

FORUM ARTICLE

Whose crescent moon to follow? Trust, communication technology, and the crisis of authority in Hui Muslim communities in Republican China

Bin Chen 

Department of Chinese History and Culture, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Hong Kong, China
Email: bin-b.chen@polyu.edu.hk

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Abstract

This article examines the paradoxical impact of emerging communication technologies on social cohesion by investigating the struggle to standardize Ramadan observance among Chinese Hui Muslim communities in the early twentieth century. Reform-minded Hui intellectuals hoped that modern media, such as print periodicals and the telegraph, would disseminate moon-sighting news and unify the diverse temporal practices of Hui Muslims across China, thereby forging a modern, unified Hui identity. However, this article argues that these technologies did not lead to seamless temporal homogenization. Instead, they amplified local divisions and precipitated a crisis of authority by forcing Hui communities to confront a new and divisive question: who and what to trust in a new information landscape? Drawing on case studies of disputes in Guangzhou, Xi'an, Beijing, and Chengdu between 1931 and 1934, the article demonstrates that Hui Muslims' trust was not monolithic but fragmented along lines of faith in the communication technology, the messenger, and the information itself, which in turn prevented the implementation of a standard Ramadan temporality. By centring the analysis on the social dynamics of trust, this article contributes to the history of technology and media studies, revealing that the adoption of technology is fundamentally a process of building, challenging, and negotiating authority through the fragile and fragmented medium of trust.

Keywords: Ramadan; communication technology; temporality; Chinese Hui Muslims; Republican China

Introduction

The arrival of a new form of communication technology is usually accompanied by the promise of a more connected, unified world. Yet, history repeatedly shows that these technologies often create new lines of fracture, forcing communities to confront difficult questions of truth, trust, and authority. This article explores this paradox through a study of Chinese Hui Muslim communities in the early twentieth century as they

grappled with the possibilities and perils of modern media in unifying the observance of Ramadan.

Ramadan, also known as the holy month, is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar. Conventionally, time-sensitive information about the lunar cycle is critical for Muslims' observance of Ramadan, which begins and ends with the sighting of the crescent moon. While seemingly a straightforward practice, in traditional China, Muslims across the vast expanse of the country would not commence fasting at the same time. The lunar cycle meant Muslims inevitably saw the crescent moon on different dates in China. Theoretically, however, Muslims could adjust their Ramadan timing according to reliable moon-sighting reports from other regions.¹ However, in imperial China, it was difficult for Muslims in different regions to share the news of a crescent moon sighting in a timely manner. Consequently, they developed various local temporal traditions to commence and end Ramadan.

By the early twentieth century, against the backdrop of a modernizing China increasingly influenced by ideas of national unity, reform-minded Chinese Hui Muslim intellectuals began to express a desire for a unified observance of Ramadan by Hui Muslims across the nation.² These intellectuals looked to modern communication technologies, such as print periodicals and the telegraph, in the hope that the rapid dissemination of moon-sighting information would enable a standardized temporal practice for Ramadan observance and thus foster a greater sense of unity within the diverse Hui Muslim communities.³

However, as On Barak's and Elisabeth Köll's recent work on technology and temporalities demonstrates, the introduction of modern communication technologies into Egypt and China did not lead to the seamless adoption of standardized, Western-style concepts of time. Instead, the integration of technology was mediated by existing social, cultural, and religious frameworks, often leading to unexpected outcomes and highlighting underlying tensions. In Egypt, the introduction of new technologies and Western temporal concepts resulted in unique Egyptian experiences of time that

¹For example, the Hadith records that Prophet Muhammad once resolved a dispute over Ramadan's dates by recourse to the moon-sighting report of a Muslim from another region. Abu Dawud, 'Sunan Abu Dawud 2341', in *Sunan Abu Dawud*, (trans.) Nasiruddin al-Khattab (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2008), vol. 3, pp. 122–123.

²In this article, '[Chinese] Hui Muslims' refers to those Muslims who traditionally live in the Han Chinese cultural areas and call themselves 'Hui'. However, from the late Qing to the Republican period, 'Hui' was also a generic term referring to all Muslims in China.

³For the development of new communication technologies in China, see Chang Jui-te, *Pinghan Tielu Yu Huabei Jingji Fazhan (1905–1937) 平漢鐵路與華北經濟發展 (1905–1937)* [The Peking-Hankow Railroad and Economic Development in North China, 1905–1937] (Taipei: Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica, 1987); Joan Judge, *Print and Politics: 'Shibao' and the Culture of Reform in Late Qing China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Barbara Mittler, *A Newspaper for China?: Power, Identity, and Change in Shanghai's News Media, 1872–1912* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004); John Alekna, *Seeking News, Making China: Information, Technology, and the Emergence of Mass Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2024); Ding Xianrong, 'Xinshi Jiaotong Yu Shenghuo Zhong de Shijian' 新式交通與生活中的時間:以近代江南為例子 [The New Transportation and Time in Life: With the Southern Part of Yangtze River in Modern Times for Example], *Shilin*, no. 4, 2005, pp. 99–109; Zhan Xiaobai, *Shijian de Shehui Wenhua Shi 時間的社會文化史:近代中國時間制度與觀念變遷研究* [Socioculture History of Time: A Study on Changes on Time Systems and Concepts in Modern China] (Beijing: Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, 2013), pp. 169–181, 299–348.

subverted the modernist emphasis on speed and punctuality, which On Barak terms 'countertempos'.⁴ Elisabeth Köll reveals that while railroads introduced concepts of Western-style time keeping, punctuality, and standardization into China, the adoption of these new concepts was slow and faced resistance. Challenges arose from existing regional differences and the varying levels of state control. As a result, traditional Chinese temporal practices coexisted with Western ones for an extended period in modern China, exemplified by the continued use of the Chinese lunar calendar alongside the solar calendar for different purposes.⁵

Drawing on the insights of On Barak and Elisabeth Köll, this article argues that the implementation of new communication technologies in the context of Ramadan moon sightings in China did not lead to a simple homogenization of temporal practice regarding Ramadan. Instead, the rapid dissemination of moon-sighting news paradoxically exposed the varying levels of trust in new information sources among Hui Muslims and deepened communal fissures, transforming a matter of calendrical observance into a public contest over religious and social authority.

Scholars have paid attention to the relationship between religion and communication technology during China's modern transition. However, the focus of the existing scholarship is on how religious groups and practitioners appropriated and contributed to the spread of communication technologies, especially modern printing technology and media, to advocate for their agendas.⁶ A critical historical change brought about by modern communication technologies was the alteration of the information landscape, which granted people, including lay religious practitioners, faster and easier access to time-sensitive information. However, easier access to information did not necessarily increase the levels of trust in the information itself or the technologies and messengers that transmitted it.

This raises a crucial question: how do communities negotiate authority when new technologies disrupt established information hierarchies? While scholars like Barak and Köll have shown that technology's effects are not uniform, the precise social dynamics of this contestation—specifically the role of fragmented trust in mediating struggles for authority—remain underexplored. This article addresses this gap by examining the struggle of Hui Muslim intellectuals to standardize Ramadan during the Republican period, a process that forced communities to confront a fundamentally divisive question: who and what to trust, and thus who had the right to lead, in a new and bewildering information landscape.⁷ The answer would be plural, for trust

⁴On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), pp. 1–20, 85–144.

⁵Elisabeth Köll, *Railroads and the Transformation of China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), pp. 128–161.

⁶Xun Liu, *Daoist Modern: Innovation, Lay Practice, and the Community of Inner Alchemy in Republican Shanghai* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2009), pp. 7–10, 231–250; Xiantao Zhang, *The Origins of the Modern Chinese Press: The Influence of the Protestant Missionary Press in Late Qing China* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007); Don A. Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), pp. 13–104.

⁷Aaron Nathan Glasserman's recent dissertation notes the 'ambiguous effect' of new communication technologies like the periodical press and the telegraph on unifying moon-sighting practices among Hui Muslims. However, Glasserman's discussion is rooted in a broader historical and sociological analysis of

was not monolithic. Consequently, the introduction of modern communication technologies precipitated not unity, but a crisis of authority within Chinese Hui Muslim communities.

Ramadan and Chinese Hui Muslims as a distinct group of people

Hui Muslim intellectuals' twentieth-century struggle for Ramadan temporal uniformity was preceded by a long history of moon-sighting disputes in imperial China that served a fundamentally different social function. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, temporal diversity regarding Ramadan was an institutionalized feature of Hui life, a mechanism through which local communities defined their unique ritual identities. In an era before modern communication, these differences were managed not through national coordination but through localization, most notably with the erection of 'moon steles' (*yuebei*; 月碑), which publicly inscribed a specific congregation's temporal rules on stone and asserted a form of local ritual sovereignty.⁸ This system produced a variety of distinct temporal traditions. Among the most common were a strictly observational practice of 'seeing the moon to begin, seeing the moon to end' (*jian yue bi, jian yue kai*; 見月閉、見月開); a fixed-date method known as 'the old third day' (*lao chusan*; 老初三) that prioritized predictability; and a hybrid approach that syncretized with the dominant Chinese lunar calendar, starting the fast on 'the second day of a big month, the third day of a small month' (*dayue chu'er, xiaoyue chusan*; 大月初二、小月初三).⁹ Each tradition represented a different choice regarding the balance between prophetic precedent, communal stability, and pragmatic accommodation. Choosing when to begin Ramadan was thus an act of affiliation with one local congregation and its particular customs, reinforcing the boundaries between the multiple, often co-located, Hui communities that characterized the imperial landscape.¹⁰ This patchwork of accepted, localized temporalities—each with its own internal logic and legitimacy—would become a problem for many Hui intellectuals later as they struggled to redefine the Hui, no longer as a collection of different local communities, but a unified national group.

From the late nineteenth century onwards, reform-minded Hui Muslim intellectuals began to adopt an ethnic lens to examine the diverse temporal traditions regarding Ramadan observance among Hui Muslim communities. They increasingly subscribed to an identity that held that the Hui were a distinct and unified group of people within the Chinese nation-state, and therefore argued that they should observe Ramadan

ritual, Islamic knowledge, and the concept of shari'a-mindedness. His work does not examine the specific Ramadan disputes of 1931 and 1934 that are the central case studies of this article. Furthermore, Glasserman does not analyse the complex impact of varying levels of trust in emerging communication technologies on religious temporalities in twentieth-century Hui Muslim communities, a key focus of the this article. See Aaron Nathan Glasserman, 'Hui Nation: Islam and Muslim Politics in Modern China', PhD thesis, New York, Columbia University, 2021.

