaced with circular, concave tops.[9] In Yunnan Province in China's southwest, protests erupted in May 2023 in the village of Najiaying in response to a plan to alter its main mosque. Tensions simmered also in the village of Shadian after news broke of plans to Sinicize its grand mosque, a massive domed edifice that has long been a source of tourism revenues and local pride. Rectification of this mosque was delayed for years owing to what Ruslan Yusupov (2023) describes as the "fraught" character of Hui-state relations in Shadian. The community is the site of the 1975 Shadian Incident, a Cultural Revolution-era military assault that killed upwards of fourteen hundred Hui villagers. In 1979, the party-state formally apologized for the "incident" and began restitution that involved rebuilding Shadian's mosques and supporting its Islamic religious life (Yusupov 2021; 2023).

Space, Ideology, and State Power

The architectural fixations of Sinicization show that under Xi Jinping, establishing a "correct view of the motherland" requires the proper ordering of space, both religious and secular. In China as elsewhere, the built environment has long served as a medium for communicating political ideals and narratives. That space possesses communicative power is a consequence, argues Amos Rapoport, of the human propensity "to impose meaning on the world through the use of cognitive taxonomies, categories, and schemata," and the fact that "built forms, like other aspects of material culture, are physical expressions of these schemata and domains" (1982: 15). Sites, spaces, and the structures they contain are themselves symbols, note Denise Lawrence and Setha Low, in that they "condense powerful meanings" and "comprise key elements in a system of communication used to articulate social relations" (1990: 466). Chinese thinkers have long recognized the importance of ordered spatial environments for disseminating and inculcating norms and values. As was said of Confucius, "if a mat was not straight, he would not sit on it" (席不正不坐, *xi bu zheng bu zuo*) (*Analects* 10:7) (2021).

[8]Paradoxically, some Chinese Salafis find benefit in the crackdown on external markers of Islam, insofar as it encourages a "purer," more interior Muslim spirituality (Stewart 2021).

[9]The website *Bitter Winter* tracks Sinicization and other campaigns to repress religion in the PRC. On the Weizhou case, see Ma Xiagu, "The 'sinicized' Weizhou Grand Mosque in Ningxia," *Bitter Winter*, 11 Feb. 2020, https://bitterwinter.org/the-sinicized-weizhou-grand-mosque-in-ningxia/.

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The notion that spaces "articulate social relations" is a core insight of Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991). In that work, Lefebvre proposed that social space is best grasped as a dialectical triad comprised of three "moments": "spatial practices," conceptual "representations of space," and lived "representational spaces" (ibid.: 38–40). The first of these, "spatial practices," refers to top-down, authoritative endeavors to demarcate and create space, such as urban planning, mapping, surveying, and enclosing. Such practices are informed by similarly authoritative normative conceptions (i.e., "representations") of how space should be organized and the purposes it should serve. Authoritative spatial practices and representations impose constraints on, but are also shaped by, the "representational spaces" of the lifeworld and the everyday activities conducted therein: laboring, consuming, socializing, worshiping, and so on. Lefebvre's formulation enables us to understand a range of endeavors as spatial practices, including the aforementioned de-halalization campaign. Although de-halalization primarily targets Muslim bodies and behavior, it is nonetheless spatial in its concerns and effects. In disciplining the dress, deportment, and consumption habits of Chinese Muslims, de-halalization imposes Han-centric "representations" of Chineseness on Muslim "representational spaces" and the mundane pursuits carried out within. After all, what good is it to Sinicize the built environment if the bodies and objects populating space still signify "foreign" Muslim identity and belief?[10]

For Lefebvre, spaces are neither neutral nor inert but "shot through with" ideology (ibid.: 41). At the same time, ideology depends on space. Asks Lefebvre: "What is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space which it describes, whose vocabulary and links it makes use of, and whose code it embodies? What would remain of a religious ideology—the Judeo-Christian one, say—if it were not based on places and their names: church, confessional, altar, sanctuary, tabernacle? … what we call ideology only achieves consistency by intervening in social space and its production, and by thus taking on body therein. Ideology *per se* might well be said to consist primarily in a discourse upon social space" (ibid.: 44). Lefebvre further argues that articulations of "discourse upon social space" involve the exercise of power. For the modern state in particular, space "has become … a political instrument of primary importance. The state uses space in such a way that ensures its control of places, its strict hierarchy, the homogeneity of the whole, and the segregation of parts" (1979: 288).

