Using Religion to Resist Rural Dispossession: A Case Study of a Hui Muslim Community in North-west China

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Abstract

In this paper, we examine the role played by religion in a struggle waged by Hui Muslim villagers against land expropriation. Religion can provide powerful resources for protest movements, especially for religious minorities, but it can also be dangerous. This is particularly true in China where the state has had little toleration of autonomous organization and has long been suspicious of religious organization, especially among ethnic minorities. Scholarly literature about collective action by religious minorities in China has focused on protests about cultural and political issues – and the repression of such protests – but there has been relatively little scholarship about protests by religious minorities over economic issues. The number of protests over economic conflicts has increased in recent years, and the state has been more tolerant of economic than of political protests. These conditions have shaped the following questions: what happens when villagers employ religious ideas and use religious organization to advance economic demands? How effective are religious ideas and organization as tools of mobilization? How do government authorities respond?

Keywords: China; protest; religion; land; peasant; Hui; Muslim

"When Hui land is expropriated by the government, they can mobilize all the Hui in the village, including seniors and children, driving cars and tractors to petition the local government," a Han villager recounted with admiration and envy. "We Han people can't be compared with the Hui, they are very united in facing everything."[1] In recent years, villages on the outskirts of Yinchuan 银川, the capital of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, have faced increasing pressure to surrender land to make way for government-backed infrastructural and commercial projects. Villages in the region are typically made up either of Han, China's dominant ethnic group, or of Hui, China's largest Muslim minority. Hui villagers

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1 Interview with local Han villager (E3), 27 January 2010.

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have earned a reputation for their ability to mobilize to resist land expropriation. This reputation is reflected in the testimony of the Han villager, who spoke from bitter personal experience: his family had lost land to make way for a commercial fish farm and had received very little compensation. Many of his fellow villagers had been impacted, and he and others had taken collective petitions to town, county and municipal authorities; however, they were unable to mobilize protests strong enough to compel officials to respond to their demands. In contrast, he noted, his immediate neighbours in Hui villages had been far more successful in mobilizing resistance to land expropriation and winning concessions.

In this paper, we recount one particular struggle against land expropriation waged by Hui villagers living outside of Yinchuan. In particular, we investigate the role that religion played in efforts to build solidarity and organize protests. It is widely recognized that religion can offer powerful resources for protest movements.[2] Kenneth Wald and Frederick Harris, for example, have pointed to several kinds of political resources that religion can provide for these movements, highlighing its role as a source of motivation, organization and social interaction.[3] For religious minorities, religion can be a particularly important resource yet it can also be dangerous. It can serve as a powerful means to mobilize co-religionists but such mobilization can also spur a backlash by the majority population and harsh repression by authorities. This is particularly true in China, where the state has had little toleration of autonomous organization and has long been suspicious of religious organization, especially among ethnic minorities in peripheral regions.

Religion plays an especially important role among several of China's major ethnic minorities, including groups that practise forms of Tibetan Buddhism and Islam. The Chinese state has attempted to manage and regulate Tibetan Buddhist and Islamic organizations and foster accommodation but it has also engaged in severe repression. This repression has been particularly harsh in Tibet and Xinjiang, where issues of political separation have long coloured often contentious relations.[4] Scholarly literature about collective action by religious minorities in these regions as well as in the rest of China has focused on protests about cultural and political issues – and the repression of such protests. This is not surprising because culture and politics form the central terrain on which relations between the state and religious minorities have evolved. Contention often revolves around cultural issues that become political and political issues that involve cultural identity, such as the rights to practise religion (together with related cultural practices) and exercise local autonomy (based on ethnic and religious distinctions).[5]

2 Juergensmeyer 1994; Graymala-Busse 2012; Mirola 2003; Smith 1996; Turner 1977; Williams 1996.
3 Harris 1994; Wald 1987.
4 Barnett 2009; Barnett and Akiner 1994; Bovingdon 2010; Cliff 2012; Dillon 2004; Gladney 1991; Goldstein 1997; Goldstein and Kapstein 1999; Han and Paik 2014; O'Brien, David 2011; Potter 2003.
5 Bovingdon 2010; Davis 2008; Gladney 1991; Hillman 2004; Schwartz 1994; Wei 2010.

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In contrast, there has been relatively little scholarship about protests in China by religious minorities over economic issues.[6] Economic conflicts – involving land, employment, housing, taxes, environmental degradation, and so on – have sparked increasing numbers of protests across China in recent years, and these issues certainly impact ethnic minorities. Moreover, although the Chinese state has sought to restrict organized protests of any kind, in recent years it has been much more tolerant of economic protests than of political protests. Indeed, while political protests continue to be severely repressed, economic protests are very common in China today and often lead to negotiations and concessions. Workers and peasants have learned that strikes, collective petitions, marches and sit-ins will often be tolerated, as long as they steer clear of demands that have political undertones. In order to avoid repression, protests must appear to be spontaneous, local, peaceful and purely economic; those who venture beyond these limits are treading on more dangerous territory.[7]

In his carefully researched volume on collective action in Xinjiang, Gardner Bovingdon presents a picture that confirms conventional understandings about protests by religious minorities in China and how the government responds. He documents a sharp contrast between protests by Uyghurs in Xinjiang and by China's Han majority: while most Han protests involve economic grievances and are largely tolerated, the vast majority of protests by Uyghurs are motivated by religious, cultural and political issues, and almost always face severe repression. Moreover, even economic protests by Uyghurs are harshly suppressed.[8] Religion, he stresses, is a central part of the equation. "Uyghurs have often used religion as a vehicle to express wider grievances," Bovingdon writes, and the government's fierce attacks on religiosity are "clearly intended to eliminate both an alternative source of meaning and space for organization."[9]

Ningxia is not Xinjiang. Although it is also a peripheral region with a history of violent ethnic conflict, the issue of political separation, which underlies the tensions in Xinjiang, does not exist in Ningxia. Nevertheless, there has been a religious revival among the Hui in that region, as among other Muslims throughout China, and religion plays a big part in the relations between the Hui population and the state, including protests. These general conditions have shaped our questions as we consider the role of religion in mobilizing Hui villagers to protest against land expropriation. What happens when villagers employ religious ideas and use religious organizations to advance economic demands? How effective are religious ideas and organization as tools of mobilization? How do government authorities respond?