⁸For a study of these disputes and the 'moon steles' used to codify them, see Ma Chao, 'Qingdai Henan Yisilan Jingxue Yanjiu' 清代河南伊斯蘭經學研究 [A Study of Islamic Classical Studies in Henan during the Qing Dynasty], MA thesis, Xi'an, Shaanxi Normal University, 2015, pp. 125–129.

⁹Ibid., p. 126.

¹⁰Glasserman, 'Hui Nation', pp. 12–15.

together. The idea that Hui Muslims across the vast nation were a distinct group of people became more and more popular as China's national crisis deepened.

Hui Muslim intellectuals wanted to mobilize their coreligionists, similar to the mobilizations of the broader Han population that their Han intellectual counterparts undertook using ethnic and racial notions.¹¹ After the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911, the state recognized the existence of *Huizu* 回族, through the concept of *wuzu gonghe* (Five Peoples under One Union; 五族共和). Hui Muslim intellectuals bitterly debated with one another whether they (Hui Muslims) were the *Huizu* in *wuzu gonghe*. Some argued that Hui Muslims were Han Chinese who believed in Islam; others claimed that *Huizu* encompassed all Muslim groups in China, including Uyghurs, and that Hui Muslims were a part of this inclusive ethnicity; still others insisted that Hui Muslims were 'an ethnicity unto themselves', exclusive of the other Muslim groups in China.¹² Despite varying opinions on whether Hui Muslims constituted an ethnic group known as *Huizu*, Hui Muslim intellectuals agreed that they were a distinct group of people. Even for those Hui Muslims who argued they were Han, believing in Islam effectively distinguished them from other Han.

However, the more the Hui Muslim intellectuals identified with the idea that Hui Muslims were a distinct group, the more distressed they became by the inability of their fellow Muslims across the nation to uniformly commence the holy month of Ramadan. For example, an editorial in *Yuehua* 月華 in 1931 lamented that even Hui Muslims in the same city—Beijing—were unable to break the fast together. *Yuehua* was one of the most influential modern-style Muslim magazines in Republican China.¹³ The editorial acknowledged that there were differing opinions among Beijing Muslims in 1931 regarding when to break the fast. The author was uninterested in judging which opinion aligned more closely with religious doctrine, but rather emphasized that Muslims should agree on one approach to ensure they broke the fast together. In the end, the author remarked, 'Those who sincerely revere the sage [Muhammad], upon witnessing this state of division, one wonders how heartbroken they must be.'¹⁴

In the twentieth century, reform-minded Hui Muslim intellectuals increasingly viewed the diversity of temporal traditions regarding Ramadan as a sign of their community's backwardness and, therefore, as a problem that needed to be resolved. Ma Jian (1906–1978) was a Hui Muslim student who had studied at Egypt's Al-Azhar University between 1931 and 1939.¹⁵ In a public speech that he delivered in Egypt in 1935 to

¹¹John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class in the Nationalist Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 67–102.

¹²Włodzimierz Cieciora, 'Ethnicity or Religion? Republican-Era Chinese Debates on Islam and Muslims', in *Islamic Thought in China: Sino-Muslim Intellectual Evolution from the 17th to the 21st Century*, (ed.) Jonathan Lipman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 107–140.

¹³Masumi Matsumoto, 'Rationalizing Patriotism among Muslim Chinese: The Impact of the Middle East on the *Yuehua* Journal', in *Intellectuals in the Modern Islamic World: Transmission, Transformation, Communication*, (eds) Stéphane A. Dudoignon, Hisao Komatsu and Yasushi Kosugi (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 118.

¹⁴Zicheng, 'Duiyu Benshi Kaizhai de Yidian Xinsheng' 對於本市開齋的一段心聲 [A Piece of Sentiment about the City's Eid al-Fitr], *Yuehua*, vol. 3, no. 6, 1931, p. 2.

¹⁵Ma Bozhong, 'Jinxiandai Zhongguo Liuai Huizu Xuesheng Lishi Jianshu' 近現代中國留埃回族學生歷史簡述 [A Brief History of Hui Students Studying in Egypt in Modern and Contemporary China], in Ma Bozhong, Na Jiarui and Li Jiangong, *Licheng: 'Minguo Liu Ai Huizu*

introduce Chinese Islam, Ma Jian claimed that Hui Muslims lagged behind their fellow citizens in many respects. Internal division was a significant reason for the lack of progress among Muslims. The inability to enter Ramadan at a unified time was, in turn, presented as foremost among the ten major causes of internal division within the Muslim community.¹⁶

The editors of *Yuehua* shared Ma Jian's ideas regarding Ramadan dates. They insisted that Hui Muslims should begin and end Ramadan at the same time, without disputes, because, they claimed, this was Prophet Muhammad's requirement. Moreover, Eid al-Fitr (the Festival of Breaking the Fast) was a major Islamic holiday that attracted attention from non-Muslim citizens in China. Any inconsistency in breaking the fast among Muslims inevitably invited ridicule from non-Muslims, leading to further disrespect towards Muslims and Islam.¹⁷

In the twentieth-century Muslim world, reform-minded Chinese Hui Muslim intellectuals were not alone in perceiving the lack of unified Ramadan dates as an issue to be addressed. In Muslim-majority countries, the state often played an active role in standardizing these dates.¹⁸ In contrast, the Chinese government did not consider the standardization of temporal practices regarding Ramadan to be a critical issue. Consequently, Chinese Muslim intellectuals placed trust in the transformative potential of modern communication technologies. For instance, after listing the ten major causes of internal division within the Muslim community in his public speech in Egypt, Ma Jian called on Islamic academic institutions in China to study those causes and spread their rulings through modern-style periodicals, particularly the magazine *Yiguang* 伊光.¹⁹ Established in 1927 in Tianjin, with the purpose of 'serving as the eyes and ears of the nation', *Yiguang* regularly presenting its readers with news, both domestic and foreign, related to Islam.²⁰ Ma Jian affirmed that *Yiguang* was sent free of charge every month to Islamic schools and renowned mosques across China, and was held in high esteem by Hui Muslim scholars. Thus, Ma Jian hoped that publishing rulings on religious activities in *Yiguang*, including those concerning the dates of Ramadan, would convince Hui Muslim scholars to accept them and thereby foster unity among Hui Muslims.²¹

Other Hui Muslim intellectuals anticipated that the telegraph would be the communication technology to unite Hui Muslims for Ramadan. Historians have demonstrated that the telegraphic system in China between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had many limitations. The service was often slow, unstable, and expensive,

Xuesheng Paiqian Shi Yanjiu 歷程: 民國留埃回族學生派遣史研究 [Journey: A Study on the Hui Student Delegations to Egypt during the Republican Period] (Yinchuan: Ningxia renmin chubanshe, 2011), pp. 1–4.

¹⁶Ma Jian, 'Zhongguo Yisilanjiao Gaiguan' 中國伊斯蘭教概觀 [An Overview of Islam in China], in *Ma Jian Zhu Yi Wenji*, (trans.) Li Zhenzhong (Beijing: Shangwu yinshuguan, 2018), vol. 1, pp. 140–141.

¹⁷Yuehua Press, 'Tongyi Fengzhai Kaizhai' 統一封齋開齋 [Unified Commencement and Conclusion of Fasting], *Yuehua*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1934, p. 4.

¹⁸Ibrahim Elhodaiby, 'Ramadan and Eid's Crescent Wars', *New Lines Magazine*, 9 April 2024, <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/ramadan-and-eids-crescent-wars>, [accessed 11 August 2025].

¹⁹Ma, 'An Overview of Islam in China', p. 143.

²⁰Jing Jun, 'Wang Jingzhai Yu "Yi Guang" Yuebao' 王靜齋與《伊光》月報 [Wang Jingzhai and the *Yiguang* Monthly Newsletter], *Ningxia Shehui Kexue*, no. 4, July 2006, p. 91.

²¹Ma, 'An Overview of Islam in China', p. 143.

and the messages that were dispatched through the wire were therefore typically short and concise to manage costs. At times, recipients might not have accurately understood the sender's intended meaning.²² However, the limitations of the telegraphic service did not prevent historical actors from envisioning the positive changes that this communication technology would bring to Chinese society.

For instance, in 1934, Hu Shiwen, a Muslim intellectual, published an article discussing the issue of using the telegraph to report moon-sighting results. Hu was well aware of the limitations of the telegraph in China at the time, such as the necessary brevity of messages. Therefore, moon-sighting telegrams would not contain details such as the direction and shape of the moon that other news reports could include. Hu also noted that sending telegrams was particularly expensive in China. Yet, in Hu's view, the high cost of sending telegrams would ensure the reliability of the moon-sighting messages transmitted; as he postulated, who in their right mind would spend a substantial amount of money on sending false moon-sighting information? In the end, Hu envisioned that with the help of the telegraph, one region's moon-sighting results would be quickly transmitted to every corner of China, allowing Muslims across the entire country to observe Ramadan together.²³

Undoubtedly, new technologies like newspapers and the telegraph enabled geographically distant Muslims to report the sighting of the Ramadan crescent moon to one another. However, reform-minded Hui Muslim intellectuals had not anticipated the varying degrees of trust that different Muslims placed on such moon-sighting news reports, as well as on the technologies and messengers that transmitted them. This scenario occurred many times in Republican China, especially in the early 1930s, and it exposes the previously unexamined dynamic between technology and religion in this period.

The Ramadan of 1931 in Guangzhou and the trustworthiness of print media

The year 1931 witnessed reform-minded Hui Muslim intellectuals in several major Chinese cities striving to improve local temporal practices related to the observance of Ramadan. In Guangzhou, the intellectuals achieved some success thanks in part to the relatively small size of the city's Muslim community. However, even within this small community, some Muslims remained sceptical of modern print media's trustworthiness—an assumption the intellectuals took for granted—making it challenging to implement reforms to local temporal traditions.

In 1931, Muslims in Guangzhou were looking for the crescent of Ramadan on the evening of 19 January (the 29th day of Sha'ban, the Islamic month that precedes Ramadan), as Muslims around the world typically would do.²⁴ That evening,

²²Alekna, *Seeking News, Making China*, pp. 28–33; Wook Yoon, 'Dashed Expectations: Limitations of the Telegraphic Service in the Late Qing', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 49, no. 3, 2015, pp. 832–857.

²³Hu Shiwen, 'Guanyu Yong Dianbao Baoyue de Yifengxin' 關於用電報報月的一封信 [A Letter about Reporting the Moon by Telegram], *Yuehua*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1934, pp. 17–18.