The spatial dimensions of state power are evident in how we think about sovereignty, which today is synonymous with control over territory, the space of the state. Beyond this, regimes deploy spatial strategies to exact compliance from their subjects. Political space is configured to render its inhabitants visible and thus governable (Foucault 1979; Scott 1999). In other cases, spatial configurations make invisible those whose presence complicates the preferred narratives of the regime (Wacquant 2000). Alternatively, spatial practices seek to sacralize or naturalize political authority, both to augment state power and to obscure its contingent origins—as Pierre Bourdieu argues, "to [make] us forget that [the state] issues out of a long series of acts of *institution* (in the active sense)" and thereby bestow on it "all the appearances of the natural" (1994: 4). While some measures aim to coerce and

[10]Muslims have resided in China for over a millennium. On the history of Chinese views of Muslims and Muslim acculturation in China, see Lipman (1997), especially chapter two.

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control, others seek to infuse space with political meanings, and to craft the built environment so as to express and reinforce these. Such practices can be categorized as "spatial cultural governance": the use of symbolic spaces and spatialized symbols to advance the state's preferred narratives, norms, and values (McCarthy 2022; Oakes 2019; Perry 2013). Yet even coercive spatial practices can be expressive. In Xinjiang, the camps and checkpoints that constrain Muslim minorities also communicate the fearsome power of the regime.

In China, the establishment and exercise of state power has long relied on symbolic spatial strategies. As early as the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BCE), ritual "progresses," the erection of steles, and personal inspection tours by Chinese emperors were among the methods used to imbue far-flung territories with the emblems and aura of imperial authority (Chang 2007; Sanft 2008). While serving practical political and military goals, these strategies facilitated what Mara Loveman (2005) calls "the primitive accumulation of symbolic power"; that is, the acquisition by state-builders of the power "to order social life" via endeavors that "make appear as natural, inevitable, and thus apolitical, that which is a product of historical struggle and human invention" (ibid.: 1654–55). Such strategies were informed by moral and ideological considerations as well as military-territorial ones. Patricia Thornton emphasizes that Chinese state-building has long been "a profoundly normative and normalizing process, which seeks not only to impose a particular moral order within which the state can claim primacy but also to make the presence of the state at the center of that totalizing vision appear both natural and necessary" (2007: 4). The success of these projects, Thornton argues, has depended on "the boundary-drawing capacity of the state: the ability of a regime to construct itself as an autonomous moral agent simultaneously separate from and embedded within an imagined political community."

The power of space to shape political identity and behavior was recognized early by the CCP. Mao Zedong's 1927 "Report on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement in Hunan" lauds the Hunan peasantry for seizing or destroying temples, clan houses, and other spaces of gentry power that embodied "the whole feudal-patriarchal system and ideology" ("Fourteen Great Achievements"). In their place, Communist revolutionaries established Poor Peasants' Associations, producers' co-operatives, and other havens of peasant power. Geared toward securing the resources needed to wage revolution, these spaces and the activities they engendered habituated ordinary people to Maoist concepts and practices such as class struggle and the mass line. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, many of the new regime's most ambitious (and notorious) policies were explicitly spatial in approach, including Land Reform, the creation of urban work units (*danwei*), and the People's Communes. CCP spatial practices produced the spectacular along with the mundane, as seen in monumental building projects that served, argues Chang-tai Hung, as "potent manifestations of the Party's grand vision expressed in colossal architecture" (2011: 258). To paraphrase Lefebvre, the Party deployed "spatial practices" that fused socialist "representations of space" with lived "representational spaces," that is, arenas of everyday experience. Its goal in doing so was the ideological transformation of the Chinese people.

After Mao, the central government's control over public space was attenuated by reforms that delegated planning authority to localities and birthed a market for real estate. Consequently, the regime lost some capacity to mold the built environment in a manner that reflected its ideological commitments, other than its commitment to growth. Spatial cultural mobilization persisted, albeit in highly decentralized form,

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via attempts to develop local economies. This mobilization has tended to promote rather than constrain diverse cultural identities and traditions, especially in minority areas where commoditizing ethnic heritage is regarded as a path to economic growth.

There is a fundamental tension in PRC spatial cultural governance between mobilization and control, especially when religion is involved. Promoting religion poses problems given the regime's avowed atheism and what Nanlai Cao terms its "secular notion of spatial modernity" (2017: 36). Given this tension, it is unsurprising that the economic mobilization of minority religions frequently engenders ersatz cultural forms and ethno-religious kitsch. As Donald Sutton and Xiaofei Kang argue, the regime prioritizes "harmony among the *minzu*," not the "accurate and complete restoration of religious sites" or of other "objects of identity that might divide or detract from patriotic loyalty to the state" (2010: 115). Its strategy has been to "exploit [religion's] market power but dwell on physical surfaces—on religion reduced to folklore" (ibid.: 122). Under Xi Jinping, however, even physical surfaces can be problematic, as the rectification of the Sino-Arab Axis makes clear.