6 Exceptions include Bovingdon 2010; Lipman 2004 and Luo 2010. Discussion of economic protests in each of these is quite limited.
7 Cai 2010; Chen 2011; Li, Yao 2015; O'Brien, Kevin, and Li 2006.
8 Bovingdon 2010, 105–134.
9 Ibid., 121.

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Case and Sources

The case examined in this paper involves protests against land expropriation brought about by the expansion of a chemical fertilizer plant in Heshui, a rural district outside of Yinchuan.[10] The project to expand the plant was launched in 2011 and is ongoing; protests by villagers began almost immediately and are also ongoing. Most of the field research for this paper was conducted between the autumn of 2011 and the spring of 2013. This investigation was conducted by the first author; the two authors have collaborated in analysing the developments and writing the paper (we use the pronoun *we* throughout for stylistic convenience).

The analysis is based on both interviews and documents. Altogether 40 residents of the district were interviewed, including three town cadres, one village cadre, one retired cadre, two imams, and two directors of mosque management committees, as well as many farmers, small entrepreneurs, and a migrant worker. Among the documentary materials collected were petition letters and leaflets written by protesters, as well as reports written by government officials about the fertilizer plant project and the protests. The first author also spent a great deal of time in the village and in village mosques observing everyday life and conversing with residents as these events unfolded.

We cannot make any specific claims about the representativeness of this case. The situation of the Hui, composed of diverse Muslim populations scattered through many Chinese provinces, is unlike that of any other minority group in China. Moreover, the history of this area and this population, the social and political circumstances obtaining there today, and the specific developments of this industrial project and the protests against it all add layers of particularity to this case. Nevertheless, we believe that our analysis of the evolution of this case can help to shed light on the role that religion can play in contentious interaction over economic disputes between members of religious minority groups and the state in China today.

Background

The Hui community and its history

The protests that have taken place in Heshui are, in many ways, similar to other protests mounted by peasants across China to resist expropriation of land for infrastructural, industrial and commercial projects.[11] As we shall see, however, in this case the understandings and actions of both protesters and government officials are informed by the identity of the Hui as a religious minority and by collective memories of rebellion and repression that go back long before the ascension of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to power in 1949. Like

10 To preserve the anonymity of interviewees, we use a pseudonym for this town.
11 Cai 2010; Chen 2011; Deng and O'Brien 2013; Guo 2001; O'Brien, Kevin, and Li 2006; Ying 2001.

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much of the Hui population in the region, the families that live in Heshui are largely descended from survivors of the calamitous Hui rebellions in north-west China during the 19th century, many of whom were forcibly relocated after the rebellions were crushed.

Altogether there are about 11 million people who are officially classified as Hui, and they are considered to be China's second largest ethnic minority. Scattered through many regions, they are culturally diverse, claiming roots that can be traced back to a variety of Muslim migrants – Iranic, Semitic, Mongolic, and Turkic – who started arriving as long as 1,300 years ago.[12] The Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in north-west China, one of five autonomous regions created by the CCP after 1949 to govern areas with large ethnic minority populations, is home to the largest concentration of Hui in the country. According to the 2010 census, about 34 per cent of Ningxia's population is Hui and about 62 per cent is Han.[13] The Hui have intermarried with Han for generations and most speak Chinese, so it is difficult to distinguish the two groups physically or linguistically. Nevertheless, religion clearly sets them apart; Hui communities are typically separate and are built around mosques.[14]

The Hui families of Heshui only settled in the area in 1982 as part of a poverty alleviation programme organized by the State Council. Previously, they had lived in Xihaigu 西海固, a desolate, arid mountain region of Ningxia that was overcrowded and impoverished. Their ancestors were among perhaps 10,000 Hui expelled from the central Shaanxi plain after the suppression of a Muslim rebellion a century earlier. Zuo Zongtang 左宗棠, the governor-general who led the suppression of the rebellion, selected Xihaigu as a site on which to establish relocation camps because it was barren, isolated from Han settlements, and would facilitate the management of the insurgent population. An explicit aim was to suppress and undermine the authority of the religious organizations that had led the uprising.[15]

The 1982 relocation to Heshui in the Yinchuan valley was a great improvement for the resettled Hui population. The valley, a fertile plain formed by the upper reaches of the Yellow River (Huanghe 黄河), is known locally as the "Jiangnan of the North" (*saishang Jiangnan* 塞上江南), a reference to the Yangtze River (Changjiang 长江) delta area that is among the most productive in China. The land that became Heshui is state-owned; part of it had been a state farm but it had been little developed. When the Hui families arrived in the early 1980s, they had to start from scratch and the first years after resettlement, as they gradually built homes and mosques and planted fruit trees and crops, were very difficult. The villages in Heshui are still among the poorest in the Yinchuan area, but over the course of more than three decades, the Hui settlers have grown

12 Dillon 1999; Gladney 1991, 1999; Lipman 1997; Yu 1996.
13 National Statistics Bureau 2012.
14 Gustafsson and Sai 2014.
15 Dillon 1999, 70; Ching 2010, 79; Li, Fanwen, and Yu 1988, 396–97.

