

Hui Christians' new Identity in Christ

by Luke Ma with Johanna White

Luke (pseudonym) was born in China into a nominally Muslim family in the Hui ethnic minority people group. Following his parents, he migrated to a western country in middle school and after several years of interaction with people from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds, he renounced Islam and became a keen atheist. During his university years he enjoyed debating with Christians until eventually God took over his life. Luke lost the debate, but found saving faith. After a few years of secular work, Luke entered seminary where he met and married Johanna (pseudonym). With help from several missionaries, and from the Lord, Johanna persuaded Luke to return to his own people as a missionary.

Introduction

‘Hui’ has a complex meaning which encompasses everything about a person. From our perspective, the word encompasses two distinct aspects of a person’s identity: their ethnic and cultural identity (people group) and their religious identity. Many Hui, however, would not see any sense in this distinction. Like many Muslim people, and people of various backgrounds, there is no clear line between religion, culture and ethnicity in the minds of Hui, nor should there be. But if we want to talk about the self-identification of Hui followers of Jesus, we need to think about such distinctions and have categories to describe them. Likewise, these believers, as they grow in their faith, start to make such distinctions, whether consciously or unconsciously:

‘I’m a Muslim follower of Jesus.’

‘I’m a Hui, but I do not believe in Islam anymore. Now I believe in Jesus.’

‘I’m a Christian. I also belong to the Hui ethnic minority in China.’

‘Among us Muslims, there are a few like me who are Christians.’

The Hui People: Unity in diversity

It is extremely difficult to generalise, because Hui are defined by diversity. They are spread over large areas of the country, although more concentrated in certain places. In different places they have undergone different levels of secularisation and integration with the Han culture. They also have different historical roots and different stories about where the Hui came from. Also influencing diversity are the four main sects of Islam in China,² how much religious education they have

² These four main sects of Islam include: *Gedimu* 格底目, *Yehewani* 伊赫瓦尼, *Salafiya* 赛莱菲耶/三抬 and *Sufi* 苏菲派. *Gedimu* is the oldest form of Islam practiced in China, the followers of *Gedimu* trace their ancestry to the earliest Muslims who came

received, and whether they are interested in religion. The Hui vary regionally as well as individually in how much being Hui is associated with religion or culture. In northeast China it is more about a cultural identity. In the northwest there is more identification with the religion of Islam. All we can really say about what unifies them is that Hui Muslims generally do not eat pork and verbally profess belief in Islam.

The Hui Christians: Diversity continues

When their pre-faith lives have been characterised by such diversity, it is no surprise that Hui believers' opinions, practices and habits are also widely varied. But it does seem like we have a little more of a chance to generalise about Hui believers compared with the broader Hui community.

By and large, those Hui who have come to the Lord through missionaries tend to be educated, secularised, urban Hui. They had non-Muslim Han³ desk-mates in school, received Communist (atheistic) education, and only ever wore traditional head coverings for special religious festivals.

This may be what initially made them more open to new ideas like the gospel. Or it may be simply because these are the Hui who had opportunities to meet missionaries and hear the gospel. Another possibility is that there are many Hui believers in small towns with conservative Islamic upbringing, but that neither I nor the people in my networks have been able to make contact with very many of them. So as missionaries gain access to more areas, as we learn more, and as the gospel penetrates more areas including the countryside, the less educated and the more

to China. However, due to *Gedimu's* long history, many of this sect's religious practices are intermingled with Chinese traditions. *Yehewani* only came to China at the end of the 19th century. Inspired by Wahhabism in the Middle East, followers of the *Yehewani* sect believe they possess a purer form of Islam and see it as their duty to cleanse Chinese Islam from its cultural trappings. However, even this is not enough for the fundamentalist *Salafiya* sect, who came to China even more recently than *Yehewani*. *Salafiya* often consider themselves the only true followers of Islam and seek to return to the way Islam was practiced in Muhammad's time, both in doctrine and practice. As a result, they're strongly evangelistic and seek to convert both non-Muslims and Muslims from other sects. Finally, there is the mystical *Sufi* Islam, where religious practices can differ radically from the other 3 sects. Often *Sufi* religious practices take on forms similar to those of Buddhism and Taoism, because their emphasis is not on doctrine but spiritual ecstasy and oneness with Allah.

³ The Han (汉) are the majority people group in China, making up about 90% of the Chinese population. They tend to be atheist or Buddhist.

devout Muslim communities, these generalisations about Hui believers' identities may shift.