Mobilizing Hui Identity as Soft Power Politics

Both the drive to mobilize and the impulse to control are evident in the case of WMC. As stated, for years WMC enjoyed the support of leaders in Beijing as well as Ningxia. In 2008, the State Council dispatched a team of 150 people from twenty-seven ministries and commissions to tour the autonomous region and formulate a plan for its development. The team recommended encouraging "Muslim countries to establish businesses in Ningxia" and developing Ningxia into "a platform for China-Arab business and investment"—objectives that the State Council approved and WMC promised to realize (Tan 2010).

Among the most high-profile backers of this development strategy was Wang Zhengwei, Deputy Party Secretary of Ningxia and chairman of its People's Government from 2008 to 2013. Wang, who is Hui, was later promoted to head the PRC's State Ethnic Affairs Commission in Beijing. Interviewed in 2008, Wang explained that in developing Ningxia's economy, it made sense to promote its "unique advantages," notably its distinctive Hui identity and culture (Wang and Lian 2008). These advantages included Muslim dietary strictures. During and after his tenure in Ningxia, Wang championed efforts to standardize and internationalize the region's halal foods processing and certification industries.

Official support for a Muslim-focused development strategy is noteworthy given that Ningxia's leadership, argues Wai-Yip Ho, had long been "hesitant to assert its Islamic heritage and connect with the Muslim *ummah*" (2013: 84). By the 2000s, however, officials were "keen to reassert [Ningxia's] Islamic past and rediscover the link with the Muslim world." Leaders had come to regard the identity and culture of the relatively assimilated Hui—China's "good Muslims," as Yuting Wang (2018) describes them—as soft power assets in the PRC's dealings with Muslim countries.[11] This perspective was bolstered by think tank and university researchers who

[11]This characterization of the Hui as "good Muslims" is relative. Many non-Muslim Chinese regard the Hui as assimilated but restive, owing to the long history of Muslim uprisings against repressive Chinese regimes. The Hui thus violate widespread assumptions about minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu*), who are expected to be simultaneously exotic and docile (McCarthy 2009: 11–15).

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organized conferences and published monographs detailing how Ningxia's distinct cultural, geographic, and economic characteristics might serve China's diplomatic and developmental goals (Fang 2017; Zhuo and Jiang 2016). Among the themes emphasized in these proceedings and publications is the transnational hybridity of the Hui. The Hui minority that emerges in these accounts is always already modern, if not post-modern—a globalized *minzu* skilled at navigating two worlds at once, the Chinese and the Islamic.

For backers of this development strategy, it was not just ethnicity or culture that made the Hui an asset for realizing China's global ambitions but their ineluctable Muslimness, which embeds them in the global *ummah.* This point is emphasized in a 2016 essay by Cong Enlin, then vice-president of the China Islamic Institute. Cong, who is Hui, asserts that China's Muslims are uniquely positioned to help realize Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), given the number of BRI countries with large Muslim populations. Describing the Belt and Road as "a road not just for trade" but "for religious and cultural exchange," Cong argues that "Muslim talents" should "play an active role" in its development (2016: 270–71). Government support for the *hajj* is also needed, since it is through *hajj* activities that "friendship between Chinese Muslims and Muslims from all over the world have been enhanced, and the relationship of mutual trust between governments has been established" (ibid.: 269). Giving "full play to religious resources," Cong explains, will allow China's Muslim citizens "to spread Chinese wisdom, tell Chinese stories, and promote Chinese voices, so as to make China's public diplomacy more vivid and deeply rooted in the hearts of the people."

Cong's statements underscore the durability of the narrative and ideal of "communist multiculturalism" that for decades informed, however imperfectly, Chinese governance of diverse peoples across a varied landscape (McCarthy 2009). The idea of a multiethnic Chinese nation—the *Zhonghua minzu*, a harmonious mix of the majority Han and multiple minority peoples—first emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in efforts to counter Han-supremacist formulations underpinning anti-Manchu, anti-Qing nationalism (Jenco 2019; Jin 2022; Leibold 2007; Tam 2023). The multicultural narrative gained salience during the Communist revolution, as the CCP endeavored to win the support of non-Han peoples inhabiting large swathes of Chinese territory. The Party's desire to maintain "the vast and diverse … geobody of the former Qing Empire," writes David Stroup, led it to "invoke a larger notion of Chineseness that implies multiculturalism, harmony, and equality under the Party's leadership" (2022: 37).