²⁴Muslims typically search for the crescent moon of Ramadan on the 29th day of Sha'ban, the eighth Islamic month. According to the Islamic calendar popular in China at the time, 19 January 1931 was the 29th day of Sha'ban. Other regions' Islamic calendars may have been different.

Guangzhou Muslims did not spot the moon, so they began fasting on 21 January.²⁵ Meanwhile, Muslims in Shanghai also searched for the crescent of Ramadan on 19 January, and saw it;²⁶ they thus began Ramadan on 20 January.²⁷ As a result, in 1931, Guangzhou Muslims began Ramadan one day behind Shanghai Muslims. Despite the difference, the actions of the Muslims in both cities were in accordance with Islamic doctrine.

According to the Hadith, if Muslims see the crescent on the 29th day of Sha'ban, then the next day is the first day of Ramadan, and they should start fasting. If they fail to see the crescent, then the next day is the 30th day of Sha'ban, and the following day becomes the first day of Ramadan.²⁸ Therefore, in 1931, when Guangzhou Muslims did not spot the moon on the evening of 19 January, 20 January became their 30th day of Sha'ban, and 21 January was their first day of Ramadan and fasting. On the other hand, because Shanghai Muslims saw the crescent on 19 January, their month of Sha'ban then ended on that date, and 20 January became their first day of Ramadan.

Had communication between the Muslim communities in Guangzhou and Shanghai been difficult, the different starting days of Ramadan in the two cities might not have caused any serious issues. However, by the early 1930s, Muslims in Guangzhou and Shanghai could no longer ignore each other. Since the late nineteenth century, as various new technologies of movement and communication, such as the telegraph, telephone, trains, steamships, cars, and even airplanes, were gradually introduced into China, it became increasingly easy for people and information to travel between different cities. As a result, a newspaper or other print periodical published in one city could be transferred to another city within a relatively short period of time, making any news contained in that publication timely and relevant.

On 21 January 1931, students at the Shanghai Private Islamic Teachers School published the first issue of their magazine, *Yisilan xuesheng zazhi* (Islamic Student Magazine; 伊斯蘭學生雜誌).²⁹ The primary mission of this magazine was to provide students with opportunities to practise essay writing; therefore, in principle, it did not accept submissions from the public.³⁰ However, this did not mean that the student editors understood their magazine as an internal publication that was not intended for external distribution.

In twentieth-century China, students in China's modern-style schools tended to feel that they bore the main responsibility for awakening their compatriots and modernizing their country. The students at the Shanghai Islamic Teachers School were all Muslims, but they shared other Chinese students' sense of responsibility towards the

²⁵Guangzhou Imams, 'Wufang a'hong Zhangjiao Qi' 五方阿洪掌教啓 [Wufang Imam's Religious Instructions], *Tianfang Xueli Yuekan*, vol. 3, no. 5, February 1931, p. 2.

²⁶Islamic Student Magazine Press, 'Benshe Qishi' 本社啓事 [Notice from This Press], *Yisilan Xuesheng Zazhi*, no. 1, 1931.

²⁷Xiao, 'Ni Ju Ying Ling Shanghai Yisilan Xuesheng Zazhi Baogao Jianyue Liyou', p. 88.

²⁸Abu Dawud, 'Sunan Abu Dawud 2325', in *Sunan Abu Dawud*, (trans.) Nasiruddin al-Khattab (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2008), vol. 3, p. 113.

²⁹For the official name of the Shanghai Private Islamic Teachers School, see 'Shanghai Sili Yisilan Shifan Xuexiao Zhangcheng' 上海私立伊斯蘭師範學校章程 [Shanghai Private Islamic Teachers School Charter], 1927.

³⁰Islamic Student Magazine Press, 'Bianji Lueli' 編輯略例 [Editing Example], *Yisilan Xuesheng Zazhi*, no. 1, 1931.

people and the country. They also felt that they had a special responsibility to awaken their fellow Muslims in China. Therefore, in addition to providing a forum for students to practise essay writing, the student editors of the *Islamic Student Magazine* set about promoting Islamic doctrine, education, and patriotism as part of their magazine's mission, as well.³¹ To fulfil this mission, they believed that their periodical should be available to Muslims in other regions. Thus, although the funds for running the magazine were limited, students in Shanghai still sent the first issue to major Islamic institutions around the country, via the postal service, hoping they would support their modernizing mission.³²

Coincidentally, the first issue of the *Islamic Student Magazine* was published just as Ramadan in Shanghai began. In its final notice in the Announcements section, the magazine included the following statement, 'The crescent moon had been sighted in Shanghai on 19 January of the solar calendar. There may be people in other places who have not seen the moon, so we hereby report [this information].'³³ Accordingly, fasting for Ramadan in Shanghai began on the next day, 20 January. The straightforward language in the news report suggested that the student editors of the *Islamic Student Magazine* expected that once Muslims in other places learned about Shanghai's moon-sighting news, they would immediately accept it and adjust their Ramadan schedules according to that of Shanghai. This straightforward account at least reached Muslim communities in major Chinese cities like Guangzhou, Xi'an, and Beijing.³⁴ However, the complicated reactions that the news elicited were perhaps beyond the wildest imagination of the student editors in Shanghai.

When the first issue of the *Islamic Student Magazine* arrived in Guangzhou, Muslims in that city had been fasting for more than half a month. Nevertheless, Shanghai's moon-sighting news was still relevant, for as long as Ramadan in Guangzhou was not yet over, the end date of Ramadan could be adjusted.³⁵ But the question of whether Guangzhou Muslims should change their Ramadan schedule was a matter taken seriously by local imams. On 24 February 1931, the imams of the five mosques in Guangzhou gathered to debate not the reliability of the moon-sighting news report in the *Islamic Student Magazine*, which they took for granted, but how to proceed now that they had received an 'accurate' report from Shanghai.³⁶

Guangzhou, at the time, only had five mosques. Therefore, the five imams' decision would affect the lives of all Muslims in the city.³⁷ The imams argued that Islamic scriptures contain both the directive that 'if the crescent moon is sighted in one location, the moon-sighting report from that location should be accepted by other places' and the requirement to 'begin fasting with the sighting of the crescent and end fasting with the sighting of the crescent'. The latter requirement seemingly mandated Muslims to

³¹Ibid.

³²Islamic Student Magazine Press, 'Notice from This Press'.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Beijing was called Beiping between 1928 and 1949. For convenience sake, however, this article will only use the name Beijing.

³⁵Guangzhou Imams, 'Wufang Imam's Religious Instructions', p. 2.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Huan Wen, 'Guangdongsheng Libaisi Fenbutu Shuoming' 廣東全省禮拜寺分布圖說明 [Explanation of the Distribution Map of Mosques Across Guangdong Province], *Tianfang Xueli Yuekan*, no. 13, 1929, p. 20.

start and end Ramadan according to their own observations of the moon. However, similar to their contemporary reform-minded Hui Muslim intellectuals, the five imams held the belief that Muslims in different regions should observe Ramadan uniformly. They claimed that the requirement of beginning and ending fasting with the sighting of the crescent moon was intended for all Muslims, not just those in a specific region. In other words, if Muslims in one region were the first to sight the crescent, it meant that all Muslims had sighted the crescent, and all Muslims must accept the first viewers' moon-sighting report and begin fasting.³⁸

It is beyond the parameters of this article to determine whether the five imams' arguments were indeed in line with Islamic doctrine. They were convinced that they were right, and concluded that Guangzhou Muslims must accept the moon-sighting news report in the *Islamic Student Magazine* and regard Shanghai's first day of Ramadan (20 January) as their own first day of Ramadan. Since Guangzhou Muslims had started their Ramadan fasting on 21 January, one day after Shanghai Muslims, the imams' choice to accept the moon-sighting report from Shanghai meant that they undertook to persuade their fellow Muslims to end their fasting one day earlier than the original schedule. This was hardly an easy task. In particular, some Muslims expressed scepticism about something the imams had taken for granted—the trustworthiness of the moon-sighting report in the *Islamic Student Magazine*.

Nonetheless, the five imams chose to trouble themselves with this difficult task because they were eager to reform the religious temporal practices of Muslims in Guangzhou. In the early twentieth century, like many other Muslim and Han Chinese intellectuals, Guangzhou Muslim intellectuals believed that they were responsible for awakening and transforming their fellow Muslims in order to save China and Islam. They formed organizations and published periodicals like *Tianfang xueli yuekan* (Islamic Academic Monthly; 天方學理月刊) and *Mumin* (Muslims; 穆民) to push for reform.³⁹ For example, in 1929, an article commemorating the first anniversary of the publication of the *Islamic Academic Monthly* emphasized that the editors of the magazine should adopt a fearless spirit in breaking the bad habits of Hui Muslims in order to fulfil the magazine's mission.⁴⁰ In 1931, when the imams reached the conclusion that Islamic doctrine required them to accept the moon-sighting news report from Shanghai, local Ramadan practice in Guangzhou had become one of the 'bad habits' that tested the reforming spirit of the imams.

Responding to this test of their zeal, the five imams distributed leaflets and posted notices urging their fellow Muslims in Guangzhou to accept the new Ramadan dates that they had set.⁴¹ Since Guangzhou only had five mosques at this time, the imams had significant public influence in the Guangzhou Muslim community. Despite this,

³⁸Guangzhou Imams, 'Wufang Imam's Religious Instructions', p. 2.

³⁹Ma Qiang, 'Minguo Guangzhou Huizu de Tianfang Xueli Yuekan Shulue' 民國廣州回族的《天方學理月刊》述略 [A Brief Introduction to Guangzhou Hui's Newspaper *Hukm al-Islam* in the Republic of China], *Xibei Minzu Yanjiu*, no. 4, 2012, pp. 56–59.

⁴⁰Ali, 'Zai Yizhounian Jinian Chongtan Benkan de Shiming' 在一周紀念重談本刊的使命 [Reiterating the Mission of This Magazine on the Anniversary], *Tianfang Xueli Yuekan*, no. 13, 1929, pp. 11–12.