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relatively prosperous by cultivating rice, wheat, vegetables, apples, and grapes, building small businesses, and taking jobs outside the village. After steady population growth, in 2003 the Heshui area was converted into an administrative town (*zhen* 镇). It is now home to over 4,400 families – some 21,000 people – of whom about 95 per cent are Hui and 92 per cent have agricultural household registration.[16]

Fertilizer plant expansion

The recent upheaval in Heshui has been caused by plans to expand a large chemical fertilizer plant located in the town. Ningxia Petrochemical Company, a subsidiary of Petro China, plans to invest 2.67 billion yuan (US$427 million) to expand the capacity of the plant; when complete, it is expected to produce 1,500 tons of synthetic ammonia and 2,640 tons of urea per day, making it the largest fertilizer plant in China.[17] In conjunction, the local government plans to widen the main highway, improve the adjacent railway line and expand the railway station, and develop a number of related commercial projects. Local officials, whose career trajectories have depended on their success in promoting GDP growth, have strongly backed the project.

The project called for the expropriation of over 7,700 *mu* 亩 of land in Heshui, impacting over 1,200 households in six villages. The compensation and resettlement scheme initially proposed by local officials in 2011 offered affected families 34,000 yuan per *mu* of land located along the highway, and 17,000 yuan per *mu* for other land, along with compensation for houses that were to be demolished. Those families with houses that appeared in aerial photos taken in 2003 were offered a fixed compensation package composed of money and commensurate housing in a new settlement area located nearby, while those with houses built from 2004 to 2006 were offered a fixed amount of money. Those who had subsequently built houses without official authorization were to receive less compensation, and those who had built houses on land zoned exclusively for agriculture were to receive no compensation. Villagers were also entitled to purchase at cost five square metres per person of commercial space or 20 square metres of apartment space in the new settlement area. Those who would lose all of their land were offered urban household registration and invited to participate in municipal pension and health insurance schemes. In addition, all displaced villagers were offered a small dislocation and moving allowance, and those who signed an agreement within ten days were offered a 3,000-yuan bonus.[18]

16 Heshui Statistics Bureau 2011.

17 China National Petroleum Corporation. 2012. "50 Kt/a synthetic ammonia & 800 Kt/a urea project starts at Ningxia Petrochemical," http://www.cnpc.com.cn/en/nr2012/201211/dae34e5d2064427f9922214155deac3e.shtml. Accessed 18 September 2015.

18 Document No. 131, produced by the government of the district in which Heshui is located, Yinchuan municipality, 2011.

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In addition to the expropriation of land and houses, the plan called for the demolition of at least 12 mosques in several villages, and their replacement with several larger mosques, to be built in another village. The existing mosques, however, belonged to a variety of sects and they served as social centres for village communities; moreover, many had built commercial shops along the highway and rental income from these shops was used to reduce the compulsory *zakah* contributions required of worshipers. Villagers and clerics, therefore, had strong reasons to oppose the demolition and consolidation of local mosques.

In order to convince villagers to accept the plan, local leaders assembled a work team composed of a large number of local grassroots cadres to conduct "thought work" (*sixiang gongzuo* 思想工作). Team members were expected to use their influence to pacify and "transform" (*zhuanhua* 转化) villagers, and each member was assigned a quota to fulfil. This task, however, proved very difficult. One member conveyed the mood of pessimism among the work team:

> You can see there are only three or four people working in our building now; the others have gone to mobilize the masses to relocate, but they have become discouraged. As a Hui cadre, I am very anxious, just as other Muslims are. The masses have called for cohesively opposing the contract with the local government. This is quite fair and reasonable. I don't know what they can do in the future [if they give up their land], because they have no skills and little money.[19]

In order to advance the plan, higher authorities replaced those in charge of the work team, gave enhanced priority to its tasks, and transferred more cadres to join the team. They, however, continued to face an uphill battle.[20]

Religious Resources for Mobilizing Resistance

Although the expropriation and compensation plan presented by the government affected residents of Heshui differently, with some faring better than others, almost all of the affected residents resisted signing the contracts. This remarkable cohesion – which stands in stark contrast to the disunity observed in other rural communities facing divide-and-conquer tactics – required collective organization and mobilization.[21] This was based not simply on individual interests but on a sense of moral righteousness and social solidarity among Hui villagers. This was the solidarity of an ethnic minority, the distinct identity of which was defined largely by religion. Moreover, as noted above, in mobilizing resistance, Hui villagers were able to make use of religious resources. These can be conceived of in two categories – moral/ideological and organizational. These two types of resources have long been recognized by scholars who study protest movements as crucial for effective collective action. Sidney Tarrow, for instance, has described "cultural and ideological frames" and "structures of mobilization" as

19 Interview with a town official (F22), town office, 22 November 2011.

20 For a detailed account of how the CCP assembles work teams to conduct thought work in order to demobilize resistance, see Deng and O'Brien 2013.

21 For a detailed account of successful divide-and-conquer tactics used by local officials in rural land requisition efforts, see Chuang 2014.

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"the two kinds of resources of social movements which make it possible for them to solve their coordination problem."[22]

Moral and ideological resources

In many countries, when peasants face dislocation and other threats to their livelihood they mobilize resistance by appealing to norms of "moral economy," that is, long standing principles that recognize a fundamental right to subsistence.[23] In China, such claims are often based on promises of inalienable land rights and subsistence guarantees made by the CCP during its first decades in power.[24] Moreover, as Kevin O'Brien and Lijiang Li have shown, villagers frequently present their protests as "rightful resistance" directed against corrupt local officials and in line with central government policies.[25] Both themes echo older Confucian ideals in which rulers are obliged to look after the welfare of their subjects and protect them against the predations of local gentry.[26] As we shall see, the Hui villagers in Heshui made use of these types of cultural frames, available to all rural activists, but they also relied on religious resources that provided a particularly strong stimulus for communal resistance.