After Mao, the regime encouraged minorities to resuscitate their distinct cultural practices and identities, even as it remained vigilant against what it viewed as separatism and extremism. This encouragement went beyond mere tolerance, as officials actively facilitated minority cultural revival—as a legitimation strategy, to promote economic development, or because they themselves were members of minority groups. Ethno-cultural revival could and did function as a mode of resistance, for instance by enabling minorities to refashion collective identities freed of the stigma and traumas inflicted under Maoist socialism (Litzinger 1998; Mueggler 2001; Makley 2005). Yet for many minority people, expressions of ethnic and religious difference constituted assertions of membership within the Chinese nation. In other words, "being minority [became] … one way of being national" (McCarthy 2009: 10).

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Even as Ningxia's development strategy and WMC piggy-backed on this multicultural national narrative, their formulations unsettled its plot and characterization. In the *Bildungsroman* that is the Chinese national story—a tale of past glory, humiliation, struggle, and eventual triumph—the Han are positioned as the main protagonist. Inclusive as communist multiculturalism was—and it was fairly inclusive, in that it created space within the national imaginary for diverse groups—minorities were cast as supporting characters, if not plot devices, in the story of the Chinese nation's journey to self-realization. A central trope of this narrative is the idea of the Han as the "elder brother" *minzu* who lifts his minority siblings out of backwardness by offering them civilization and technological know-how (Harrell 1996; Jin 2022). With the help of the more advanced Han, minorities were propelled through stages of development, from "primitive" and "semi-feudal" stagnation to socialism with Chinese characteristics. In the developmental imaginings articulated in Ningxia, however, the Hui are portrayed not as bit players but as protagonists, indispensable to the plot's unfolding and China's global ambitions.

Entrepreneurs and Local Officials in the Making of World Muslim City

Although backed by leaders in Beijing, WMC was in many respects a local endeavor, spearheaded by local entrepreneurs as well as city and county officials. Among the former was Yu Zhiyi, an Yinchuan businessman and informal diplomat with extensive connections in the Middle East (Cao 2009). For a time, Yu headed WMC's parent company, in which he held a sizeable ownership stake. A Ningxia native who holds a degree in business management from Renmin University, Yu is founder and principal of the Ningxia Muslim International Language School, the private vocational school that was among WMC's first subprojects (Liu, Wang, and Tang 2011: 92). He has served in the Ningxia People's Political Consultative Conference, representing the field of education. In 2016, he leveraged his position in this consultative body to advocate for increased government funding for Arabic-language education.[12]

Yu also co-founded and led the Ningxia Muslim Welfare Association, a charity that was instrumental in getting WMC off the ground. Established in 2001 under the supervision of the Ningxia Ethnic Affairs Commission, for roughly fifteen years the association channeled tens of millions of yuan from foreign Muslim aid groups toward humanitarian endeavors in Ningxia. In 2007, it facilitated the donation of two million yuan from Kuwait's Zakat House and the Asian Muslim Committee of the International Islamic Charitable Organization to establish the Ningxia Muslim Orphanage (Wu 2012). Due to the association's efforts, both the orphanage and Yu's vocational school were incorporated into the plans for WMC 1.0. As a result, these entities received millions more in donations from foreign Muslim aid organizations, both state-backed and private.

[12]Yu's advocacy of Arabic language education made him the target of Islamophobic vitriol on social media. Among those attacking Yu was Xi Wuyi, a Marxist scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and one of China's most hyperbolic critics of Islam. See "Shiwu nian san yi? Zhei dian qian buji gaige jingying touzi xiejiao wan fen zhi yi. Gaige jingyin xianran shi xiejiao chu sheng zhuangshi fu ti" [300 million in fifteen years? This amount of money is less than one ten thousandth of what the reform elites invested in cults. The reform elites are obviously reincarnations of cult beasts], Weibo, 4 Jan. 2017, reposted at http://m.xys.org/forum/db/12/178/158.html (last accessed May 21, 2024). See also Zhengben Qingyuan (2017).

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The role played by Yu and the Ningxia Muslim Welfare Association underscores the philanthropic and diplomatic dimensions of WMC in its early years. Philanthropy is an important means by which wealthier Muslim and Arab states have cultivated relations with the PRC. Because of its sizeable Muslim population and status as a Hui autonomous region, Ningxia has long been a focal point of this philanthropic diplomacy, and an arena in which the PRC has sought to demonstrate its goodwill toward Muslims and tolerance of Islam. The Ningxia Muslim Welfare Association helped coordinate these endeavors under the watchful eyes of Ningxia's Foreign Affairs Bureau and Ethnic Affairs Commission (Liu, Wang, and Tang 2011: 105–6). It leveraged Yu's extensive Middle Eastern connections, identified needy Hui communities in Ningxia, and distributed funds from foreign Muslim organizations to support projects in these communities: installing wells, renovating dilapidated housing, building mosques, and so on. The association also facilitated informal meetings between Ningxia officials and visiting Muslim dignitaries, with Yu typically serving as host and translator. It was through these diplomatic and philanthropic interactions that plans for WMC began to take shape (ibid.: 101–3).