⁴¹Yang Ruisheng, 'Jianyue Qizhai Jianyue Kaizhai Ji Baoyue Lingyue de Yuanli Xu' 見月起齋見月開齋及報月領月的原理續 [Principles of Beginning and Breaking the Fast upon Moon Sighting, and the Procedures for Moon Reporting and Moon Observance (Continued)], *Tianfang Xueli Yuekan*, vol. 3, no. 7, April 1931, p. 3.

many Guangzhou Muslims remained sceptical. First, they claimed that due to the geographical differences between Guangzhou and Shanghai, they would inevitably see the crescent moon at different times and, therefore, should not accept each other's moon-sighting reports. Second, before the early 1930s, it was rare for Hui Muslims in one city to accept moon-sighting news reports from another city. Why start now? asked the incredulous Muslims. Third, and most significantly, even if the Guangzhou Muslim community was to accept another region's moon-sighting reports, the sceptical Muslims challenged the very legitimacy of the imams' chosen medium, questioning whether a modern-style student magazine could possess the sacred authority required for a moon-sighting report. This was not merely a question of reliability; it was a fundamental dispute over what constituted a valid source of religious truth in the modern age, setting the imams' reformist agenda against the congregation's deep-seated notions of piety and tradition.⁴²

The five imams had not anticipated such a strong dissenting voice from their congregation, nor could they ignore it, as it had become a challenge to their authority. Therefore, Imam Yang Ruisheng, who participated in the meeting at the Huaisheng Mosque, published an essay in the reform-minded *Islamic Academic Monthly* to rebut oppositional views. To counter the idea that Muslims in Guangzhou should not accept Shanghai's moon-sighting report due to geographic differences, Yang Ruisheng claimed Islamic doctrine emphasized that Muslims around the world were one family and should strive to enter the month of Ramadan together. Thus, Imam Yang argued, once the crescent moon had been sighted by Muslims in one location, Muslims in other locations should follow suit and commence their fast, unless the distance between the two locations was excessively great. According to Imam Yang, only when the east–west distance exceeded a month's journey (*yi yue zhi cheng*; 一月之程), or the north–south distance exceeded 10,000 *li*, was there no need to accept each other's moon-sighting reports.⁴³ Obviously, the distance between Guangzhou and Shanghai was not 'excessively great'.

However, if, according to Imam Yang, Guangzhou's Muslims were required by doctrine to accept Shanghai's moon-sighting report, and vice versa, it became even more necessary for him to explain why this had rarely been practised until the early twentieth century. In facing this dilemma, Imam Yang admitted that there were certain local traditional ways by which to determine the dates of Ramadan. For instance, in Guangzhou, some Muslims always started and broke the Ramadan fasting on the third day of the lunar month, regardless of whether the crescent moon had appeared. However, Yang stated that this local temporal practice was contrary to Islamic doctrine, and it had not been corrected only due to past disagreements and mutual suspicion among Muslims. Now, though, Yang held the belief that it was his responsibility as an imam to enlighten his fellow Muslims about the principles of moon sighting and reporting, in order to correct past mistakes. Finally, as for the critical concern over whether a news report in a modern periodical was a religiously appropriate venue for a moon-sighting report, Imam Yang dismissed this as a question stemming

⁴²Ibid., pp. 3–4.

⁴³Ibid., p. 3.

from religious ignorance.⁴⁴ Essentially, Yang was using the Guangzhou imams' religious authority to counter the challenge to the authority of modern print media.

The dispute over Ramadan in 1931 Guangzhou demonstrates that the adoption of communication technology is not a straightforward technical process but a social one, fundamentally shaped by who people choose to believe, what media they deem legitimate, and how information is validated. While the reform-minded Guangzhou imams took the *Islamic Student Magazine's* reliability for granted, their congregation's scepticism revealed a distrust not just of distant information, but of the modern medium itself. The question of whether a student-run periodical could possess the sacred authority traditionally held by local observation lay at the heart of the conflict. This profound scepticism towards the legitimacy of modern print media was not unique to Guangzhou Muslims. As the same moon-sighting report from Shanghai reached the city of Xi'an, it provoked an even more explicit and vociferous debate, forcing one reform-minded imam to undertake the immense social labour of trying to build technological authority in the face of 'fake news' accusations.

Fake news or credible information? The Ramadan of 1931 in Xi'an

Due to limited sources, the dispute over the reliability of the moon-sighting report in the *Islamic Student Magazine* in Guangzhou can only be examined indirectly. In comparison, the Ramadan of 1931 in Xi'an revealed a deep-seated scepticism about the trustworthiness of modern print media in the minds of many. In 1931, Muslims in Xi'an were looking for the crescent of Ramadan on the evening of 19 January, as were their counterparts in Shanghai and Guangzhou. Like the Muslims in Guangzhou, Xi'an Muslims did not spot the moon that evening, so they began fasting on 21 January, one day behind Shanghai Muslims.⁴⁵ Soon, the *Islamic Student Magazine* arrived in Xi'an and brought with it the news of the moon-sighting.

As mentioned above, due to the lack of funding, the student editors of the Shanghai Islamic Teachers School only mailed their magazines to major Islamic institutions, hoping those institutions would support their modernizing agenda. The Shaanxi Islamic Association (Shaanxi Huijiao gonghui; 陝西回教公會) in Xi'an was one of those that received the first issue of the *Islamic Student Magazine*.⁴⁶ The association was founded by local lay Muslim elites, particularly merchants, for the promotion of local modernizing projects, such as the founding of several modern-style primary schools in Xi'an in around 1930.⁴⁷

The student editors of the *Islamic Student Magazine* most likely saw an organization devoted to local modernization projects as a natural ally in their efforts to reform Muslim communities. Therefore, they sent the Shaanxi Islamic Association the first issue of the magazine in the hope that the association would spread the information in their magazine, including the fact that Shanghai had seen the crescent moon on

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 4.

⁴⁵Xiao Yuqing, 'Xiao Yuqing a'hong Lai Han' 蕭毓清阿洪來函 [A Letter from Imam Xiao Shuqing], *Yisilan Xuesheng Zazhi*, no. 2, 1931, p. 87.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ma Ximing, 'Jindai Xi'an Huizu Shiyejia Ma Ruisheng Xiansheng' 近代西安回族實業家馮瑞生先生 [Feng Ruisheng, a Modern Hui Entrepreneur in Xi'an], in *Xi'an Wenshi Ziliao*, vol. 12, 1987, pp. 75–77.

19 January. By the time the magazine reached the Shaanxi Islamic Association, Xi'an Muslims had already begun fasting. The association, however, shelved the student publication and took no action.⁴⁸ This inaction suggests that even an organization promoting modern education did not necessarily want to intervene in a matter of local religious temporality.

Eventually, the *Islamic Student Magazine* found an ally not among lay Muslim elites but religious practitioners in Xi'an. About two weeks into Ramadan in Xi'an, an imam named Xiao Yuqing of the Sajinqiao Mosque got his hands on another copy of the *Islamic Student Magazine* at the Twelfth Primary School in Xi'an and was surprised to find out about the moon-sighting news report in it.⁴⁹ He was surprised not because it was his first encounter with the information that Xi'an had begun observing Ramadan a day later than Shanghai, but because this detail appeared as a news report in a modern-style magazine. Previously, Imam Xiao had learned through other channels that the crescent moon might have been sighted in Shanghai and Henan on 19 January. A few merchants returning from Shanghai and Hankou brought back the news about the moon sighting in Shanghai in 1931. However, Imam Xiao had regarded it as a rumour. Meanwhile, an Islamic association in Henan had sent a letter to Xi'an attesting that more than 20 people had seen the crescent on 19 January. Once again, Xiao questioned the credibility of the information, noting the absence of an address for the association on the envelope and the lack of a signature or seal on the letter.⁵⁰ Oral transmission and letters were relatively traditional channels of communication, but Imam Xiao did not place much trust in them.

By contrast, Imam Xiao took the reliability of the moon-sighting news report in the modern print media (the *Islamic Student Magazine*) for granted and wanted Xi'an Muslims to accept it. He held the conviction that when Muslims in one city received a reliable moon-sighting report from another city, they should accept it and break their fast at the same time as the other city. However, by this time, Xi'an Muslims had been fasting for half a month. Asking them to break the fast at the same time as Shanghai would mean asking them to fast one day less according to their original schedule, which was not easy. This was also the challenge that the five Guangzhou imams had faced. Imam Xiao understood that he needed the support of the Muslim public in Xi'an to alter the city's fasting schedule. Therefore, he informed the Shaanxi Islamic Association about his findings and opinion. No doubt, Xiao believed this public-spirited association would support him.⁵¹

Imam Xiao's anger and frustration were palpable when he discovered that the Shaanxi Islamic Association had received the *Islamic Student Magazine* and yet had deemed it unnecessary to take any action. To Imam Xiao, the observance of Ramadan on proper dates was a sacred duty, a divine command that demanded the attention and action of all Muslims. The receipt of a moon-sighting report should have prompted immediate public discussion among all concerned parties. Xiao accused the

⁴⁸Xiao, 'Xiao Yuqing a'hong Lai Han', p. 87.

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Xiao, 'Ni Ju Ying Ling Shanghai Yisilan Xuesheng Zazhi Baogao Jianyue Liyou', p. 90.

⁵¹Xiao, 'Xiao Yuqing a'hong Lai Han', p. 87.

association of behaving like an exclusive 'private club' (*sihui*; 私會) rather than fulfilling its responsibilities as a true 'association' should (*gonghui*; 公會).⁵²

Disappointed by the Shaanxi Islamic Association, Imam Xiao Yuqing appealed directly to eight major mosques in Xi'an. However, only three of them—one of which was Xiao's own mosque—agreed to accept Shanghai's moon-sighting news report. The majority of Xi'an's Muslims did not respond to Xiao's appeal. Moreover, some Muslims vehemently opposed Xiao's attempt to alter the city's fasting schedule. The opposing Muslims made three counterarguments. First, the geographic locations of Shanghai and Xi'an were so distant that the cities would see the moon at different times. Second, they claimed that there were no clear requirements in the Islamic classics for Muslims to accept moon-sighting reports from other cities. Third, and most notably, the opposing Muslims launched a direct attack on the very communication technology that reform-minded Muslim intellectuals like Imam Xiao relied upon, namely newspapers and magazines.⁵³ They claimed that these were all propagandistic in nature, and would disseminate information that was often inconclusive, misleading, or outright *fake* to serve their agendas. Consequently, Xi'an Muslims should not consider the moon-sighting news in the *Islamic Student Magazine* as reliable.⁵⁴

The three counterarguments were troubling to Imam Xiao Yuqing. Word began to spread in Xi'an that breaking fast at the same time as Muslims in Shanghai was religiously inappropriate. As a response, on the new date of breaking the fast, Imam Xiao posted a long essay at the gates of the three mosques, defending himself and his followers.⁵⁵ This long essay deserves in-depth scholarly discussion. First, Imam Xiao Yuqing wrote a paragraph to explain why geographical and doctrinal reasons could not be used to justify the rejection of the moon-sighting report from Shanghai. Xiao stated that, based on his study of several Islamic classics, if Muslims in one area did not see the crescent moon but received a reliable moon-sighting report from other regions, they should accept the report, and start and break their fast according to the report. Xiao acknowledged that the moon may appear at different times in different areas, but he insisted that reliable reports of moon sightings from different places should be accepted by Muslims in different areas regardless.⁵⁶

However, the opposing Muslims' charge of 'fake news' forced Imam Xiao to do more than simply defend the reliability of a single report. He had to construct an entirely new framework for establishing trust in a remote, mass-produced medium. Imam Xiao's detailed defence, in essence, was an attempt to build a new kind of technological authority, one based on the perceived integrity of the magazine's mission, its editors, and its professional quality. This case, therefore, offers a rare insight into the social labour required to make new technologies authoritative.

