

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Organizing Dots and Lines: Eastern Hui and the Adaptation of the CCP's Nationalities Work in the Revolutionary Era

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Abstract

Although ethnic governance in the People's Republic of China is often portrayed as a matter of controlling "minority nationalities" in the country's frontier regions, the ethnic affairs bureaucracy operates in every province. The origins of "nationalities work" as a discrete domain of governance can be traced to the Chinese Communist Party's efforts to mobilize scattered Hui communities in the eastern provinces of Shandong and Hebei in the 1930s–1940s. Thanks to the initiative of Hui Communists, local Party leaders came to understand that Hui were not simply scattered but interconnected. They adapted and replicated organizational methods to exploit Hui networks for gathering intelligence, smuggling goods and penetrating enemy-controlled cities. This history offers an instructive case of adaptive governance in the revolutionary period and the role of ethnic minority cadres in policy entrepreneurship. It also underscores the importance of the Party's experience in eastern China in the study of Chinese ethnic policy.

摘要

尽管中华人民共和国的民族治理经常被描述为对边疆地区“少数民族”的控制，但管理民族事务的官僚机构在每个省份都有运作。“民族工作”作为一个自成一体的治理领域可以追溯到20世纪30年代至40年代中国共产党在东部省份山东和河北动员分散的回族社区的努力。由于回族共产党人的倡议，当地党的领导人逐渐认识到，回族并不仅仅是分散的，而且是相互联系的。他们调整并复制了组织方法，利用回族网络收集情报、走私货物和渗透敌方控制的城市。这段历史为中共在革命时期的灵活治理和少数民族干部在政策创新能力上都提供了具有启发性的实证案例。它同时指明了研究中共在华东地区的经验对于研究中国民族政策的重要性。

Keywords: ethnic policy; nationalities work; Hui; minority nationalities; nationality cadres; adaptive governance

关键词: 民族政策; 民族工作; 回族; 少数民族; 民族干部; 适应性治理

The frontier looms large in the study of ethnic politics and policy in China. The country's western border is a legacy of the Qing conquest of large swathes of Inner Asia and its diverse population.¹ Recognition of culturally distinct constituencies was central to the ideology and administration of the Qing empire, whose ruling Manchu dynasty consciously maintained its own separate ethnic identity.² The Qing's successors have likewise manipulated ethnic boundaries in an effort to preserve control over the old empire's vast domain, variously eliding or entrenching the identities of the peoples who putatively constitute the overarching "Chinese nation" (*Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族).³ For most of its history, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has touted its

1 Perdue 2005.

2 Crossley 1999; Elliott 2001.

3 Deal 1984; Leibold 2007; Mullaney 2006.



system of “national regional autonomy” (*minzu quyu zizhi* 民族区域自治) as proof of its unprecedentedly just and equitable treatment of the country’s 55 officially recognized “minority nationalities” (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族). At the same time, the CCP’s repressive and increasingly assimilationist rule over the peripheral and nominally autonomous regions of Tibet, Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang reflects the persistently fraught relationship between ethnic politics and frontier governance.⁴

But it would be a mistake to conflate, in the CCP’s current parlance, the “frontier question” with the ethnic one, not least because millions of minority nationals live dispersed throughout the central and eastern provinces.⁵ The scattered settlement of Hui (Chinese Muslims), China’s “familiar strangers” in the words of historian Jonathan Lipman, exposes the limitations of studying ethnic politics solely in relation to the country’s borderlands and suggests the importance, as historian and cultural studies scholar Hai Peng has argued, of attending to the distinct political histories of Hui in eastern and north-western China.⁶ To be sure, there are numerous Hui autonomous areas in China, including the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, as well as over a dozen autonomous counties and prefectures, predominantly in south-western and north-western China. However, the majority of Hui are classified as “scattered minority nationalities” (*sanzaju shaoshu minzu* 散杂居少数民族), meaning they reside outside of their titular autonomous areas.⁷ This scattered subset (roughly 65% of scattered Hui in 1990) mostly live outside of the western border provinces⁸ and are disproportionately urbanized.⁹

China’s scattered minority nationals are remarkable, not just because most of them defy the common association of ethnic minorities with rural life far afield from the eastern hubs of political and economic power but also because they are recognized and governed as “nationalities” in the first place. As in so many fields of governance, the CCP derived many of its early nationality theories and policies from the Soviet Union and subsequently adapted them to the Chinese context.¹⁰ The CCP’s management of scattered minority nationals marks a break from the Soviet model, in which minority groups’ particular rights were inextricably linked to their titular territories. Historian Terry Martin describes the Soviet strategy of “ethno-territorial proliferation,” according to which the state engineered tens of thousands of territorial units and deported and resettled minority nationals to ensure that they formed a local majority, whether at the level of a republic or a village, and could thereby enjoy the cultural rights and representation associated with the

4 Dreyer 1976; Leibold 2013; Sun 2020; Zenz and Leibold 2020.

5 Although the formulation “frontier question” was associated with the Kuomintang in the 1930s–1940s and became an object of CCP criticism in the early PRC period (Leibold 2007, 3, 51–79; Zhou, Enlai 2006), it has since returned to official Chinese discourse. For a recent example, see the March 2023 announcement of the establishment of the Frontier Work Commission (*bianjiang gongzuo weiyuanhui*) under the Association for the Unity and Progress of the Chinese Nation (*Zhonghua minzu tuanjie jinbu xiehui*): www.mzb.com.cn/html/report/23040263-1.htm.

6 Lipman 1997; Hai, Peng 2023.

7 28,740,000 minority nationals (31.5% of all minority nationals) were “scattered” in 1990, up in absolute terms from approximately 22,470,000 (33.4%) in 1982. Shen 2001, 50; Shen, He and Wang 2003, 105–106.