At first, only a few Hui villagers were planning to organize a collective petition to the government to oppose the expropriation plans. Shortly thereafter, however, an anonymous open letter was posted on the doors of every household in Heshui. The letter, titled "Fight to the death with our own blood to defend our homesteads (*jiayuan* 家园)," called on all residents to unite to resist dispossession:

> Dear fellow Muslims of the town: As devout Muslims and believers in Allah, we are very proud of our long history of living in a Muslim settlement and we are satisfied with our current lifestyle. However, is what is happening now really harmony? The Old Huihui (*lao huihui* 老回回) will be displaced – they want to strangle us. My fellow Muslims, it is time to wake up! Why allow our homes, constructed by three generations, to be destroyed at the hands of the Han people? We will swear to protect our homesteads in the name of Allah. Wake up, my fellow Muslims! They hope to persuade us to move with talk about giving us 40 square metres per capita [of housing] in exchange for all of our yards and all of our property accumulated over a lifetime. Let's wake up quickly! You can buy beautiful houses and large buildings anywhere, but everyone knows that that once you have lost your home and yard, you can never get it back … [This plan] means to take away our essence. My fellow Muslims, wake up quickly! No one but us cares about how we will live in the future.

The letter added a special appeal to those who were not directly threated with dispossession:

> Because of our disunity, they take advantage of our weaknesses. And so, my fellow Muslims, get united! One pair of chopsticks is easy to break, but it is difficult to break a bundle of

22 Tarrow 1994, 7; also see McAdam, McCarthy and Zald 1996.
23 Scott 1976.
24 These promises were reiterated in different ways as the CCP carried out land reform, then collectivization, and finally the household responsibility system (Andreas and Zhan 2015).
25 O'Brien, Kevin, and Li 2006.
26 Perry 2008; Wu 2015a.

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chopsticks. Please do not just watch, waiting to see what happens, otherwise the way I am treated today will be the way you will be treated tomorrow … Unite! We will swear to defend our homesteads in the name of Allah![27]

The letter had a galvanizing impact. The language was not religious in the sense of citing Quranic scriptures or invoking Islamic conceptions of rights, but it effectively appealed to a collective sense of historical injustice connected with the villagers' religious identity. Not all villagers endorsed the militant religious rhetoric of the letter, but its call to defend the community aroused sentiments that were widely shared. Several interviewees used language that had little religious content and was more in line with official state discourse but expressed the same indignation. One older villager, for instance, explained:

[The Hui] love socialism and support the leadership of the Communist Party and the development of our country. However, as citizens we should be entitled to the basic right to survive in this country. The Communist Party has taken care of us – in order for us to survive, it moved us from Xihaigu, which the United Nations said was not suitable for human habitation. We thank the Party. But now the local government has started to grab our land. We do not have any excessive demands and ambitions, we only want to live. We have farmed for generations, we can do nothing except grow crops … Although we are peasants, the local government should not regard us as a ball to be kicked back and forth.[28]

A popular verse composed to protest expropriation advanced the same themes, adding sharp condemnation of local officials' corruption and abuses of power.

We came from the mountains to the plains and worked hard for 20 years,
We changed sand into fertile land, desert into rice paddies.
Now we have broad avenues and orchards surrounding our villages
With plenty of food to eat and clothes to wear, peasants are happy.
But just as a better life is beginning, now they tear down our houses and grab our land.
Tilling the land is the lifeblood of peasants, without land we can't survive.
Higher level bureaucrats fail to investigate, local officials act recklessly and illegally,
Officials and businessmen collude to defraud the people, despotically demolishing houses and grabbing land,
As brutal methods are used to kick us out, the masses are indignant.
The police are mobilized to suppress us, forcibly removing us from our homes.
They flout Party discipline and state law, severely damaging relations with society.
We won't tolerate fraudulent and illegal expropriation of farmland.
Corrupt officials are too outrageous, we must get rid of them completely.[29]

In this verse, which was widely distributed in Hui villages and also submitted to local Party officials, one can observe claims based on "moral economy" and "rightful resistance" principles. Both types of principles, which were also alluded to by the older villager quoted previously, are, as we have noted, invoked by peasants resisting dispossession throughout the country. In this case, however, these themes were reinforced by references to the specific history of the Heshui community, which both government officials and community members know is bound up with the chronically troubled relationship between the Hui minority and successive Chinese states.

27 Anonymous 2011a. Authors' translation.
28 Interview with local Hui villager (F23), 25 March 2012.
29 Anonymous 2011b. Authors' translation.

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Many villagers raised this historical connection more explicitly. "In the Qing period," one villager explained, "the Old Huihui were forcibly evicted and relocated to barren mountains; generations lived bitterly … My father dedicated his life to this land and, you see, we have built beautiful houses and cultivated fertile land. Now, the local government wants to evict me again. Who wants to do that?"[30] For the residents of Heshui, historical memory and religious identity made the government plans for acquiring their land and demolishing their homes not simply a matter of economic development but a means to once again displace the Hui. When discussing their opposition to the plans, they depicted it not only as a land grab but also as an ethnic attack, pointedly describing themselves not only as peasants but as "Muslims" and "Old Huihui." As we shall see, the religious overtones were intensified by the fact that the plan not only called for the expropriation of the land and homes of individual households but also the demolition of mosques.