Imam Xiao Yuqing stated that the *Islamic Student Magazine* was not an ordinary news outlet, but a self-identified religious periodical with the mission of promoting Islamic doctrine. Given its purpose, Xiao insisted that the magazine must have attached more

⁵²Ibid., p. 88.

⁵³Ibid., pp. 87–88.

⁵⁴Xiao, 'Ni Ju Ying Ling Shanghai Yisilan Xuesheng Zazhi Baogao Jianyue Liyou', p. 89.

⁵⁵Xiao, 'Xiao Yuqing a'hong Lai Han', p. 88.

⁵⁶Xiao, 'Ni Ju Ying Ling Shanghai Yisilan Xuesheng Zazhi Baogao Jianyue Liyou', p. 88.

importance to the reliability of the information that it published in comparison to ordinary publications; otherwise, the magazine would not have been able to spread Islamic teachings.⁵⁷ Xiao here appealed to the religious faith of Xi'an Muslims to argue for the magazine's credibility.

The overarching purpose of a magazine does not inherently ensure the accuracy of each individual piece of information that it contains. Therefore, Imam Xiao then endeavoured to demonstrate that a tangible group of individual Muslims was accountable for the veracity of the 1931 moon-sighting news report. Xiao pointed out that the report appeared in a section titled 'Announcements of Our Magazine'. This meant, in effect, that all of the magazine's student editors were guarantors of the reliability of the report. Meanwhile, like the editors, the contributors to the magazine were all Muslim students from the Shanghai Islamic Teachers School. In Imam Xiao's view, those contributors thus became endorsers of the accuracy of the moon-sighting news. There were nearly 30 contributors in the first issue of the *Islamic Student Magazine*, and Xiao argued that it was hard to doubt a moon-sighting news report that was endorsed by all of them.⁵⁸

Moreover, editors and contributors were not the only groups of individuals who were responsible for a magazine's credibility. The *Islamic Student Magazine* relied on financial donations from Muslim merchants in Shanghai who were passionate about promoting Islam.⁵⁹ Imam Xiao argued that sighting the Ramadan crescent moon was a sacred matter. If the magazine falsely reported the moon appearing in Shanghai, this would represent a severe religious offence. The donors to the magazine would certainly not stand by while their money was spent irresponsibly on religious matters.⁶⁰

As if he were concerned that the Xi'an Muslims might doubt the integrity of such donor-merchants, Imam Xiao further pointed out that Shanghai, where the *Islamic Student Magazine* was published, was a gathering place for talent. This included contemporary outstanding Muslim intellectuals, such as Da Pusheng and Ha Decheng, who were proficient in both the Islamic classics and Chinese literature. They were, he argued, rare talents of Chinese Islam, not comparable to those who were 'stubborn and decayed'.⁶¹ Here, Xiao was clearly using praise for Da and Ha to implicitly criticize those Xi'an Muslims who opposed him. Xiao inferred that if the crescent moon had not appeared in Shanghai on 19 January, and the magazine falsely reported it, Da Pusheng and other honourable Shanghai Muslim intellectuals would have already pointed out this grave mistake.⁶²

Finally, Imam Xiao asked Xi'an Muslims to look at the content of the *Islamic Student Magazine*, which consisted of three main sections: translations, essays, and news briefs. Its language was accessible, and its discussions were broad and aligned with modern

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 89.

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Ge Zhuang, 'Jindai Shanghai Huishang Qunti de Tezheng Yu Wenhua Gongxian' 近代上海回商群體的特徵與文化貢獻 [The Characteristics and Cultural Contributions of a Group of Hui Merchants in Modern Shanghai], *Huizu Yanjiu*, no. 4, 2008, pp. 38–39; *Islamic Student Magazine* Press, 'Benshe Mingxie' 本社鳴謝 [Our Society's Acknowledgements], *Yisilan Xuesheng Zazhi*, no. 1, 1931, pp. 43–44.

⁶⁰Xiao, 'Ni Ju Ying Ling Shanghai Yisilan Xuesheng Zazhi Baogao Jianyue Liyou', p. 89.

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

trends.⁶³ In other words, the people running the magazine were dedicated and professional. Thus, he argued, the credibility of their moon-sighting news report should not be questioned in bad faith. In the end, Imam Xiao Yuqing appealed to his fellow Xi'an Muslims to trust the *Islamic Student Magazine* and not to isolate themselves and resort to ignorant tactics in an era of civilization and progress.⁶⁴ Here Xiao was suggesting that accepting the reports in modern periodicals was equal to accepting modern civilization.

Imam Xiao Yuqing had meticulously constructed a case for the trustworthiness of a modern print medium, the *Islamic Student Magazine*. He appealed to the magazine's religious mission, the collective witness of its 30-plus editors and contributors, the financial oversight of its devout merchant donors, and the reputational guarantee of famous Shanghai intellectuals like Da Pusheng. In essence, Imam Xiao attempted to graft traditional markers of authority—personal reputation, collective testimony, and elite endorsement—onto a modern, distant, mass-produced medium. However, Imam Xiao was ultimately unable to convince a large portion of the Xi'an Muslims to disregard their Ramadan tradition. This outcome demonstrates that the authority of a new communication technology is not inherent but must be actively and painstakingly constructed—a process that can easily fail when the source is perceived as socially or geographically distant.

In the cases in Guangzhou and Xi'an, reform-minded Hui Muslim intellectuals accepted the reliability of the news report in the *Islamic Student Magazine* and used it to promote changes in temporal practices in their communities. However, intellectuals who were traditionally favoured by the information hierarchy were not always at the forefront of using and promoting new communication technologies. Sometimes, ordinary Muslims demonstrated a greater receptivity to certain news and new technologies, subverting the information hierarchy and compelling Muslim intellectuals to follow suit.

The Ramadan of 1931 in Beijing and the telephone

In 1931, Muslims in Beijing began their Ramadan fasting on 21 January. However, that they all conformed to this date came about more by accident, rather than reflecting the Beijing Muslim community's homogeneity—in fact, quite the opposite was the case. In that year, there was a disagreement among Muslims in Beijing regarding which day to search for the crescent moon of Ramadan, even though they lived in the same city. According to Islamic doctrine, Muslims should look for the crescent of Ramadan on the 29th day of Sha'ban. But in 1931, some Muslims in Beijing asserted that the 29th day of Sha'ban was 19 January, while others argued that it was 20 January. As a result, they disagreed with each other regarding which day to search for the crescent moon. On 19 January, there was no sighting of the moon, but there was on 20 January.⁶⁵ Those Muslims who searched for the crescent on 19 January started fasting on 21 January because it had not been sighted on 19 January. Those who considered 20 January to be

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Ibid., p. 90.

⁶⁵Zicheng, 'A Piece of Sentiment about the City's Eid al-Fitr', p. 1; Wang, 'Niuji Libaisi Cheng'ren Baoyue Zhi Liyou', p. 13.

the 29th day of Sha'ban also started fasting on 21 January because the crescent was sighted on 20 January.

When the news that Muslims in Shanghai had sighted the crescent moon on 19 January spread to Beijing, it disrupted the superficial tranquillity of the Beijing Muslim community, setting off bitter debates. Like Muslims in Guangzhou and Xi'an, Muslims in Beijing found out that they had started fasting a day later than Muslims in Shanghai, Shandong, Henan, and Liaoning (20 January) some time after the beginning of Ramadan.⁶⁶ The editors of the *Islamic Student Magazine* had sent their magazine from Shanghai to Beijing, as a student of the Beijing Chengda Teachers School mentioned that he had read it.⁶⁷ However, on the basis of the available materials it cannot be ascertained whether the magazine's moon-sighting news report was where Beijing Muslims learned about the beginning date of Ramadan in Shanghai. Nevertheless, the *Islamic Student Magazine* certainly stimulated the spread of Ramadan-related news in China, raising Beijing Muslims' awareness of the divergence in the dates of Ramadan.

However, unlike in Guangzhou and Xi'an, in Beijing, no reform-minded imams took the lead in demanding acceptance of other cities' moon-sighting reports. In fact, at the beginning of Ramadan, Beijing's Dongsì Mosque received a telephone call from Gansu's Xishan Mosque and learned that Muslims in that mosque had sighted the crescent moon on 20 January, but chose not to accept the report.⁶⁸ This was not because the mosque was too conservative to trust news arriving via a new communication technology like the telephone, but instead related to the precarious status of the reformist wing of the Muslim community in the Republican era.

At the time the Dongsì Mosque was the campus of the Chengda Teachers School, and Ma Songting, Chengda's director of general affairs, was the mosque's imam.⁶⁹ Ma Songting was also a renowned reform-minded imam,⁷⁰ and the mission of Ma's Chengda Teachers School was to modernize Chinese Islam.⁷¹ Therefore, it can be argued that in 1931 the Dongsì Mosque was dominated by reform-minded Muslim intellectuals. Nevertheless, it ignored the moon-sighting phone call as the priority of reform-minded imams like Ma Songting was to maintain the uneasy unity of the Muslim community. They understood that, at the time, accepting other regions' moon-sighting reports was still uncommon among Hui Muslims, and acting rashly would only

⁶⁶ Yuehua Press, 'Chuyi Jianyue, Chu'er Kaizhai' 初一見月,初二開齋 [See the Moon on the First Day of the Lunar Month, Break the Fast on the Second Day of the Lunar Month], *Yuehua*, vol. 3, no. 6, 1931, p. 19.