8 “Western border provinces” refers to Xinjiang, Ningxia, Qinghai, Inner Mongolia, Gansu, Shaanxi, Tibet, Yunnan and Guizhou. With the exception of Dachang and Mengcun Hui autonomous counties in Hebei, all Hui autonomous areas are located in those Western border provinces. Thus, we can estimate the percentage of scattered Hui who live outside those Western border provinces by subtracting the total Hui population for those provinces in 1990 (4,919,920) and the Hui scattered population outside of those provinces (i.e. the Hui population of Dachang and Mengcun, 49,000 total) in 1990 and dividing that figure (3,643,081) by the total scattered Hui population in 1990 (5,630,000), or about 65%. Guojia tongji ju renkou tongji si and Guojia minzu shiwu weiyuanhui jingji si 1994, 6–37; Mu 1992, 63–64; Shen, He and Wang 2003, 105–106.

9 The Hui had an above-average rate of scatteredness: 68% in 1982 and 65% in 1990. 58% of all minority nationalities living in cities were “scattered” in 1990, compared to 70.4% in 1982; while 87.6% of urban Hui were scattered in 1990, compared to 94.3% in 1982. Shen, He and Wang 2003, 110–11.

10 Deal 1984; Dreyer 1976; Glasserman, 2021; Leibold 2007; Liu, Xiaoyuan 2004; Perry 2019.

“national form.”¹¹ Nationality in the Soviet Union was fundamentally a matter of territory; a territorially dispersed nationality was a contradiction in terms.

By contrast, a large bureaucracy of ethnic governance throughout the People’s Republic of China (PRC) complements the territorialization of national identity in the autonomous areas. Offices in every province and hundreds of smaller administrative units are dedicated to “nationalities work” (*minzu gongzuo* 民族工作). Whereas the PRC’s system of territorial autonomy, like its Soviet counterpart, ostensibly guarantees political representation and cultural rights to the titular minority nationality (such as Tibetans in the Tibetan Autonomous Region), the ethnic affairs bureaucracy is responsible for organizing, mobilizing, and attending to the needs of minority nationals wherever they reside, both inside and outside of autonomous areas. This bureaucracy has existed since the early years of the PRC.¹² The Nationality (Ethnic)¹³ Affairs Commission (*minzu shiwu weiyuanhui* 民族事务委员会, or NAC) of the State Council was established in late 1949, and by 1957 most provinces and directly administered municipalities had established their own related office with specific instructions to handle and protect the rights of scattered minority nationalities.¹⁴ This system reflects the importance the CCP has long attached to nationalities work as a discrete form of political practice independent of any particular place. Yet it remains poorly understood, due in part to a scholarly focus on China’s frontiers.

This article contributes a new perspective to the study of ethnic politics in China by tracing the roots of the PRC’s functional bureaucracy for ethnic affairs back to the CCP’s efforts to organize dispersed Hui communities in eastern North China during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) and Chinese Civil War (1945–1949). As part of its United Front work to win over and control non-Communist groups and classes, the CCP competed with the Japanese occupation and Kuomintang regime to rally the region’s scattered Hui population by forming separate Hui “mass associations” (*qunzhong tuanti* 群众团体) – in the words of one Communist journalist, “organizing the dots and lines” of Hui society.¹⁵ However, the CCP faced a shortage of competent and motivated cadres. Organizing required local knowledge of Hui networks and norms and, given its association with religion and ethnic identity, was ideologically fraught and professionally unappealing. These difficulties were especially acute for the leadership of the CCP’s base area in the Ji–Lu 冀鲁 (Hebei–Shandong) border region (*bianqu genjudi* 边区根据地). After initial failure, the base leadership devised a new institutional arrangement to address these personnel challenges: the Ji–Lu Hui detachment (*Huimin zhidui* 回民支队), a mobile corps of soldiers and cadres specializing in Hui work who could be deployed to set up local Hui mass organizations and recruit Hui cadres and soldiers.¹⁶

11 Martin 2001, 10, 33. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union initially established separate organs dedicated to work among the territorially dispersed Jewish population, but they were dissolved in 1930. See Gitelman 1972, 472–481.

12 Zhao and Leibold 2020, 489–491.

13 In this article I translate *minzu* as “nationality,” “nationalities” or “national” when it refers to the official category by that name (e.g. the system of “national regional autonomy”) in keeping with translations in the official English versions of the 1954 and 1982 PRC constitutions. I use “ethnic” as a category of analysis for institutions, practices and concepts concerned with ethnicity (i.e. the status or sense of belonging to a group defined by shared descent and common culture): thus, “nationality” is a key category in China’s *ethnic* policy. Note that the official English translation of the State Council’s *minzu shiwu weiyuanhui* changed from “Nationality Affairs Commission” to “Ethnic Affairs Commission” in the early 2000s (Ma, Rong 2016); however, I have preserved “nationality” in my translations because this article focuses on the period before this change.

14 Renmin chubanshe bianji bu and Zhengwuyuan 1953; Zhou, Wenjing 2000, 27.

15 Hai, Yan 1940, 75.

16 Recruitment and training of Hui cadres in Shandong and Hebei appears to have been decentralized and informal, with no significant support from the Yan’an Nationalities Academy (*Yan’an minzu xueyuan*) at the CCP’s headquarters in Shaan–Gan–Ning, especially in the early years of the war. A key directive from 1943 (introduced below) ordered the establishment of “Hui classes” (*Huimin ban*) and “Hui groups” (*Huimin zu*) in local schools, suggesting a reliance on pre-existing local institutions. The most important Hui training centre in Ji–Lu was probably the Hui Nationality Cadre School (*Huizu ganbu xuexiao*), which was established in the summer of 1941 and which trained over five hundred

The development of the Ji–Lu Hui detachment marked the emergence of Hui work as an area of CCP activity and expertise set apart from the United Front work and mass associations in any single county where Hui resided. The resulting coordination between local and itinerant Hui cadres clarified a previously unappreciated dimension of Hui settlement patterns. As exemplified by the Ji–Lu Hui detachment’s close cooperation with the communities through which it moved, the Hui were not simply scattered but interconnected. In an effort to enhance the political value and legitimacy of their work, Hui cadres showed that their commercial and religious networks could be used to obtain and transmit intelligence and smuggle critical supplies. In addition, many nodes of these networks were located in cities, and as the Party in Shandong turned its attention to the urban front of its conflict with the Kuomintang regime, it sought to exploit those nodes by assigning Hui cadres to city work and organizing Hui work teams under city work committees. The incorporation of Hui work into city work proved to be an appealing formula that was adopted in neighbouring Hebei and subsequently transplanted to other regions. After 1949, cadres from the Ji–Lu Hui detachment and similar units in Hebei were dispatched for Hui work throughout China and constituted a significant bloc within the NAC. By the early 1950s, scattered nationalities work, once neglected and suspect, had been established as a domain of political practice throughout the bureaucracy of the nascent party-state.