The anonymous letter had such an impact because it invoked this troubled history in particularly stark and potent terms, highlighting the religious identity that distinguishes the Hui minority from the Han majority and colours their relationship with the state. It added intensity to the villagers' moral claims to the land and urgency to the plea for communal solidarity. The religious references imbued the struggle with a moral meaning that went beyond mundane calculations of land values and individual interests, beyond moral economy claims to subsistence, and even beyond simple ethnic grievances; it became a religious struggle that demanded the commitment of all members of the community. By so doing, the letter amplified the solidarity of Heshui residents, and it also made the looming confrontation potentially more perilous for both villagers and state officials.

Organizational resources

As many scholars have noted, popular resistance in contemporary China is characterized by a low degree of organization and is much more informal, transient and "cellular" than in many other countries.[31] This is a product of Chinese state policy, which tolerates and accommodates many kinds of protests, but is quick to repress efforts to create organizations that are autonomous from the CCP and might mobilize opposition. Even the most resilient, protracted and organized protest efforts must rely on informal ties, as overt displays of organization invite repression.[32]

In this regard, Hui Muslims have an important advantage in that the mosque itself, along with formal and informal groups connected with the mosque,

30 Interview with local Hui villager (F20), 15 December 2011.
31 Lee 2007; Lee and Friedman 2010; Wu 2015b; Xie 2008.
32 Wu 2015a.

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provides organizational resources that can be used to mobilize collective action. Mosques are powerful organizations with a membership of congregants, regularly scheduled prayers and professional leadership. These provide potential mobilizing structures that secular communities do not have. However, mosques – and the religious sects to which they belong – not only unite but also divide the Hui community, and there have been periods of violent sectarian conflict. Moreover, because of their potential for mobilization, mosques have long been the object of state regulation and control. In this section, we will focus on state efforts to control religious organization in order to prevent it from being used as a resource for resistance. In the subsequent section, we will examine the limits of that control.

There are 34 mosques in Heshui, most of which belong to two of China's largest branches of Islam, Gedimu and Jahriyya. The Gedimu school, which has 18 mosques, is China's oldest and largest Muslim tradition, dating from the Tang dynasty, while the Jahriyya school, which has 11 mosques, is a Sufi tradition that dates from the last years of the Ming dynasty. Two mosques belong to the Khufiyya sect, another to the Sufi school, and three to the Yihewani sect, which was inspired by the Wahhabi movement.[33] The beliefs and practices of each of these traditions are quite distinct.

Hui villages have traditionally been established along strictly sectarian lines, with every hamlet organized around a mosque and all villagers belonging to a single sect. This was the situation in the mountain district of Xihaigu, where the Hui population of Heshui lived before 1982. Relocation, however, broke down the previous residential pattern, as families from different villages – and different sects – were resettled in the same village. As a result, all the villages of Heshui have populations and mosques belonging to different sects, and many residents live far from a mosque of their own sect. When age, weather and time constraints make it difficult to pray in their own mosques, residents sometimes must pray in nearby mosques that belong to other sects. In the years that followed relocation in 1982, the mixing together of different sects led to frequent misunderstandings and conflicts, and Heshui residents have been concerned that current relocation plans will lead to similar conflicts.

In Hui villages, mosques are not only places for religious activities but also important social centres. They are, of course, the site where villagers meet for Friday prayers, and with the religious revival of recent years, mosques have also organized summer schools that offer religious education for children and adults. Many villagers also go to the mosque for help with various problems, including marriage and family issues and neighbourhood disputes. Typically,

33 The name Gedimu 格底目 is derived from the Arabic *qadim*, meaning ancient. Both the Jahriyya and the Khufiyya schools emerged from the Naqshbandi branch of Sufism. The names, respectively Zheherenye 哲合忍耶 and Hufuye 虎夫耶 in Chinese, refer to contrasting practices of praying loudly or quietly. Yihewani 伊赫瓦尼 is the Chinese equivalent of the Arabic term *ikhwan* (brotherhood); the most recent of the Chinese schools of Islam, it began to gain a large following during the final years of the Qing dynasty. See Mian 1991; Dillon 1999; Ma 2000.

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the management committees of local mosques (see below) are made up of the most respected and influential villagers.

Because mosques are such important institutions in Hui villages, and especially because religious leaders and religious organizations have played a central role in Hui rebellions, Chinese state authorities have long sought to influence these organizations and constrain their activities. After the Hui rebellions of the 19th century, Qing officials attempted to weaken the authority of the imams, who had been largely autonomous from the state, and instead promote the authority of mosque managers, who were more compliant. This gave rise to a model of mosque management, promoted by subsequent governments as well, that has separated administrative and religious functions. In the early Republican era, regional Muslim boards were established, and during the Anti-Japanese War, the Interior Ministry of the Nationalist government created a national system of Muslim boards to mobilize for war and war relief efforts. After the CCP took power, it established a Chinese Islamic Association, which operated under the guidance of the Party's United Front Work Department. Local branches of the Islamic Association were gradually established in all regions with a significant Muslim population, and in 1958, the Party promulgated a system of "democratic management committees" to administer mosques. The system was more fully institutionalized by the post-Mao leadership after 1978.[34]

Today, every mosque in China has a democratic management committee, led by a director and several deputy directors. These officers are elected by congregants for terms of three to five years and cannot serve more than two consecutive terms. Mosque management committees operate under the guidance of the local Islamic Association and also report to the religious affairs bureau of the county government. After consulting with congregants and the local Islamic Association, mosque management committees are responsible for appointing an imam, who presides over the religious activities of the mosque. In order to become an imam, candidates must be awarded an "Islamic teaching qualification certificate." This involves passing a qualifying examination, administered by the local Islamic Association, which is composed of a written part that focuses on current political and religious policies, laws and regulations, and an oral part that focuses on the teachings of classic Islamic texts. The Islamic Association must also confirm candidates' good conduct, law-abiding nature and moral cultivation.[35]