⁶⁷ Ma Yugui, 'Du Yisilan Xuesheng Zazhi Hou Yougan' 讀伊斯蘭學生雜誌後有感 [Reflections after Reading the Islamic Student Magazine], in *Chengda Wenhui* (Beijing: Chengda shifan xuexiao, 1932), vol. 4, pp. 127–130.

⁶⁸ Yuehua Press, 'Chuyi Jianyue, Chu'er Kaizhai', p. 19.

⁶⁹ Liu Dongsheng, 'Chengda Shifan Xuexiao Xiaoshi Shu Yao' 成達師範學校校史述要 [A Concise History of the Chengda Teachers School], *Huizu Yanjiu*, no. 2, 1993, p. 63.

⁷⁰ Sai Shengbao, 'Aiguo Zhuyi Zhe, Yisilan Jingxue Jiaoyujia Ma Songting Da'ahong' 愛國主義者、伊斯蘭經學教育家馬松亭大阿訇 [Patriot and Islamic Educator Imam Ma Songting], *Huizu Yanjiu*, no. 2, 1992, pp. 98–100.

⁷¹ For more on Chengda, see Bin Chen, 'The Chengda Teachers School and Modern China's Frontier Politics: Ethnicity and Religion in the Implementation of Republican Law, 1925–1949', *The Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 81, no. 2, 2022, pp. 323–340; Yufeng Mao, 'Muslim Educational Reform in 20th-century China: The Case of the Chengda Teachers Academy', *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident*, no. 33, 2011, pp. 143–170.

provoke doubts and disputes among their constituents.⁷² More importantly, the traditional information hierarchy favoured imams, whether they were reformists or not. When imams did not act on moon-sighting news, the congregation typically could not do so either.

Therefore, despite the news that Muslims in many other places began their fast on 20 January, it seemed that Beijing Muslims were still on track to break their fast according to their original schedule. This meant that they began to search for the crescent moon again on their 29th day of Ramadan (18 February 1931) to decide when to break their fast.⁷³ This practice was in accordance with Islamic teachings. On the 29th day of Ramadan, if Muslims can see the crescent, then the next day is the day of Eid al-Fitr and the first day of Shawwal (the tenth Islamic month). If Muslims cannot see the crescent, then the next day is the thirtieth day of Ramadan, and the day after that is Eid al-Fitr.⁷⁴

The absence of elite intellectuals' leadership did not mean that all Beijing Muslims ignored the moon-sighting news from other regions. Muslims in Shanghai and many other regions sighted the crescent moon on 19 January. Thus, their 29th day of Ramadan was 17 February, one day earlier than that of Beijing. Without instructions from imams, several Muslim clerks working for the Beijing Yiwenzhai Jewellery Store wanted to verify the accuracy of the moon-sighting news from other regions by looking for the crescent from the store's building.⁷⁵ Their assumption was that the crescent moon of Ramadan appeared at the same time across China. If they could see the crescent on 17 February, that meant the crescent must have appeared in Beijing on 19 January, the moon-sighting news of regions like Shanghai was trustworthy, and Muslims in Beijing should break their fast on 18 February, instead of 19 or even 20 February.

On the evening of 17 February, the weather in Beijing was clear, and looking up towards the southwest, the clerks saw a moon as thin as a line. To these clerks, this meant they had sighted the crescent moon, which verified the news that regions like Shanghai had sighted the crescent on 19 January. Next, the store clerks reported their findings to major mosques in Beijing, hoping that they would adjust the date to break the fast.⁷⁶ Like Imam Xiao Yuqing in Xi'an, the store clerks held the belief that the schedule of Ramadan was closely related to the public interest of the Muslim community. And they, as Muslims, had the obligation to make sure that those dates were accurate, even though they might just be lay Muslims.

Reform-minded imams in Beijing did not initiate the effort to review Beijing's Ramadan schedule based on the moon-sighting news of other regions. Imam Ma Songting even deliberately ignored a point-to-point moon-sighting phone call. However, the evening of 17 February witnessed a dramatic subversion of the traditional

⁷²Ma Songting, 'Dongsipailou Qingzhensi Zheci Chengling Baoyue de Jingguo' 東四牌樓清真寺這次承領報月的經過 [The Process of Undertaking the Reporting of the Moon at the Dongsipailou Mosque], *Yuehua*, vol. 3, no. 6, 1931, pp. 15–16.

⁷³Wang, 'Niujie Libaisi Cheng'ren Baoyue Zhi Liyou', p. 13.

⁷⁴Liu Xiaochun, 'Woguo Musilin Jiezhai Shijian Tanta' 我國穆斯林齋戒時間探討 [Discussion on the Fasting Times for Muslims in Our Country], *Zhongguo Musilin*, no. 3, 2013, p. 24.

⁷⁵Yuehua Press, 'Chuyi Jianyue, Chu'er Kaizhai', p. 19.

⁷⁶Ibid.

information hierarchy. A small group of lay store clerks, armed with a telephone, effectively bypassed the established authority of the city's imams. By rapidly disseminating their own moon-sighting report through that communication technology, they, albeit temporarily, created a new, independent node of authority that forced the religious elite to react.

Some of the four store clerks who originally sighted the crescent moon went to mosques to report their findings in person.⁷⁷ According to a survey in 1937, Beijing had 46 mosques in total, all of which were built before 1926,⁷⁸ which means that in 1931, Beijing had at least 46 mosques. If, on the evening of 17 February, information could only travel from person to person in Beijing, it would have taken a while before the whole city learned the news. Yet, the store clerks' moon-sighting news was extremely time-sensitive. If their sighting was reliable, Muslims in Beijing needed to change their Ramadan schedule immediately and stop fasting the next day (18 February).

Facing this time-sensitive challenge, some of the clerks in the Yiwenzhai store took to the telephone to inform Beijing mosques of the moon-sighting news.⁷⁹ Phone calls accelerated the circulation of the moon-sighting news. Consequently, on the evening of 17 February, it was hard for imams and lay Muslims alike in Beijing to ignore the report of the moon sighting from the Yiwenzhai store. For instance, Ma Songting, the imam of the Dongsì Mosque, heard the news during a phone call from the store, rather than through in-person interactions with the clerks.⁸⁰ Imam Ma had ignored a moon-sighting report a few weeks prior, but he understood that doing nothing about the clerks' report was not an option, as the news was spreading like wildfire in Beijing. At the same time, Imam Ma was still cautious. He did not wish to disturb the fragile unity of the Beijing Muslim community during Ramadan due to hasty decision-making. Therefore, after ending the phone call with the store clerks, Ma Songting personally went to the jewellery store to investigate and verify the news.⁸¹

There, Imam Ma Songting found out that the first of the four young Muslim clerks, around the age of 20, was a young man with the surname Zhao. Ma Songting specifically inquired about Zhao's character from the imam of the area where the store was located. The response he received was that Zhao was the most honest and reliable person in the store and that he actively participated in religious activities such as fasting and worship. Subsequently, Ma visited the location where the moon was observed and asked each of the four clerks about the circumstances of their moon sighting, including the shape of the crescent moon and the time and place of the sighting. The statements of the clerks were all consistent, with no contradictions. To testify that what they said was true, the store clerks also complied with Ma Songting's request to recite the Shahada, the formal declaration of faith, which states: 'There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet'.⁸²

⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁸Wang Mengyang, 'Beipingshi Huijiao Gaikuang' 北平市回教概况 [The Overview of Islam in Beiping City], *Yuehua*, vol. 9, no. 12, 1937, pp. 3–4.

⁷⁹Ma, 'Dongsipailou Qingzhensi Zheci Chengling Baoyue de Jingguo', p. 15.

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Ibid.

After the investigation, Ma Songting found that the moon-sighting report from the Yiwenzhai clerks was trustworthy according to Islamic doctrine. However, he did not immediately adjust the date of his mosque's Eid al-Fitr. What he least wanted to see was a split among the Muslims in Beijing over the timing of Eid al-Fitr. He hoped that his fellow Muslims would either all accept the moon-sighting report or not at all. Therefore, Ma Songting began to inquire about the attitudes of other mosques in Beijing, mainly by telephone, due to time constraints. Soon, Ma learned from phone calls that several mosques, including the influential Niujie Mosque and Jiaozihutong Mosque, had decided to accept the clerks' report and break the fast on 18 February. Ma Songting also consulted with the leader of the China Islamic Association for Progress (Zhongguo huijiao jujinhui; 中國回教俱進會) via telephone.⁸³ Established in 1912 by Beijing Muslim elites, at the time the Association for Progress was one of the largest Muslim associations not just in Beijing but in all of China.⁸⁴ The association's leadership held that since the report of the store clerks was credible, Muslims in Beijing should accept it.⁸⁵

At this point, Ma Songting concluded from all of his phone calls that the 'majority' of Muslims in Beijing had deemed the moon-sighting report of the Yiwenzhai clerks to be trustworthy, and he needed to follow suit to avoid dividing the community. Only then did he decide to have the congregation of his Dongsì Mosque stop fasting and hold the ceremony of breaking the fast the next day.⁸⁶ However, the 'majority' perceived by Imam Ma represented only those Muslims in his social and communication network. The possession of telephones served as a significant indicator of the boundaries of Imam Ma's circle of communication. This meant that on the evening of 17 February, Imam Ma was unable to reach many Beijing Muslim leaders. When he chose to trust and accept the moon-sighting report from the Yiwenzhai store, he was probably unaware of the great controversy this same report had sparked within the Beijing Muslim community on the same evening.

The core of the controversy was whether the Yiwenzhai store clerks could be trusted to accurately report the sighting of the crescent moon. In fact, at the beginning of the Ramadan of 1931, some clerks from the Beijing Yibao Store were said to have seen the crescent on 19 January but dared not report it.⁸⁷ The Yiwenzhai store clerks were young lay Muslims with limited religious training, and the schedule of Ramadan was of high religious significance. As such, many Muslims in Beijing did not trust the store clerks and even disparaged them, believing that they should not meddle with the issue of moon sightings.⁸⁸

Many Beijing imams also considered the moon sighting by the Yiwenzhai store's lay Muslim clerks as a challenge to their authority and pushed back with harsh criticism. The atmosphere in Beijing's Muslim community became so intense that the editors of *Yuehua* felt compelled to defend the Yiwenzhai clerks. The editors argued that those

⁸³Ibid., pp. 15–16.

⁸⁴Pei Feifei, 'Zhongguo Huijiao Jujinhui Jiceng Zuzhi Shuping' 中國回教俱進會基層組織述評 [Commentary on Grassroots Organizations of the Chinese Islamic Association] (1912–1915), *Huizu Yanjiu*, no. 1, 2021, pp. 5–8.