Challenges of Hui Work in the Ji–Lu Border Region

Among the numerous tasks before Commander Xiao Hua 肖华 (1916–1985) upon his arrival in the Ji–Lu Border Region in August 1938 was organizing its large and scattered Hui population. The Sichuan-born Hakka and newly minted political commissar had come from the CCP’s headquarters in the Shaan–Gan–Ning 陕甘宁 (Shaanxi–Gansu–Ningxia) border region in north-west China. Although Gansu and Ningxia had large Hui populations, the counties that made up the Communist base area there had fewer than 1,300 Hui.¹⁷ By contrast, according to CCP sources, it was estimated that 200,000 Hui lived scattered throughout the Ji–Lu border region, with a similar figure estimated for the nearby Jizhong 冀中 (Central Hebei) base area (*genjudi* 根据地).¹⁸

Still, Hui work was hardly a priority in eastern North China. While in Shaan–Gan–Ning the Party enjoyed essentially uncontested rule throughout the Second Sino-Japanese War, in Shandong and Hebei it was constantly threatened by both Japanese and Kuomintang forces. In Central Hebei the Communists at least had strong local roots, but in Shandong (including Ji–Lu) tensions between the Party organization and local society ran high.¹⁹ Commander Xiao was therefore focused on securing the Party’s tenuous position, expanding its ranks and strengthening local resistance against the Japanese occupation. Moreover, the correct method of organizing the Hui was politically uncertain. According to Mao Zedong’s 毛泽东 “mass line” doctrine, the Party had to maintain continuous contact with the people, and within a given locale, peasants, industrial workers, merchants, professionals and other constituencies had to be organized into mass organizations.²⁰ Should Hui farmers, industrial workers, merchants and so forth be assimilated into ordinary mass organizations, or did they require separate institutions?

On Commander Xiao’s orders, Feng Jing’en 冯景恩 (1905–1986), a native Hui and veteran Communist Party member, established the Ji–Lu border region Islamic Resist-Japan National Salvation General Association (*Huijiao kangri jiuguo zonghui* 回教抗日救国总会, henceforth “General Association”) in late 1938. Like other mass organizations, it aimed to establish local

cadres in classes held in a cellar and later in tunnels and dugouts as Japanese “mop-up” campaigns forced the school to operate itinerantly (Zhonggong zhongyang Shandong fenju 2015; Gao, Suping 2013, 70; Wang, Lianfang 1999, 84–85).

17 Shaan Gan Ning bianqu zhengfu minzu shiwu weiyuanhui 1991, 127–128.

18 Wang, Lianfang 1998; Hai, Yan 1940.

19 Wei 2000, 95–97; DeVido 2000, 173, 177–180.

20 Lin 2019.

branches in different counties within Ji–Lu and convene an assembly of delegates to elect leaders and mobilize the Hui population in support of the CCP. However, before any organizing could begin, Feng was arrested by the Kuomintang, and the organization, evidently held together by little else than his personal efforts, quickly dissolved.²¹ It would take nearly two more years for another Hui organization to be established in the Ji–Lu area.

The demise of Feng’s General Association reflected challenges inherent in the Party’s Hui work. In the first place, the establishment of separate Hui institutions was ideologically questionable in the late 1930s. The “Outline of the Huihui national question” (*guanyu Huihui minzu wenti de tigang* 关于回回民族问题的提纲), the key document justifying the CCP’s recognition of the Hui as a nationality (rather than simply a religious group), was not published until April 1940. Although Mao had already declared support for the self-determination of the Hui nationality in May 1936, some Party members continued to maintain that Hui and Han differed only in terms of religion and not nationality.²² Commander Xiao himself had some passive experience in ethnic affairs before coming east to Shandong: he was a Long Marcher who had participated in the Western Expedition and witnessed Peng Dehuai’s 彭德怀 (1898–1974) formation of a Hui military division and the establishment of the Hui autonomous government in Yuhai 豫海 county.²³ But those short-lived experiments in the north-west did not provide compelling precedent for setting up separate Hui institutions. An article calling for the establishment of Hui autonomous areas was included in the May 1941 administrative programme for Shaan–Gan–Ning but not in the initial programme from April 1939.²⁴ Meanwhile, in Shandong, several of Feng’s comrades resisted establishing separate Hui institutions even as they recognized the Hui as a distinct nationality, claiming that “the Party is the vanguard of the proletariat and cannot be divided into any nationalities.”²⁵

Creating separate Hui institutions in Ji–Lu was also difficult because it involved a substantial population dispersed across different administrative areas. The Japanese occupation and Kuomintang faced this challenge too, but they were less constrained on this front because co-opting local Hui elites did not entail compromising a commitment to revolution and class struggle. As historian Ando Junichiro has documented for Beijing and Tianjin, the Japanese occupation-sponsored China Islamic League (*Zhongguo Huijiao lianhehui* 中国回教联合会) leadership was based on Islamic associations that local Hui had organized before the occupation.²⁶ In other words, the league incorporated existing structures rather than fundamentally restructuring Hui society.²⁷

Personnel recruitment presented yet another challenge to the CCP’s Hui work. Hui Communists who could be trusted by Party leadership were not necessarily interested in Hui work. On the one hand, it was not a promising path for career advancement, owing to its questionable ideological legitimacy as well as its seemingly marginal significance in the grand scheme of the revolution. The leadership of Feng’s General Association contemplated forming a separate Hui military unit to facilitate recruitment and accommodate Hui dietary restrictions (chiefly not consuming pork); however, some members opposed the idea on the grounds that serving in such a group was far less glorious than joining the Communists’ famed Eighth Route Army.²⁸ On the other hand, Hui cadres who were in principle willing to focus on Hui work were not necessarily capable of doing so. Many Hui who joined the Party had rejected their traditional customs and were reluctant to return home and adopt them anew for the sake of winning support for the Communist cause.²⁹