Local Communist Party officials also promoted WMC. Xia Xiyun, the ethnic Han party secretary of Yongning County when WMC was first launched, published an article in 2009 in the journal *Gongchan Dangren* [Communist party member] detailing the county's plan to "build a famous tourism city of Hui culture" (quoted in Jiang 2013: 50–51). In an interview, Xia predicted that WMC would "establish [Yongning] as a Muslim brand," "achieve leapfrog development in the Hui culture industry," and transform the county into "a tourist destination for Muslims … from all over the world" (Wang et al. 2009: 2). Xia was promoted in 2010 to party secretary of Yinchuan's Jinfeng District, where Yuehaiwan CBD is located. In that position, Xia headed the committee overseeing the construction of the Sino-Arab Axis (Miu Miu 2018).

Realizing WMC's vision depended on the backing of not just the Party but the state —government officials and bureaucratic agencies at the city, county, and township levels. Subprojects required various permits and approvals from bureaus of Land and Resources, Finance, Construction, and Housing and Rural-Urban Development. This was especially the case for subprojects slated for construction on rural land, which under Chinese law is owned by rural collectives, that is, villages. State approval is needed both to transfer use rights to entities outside the collective and to convert agricultural land for non-agricultural purposes, like tourism and industry.[13] In Yongning, local officials were tasked also with providing compensation and relocation assistance to rural villagers induced to relinquish their homes and fields for WMC endeavors (Jiang 2013; Zhang 2014b).

Despite considerable backing from powerful officials in Ningxia, WMC 1.0 encountered difficulties not long after it was launched. Only part of the project's estimated 800 million yuan budget was provided by foreign Muslim donors, and for the remainder WMC's parent company sought financing in the Middle East. Unfortunately, the company faced delays in acquiring state certificates showing its right to develop certain land parcels in Yongning, which meant it lacked the collateral needed to secure loans. By mid-2010, WMC was short of cash and having trouble

[13]An account of PRC land rights is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that land cannot be freely bought and sold, and how land is classified restricts how it may be used. Township and city governments have some authority to requisition and reclassify rural land for development purposes. Much rural development proceeds, illicitly, without formal reclassification or transfer of use rights (Zhu 2019: 126–60).

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paying suppliers and contractors. At that point only one of the buildings for the vocational school had been completed (Zhao 2015).

New life was breathed into WMC in 2011 when a majority stake in its parent company was sold to the Sanxian Group, a Beijing-based investment firm engaged in property development and cultural tourism. Sanxian is tied to charismatic and controversial business guru Liu Yimiao (Liu "One Second"), founder of the Sparta Education Group, a "business intelligence dissemination company" whose success training courses cost upwards of 300,000 yuan (over US$42,000) to attend (*English China News* 2011).[14] Following the acquisition, WMC's budget ballooned to 23 billion yuan, and subprojects increased from thirteen to twenty-three. An August 2012 grand (re)opening ceremony for WMC 2.0 was attended by more than five hundred people, among them Wang Zhengwei and other leading Ningxia officials (Zou jin Shijie 2014).

Even as subprojects multiplied, Sanxian insisted it would adhere to WMC's Muslim-centric vision. At the 2012 ceremony, the firm's CEO emphasized its commitment to "showing Ningxia's unique Hui culture and strong ethnic customs to the world" and to building "a model city for the harmonious integration of Chinese and Muslim cultures" (ibid.: 2014). Still, the acquisition shifted WMC's focus away from charity and education toward real estate and leisure and extended its geographic reach from Yongning County into Yinchuan's CBD. New endeavors announced by Sanxian included the Sino-Arab Axis, the Ningxia International Hall, a luxury resort development, and an "urban sports park." Some never-implemented WMC 1.0 subprojects were rolled over into Sanxian's plans, among them ideas for a "One Thousand and One Nights" theme park and a Silk Road Museum. Others were dropped, including the Quran Mosque. Acres of half-finished country exhibition pavilions were demolished to make way for high-end housing.