⁸⁵Ma, 'Dongsipailou Qingzhensi Zheci Chengling Baoyue de Jingguo', p. 16.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Wang, 'Niujie Libaisi Cheng'ren Baoyue Zhi Liyou', p. 13.

⁸⁸Ibid., p. 14.

who announced the sighting of the crescent moon should not be attacked, as observing the moon was a common duty among Muslims, not a privilege exclusive to a few religious leaders. Despite the support of reform-minded intellectuals, in the end, only seven mosques accepted the store clerks' report and changed their fasting schedules,⁸⁹ meaning that the majority of the mosques did not accept the moon-sighting report. Meanwhile, those mosques that rejected the Yiwenzhai clerks' report did not break their fasting on the same day either: some did it on 19 February, while others chose 20 February.⁹⁰ In the end, Muslims in the same city celebrated Eid al-Fitr on three different dates in 1931.

The differing levels of trust in new information sources further fragmented the temporal landscape among Beijing Muslims. This division saddened the reform-minded Muslim intellectuals who aspired to foster Muslim unity in China. Imam Ma Songting described the division as a 'great regret'.⁹¹ The question then became how to unite the Hui so that they could observe Ramadan together in the future. One essay discussing the 1931 Ramadan controversy in *Yuehua* stated: 'We need not dwell on what has passed, but we must study and discuss what lies ahead.'⁹² Placing hope in the future was understandable, as the spread and advancement of communication technologies over time could foster stronger connections within the Muslim community. But would what lay ahead be better?

The Ramadan of 1934 and third-party information

The development of new technology not only facilitated faster communication between two locations but also made it more convenient to discuss information received from third parties. Whether to trust this third-party information posed a challenge for Hui Muslims. By the end of 1933, another Ramadan was approaching. In that year, Muslims in Chengdu, Sichuan province, searched for the crescent moon on 18 December. Due to bad weather, they did not find the moon and set 20 December as Chengdu's first day of Ramadan. However, the next day (19 December), a Muslim from the nearby town of Jinquanchang went to Chengdu to personally report the news that Muslims in the town had seen the crescent moon on the 18th. He asked the imams in Chengdu to accept his report so that Muslims in Chengdu and the surrounding areas could begin Ramadan together. However, not a single imam in Chengdu agreed to do so. Muslims in Chengdu thus began fasting on 20 December. On 9 January 1934, approximately 21 days after Chengdu entered Ramadan, a Muslim merchant by the name of Yang Lantian received a letter from a friend in Shanghai. The letter revealed moon-sighting news not from Shanghai, but from a third location—Beijing, where the crescent had been sighted on 17 December 1933, suggesting that Ramadan should have begun on 18 December in Chengdu, rather than on the 20th.⁹³

⁸⁹Yuehua Press, 'Chuyi Jianyue, Chu'er Kaizhai', pp. 19–20.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Ma, 'Dongsipailou Qingzhensi Zheci Chengling Baoyue de Jingguo', p. 17.

⁹²Qian, 'Xinyue Jiufen de Mianmianguan' 新月糾紛的面面觀 [Aspects of the New Moon Dispute], *Yuehua*, vol. 3, no. 6, 1931, p. 5.

⁹³Yuehua Press, 'Kaizhai Xiaoxi' 開齋消息 [News of Breaking the Fast], *Yuehua*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1934, pp. 27–28.

In the early twentieth century, letters mailed via China's postal system were still the primary communication technology through which people in Chengdu acquired information about the outside world. Historian John Alekna's recent study of the May Fourth Movement in Chengdu revealed that the movement only started to have a real impact there when the first mail containing the news of the movement arrived from Beijing in mid-May. Until that point, there was 'simply not enough information' about the movement to cause a sensation in Chengdu.⁹⁴ At the turn of 1934, it took Yang Lantian over 20 days to receive a letter containing brief and second-hand information about Ramadan in Beijing. However, this information, albeit brief, was still relevant, as Muslims in Chengdu had not yet celebrated Eid al-Fitr, and it was enough to cause a sensation among the Chengdu Muslim community.

Even though Yang Lantian (1883–1972) only had second-hand information on the moon-sighting result in Beijing, because the information was from a friend in Shanghai, he took it seriously. This was related to Yang's background. Although he was a merchant in Chengdu, Yang Lantian was born and grew up in Songjiang (today part of Shanghai). In 1908, supported by his brother-in-law and an influential Muslim merchant in Shanghai, Ma Jinqing (1880–1946),⁹⁵ Yang travelled up the Yangzi River to do business in Chengdu, which primarily involved transporting fashionable goods from Shanghai to Chengdu for sale while also bringing Sichuan's local specialties back to Shanghai. Thanks to his astute management, Yang made considerable profits. In 1912, he even relocated his entire family to Chengdu.⁹⁶ Given Yang's background and business model, it was evident that he had many trusted friends and business partners in Shanghai. Upon learning of the moon sighting in Beijing from his friend in Shanghai, Yang's first reaction was not to fact-check the third-party information but to reveal it to the Muslim public in Chengdu.

Yang Lantian was a devout Muslim. Having achieved significant success in business, he frequently engaged in religious charitable activities.⁹⁷ By 1934, he was also serving as the chair of the board of his neighbourhood mosque, the Chengdu Sishi Mosque. Yang took the letter to the imam of the Sishi Mosque, asking him to accept the moon-sighting report, even though it was a second-hand one. Uncertain of how to proceed, the imam of the Sishi Mosque sought advice from Imam Ma Guquan of the Chengdu Huangcheng Mosque,⁹⁸ founded in 1666 and one of the largest mosques in Sichuan.⁹⁹ Born into a family of imams in Sichuan, Imam Ma Guquan presided over the

⁹⁴Alekna, *Seeking News, Making China*, pp. 28–34.

⁹⁵For more on Ma Jinqing, see Gai Weide (ed.), 'Mianhuai Ma Gong Jinqing' 緬懷馬公晉卿 [In Memory of Ma Jinqing] (Shanghai: n.p., 1996).

⁹⁶Yang Ruisheng and Yang Jiansheng, 'Yi Xianfu Yang Lantian Zai Chengdu de Shangmao Huodong' 憶先父楊蘭田在成都的商賈活動 [Recalling the Commercial Activities of My Father Yang Lantian in Chengdu], in *Zhongguo Nanfang Huizu Jingji Shangmao Ziliao Xuanbian* 中國南方回族經濟商賈資料選編 [Selected Compilation of Economic and Trade Information of the Hui Ethnic Group in Southern China], (eds) Duan Jinlu and Yao Jide (Kunming: Yunnan minzu chubanshe, 2002), pp. 309–310.

⁹⁷Ibid., pp. 310–311.

⁹⁸Yuehua Press, 'Kaizhai Xiaoxi', p. 28.

⁹⁹Ma Jianzhao and Zhang Shuhui (eds), *Zhongguo Nanfang Huizu Tuantu Yu Zongjiao Changsuo Wenshi Ziliao Jiyao* 中國南方回族團體與宗教場所文史資料輯要 [Compilation of Historical and Religious Materials of the Hui Ethnic Group and Religious Sites in Southern China] (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2015), pp. 278–280.

Huangcheng Mosque for an extended period, ultimately spanning more than three decades. Many imams in Sichuan were his disciples,¹⁰⁰ and as such, when imams in Sichuan encountered difficult issues, they often turned to him for advice. Imam Ma Guquan did not accept the moon-sighting report of Yang Lantian's friend. However, Yang insisted that the information in his friend's letter was reliable. He and several other Muslim merchants even began planning to organize Eid al-Fitr by themselves.¹⁰¹

In the meantime, it is likely that Yang Lantian sought confirmation from other friends in Shanghai regarding the exact moon-sighting dates in Beijing, as his friend's letter was the subject of scepticism. With Ramadan in Chengdu nearing its end, the telegraph became his primary means of seeking timely information from Shanghai. On the morning of 16 January 1934, 28 days after Chengdu entered Ramadan, Yang received a telegram from Shanghai stating that Eid al-Fitr was going to be celebrated on 17 January, potentially two days earlier than Chengdu. By noon on 16 January, Yang had received another telegram from Shanghai, claiming that the crescent moon had indeed been sighted in Beijing on 17 December 1933.¹⁰² The telegraph had finally joined the arena of reporting moon-sighting results, albeit with results from a third location.

In hindsight, the telegraph system in early twentieth-century China was far from perfect. In 1933, Beijing Muslims searched for the crescent moon of Ramadan on two different dates: 17 December and 18 December. And they also started fasting on different dates.¹⁰³ This information was lost in the moon-sighting telegrams received by Yang Lantian. Still, Yang had faith in those telegrams and acted accordingly. He was convinced that the Ramadan schedule in Chengdu required adjustment, but felt pessimistic about his chances of persuading Chengdu's imams to embrace his perspective. Consequently, Yang decided to sidestep the imams, including the one at his Sishi Mosque, and instead host the Eid al-Fitr ceremony in his private residence with fellow Muslims who shared his view. Religious leaders of the Shisi Mosque were horrified when they got wind of Yang Lantian's plans. They feared that allowing Muslims to organize Eid al-Fitr at private residences would end the mosque's authority and tear the community apart. The imam of the Shisi Mosque was now inclined to accept the moon-sighting telegram from Shanghai, and he immediately went to the Huangcheng Mosque to urge Imam Ma Guquan to convene a citywide meeting of Muslims to collectively receive the moon-sighting telegram from Shanghai. Yang Lantian also sprang into action again, campaigning vigorously in the hopes of persuading Chengdu's Muslim community to break their fast early. Ultimately, however, Imam Ma Guquan remained unmoved.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰⁰Bai Shouyi, 'Zhongguo Yisilan Jingshi Chuan' 中國伊斯蘭經師傳 [The Biographies of Islamic Scholars in China], in *Bai Shouyi Wenji Minzu Zongjiao Lun Ji (Shang)* 白壽彝文集 民族宗教論集(上) [Anthology of Bai Shouyi's Essays on Nationalities and Religions (One)] (Kaifeng: Henan daxue chubanshe, 2008), p. 425.

¹⁰¹Yuehua Press, 'Kaizhai Xiaoxi', p. 28.

¹⁰²Ibid.

¹⁰³Yuehua Press, 'Qinming Zhaiyue You Fenqi' 欽命齋月又紛歧 [The Imperial Decree of Ramadan is Inconsistent], *Yuehua*, vol. 5, no. 36, 1933, p. 30.