21 Gao, Suping 2013, 48–50.

22 Mao 1991; Li, Yimeng 1991.

23 Xue 2009, 51–57, 85.

24 Shaan Gan Ning bianqu zhengfu 1981a; 1981b.

25 Wang, Lianfang 1991, 48.

26 Hammond 2020, 75–79; Andō 2014, 33–36, 39–41, 78.

27 It also sponsored a Hui hajj delegation and local religious education. Hammond 2017; 2020; Matsumoto 2016.

28 Wang, Lianfang 1991, 48.

29 Liu, Geping 1991, 1299–1300.

At the same time, cadres who managed to retain ties with their home communities had reason to fear that they would arouse suspicion of dual loyalties and vulnerability to Japanese and Kuomintang machinations.

These dynamics were particularly pronounced in the early career of Wang Lianfang 王连芳 (1920–2000). Wang was one of Feng’s comrades in the abortive General Association and a fellow Hui Communist. He came from a relatively affluent family with ties to the first generation of Communists in the region. One of his older brothers, Wang Lianbi 王连璧 (d. 1947), was a young leader in the local Communist movement and introduced him to the Party organization in the early 1930s. But this relationship ultimately proved to be a liability. Wang Lianbi was arrested by the Kuomintang and gave up the names of approximately a hundred local Party members, most of whom were subsequently captured and executed. After the Japanese invasion of July 1937, Wang Lianbi worked for the occupation-run Islamic League. Wang Lianfang ultimately deemed this association to be an existential threat; following a series of correspondences after the Japanese surrender, he facilitated the entrapment of Wang Lianbi and, on order of the base area Party committee and despite his own parents’ imploring, presided over his brother’s execution in 1947.³⁰

The Wang fratricide was an exceptionally brutal solution to a chronic dilemma for Hui Communists. Their ambition within the Party was always in tension with their apparent aptitude for Hui work and familiarity with Hui communities. Organizing Hui was at best a marginal project unhelpful for career advancement and at worst a source of political suspicion. The members of Feng’s General Association had little incentive to continue the work after their leader’s arrest. In all likelihood Wang Lianfang was relieved and hopeful when he was dispatched in late 1938 to set up and lead the Ji–Lu border region’s Chinese National Liberation Vanguard (*Zhonghua minzu jiefang xianfengdui* 中华民族解放先锋队), a United Front operation aimed at organizing local youth and intellectuals.³¹ But it was only a temporary break from Hui work, to which Wang Lianfang would again be assigned in 1940.

Adapting the Jizhong Model to the Ji–Lu Border Region

Hui work began anew in Ji–Lu nearly two years later, this time under the direction of Wang Lianfang. In July of 1940, on orders from the local Party leadership, Wang established the Ji–Lu border region’s Hui Resist-Japan National Salvation Association (*Huimin kangri jiuguo zonghui* 回民抗日救国总会, henceforth “Hui National Salvation Association”), which proved more resilient and effective than Feng’s earlier General Association. This success resulted from an innovation in the organization of the Hui National Salvation Association, referred to below as the “unified leadership structure.”

Two emissaries from the Hui organization in the nearby Jizhong base area catalyzed the resumption of Hui work in Ji–Lu. These cadres had been sent by Ma Benzhai 马本斋 (1901–1944), a Hui Communist soldier in the Jizhong base area, to develop a Hui organization in Shandong. Their miraculous survival of the journey behind enemy lines and into the border region was a testament to the potential utility of Hui networks. Donning traditional *ahong* 阿訇 (religious scholar) attire, the two Hui cadres evaded detection by the Japanese and linked up with the Ji–Lu Party organization.³² At the same time, developments in the first half of 1940 mitigated some of the issues that had previously impeded Hui organizing. In the wake of the Kuomintang’s “anti-Communist high tide” campaign in Shandong, the Ji–Lu Party leadership was again focused on expanding United Front work and establishing new mass organizations.³³ Two of the Hui Communists who had previously

30 Gao, Suping 2013, 13–25.

31 Ibid., 43.

32 Wang, Lianfang 1991, 49.

33 DeVido 2000, 176–77, 185 (n. 8).

opposed the formation of a separate Hui military unit were no longer around.³⁴ In addition, the publication of the “Outline on the Huihui National Question” in the Party journal *The Communist* (*Gongchandang ren* 共产党人) in April 1940 formalized the CCP’s recognition of the Hui as a nationality (and not just a religious community), conferring new legitimacy to Hui work.³⁵

Under these newly favourable conditions, the emissaries reported on Hui work in Jizhong over the previous two years. The base area had two main Hui institutions. The first was a mass association (comparable to Feng’s General Association), called the “General Association of the Jizhong Area Hui Federation for the War of Resistance and National Construction” (*Jizhong qu Huimin kangzhan jianguo lianhe zonghui* 冀中区回民抗战建国联合总会, henceforth “Hui National Construction Federation”). Under the leadership of the Hui Communist Ma Yuhuai 马玉槐 (1917–2010), the Hui National Construction Federation had convened a representative assembly three years in a row and drew delegates from about a dozen counties.³⁶ In August of 1940, a CCP journalist documented the impressive extent and accomplishments of Hui work in Jizhong. County branches and village units of the federation had overseen local elections for Hui representatives and were staffed by over a thousand Hui cadres.³⁷ The second institution was the Jizhong military district (*junqu* 军区) Hui detachment, a predominantly Hui armed unit comprising several previously independent militias from the region and under the leadership of Ma Benzhai.