The eclecticism of these WMC endeavors was, in theory, synergistic. Once completed, subprojects would offer cultural and recreational complements to financial and industrial ventures being pitched to Middle Eastern investors. Executives from Kuwait or Dubai could attend a trade expo at the Ningxia International Hall, with Arabic translation assistance provided by graduates of the WMC-funded vocational college. Afterwards they might avail themselves of WMC leisure offerings—museums, light shows, halal eateries, golf, et cetera—before retiring to their villas at Sanxian Wisdom Bay, WMC's resort community in Yongning. Thanks to Ningxia's Hui Muslim cultural and religious resources, the executives could enjoy these amenities confident of fulfilling their Islamic spiritual and dietary obligations.

The Demise of World Muslim City

WMC's problems did not end with Sanxian's acquisition. Subprojects encountered more regulatory difficulties, some of Sanxian's own making. Actions by the firm and by local officials ensnared WMC in legal disputes that led to the suspension of major

[14]Sanxian was established by investor-acolytes of Liu, the firm's honorary chairman. Liu, who has been accused of brainwashing Sparta recruits, claims to have embarked on his path as motivational guru after reading Napoleon Hill's 1937 *Think and Grow Rich*, a classic of the self-improvement genre (*English China News* 2011). See also "Liu Yimiao," https://www.factpedia.org/index.php?title=刘一秒&variant=zh-hans (accessed 17 Jan. 2024).

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endeavors. In 2013, after construction had begun on the luxury resort development and adjacent sports park in Yongning, these projects were determined to have violated national land-use laws prohibiting the construction of detached villas and the unapproved conversion of farmland. Investigative reporting revealed also that Sanxian had started work on both projects before securing land-transfer certificates from the state, another violation of the law that county bureaus of Construction, Finance, and Land and Resources either enabled or ignored (Zhang 2014a). The "urban sports park"—portrayed in Sanxian promotional materials as an eco-friendly green space conducive to wellness (Yi 2014)—turned out to be a thirty-six-hole golf course, in contravention of a 2004 law prohibiting new course construction throughout the PRC. When queried by a reporter, the director of the county Land and Resources Bureau denied the existence of the golf course, stating that the bureau had investigated the property and "did not find a single hole" (Zhang 2014b).

Compounding matters, some of the rural land illegally used for the course and resort was illegally expropriated from farmers to whom it had been leased. When the farmers resisted, officials approved the forcible seizure of the leased land and the destruction of their crops and greenhouses. In 2013, China's Ministry of Land and Resources ordered its Yongning bureau to confiscate the golf course property and fined Sanxian over 17 million yuan. Shortly thereafter, however, the county bureau (illegally) returned the course property to Sanxian, ostensibly so the firm could take care of it and prevent its deterioration. Golf course construction resumed, though later it was halted again, and the state re-confiscated the property (Zhang 2014b). Other subprojects met similar fates. Construction on a government office complex in Yongning shut down after it emerged that neither Sanxian nor county officials had secured approval from the Planning Division of the National Development and Reform Commission, as required for all new government buildings (Shengye Construction v. Yongning County 2019). Today largely moribund, WMC lives on in lawsuits wending through the courts.

Whether in spite or because of its grand ambitions, the manner in which WMC's backers proceeded mired subprojects in controversies that resulted in their suspension and termination. Few subprojects were completed, and many were never begun. The basic problem, according to one observer, was that WMC's "grand blueprint" was "seriously out of touch with reality," and Sanxian's multi-billion-yuan investment was an "economic bubble" that existed only on paper (Zhao 2015). Yet, as an overall endeavor, WMC's fate was likely sealed by events at the top, specifically the words and actions of Xi Jinping. In 2018, Ningxia officials intensified their Sinicization efforts, removing allegedly "Saudi" and "Arabic" elements from structures throughout the autonomous region and transforming its built environment "in line with the spirit of Chinese culture and the progress of the times" (Central Committee 2018). Overtly Muslim projects that until then had mostly avoided controversy became casualties of the campaign, such as the Sino-Arab Axis. Hui Hometown Culture Park was also Sinicized: its name was changed in 2018 to Ningxia Folk Customs Park, and in 2020 domes and minarets atop park buildings were removed (see figure 6). Deprived of its main attraction, exotic architecture, the park fell into disrepair and bankruptcy. In 2022, Ningxia's Department of Culture and Tourism revoked its certification as a "cultural industry demonstration unit" (Er Shuai Xiong 2022).