In practice, Gedimu mosques are administered differently than Jahriyya mosques, as the former have traditionally been more decentralized and autonomous, while the latter have always operated as part of centralized religious orders known as *menhuan* 门宦.[36] In Gedimu mosques, congregants typically elect both the management committee director and the imam, and the director

34 Ding 2012.

35 Ding 2012; Xinhuanet.com 2009; Chinese Islamic Association 2012.

36 Jahriyya *menhuan*, equivalent to the Arabic *silsila* (order or chain of succession), emerged as the Sufi school gained adherents in China during the Qing dynasty. *Menhuan* leaders (known as *jiaozhu*, equivalent to the Arabic *shaykh*), exercised strong control over dozens of mosques through a network of leaders

typically serves for a longer term and has more authority than the imam. In Jahriyya mosques, while the management committee director is elected locally, the imam is appointed by leaders of the order and typically has more authority. Since the 19th century, Chinese state officials have been particularly concerned about controlling the Jahriyya orders, which played an especially important role in the Hui rebellions. Today, higher-level Jahriyya leaders are often appointed to serve as members of the local, provincial and national bodies of the Chinese people's political consultative conference. In contrast, the more decentralized Gedimu mosques tend to operate more autonomously from state and Party agencies.

Starting in 2008, the Yinchuan municipal government began providing some imams with a state stipend of 400 yuan per month. The explicit purpose was to involve them directly in state governance, shifting from a model in which they report only to the mosque management committee to a model in which they also report to the sub-district office of the municipal government, which is now responsible for assessing their work on a quarterly basis. For the purposes of assessment, one Yinchuan district created a form listing the duties of imams; the first two stipulations required that they: "Unswervingly hold high the banner of patriotism and socialism, uphold the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist system, safeguard national unity and social stability, and resolutely oppose all separatist forces and separatist activities," and "Adhere to the ethnic and religious policies, laws and regulations of the Party and the state, adhere to the principle of independent self-management, conscientiously resist and expose illegal activities conducted in the name of religion, maintain existing religious structures, and promote inter-religious and intra-religious unity and harmony."[37]

The institutional forms and provisions described in the preceding paragraphs all indicate how concerned the CCP is about keeping Islamic religious organizations and personnel under state regulation and supervision. In practice, however, as we shall see, it is difficult to maintain a tight rein, especially when state policies conflict with the interests and convictions of mosque constituents.

Mobilizing Resistance

As Hui activists in Heshui mobilized against plans to expropriate their land and demolish their houses and mosques, they knew they were likely to face repression. The 2011 project was a continuation of a long-term development plan that had

footnote continued

and advisers, often drawn from among relatives. Ching 2010; Ma 2000; Nationalities Problem Research Group 1980.

37 Quarterly form listing the duties of imams of mosques issued by a local district government, Yinchuan municipality, 2011. Authors' translation.

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already claimed a substantial amount of Heshui land for a new railroad station and other related projects. Villagers who had protested against these earlier projects had been beaten and arrested numerous times. In 2008, local authorities mobilized some 400 policemen, 50 police cars and 30 forklifts to break up a protest against land dispossession; 13 villagers were arrested and 21 were injured, six seriously. In April 2011, another protest against land expropriation led to five villagers being hospitalized. One of the organizers of the protest recalled what happened:

> We organized 80 villagers from several villages – wearing white hats and scarves – to sit-in at the gate of the government headquarters of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region [in Yinchuan]. Hui peasants from other areas also came to petition the government, but they all left. We stayed, expecting to meet with the leader of the government that afternoon, but later we learned he had left by the back door. That evening, the street lights were turned off and it was too dark to see anything. A gang of plainclothes men armed with plastic sticks came from nowhere and began to beat us mercilessly … The game of petitioning by organized villagers was over.[38]

Despite the risk, less than a year later, when the government announced an even bigger development project that demanded more land, the Hui villagers stepped up their resistance. This time, they were able to make use of religious resources – moral and ideological as well as organizational – to build community cohesion and mobilize protests. As we shall see, they understood that the employment of religious resources increased the risk of repression, but it also enhanced the power of their protest, the threat sensed by authorities, and the potential for concessions.

Mosque incident

Shortly after the fertilizer plant expansion plan was announced, the deputy mayor of Heshui arrived at a Jahriyya mosque that was slated for demolition. He brought with him a work team prepared to measure the mosque structure and its land. An angry confrontation ensued, drawing a large crowd of members of the order. This is how the imam recalled the events:

> A group of people responsible for resettlement came to the mosque that day; one man in the group swaggered up to the mosque smoking a cigarette. He was blowing smoke rings and he then threw down the cigarette butt in the courtyard. This is something Hui Muslims do not expect to see. I was so angry! When he came back and quarrelled with me and he told me he was also a Hui, I slapped him and another guy on the face. Later, I found out that they were the deputy mayor and the director of the justice bureau. Yesterday, I heard that they wanted me to be detained for refusal to cooperate with the resettlement … I went to the police station and admitted my mistake, but I told them I was not afraid of being detained or sentenced because I dealt with people and affairs according to the law and according to Islam … As a state civil servant, whether you're Han or Hui, you should respect the customs of the Hui Muslims when you came into a mosque, which is a holy place for the Hui. If you want to detain me here, that's OK; five days [in jail] will pass quickly. But, after that, if they come into the mosque again to detain me, I don't care who they send, I'll continue to fight, and things will escalate.[39]

38 Interview with local Hui villager (F28), 20 February 2013.
39 Interview with local imam (F37), 20 March 2013.

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Local officials immediately suspended preparations for demolishing the mosque and reported the incident to higher authorities. Leaders of the local united front work department consulted with the top leader of the local Jahriyya order about how to deal with the situation. They asked him either to transfer the imam to another mosque or compel him to make a public apology to the deputy mayor and the justice bureau director in the local police station. The Jahriyya leader decided that the imam should not be transferred because he had been at the mosque for four years, was familiar with the situation, and was in a position to be able to handle all of the critical matters of the mosque, including the process of resettlement. Instead, he asked the imam to apologize to the officials publicly, but insisted that this be done in the mosque, not in the police station. After this incident, local officials suspended the imam's monthly stipend of 400 yuan, but he remained at his post and plans to demolish the mosque were suspended.