These accomplishments in central Hebei renewed the Ji–Lu base area leadership’s interest in Hui work. Once again, Wang Lianfang was called upon to take on work he found unappealing but for which his superiors deemed him particularly suited. He was summoned from his post as head of propaganda for the base area’s youth organization to meet with the Ji–Lu Party secretary, Li Qihua 李启华 (1914–1995), who charged him with organizing local Hui. Wang admitted that he still abstained from eating pork, drinking alcohol and smoking tobacco but insisted that he lacked the insider knowledge he was presumed to possess: he was a materialist, not a Muslim, he had mostly forgotten how to pray, and all he remembered of his childhood Arabic lessons was the letter *alif*.³⁸ In the end, however, he accepted his orders and met with the two emissaries to develop a plan for organizing local Hui.

Wang Lianfang managed to turn the burden of Hui work into an opportunity. He adapted the model of Hui work described to him by the cadres from Jizhong to the particular circumstances of Ji–Lu in a manner that simultaneously served the interests of the local Party leadership and enhanced his personal authority. Wang and his superiors recognized the value of the Jizhong Hui detachment, which had not only contributed to the armed struggle against Japan but also enhanced the Party’s reputation among local Hui and facilitated recruitment of Hui soldiers and cadres. Li Qihua insisted that a similar unit be established in Ji–Lu. But whereas in Jizhong, the local Hui mass association had no direct ties to the Hui military unit, in Ji–Lu, at Wang’s repeated urging, the two institutions would be linked at the top. Wang became director of the Ji–Lu Hui National Salvation Association and political commissar of the new Ji–Lu Hui detachment. Other top staff likewise held double appointments across the two organizations.³⁹ This was unique;

34 Liu Zifang and Wang Junfeng, both officers in Feng’s original Hui General Association, opposed establishing a Hui military unit. After the General Association collapsed, Liu was repositioned in north-western Shandong. Wang Lianbi killed Wang Junfeng in early 1939. *Zhonggong Dezhou shi wei dang shi yanjiushi* 2004; Wang, Lianfang 1991, 48–49; Gao, Suping 2013, 20.

35 *Zhongyang xibei gongzuo weiyuanhui* 1940. For the drafting and content of the “Outline,” see Wang, Fuping 2019; Glasserman 2021.

36 Ma, Yuhuai 2015.

37 Hai, Yan 1940.

38 Wang, Lianfang 1985, 103–104.

39 *Ibid.*, 90–91.

according to Wang Lianfang, no other mass organization in the border area was linked to a military unit in this way.⁴⁰

The arrangement expanded Wang Lianfang's authority and thus served his professional ambitions within the parameters of Hui work. It was not the first time he had integrated armed struggle and mass work. In his previous post as propaganda chief and captain of the Chinese National Liberation Vanguard in Ji-Lu, Wang had pioneered the organization of subordinate local militias until leadership disputes led the local CCP to dissolve the vanguard in the spring of 1940.⁴¹ Wang evidently drew on this experience when he was tasked with organizing Hui in Ji-Lu and urged the Party leadership to link Hui mass and military work.⁴² He asked the Jizhong emissaries specifically about the relationship between Ma Yuhuai's mass organization and Ma Benzhai's military unit and raised the issue again in a later meeting with Ma Benzhai, who acknowledged that the Jizhong detachment had little contact with the federation.⁴³

From the perspective of the Ji-Lu Party leadership, the unified leadership structure was appealing because it addressed one of the main challenges that had previously impeded local Hui work: the lack of politically reliable and capable cadres. Unified leadership facilitated coordination of the small but relatively disciplined Hui detachment with the mass-oriented Hui National Salvation Association. On the one hand, cadres from the Hui detachment could be deployed where needed to support Hui work. On the other hand, cadres working at branches of the National Salvation Association could identify and recruit promising cadres for the Hui detachment. As Wang Lianfang described it (albeit in rather self-congratulatory terms), "the two organizations were as close as members of a single family ... cadres from both were in constant contact; cadres from the Hui National Salvation Association who were suited for army work were transferred to the Hui detachment, while soldiers from the Hui detachment suited for local work were transferred to the Hui National Salvation Association."⁴⁴

The unified leadership structure yielded other benefits as well, as exemplified in Wang Lianfang's collaboration with the *ahong* Xin Zongzhen 辛宗真 (1902–1973), cleric at the Great North Mosque (*Beida si* 北大寺) in Cang 沧 county. Xin's mosque was not far from a Japanese stronghold, and a Hui officer serving in the occupation forces sometimes went there to pray. Ji-Lu Hui detachment cadres approached Xin, and together they eventually persuaded the officer, Ma Yongxiang 马永祥, to share intelligence and protect local resistance fighters. Xin proceeded to secretly organize a branch of Wang's Hui National Salvation Association. His mosque served as a waystation and hiding place for Hui cadres and Communist soldiers operating behind enemy lines, and at one point Xin even disguised some Eighth Route Army troops as worshippers to protect them from Japanese inspection. He relayed intelligence from Ma Yongxiang through the Hui National Salvation Association's "Islam Arising" (*Yi xing* 伊兴) network of informant stations.⁴⁵ This arrangement also enabled smuggling across the Japanese blockade. At the direction of the Hui National Salvation Association, local Hui merchants sold grain and salt behind enemy lines in the occupied cities and purchased medicine, cloth, ammunition and ink to bring back to the base areas and replenish the dwindling supplies of the Hui detachment and other Communist forces.⁴⁶

Wang's system of unified leadership proved to be an advantageous adaptation to the Jizhong model. Although the Party's control over Ji-Lu remained shallow and vulnerable through 1943, the Hui National Salvation Association established four division offices, each of which was

40 Gao, Suping 2013, 69.

41 *Ibid.*, 44–45.

42 Wang, Lianfang 1985, 68–69.

43 Gao, Suping 2013, 54–55.

44 Wang, Lianfang 1991, 51.

45 Wang, Jianxi 1997.

46 Gao, Suping 2013, 71–72.

responsible for Hui work in three to five counties. At the same time, the Ji–Lu Hui detachment grew dramatically. Within about a year, the original group of some twenty cadres ballooned into a force of five hundred.⁴⁷ By the end of the war against Japan, it had grown to over 1,500.⁴⁸ When Wang Lianfang was captured by the Japanese in November 1943, the detachment and Hui Salvation Association not only survived but helped coordinate his successful escape.⁴⁹ Shandong Party documents from the mid- and late 1940s indicate persistent difficulties in establishing a foothold in Hui communities, cultivating Hui cadres and keeping them committed to Hui work.⁵⁰ But the formation of a mobile corps of Hui cadres who could support Hui mass work had proven to be a feasible and promising method for Hui mobilization.