WMC is not a completely failed scheme. Several major subprojects were completed, including the Ningxia International Hall, although its mesh exterior was later modified to make it appear less like a Muslim head covering. The former

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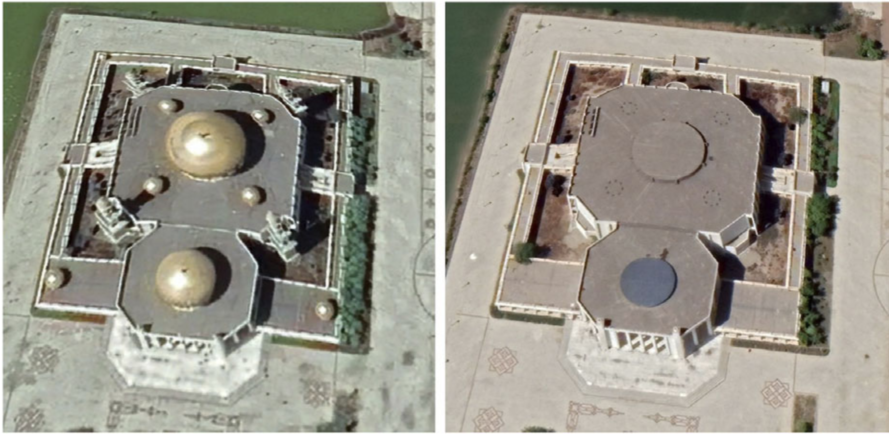

Figure 6. Roof of the Golden Ceremonial Hall, Hui Hometown Culture Park, before and after Sinicization. Satellite images taken in May 2019 (left) and April 2022 (right). Maps Data: Google, © 2024 Maxar.

Sino-Arab Axis, now called Unity Road, remains a boulevard of fountains, plazas, and Xi-approved sculptures and pavilions. Sanxian's Ningxia subsidiary held on to a small section of the golf course, which it has rebranded as "Happy Base Camp," an event site for camping, cook-outs, and corporate teambuilding (Yongning County Broadcasting 2021). One partial success story is the vocational school founded by Yu Zhiyi. In 2014, the renamed Ningxia International Language School moved to a more modern and spacious campus in Yinchuan built partly with WMC funds. The following year, the chairman of the Kuwait Investment Bank donated 22 million yuan to establish an Arabic-language teacher training center at the school (Wu 2016). In 2023, the school was renamed again as the Ningxia Business Vocational School. Although the school once aspired to be "the largest Arabic language talent training base in China" (Han 2013), today the emphasis on Arabic is greatly diminished. Business Arabic remains one field of study, but otherwise the curriculum is fairly typical of secondary vocational institutes in the PRC.[15]

Sinicization notwithstanding, PRC partnerships with Muslim nation-states have increased in recent years. Under the aegis of the Belt and Road Initiative, the PRC and Arab states have "implemented more than two hundred large-scale cooperation projects in the fields of energy and infrastructure, and the results of cooperation have benefited nearly two billion people on both sides" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2023). China continues to host an array of Sino-Arab summits and conferences. Along with trade, tech, and energy, culture remains a focus of these events. In 2022, the fifth Arab Arts Festival was held in Jingdezhen in eastern Jiangsu Province, bringing a "hint of the exotic" to that city, the traditional porcelain capital of China (Yang 2023).

[15]Majors offered include electric vehicle repair, nursing, computer graphics, and business English, to name a few. See "Guanyu 2023 ji zhuanye rencai peiyang gongshi" [Announcement regarding the 2023 professional talent training plan], Ningxia Business Vocational School (website), 2 Nov. 2023, http://www.nxbvs.com/xinwenzhongxin/962.html.

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Under Xi Jinping, however, neither Ningxia's nor China's Hui Muslim culture appears to be a topic of discussion at these forums and festivals, much less the focus of diplomatic or economic mobilization. Instead, it is the culture of China's five thousand-year-old civilization (or is it six thousand?) that is celebrated for enhancing international cooperation. As explained by the PRC's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Chinese civilization and Arab civilization have their own systems and characteristics," and it is "from each other's civilizations" that China and the Arab world "actively draw wisdom and nourishment" (2023). To demonstrate Sino-Arab friendship and its commitment to mutual tolerance, in 2022 the PRC supported a UN resolution designating 15 March as an "International Day to Combat Islamophobia."

Conclusion

World Muslim City was promoted and justified in terms of national imperatives to develop China's west and forge closer relations with the Muslim world. It was enabled by a multicultural national narrative that encouraged the economic mobilization of Hui identity and traditions. The project was facilitated also by the fragmented character of the PRC's sprawling governing apparatus, a system that for decades enabled policy improvisation, and deviation, at the local level. Although backed by top leaders in Beijing, WMC was in great part a local endeavor, championed by city and county officials and private entrepreneurs. This case reveals how regional development schemes are conjured and implemented in China, and how official narratives and policies create openings for the pursuit of local agendas, or have done so in the past. This case suggests also that the mobilization of official narratives can obscure elements of the "real" story, such as greed, hype, and illegal land-grabs, familiar themes in China's quest for growth.