Although he lost his stipend, the imam appeared calm and satisfied. This was a victory, he told us, in a struggle for religious rights that had been going on for hundreds of years. The important thing, he added, was not the stipend but that the mosque remained standing.

Demanding full compensation

For the Hui peasants slated to lose their land and homes, the development plans threatened their basic subsistence. Even if they won more compensation, without land they faced a highly uncertain future. A local activist explained:

> If the local government wants to take our fertile land, we hope in exchange they will give us equally good fertile land or set aside land near the railway station so we can collectively build stores, garages, warehouses, and so on … For landless peasants, facing economic crisis and inflation – which causes money to be more and more worthless – what can they do even if you give them two to three million? How long can that last? How can young people live in the future?[40]

Nevertheless, villagers knew there was little hope for turning back a project with such strong support from local officials. Ultimately, therefore, they focused on delaying implementation and improving their compensation. They raised two main issues. First, they demanded full compensation for all houses and not just those built before 2003. Second, they demanded to be compensated at the full market value for their homes and land-use rights. Most rural land in China is owned by village collectives and use rights are contracted to individual village households. When local governments expropriate village land, they are only required to pay villagers a standard rate to compensate for the loss of use rights.[41] In contrast, use rights for state-owned land must, according to law, be

40 Interview with local Hui villager (F23), 12 May 2012.

41 Once village land is transferred to state ownership and re-zoned for urban development, use rights can be sold to developers for a much higher, market-based price. The difference between the two prices – which can be very large – is an important source of local government revenue as well as the cause of acrimonious disputes between villagers and local officials.

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compensated at market prices, which are generally much higher. In this case, because the Hui villagers had been resettled on state-owned rather than collectively-owned land, they pointed out that by law they should receive full market value for surrendering their use rights.

Even the anonymous letter combined its militant call to defend Hui homesteads with practical demands for higher compensation, backed up with legal justifications:

> Our homes will be taken by those who discriminate against Muslims using deceptive language (*huayan qiaoyu* 花言巧语) … Our homes were built by our industrious hands and our sweat, they did not fall from the sky. Why not compensate us! … In January of this year, the State Council promulgated the "Ordinance of state-owned land and housing demolition and compensation," which decreed that demolished houses must be compensated in kind according to housing area or compensated with money according to market price. Worried that we would take advantage of this regulation, they claimed our lands were "collective land." How absurd this is! … They regarded us as people easy to cheat and ignorant of the law, issuing an extremely callous document (No. 240) that denied compensation for our garden plots, terraces, wells, trees and so on.[42]

Effective mobilization required organization and leadership, and this was provided by the management committees of several mosques. Although historically the Jahriyya orders, with their disciplined hierarchical organization, had been much more effective than other Islamic sects at mobilizing their followers, this was not the case in Heshui in 2011; indeed, it became clear that CCP efforts to integrate Jahriyya leaders into the state establishment had succeeded in constraining the Jahriyya orders. On the other hand, the decentralized character of the Gedimu mosques, which had given them less mobilizing capacity in the past, now gave them more autonomy from the state, thus allowing them more room to mobilize their congregants.

The director of the management committee of one Gedimu mosque played a key role. First, he travelled on his own to Beijing – 1,200 kilometres away – to petition central authorities. Armed with a sheaf of documents and overcoming many obstacles with the help of a friend in Beijing, he visited several ministries, with little result. After this "learning experience," he came to recognize the importance of mobilizing a show of determination and cohesion in order to defend the interests of the Heshui community. For this purpose, he contacted the management committee directors of seven other mosques. His efforts were well received by the directors, as well as by a great many people in Heshui.

On 13 November, 26 representatives, sponsored financially and politically by five mosque management committees, departed for Beijing, petitions in hand. Their plans, however, were betrayed to local officials and they were intercepted by local police before they had reached the Ningxia border; 13 representatives were detained. Hearing that their representatives had been seized, about a thousand angry Hui villagers gathered and began marching from Heshui to the provincial government offices in Yinchuan, more than 20 kilometres away. Along

42 Anonymous 2011a. Authors' translation.

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the way, they were joined by many others. Most of the protesters were young, but some were in their 60s and 70s; most wore the white hats and scarves that serve as symbols of Hui identity. The protesters had not applied for a permit to march and local officials dispatched police to try to stop the march three times, to no avail. When the protesters finally reached the provincial government offices, the vice-president of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region met with them. He promised that their detained representatives would be released immediately and agreed to meet with them again in Heshui to discuss their grievances. He also provided buses to take all of the protesters back to their villages.

Two days later, the vice-president and a delegation of other officials went to Heshui to conduct "on-the-spot work" (*xianchang gongzuo* 现场工作), listening to the complaints of the Hui villagers. The representatives presented their case, including detailed denunciations of the practices of local officials. Afterwards, the government significantly changed the compensation scheme. Although it did not agree to pay market value for expropriated land and homes, it did agree to include all houses built between 2003 and 2011, and offered three alternative compensation schemes, allowing households to choose from among them. The first provided an apartment in the new housing development, as well as cash for land, other structures, fruit trees, wells and other improvements, and a small living allowance. The second provided a shop-house (a multi-storey building with a storefront on the ground level and dwelling space above) on a commercial street in the new housing development, and the third provided farmland in another village and a stipend to build a house. Although the new schemes still did not fully compensate for everything the displaced villagers were losing, they were a significant improvement over the original plan.