Hui Work and City Work

In September 1943, five years since his experiment with Feng's failed Hui General Association, Commander Xiao Hua again found himself involved in organizing Hui in Ji–Lu. As before, the local Party operated in a dangerous environment with severe constraints on materiel and personnel. Eight “mop-up” campaigns by the Japanese in the first half of 1943 had inflicted heavy losses on the Party's forces and political apparatus and had forced the Shandong Party bureau to disperse cadres and reduce operations in the base area.⁵¹ But the tide began to shift during the summer. In July, the Kuomintang completely withdrew from Shandong.⁵² In September, the Shandong Party bureau committee, which Xiao had joined that month, issued a slew of orders aimed at consolidating financial, military and political control and building strength for the counter-offensive against Japan. Among these was the “Directive regarding Hui work” of 13 September.⁵³

The September 1943 directive articulated several of the problems and solutions associated with Wang's Hui organization in the Ji–Lu border region. After surveying the foundation for Hui work throughout Shandong, the directive called for the “resolution of cadre problems,” noting that some cadres who formerly engaged in Hui work had been seconded to other projects, while many others were unwilling to work closely among Hui because they had long since abandoned their traditional lifestyle. The Party had already cultivated valuable talent for Hui work; what was necessary now was the resolve to transfer those cadres back to Hui work. Such work would include expanding Hui mass work by establishing more branches and rationalizing the organization of the Hui National Salvation Association, and ensuring that all cadres engaged in Hui work scrupulously observed Hui customs.

The directive also drew implicitly on the precedent of the Hui detachment. It called for the establishment of armed Hui organizations where they were lacking by aggregating Hui cadres and soldiers as well as through recruitment and education by association branches. Hui armed organizations would fall “under the leadership of the military district [administrative level] or above, and in this way it will be easy for them to grasp policy and strategy, and furthermore they can adapt to the scattered environment of the Hui.”⁵⁴ Thus, the directive codified and instituted one of the inadvertent outcomes of Wang's unified leadership structure: the differentiation of Hui work from the particular places in which Hui resided in the form of an administratively superior corps of specialists who could be deployed locally as needed. Accordingly, in February 1944, when the Ji–Lu border region and Qinghe 清河 region were reorganized into the Bohai 渤

47 Wang, Lianfang 1998, 172.

48 Wang, Lianfang 1985, 95.

49 Gao, Suping 2013, 70.

50 Zhonggong zhongyang Shandong fenju 2015, 353–54; Jizhong qu xingshu 1998; Liu, Geping 1991, 1299–1300.

51 Zhu and Li 1983, 475.

52 Lai 2011, 165–176.

53 Zhonggong zhongyang Shandong fenju 2015.

54 Ibid., 355.

海 military district, the Ji–Lu Hui detachment fell under the authority of the new military district administration.⁵⁵

The directive not only formalized the system of Hui work that had developed over the previous five years in Ji–Lu and Jizhong, it also linked that system to the emerging focus of political and military efforts: cities. As the Party consolidated control over much of Shandong in the second half of 1943, it turned its attention towards amassing manpower and materiel for the expected resumption of direct hostilities with Chiang Kai-shek’s government while also fomenting anti-Kuomintang sentiment and developing a covert presence in cities and railway towns to lay the groundwork for a future takeover.⁵⁶ Given their association with urban commerce and long-distance trade, Hui were now seen as a strategically positioned population. As the September directive explained, “today, as we proceed to take over the large and small cities and major lines of communication, Hui work is doubly important.”⁵⁷ The third section of the directive, “development of city work,” tied Hui work to the urban takeover, stipulating that city and railway work committees should form Hui work teams.⁵⁸ When the leadership of the Bohai base area (into which Ji–Lu had been incorporated) created a Tianjin work committee in August 1944, it appointed as secretary Liu Geping 刘格平 (1904–1992), a Hebei-born Hui and one of the earliest CCP members in the province.⁵⁹

At a conference on city work the following month, Shandong Party committee deputy secretary Li Yu 黎玉 (1906–1986) called for particular attention to the Muslim masses in urban Islamic associations. Indeed, in his memoir Liu Geping recalls relying on his Hui relatives and friends to cultivate ties with some members of the city’s “upper stratum” (*shangceng* 上层) who received political training in the CCP-controlled territory and were then sent back to Tianjin for “underground work” (*dixia gongzuo* 地下工作).⁶⁰ After his escape from prison and subsequent political rehabilitation, Wang Lianfang was appointed propaganda bureau chief of the Tianjin work committee in May 1945 and helped build the Party’s base among Hui and students in the city.⁶¹

The expansion of Hui work and its integration into city work continued after the end of the Second Sino-Japanese War. On 15 August 1945, the day the Japanese surrender was announced, the Shandong Party bureau ordered the formation of Hui military units and armed work teams throughout the province as well as Hui work committees and Hui National Salvation Association branches in appropriate counties, noting the large number of Hui in cities along the railways and communication thoroughfares.⁶² In late August, the bureau instructed Liu Geping to form a new Shandong Province Hui Association, an administratively superior successor to the earlier Hui National Salvation Associations.⁶³ At a conference on Hui work in April of 1946, Liu reported on the accomplishments of his tenure, estimating that the association had organized over 40,000 people and established an extensive network of district, county, village and urban township branches. It had implemented land reform in over a hundred villages and six cities and supported seven Hui brigades as well as the (formerly Ji–Lu) Hui detachment.⁶⁴

In his report, Liu also stressed the link between Hui work and city work. The key to unlocking the political potential of North China’s urban Hui was not simply propaganda and agitation but

55 Wang, Huang and Qu 1989, 180.

56 Yick 1995; Gao, James Z. 2004; Pepper 1999; Levine 1987.

57 Zhonggong zhongyang Shandong fenju 2015, 354.

58 Ibid., 355; Perry 2019.

59 Wang, Huang and Qu 1989, 168.

60 Li, Yu 1983, 55; Liu, Geping 1999, 200–201, 507–508.

61 Wang, Huang and Qu 1989, 168; Wang, Lianfang 1985, 117.

62 Zhonggong zhongyang Shandong fenju 1984.

63 The immediate predecessor was the Bohai district’s Hui National Salvation Association, to which Wang Lianfang’s original Ji–Lu Hui National Salvation Association was converted in early 1944 after the Ji–Lu border region was integrated in the Bohai administrative area. Wenshi zu 1991, 15.