¹⁰⁴Yuehua Press, 'Kaizhai Xiaoxi', p. 28.

As unified action among the city's Muslims was unlikely, the imam of the Shisi Mosque decided to accept Yang Lantian's viewpoint and proceeded to hold Eid al-Fitr for the Muslims in his neighbourhood on 17 January, ahead of other mosques in Chengdu. This move was seen by other imams in Chengdu as a challenge to Imam Ma Guquan's authority, and they vehemently denounced the Shisi imam as treacherous.¹⁰⁵ The Shisi imam was torn between his peers and his congregation as his dilemma represented a direct clash between two competing logics of authority. On one side was Imam Ma Guquan, whose power was rooted in traditional religious scholarship and local institutional hierarchy. On the other was the merchant Yang Lantian, whose influence derived from modern, geographically extensive commercial networks and firm trust in new communication technologies. The Shisi imam's eventual decision to side with Yang reveals the potent challenge that this new, technologically mediated form of authority posed to the established religious order. On the other hand, Yang's ultimate failure to sway the entire city demonstrated the resilience of traditional religious authority. Neither form of authority was absolute. Thus, the outcome was not replacement, but another instance of fragmentation.

The divisiveness of Muslim communities revealed by the Ramadan of 1934 prompted the editors of *Yuehua* to lament that an 'insurmountable barrier' had seemingly formed between Muslims in China.¹⁰⁶ Yet, just as in 1931, *Yuehua*'s editors understood that 'The past is gone, and regret is of no use; the only thing to strive for is improvement in the future.'¹⁰⁷ The question of how to strive for future improvement, however, remains open to debate. One certainty is that technological advancements, despite their seemingly unifying influence, cannot alone overcome the resilience of local temporalities.

Conclusion

The fraught Ramadan observances in Guangzhou, Xi'an, Beijing, and Chengdu during the 1930s reveal a consistent pattern: the introduction of modern print media, telegraphy, and telephony did not resolve temporal diversity; instead it entered the public arena to contest authority. From the scepticism towards a modern student magazine in Guangzhou and Xi'an to the bottom-up challenge enabled by the telephone in Beijing and the clash between personal networks and local religious order in Chengdu, these case studies demonstrate that the central conflict was not over technology, but over authority. The hope that technology would unify the Hui community, a dream of reform-minded intellectuals like Ma Jian and Hu Shiwen, shattered when it encountered a harsh reality. Instead of resolving disputes, new communication technologies forced a difficult and divisive question upon the community: in an age of mass information, whose crescent moon, and whose authority, should one ultimately follow? Given that Hui Muslims' trust fragmented along lines of faith in the communication technology, the messenger, and the information itself, it naturally follows that there would be different answers to this question, which in turn prevented the seamless imposition of a standardized temporality regarding Ramadan.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶*Yuehua* Press, 'Bianzhe Shuo' 编者说 [Editor Says], *Yuehua*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1934.

¹⁰⁷*Yuehua* Press, 'Tongyi Fengzhai Kaizhai', pp. 4–5.

Today, nearly a hundred years later, communication technologies have seen unprecedented development in China. Yet, local temporal practices regarding Ramadan have not been eliminated. As late as 2022, Muslims in China still did not have unified Ramadan dates. In 2022, the China Islamic Association (Zhongguo Yisilanjiao xiehui; 中國伊斯蘭教協會) regarded 3 May as the date of that year's Eid al-Fitr.¹⁰⁸ While major Muslim regions like Xinjiang, Ningxia, and Yunnan did break their fast on 3 May, the Muslims of Qinghai province followed a different schedule,¹⁰⁹ celebrating 2022's Eid al-Fitr on 2 May.¹¹⁰ Even those provinces that observed Eid al-Fitr on 3 May often only did so because this date was confirmed by their respective provincial Islamic associations. On 1 May 2022, the Yunnan Islamic Association announced that it had not seen the crescent of Shawwal and had not received reliable moon-sighting reports from other regions, and so Yunnan ended Ramadan on 2 May and observed Eid al-Fitr on 3 May.¹¹¹

It is interesting that the Yunnan Islamic Association claimed that it did not receive 'reliable' moon-sighting reports from other regions on 1 May. By 2022, nearly everyone in China owned a smartphone and was using the social networking platform WeChat. With the assistance of algorithms, the news of the sighting of the Ramadan crescent could instantly and accurately reach all Muslims across China. It was likely that, in 2022, the Yunnan Islamic Association received a vast number of moon-sighting reports. However, the association deemed that no outside reports were reliable, so Yunnan broke fast according to its observation of the moon cycle in 2022. Similar to Muslims during the Republican period, Muslims in China today continue to exhibit differing levels of trust in new forms of communication.

¹⁰⁸China Islamic Association, '2022 Nian Gongli Nongli Yisilan Jiaoli Duizhaobiao' 2022年公曆、農曆、伊斯蘭教歷對照表 [Comparison Table of the Gregorian Calendar, Lunar Calendar and Islamic Calendar in 2022], Zhongguo Yisilanjiao Xiehui, 2022, <http://www.chinaislam.net.cn/cms/glnldzb/2022niangongli-nongli-yisilanjiaoliduizhaobiao/>, [last accessed 13 May 2024].

¹⁰⁹Yunnansheng yixie, 'Yunnansheng Yisilanjiao Xiehui Guanyu 2022 Nian "Kaizhaijie" Youguan Shiyi de Tongzhi' 雲南省伊斯蘭教協會關於2022年'開齋節'有關事宜的通知 [Notice from the Yunnan Province Islamic Association Regarding Matters Pertaining to the 2022 'Eid al-Fitr'], Weixin Official Accounts Platform, Yunnan Yixie Zaixian, 1 May 2022, http://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/?_biz=MzIzODY1NzM4OQ==&mid=2247500864&idx=1&sn=1e02870b774687677d044b24b1990c7c&chksm=e9348e42de4307546daba744803c6b9bb291bf5579bf2f0742d76a057a005cb5a8c87077186f#rd, [accessed 11 August 2025]; General Office of the People's Government of Xinjiang, 'Guanyu 2022 Nian Jiejiari Fangjia Anpai He Dongxiaji Zuoxishijian de Tongzhi' 關於2022年節假日放假安排和冬夏季作息時間的通知 [Notice on the Arrangement of Public Holidays for 2022 and the Working Hours for Winter and Summer Seasons], Xinjiang weiwuerzizhiqu renminzhengfu wang, 23 December 2021, <https://www.xinjiang.gov.cn/xinjiang/tzgg/202112/45e6b454712a4827b1d0554d4c558171.shtml>, [accessed 11 August 2025]; Aluoha, '2002 Nian Kaizhaijie Shi Nayitian Jiyue Jihao' 2022年開齋節是哪一天是幾月幾號? [When is the Eid al-Fitr in 2022? What Date and Month?], Yinchuan Bendi bao, 28 December 2021, <http://yc.bendibao.com/news/20211228/43745.shtml>, [accessed 20 August 2025].

¹¹⁰Qinghaisheng yixie, 'Qinghaisheng Yixie Guanyu 2022 Nian Zhaiyue Ruzhai Shijian de Tongzhi' 青海省伊協關於2022年齋月入齋時間的通知 [Notice from the Islamic Association of Qinghai Province on the Beginning of Ramadan in 2022], Musilin Zaixian, 1 May 2022, http://www.muslimwww.com/html/2022/jinrijujiao_0401/36279.html, [accessed 11 August 2025].

¹¹¹Yunnansheng yixie, 'Yunnansheng Yisilanjiao Xiehui Guanyu 2022 Nian "Kaizhaijie" Youguan Shiyi de Tongzhi' 雲南省伊斯蘭教協會關於2022年'開齋節'有關事宜的通知 [Notice from the Yunnan Province Islamic Association Regarding Matters Pertaining to the 2022 'Eid al-Fitr'].

China is not alone in lacking standardized national dates for Ramadan observance. In Iraq in 2024, Sunni and Shia Muslims began their fast on different dates.¹¹² In Pakistan, some Muslims have rejected the confirmation of moon sightings received via telephone, often resulting in them observing Ramadan on different dates to other Muslims in the country.¹¹³ In the southern Kashmir region administered by India, for years Muslims there relied on moon-sighting news from Radio Pakistan, the country's national public radio broadcaster, to determine the start of Ramadan. However, in 2024, many prominent Muslims in southern Kashmir came together to establish an independent committee to look for the crescent moon of Ramadan. This change was not due to difficulties in receiving broadcasts from Radio Pakistan but instead stemmed from a desire to disassociate the Ramadan practice between Kashmir and Pakistan.¹¹⁴

The enduring fragmentation of Ramadan temporal practices in China and many other regions reveals a core dynamic of modern life: communication technologies may facilitate connections, but they do not automatically create consensus or community. Instead, by multiplying the sources of information and potential authority, they often illustrate and deepen pre-existing social fissures. They force societies into fraught, public negotiations over not only what is true, but who gets to decide. Understanding this complex interplay of technology, trust, and society is essential in an era where new digital tools continue to promise global unity while often delivering more profound and complex forms of division. The question of 'whose crescent moon to follow' is in fact a central challenge of our interconnected world.

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¹¹²Elhoudaiby, 'Ramadan and Eid's Crescent Wars'.

¹¹³Ali Akbar, '190 Years of Controversy: The Qasim Ali Mosque and Moon Sighting Elitism', Dawn.com, 17 July 2015, <http://www.dawn.com/news/1193393>, [accessed 11 August 2025].

¹¹⁴Bashaarat Masood, 'Decode Politics: Why J&K's Ramzan Moon-Sighting is Caught between Pakistan, a New Committee', *The Indian Express*, 10 April 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/jk-ramzan-moon-sighting-caught-between-pakistan-a-new-committee-9208205/>, [accessed 11 August 2025].

Appendices: Important months mentioned in the article

January 1931

S	M	T	W	R	F	S
				1	2	3
4	5	6	7	8	9	10
11	12	13	14	15	16	17
18	19*	20**	21	22	23	24
25	26	27	28	29	30	31

*Shanghai Muslims spotted the Ramadan crescent.

**The first day of 1931 Ramadan in Shanghai.

February 1931

S	M	T	W	R	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17*	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28

*The 29th day of 1931 Ramadan in Shanghai

December 1933

S	M	T	W	R	F	S
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18*	19	20**	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30

*Chengdu Muslims failed to spot the Ramadan crescent.

**The first day of 1933–1934 Ramadan in Chengdu.

January 1934

S	M	T	W	R	F	S
31 (Dec.1933)	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30	31			

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