As of the autumn of 2015, when we last checked, most of the houses slated for demolition had already been levelled but only one mosque had been destroyed and the rest had been spared.

Using Religion as a Resource for Economic Resistance

When the mosque management committee director who initiated the petition campaign approached the imam of an important mosque belonging to the Jahriyya order, the imam urged caution and he particularly discouraged using religion to mobilize villagers. He explained his opposition to us this way:

> I told him I have no comment if you want to participate in this collective petition, but I was very concerned that every household had received a letter that seemed to say that the Qing government moved our Old Huihui out to the mountains and now the government wanted to move us again, and that they would swear to defend our homesteads in the name of Allah! It sounded like they wanted to use religion to put pressure on the government … I went to persuade the director of our mosque to quit the collective petition. I told him that the Communist Party was opposed to riots in the name of religion; you could raise other reasons, such as subsistence and housing, but not religion. We, the Jahriyya order, have experienced a bloody history. It was not easy to win the rare opportunity for development that we now have. If despite the [government's] good religious policy, you mobilize opposition in the name of religion, you'll only be

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asking for trouble. Nevertheless, some of the Hui Muslims of the Jahriyya order still joined their [protest] activities.[43]

Others in Heshui clearly held very different views. One resident who was active in the protests explained why he supported putting pressure on the government:

We are in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. The central government is always emphasizing the importance of the unity of ethnic groups and social stability. If we continue to petition to the government of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, charging the local government with financial irregularities and demanding greater resettlement compensation, once the central government learns about it, the president of the autonomous region will be held responsible for the results.[44]

Both of these men clearly understood the potential power of religious/ethnic mobilization; however, one stressed the increased risk of repression while the other stressed the enhanced potential to win concessions. They were both right. In this conflict, the actions of both the Hui protesters and government officials were informed by two slogans that serve as fundamental guidelines for CCP governance: Deng Xiaoping's famous motto, "Stability overrides everything" (*wending yadao yiqie* 稳定压倒一切), and Jiang Zemin's oft-repeated counsel, "Ethnic and religious issues cannot be treated trivially" (*minzu zongjiao wu xiaoshi* 民族宗教无小事). The protesters knew that by using religious resources to mobilize protests they were playing with fire, and so did government officials. In this case, fire served as an effective means to win concessions.

The Heshui case shows that religion can provide effective resources for advancing economic demands in China. The economic concerns of Hui villagers were similar to those of peasants threatened with dispossession in many other areas, but in this case, these concerns were augmented by religious sentiment, especially because the demolition of mosques was involved. The resistance shown by the Heshui villagers was also similar in many ways to that mounted by other Chinese peasants, but they were able to make use of religious resources unavailable to most others. In this paper, we have focused on two forms of religious resources employed by Hui activists – moral/ideological and organizational.

With regard to moral and ideological resources, while Heshui activists effectively invoked the "moral economy" and "rightful resistance" themes common to many peasant protests in China, they were also able to make use of a strong sense of collective identity and powerful cultural references provided by a common religion. These were especially potent because they set the community apart from the state and were bound up with a long history of conflict with the state.

With regard to organizational resources, Hui villagers had access to formal and informal structures that do not exist in most villages. Village mosques provided points of regular social interaction and organizational resources that can be used to mobilize community solidarity in the face of economic threats. Imams and mosque management committee directors could make use of existing

43 Interview with local imam (F37), 20 March 2013.
44 Interview with retired cadre who is also a local villager (F30), 20 March 2013.

mandates of authority from the community, and mosques could easily become platforms for mobilization, facilitated by ties among religious leaders. For these reasons, the CCP has long sought to bring mosques under its own supervisory apparatus but its capacity to constrain resistance was limited.

By appealing to the Hui villagers' strong sense of collective identity and connecting the current conflict over land expropriation with longstanding collective memories on the one hand, and by making use of formal and informal organizational resources provided by village mosques on the other, Heshui activists were able to build communal solidarity and overcome the divide-and-conquer tactics that officials have effectively used to undermine resistance in Han villages.

As is often the case with economic conflicts in China, whether they involve the Han majority or ethnic minorities, state authorities reacted to the protests by Heshui villagers with both repression and concessions. The introduction of religion increased the potential threat to the state, upping the ante and heightening the prospects for both repression and concessions. In this case, at least, by intensifying the pressure on authorities, religious mobilization ultimately compelled them to grant significant concessions.

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Biographical notes

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摘要: 本文分析了宗教在回族穆斯林村民抵制土地剥夺过程中的作用。中国的现实情况是国家严格管理自治组织，对少数民族地区的宗教组织也长期进行管控。因此，对于有宗教信仰的少数民族而言，宗教既能为他们的抗争活动提供有力的资源，但同时也会带来一定的政治风险。当前学术界对于中国有信仰的少数民族的集体行动的研究主要集中在文化和政治议题的抗争, 以及对这些抗争的镇压方面。相对而言, 很少有学者关注有宗教信

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仰的少数民族对经济议题的抗争。实际上，近些年来经济议题的抗争不断呈上升趋势，国家对此也采取了比政治议题抗争更加宽容的态度。正是这样的背景促使我们研究这样的问题：当村民利用宗教语言和宗教组织来推动经济需求是会发生什么？将宗教语言和宗教组织作为动员工具的效果如何？政府部门对此会采取什么样的反应？

关键词: 中国; 抗争; 宗教; 土地; 农民; 回族; 穆斯林

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