64 Liu, Geping 1991, 1295.

exploitation of their networks and existing organizations. When it came to encircling and penetrating major cities, it was imperative to “make use of the special characteristics of the Hui,” including the relationships between relatives, merchants, clerics and religious students. The Party should also take advantage of “existing organizations and ethnic solidarity,” manifested in urban Hui guilds and monopolies. Liu concluded the discussion of city work by citing an anonymized example of recent Hui mobilization in a railway hub. He attributed the success to the foundation for Hui work that was already in place when it came time to encircle the city in question. The Party had linked the livelihood of Hui in suburban hamlets to its industrial and commercial policies and mobilized them to enter the city to engage in commerce and secretly mobilize urban Hui to come to the base area. As a result, “making use of Hui connections while developing city work was relatively smooth.”⁶⁵ Liu here expressed a fundamental transformation in the Party’s understanding of Hui work. The dispersed settlement that had once been an organizational challenge was now a political asset, not just for gathering intelligence and smuggling goods but also for building urban revolution.

Exporting the Ji–Lu Model

The integration of Hui work and city work proved to be an appealing formula beyond Shandong. In late 1944, Liu Ren 刘仁 (1909–1973), head of the Jin–Cha–Ji 晋察冀 border region Party bureau’s newly created city work department, formed a Hui work committee and put Ma Yuhuai, former director of the Jizhong Hui National Construction Federation, in charge in early 1945. In his orders to Ma, Liu Ren noted the large Hui populations in Beijing, Tianjin, Baoding 保定, Shijiazhuang and Cangzhou 沧州 and the possibility of exploiting their commercial networks.⁶⁶ In May 1945, the Jizhong city work department formalized these instructions. It proclaimed that “urban Hui work is one of the major components of city work” and, like Liu Geping’s report in Shandong, framed Hui networks as a useful feature of the social environment. It outlined a series of policies including bringing urban Hui merchants to the base areas, establishing Hui restaurants and shops, providing credit and grain to poor Hui, organizing Hui cooperatives and recruiting urban Hui to study in the base areas. The directive emphasized the importance of working with the Hui “upper strata” while organizing the masses and developing their class consciousness.⁶⁷

The directive further institutionalized Hui work within different levels of the Party bureaucracy. It was ordered that all county-level Party committees overseeing areas where Hui resided include a Hui officer and, where necessary, a three-person Hui work team. Hui officers at the regional Party committee were to be distributed to work with the Beijing, Tianjin, Baoding, Cangzhou and Bozhen 泊镇 committees. Reflecting the persistent problem of a lack of personnel dedicated to Hui work, the directive specified that in general Hui cadres within the city work department should not hold dual appointments. It also clarified the function of the Hui mass associations and their relationship to other offices. Within a given locale, the Hui mass association was the permanent and public apparatus for Hui work. Its cadres were responsible for “open” (not secret) work, such as conducting surveys of the local Hui population and brokering introductions as well as mobilizing Hui masses in support of the Party’s campaigns. Hui cadres in the city work department, by contrast, were appointed to initiate and coordinate the organization of the Hui mass associations. Once they had established a foothold in a suburban village, Hui work leadership was to be handed off to the local Hui mass association.⁶⁸

These practices of Hui work circulated beyond Shandong and Hebei during the Civil War. In February 1946, the East China Party bureau (in charge of Shandong) issued a new “Directive

65 *Ibid.*, 1301–3.

66 Ma, Yuhuai 1992, 50–51.

67 Zhongguo Gongchandang Jizhong qu weiyuanhui cheng gong bu 1995.

68 *Ibid.*

regarding Hui work” to the Central China bureau. Echoing earlier documents from Shandong and Hebei, this directive explained that organizing the estimated 500,000 Hui who resided in the base areas as well as the Central China district’s major cities – Shanghai, Nanjing, Zhenjiang 镇江, Changzhou 常州 and Bengbu 蚌埠, among others – constituted “a major task in winning over the urban masses.” It called for careful use of *ahong* for Hui work and the deployment of Hui work cadres for the organization of local Hui associations.⁶⁹ These instructions appear to have had some influence in the Central China district too; for example, Hui mass associations were established throughout Henan province, and when Communist forces took over Zhengzhou, soldiers were ordered to “pay attention to Hui work in the city.”⁷⁰

Perhaps the strongest vector for the early development of Hui work was the cadres from the Hui detachment. In June 1946, after the resumption of open conflict between the Kuomintang and CCP in Manchuria, the Northeast Party bureau ordered the formation of a new Hui detachment, composed largely of northbound veterans of its predecessor in Ji-Lu. By the following summer, Hui mass associations had been established throughout the region, including the cities of Harbin, Jiamusi 佳木斯 and Mukden (Shenyang).⁷¹ In a September 1947 “Circular on the Hui question,” the Northeast Party bureau gave notice that it had dispatched cadres from the Hui detachment to carry out Hui work under the leadership of local Party organizations in different parts of the region. It also called for the establishment of Hui work training courses to develop new, politically reliable talent.⁷² After the Civil War, Hui detachment cadres went on to staff the central and local offices of the ethnic affairs bureaucracy in the 1950s: Liu Geping was appointed deputy director of the NAC of the State Council (he would later become first Party secretary of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region); Ma Yuhuai became a member of the central NAC in addition to directing the Beijing municipal NAC; and Wang Lianfang headed the provincial NAC in Yunnan. Hundreds of Hui detachment cadres were sent westward to the more heavily Hui regions of Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai and Yunnan.⁷³