The demise of WMC underscores the increasingly narrow view of nation and tradition advanced under Xi Jinping. For minorities such as the Hui, official rhetoric portraying China as a bounded, coherent civilizational entity constrains cultural, religious, and even business endeavors that deviate from the secular, Han-dominated mainstream. The space for local policy improvisation has also narrowed. Xi's drive for control has entailed moves to strengthen intra-Party discipline and ensure that policies are implemented in accord with central government directives. Buttressing this agenda is an anti-corruption campaign, now in its second decade, that has ensnared tens of thousands of party-state officials. Among them is Xia Xiyun, former Party Secretary of Yongning County and backer of WMC. Xia was investigated for corruption in 2015, expelled from the Party, and subsequently convicted of bribery and other crimes for which he is serving a thirteen-year prison sentence (Shen 2017). In 2022, former Ningxia Deputy Party Secretary Wang Zhengwei became the subject of a corruption investigation (Chin 2022). Earlier, in 2016, Wang was removed from his post heading the State Ethnic Affairs Commission after just three years in office, allegedly for championing halal standardization and other Muslim minority concerns.

These punitive measures highlight an important aspect of Sinicization: its targets include not just religious organizations and physical structures, but also party-state officials. The campaign depends on officials, who are expected to faithfully execute its directives and thereby demonstrate obeisance to the CCP and to Xi himself. In

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analyzing the Zhejiang church cross-removal campaign, a forerunner of Sinicization nationwide, Nanlai Cao notes that the Zhejiang effort "developed in parallel with the top-down nationwide party building movement" (2017: 35). Cao avers that even if the campaign fell short in "containing the massive growth of Christianity in China," it succeeded in establishing "a coercive environment for political discipline and the engineering of secular state morality among society at large" (ibid.: 45). Through spatial rectification, "the state has managed to reassert its ideological power and modernist vision in local communities…." The events in Zhejiang, he argues, show that "religious work has become part and parcel of the party-building work" under Xi Jinping. The same can be said of the push to Sinicize religious and secular spaces throughout the PRC. The campaign is one in a long line of Chinese state-building (and re-building) projects—efforts to accumulate or re-accumulate symbolic power —that have sought to discipline and instill virtue in the functionaries of the regime.

As seen in the rectification of the Sino-Arab Axis, strategies of Sinicization highlight the CCP's continued reliance on spatial cultural governance. Cultural governance typically eschews coercion, aiming instead to elicit consent by cloaking power in culturally resonant garb. Yet Sinicization hardly obscures the regime's coercive power. Rather, it communicates that power clearly, no matter the murkiness of specific directives. The campaign suggests a corollary to Bourdieu's (1994: 12) maxim that "the most brutal relations of force are always simultaneously symbolic relations": it shows that symbolic relations can be means of exerting brute force, or of demonstrating the capacity to do so. Whether or not Sinicization has cultivated consent among its targets is unclear. There is no question that it has elicited compliance.

To return to Lefebvre, Sinicization is a "discourse upon social space" that promotes the ruling ideology, an ideology not of revolutionary socialism but of Xi-ism, nationalism, and Party control. Its spatial practices impose Xi-ist "representations of space" on experiential "representational spaces," from mosques and theme parks to venues like the Sino-Arab Axis. The built environment is a medium through which abstract concepts—Xi's authority, Chinese tradition, national rejuvenation—are rendered concrete. Spatial practices of Sinicization operate much like political rituals: repeated, patterned, symbolic actions that channel power and affirm the moral-political order.[16] These coincide with other measures to discipline officials and the private sector, and to advance not just ideological orthodoxy but orthopraxy, correct practice in the governance of the Chinese body politic. The question of whether Sinicized buildings, liturgies, and spaces are authentically Chinese is, for the most part, unimportant. What matters is that the rituals of Sinicization are enacted: domes are demolished, rooflines rectified, the nation's flag is raised at mosques before Friday *Jum'ah* prayer. Repeated at sites across China, these practices express and amplify the power of the regime.

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[16]As Charles Sanft explains, "ritual always indexes its performer's (or performers') submission to the social structure that contains the ritual. Carrying out a ritual means accepting, in front of an audience, the moral order sanctioning that ritual. The audience observing a ritual includes the performer, and the index of submission to a social order may be targeted at the performer" (2008: 22).

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