Conclusion

“Nationalities work” has been a pillar of ethnic governance in the PRC since the country’s founding in 1949. Studies of ethnic politics in China have focused overwhelmingly on the country’s system of national regional autonomy, which ostensibly guarantees minority nationality representation in local government, linguistic freedom and other forms of cultural expression within titular ethnic areas. Administration of this system is certainly an important part of ethnic governance in the PRC, but the former by no means exhausts the latter. This is so not only because many members of the PRC’s 55 officially recognized minority nationalities do not live in a titular autonomous area but also because “nationalities work” is not reducible to appointing minority officials instead of Han ones and involves expertise in the particular characteristics of local identity and ethnic relations.

Discovering and exploiting the “dots and lines” of Hui society was thus a formative experience in the development of the CCP’s approach to ethnic governance and a potential source of inspiration for Hui detachment cadres as they moved on to other regions and encountered other “minority nationalities.” After a long career with the NAC in Yunnan, the province home to the largest number of different minority nationalities, Wang Lianfang reflected on what he had learned from his aforementioned efforts to organize Hui smuggling near Ji-Lu during the Second Sino-Japanese War: “[I] began to understand an important principle of the Party for work in nationality areas

69 Minzu wenti yanjiuhui 1991.

70 Zhang 2009, 161.

71 Liu, Baojun 2001; Wang, Lianfang 1992, 55.

72 Zhonggong zhongyang dongbei ju 1991.

73 Wang, Lianfang 1985, 97–98.

– that all work must proceed from actual nationality conditions, and thereafter I would never again avoid the complex problems that appeared among Hui and in all tasks attended to whatever the Hui's unique circumstances might be."⁷⁴

From this perspective, the construction of an ethnic affairs bureaucracy in the early years of the PRC appears unsurprising and to be a logical step in the consolidation of CCP rule. At the time, however, it marked the culmination of a complex and contingent process. The institutionalization of ethnic affairs as a domain of expertise and aspect of governance depended on the distinction between the administration of particular places and nationalities work as such. The Party leadership in Ji–Lu first made this distinction in the second half of 1940, when it implemented Wang Lianfang's unified leadership model for the base area's Hui mass association, branches of which were associated with a particular county and its Hui population, and the base area's Hui armed unit, which was mobile and fell under the jurisdiction of the base area rather than any one of its constituent counties. The coordination between local and itinerant Hui cadres that this arrangement enabled in turn surfaced one of the defining features of Hui society in eastern North China: the commercial and religious networks connecting its scattered rural and urban communities. As the Party leadership in Ji–Lu recognized the utility of these networks, especially for penetrating and taking over cities, it formalized Hui work within its bureaucracy and, through intra-Party directives and the redeployment of Hui detachment cadres, laid the foundations for Hui work across China.

The Ji–Lu base area leadership could hardly have anticipated these developments when it first endorsed Wang Lianfang's unified leadership model. Its decision to do so was a response to the immediate constraints on Hui work: Hui were found throughout the region, targeted for co-optation by the Japanese and Kuomintang, and generally sceptical of the CCP's forces, whose small cohort of Hui cadres were reluctant to take the lead on work of dubious political legitimacy that promised little in the way of a career and forced them to return to the communities and lifestyle they had long since abandoned. Nevertheless, Wang helped address these challenges by devising and implementing his unified leadership model, which facilitated the efficient deployment of the small number of qualified and reliable cadres to set up a branch of the Hui Salvation Association in a particular locale and then move on.

In this respect the foregoing offers an instructive case of the adaptation of CCP governance in a particularly sensitive area of policy. Political scientists Sebastian Heilmann and Elizabeth Perry underscore the importance of continual policy adjustment and local improvisation to the CCP's resilience and trace the origins of these practices to the revolutionary era.⁷⁵ The evolution of Hui work in eastern North China further substantiates their thesis in two ways. First, it exemplifies the iterative and decentralized process of policy modification in response to particular local challenges. Second, it demonstrates that one of the distinguishing features of ethnic governance in the PRC – the institutionalization of “nationalities work” as a discrete domain of policy independent of any particular region – originated in local cadres' formative struggles against the Kuomintang regime and the Japanese occupation. This case thus complements earlier studies that have elucidated the CCP's departure from the Soviet model of ethnic governance regarding the ethnic classification, the right of minority nationalities to secede and the federal structure of the state.⁷⁶ At the same time, this case also draws attention to the inadvertency of adaptive governance: the intelligence, supply smuggling and access to urban enclaves that ultimately made Hui work a worthwhile investment were unforeseen by-products of Wang's unified leadership model, adopted to meet the urgent needs of wartime mobilization in a competitive military and political climate.

Adopted, it should be added, at the insistence of a young and ambitious Hui Communist. If anyone in this story should be credited with the sort of policy entrepreneurship often lauded by both

74 *Ibid.*, 137.

75 Heilmann and Perry 2011.

76 Dreyer 1976; Deal 1984; Leibold 2007; Mullaney 2006; Zhou, Minglang 2010.

Party leaders and China watchers, it is Wang Lianfang and his cohort of Hui cadres. Eager to climb the Party ranks, Wang began his career organizing youths and students and was reluctant to take up Hui work when he was called to do so, invoking his firm belief in Marxism–Leninism and long abandonment of religious practice as reasons why he should not be tasked with what must have appeared like a career-killing assignment. Likely with little choice in the matter, he rose to the occasion. But he did not stop there. He parlayed his particular ethnic identity into a position of leadership and, by giving full play to the potential of Hui networks at a time when no advantage could be ceded to the enemy, attracted his superiors' attention and helped secure for his marginal and neglected domain a permanent space within the party-state. Thus, this case also reveals how personal ambition animates what is often thought of as the quintessentially impersonal process of bureaucratic adaptation to a particular social environment.

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