Believers are also influenced by the Islamic sect they came from. Most I've met are from the more mystical, less orthodox streams of Islam including Sufism. They enjoy the experience of closeness with God and the heartfelt assurance of salvation that Jesus brings. Here we see that they have brought with them some aspects of their Islam – the focus on experience and feelings rather than orthodoxy – yet joyfully abandoned other aspects like reliance on one's own actions to achieve salvation.

Common characteristics of the Hui Christian

We are different!

If you ask a Hui what it means to be Hui, they will say things like, 'We are not Han.' 'We do not eat pork.' 'We do not celebrate Spring Festival.' 'We are Muslims.'

Do you see a pattern? Apart from Islam, the Hui find it hard to think of anything special about their people group. Everything else is what they are 'not.' How do they choose which things to mention they are 'not?' Notice they are not comparing themselves to Europeans or Africans, nor to other Muslim people like the Uighur in China, nor to other religious groups in their neighbourhoods like Buddhists, but to the Han Chinese people. It has been said that if the Han disappeared from the earth, the Hui would no longer know who they are.

Titles of books on the Hui often reflect this comparative way of defining the Hui. Think of *Between Mecca and Beijing* by Maris Boyd Gillette and *Familiar Strangers* by Jonathan Lipman.

Hui define themselves by their differences from Han, so it is natural for Hui believers to define themselves by how they differ from Han believers. Think back to the kinds of Hui who tend to become believers. Living in large Chinese cities alongside Han friends and workmates, these Hui have spent their whole lives explaining that they are different:

'Actually, I'd love to have lunch with you, but would you mind going to a halal restaurant?'...

'No, I'm not planning anything special for Spring Festival, because my family is Hui.' ...

'I need a day off work to attend a religious event with my family. No, you haven't forgotten to check the calendar. It's not on your calendar. It's a Muslim festival.'

Defining themselves by their differences doesn't change when they start to follow Jesus. What does change is the *degree* of difference between them and their Han friends. The gap gets smaller. When they were Muslims and their Han friends

were atheists, they had a fundamental worldview clash. Now, being in a community of Christians, it becomes more of a vague feeling of not quite fitting in, of not being fully understood, and of having only a few customs and habits to cling to which help them explain this difference.

Pork is the main issue

In my experience, most Hui who follow Jesus worship with Han Christians in Han churches. They sing the same songs and use the same Bible translation as the Han (HHB 和合本). The one thing they tend to do differently is avoid eating pork. Some Hui are even happy to eat together with Han Christians in a Han restaurant and simply not choose the pork foods. Some, I think a minority, in order to not stand out, start to eat pork with their Han brothers and sisters. These people do so begrudgingly, and keep it secret from their families. Some churches, including the one I regularly attend, care for their Hui members by no longer cooking pork for group meals. Unfortunately though, this situation is rare, and the Hui in most churches are expected to be the ones who accommodate themselves to the majority.

Hui believers know food is not and should not be the major issue. When they encounter Jesus' teaching on inner versus outer cleanliness in Matthew 15:11 and 23:24-26 it resonates with what they know deep down to be true but have never been able to articulate. They all know supposedly devout Muslims who provide proof that Jesus' words to the Pharisees in Matthew 23:26 are true also of Muslims, 'In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.' They know that what goes into their mouths is far less important to God than what comes out of their mouths. They know that a truly righteous person is known not by what he eats, but by what he says and does. 'For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him' (Matthew 12:34b-35a).

Still, many Hui believers continue to avoid pork because they are simply not accustomed to the taste, because they want to be seen as good in front of their families, to be a witness to others and to signal to the Han that they are somewhat different. Even though some will eat pork out of convenience when no one they know is watching, they still do not want to be pressured to do so, and it makes them feel cared for when they are offered pork-free food. Peter's vision in Acts 10: 9-17 and Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 have proven very helpful to both Hui believers wrestling with what they should eat, and Han believers learning to love their Hui brothers and sisters.

A good friend of mine, Sister Li, is from an eastern province where the Hui are quite integrated with the Han. She comes from a Hui family who raised pigs for a living. After believing, she received a burden to share with other Hui and actually stopped eating pork. Sister Li was noticeably offended when another Hui made judgemental comments about the Hui from her area because they eat pork.

What they call themselves

So what do these brothers and sisters of ours call themselves? Firstly, they all still call themselves Hui. None of them now call themselves Han, and if someone accuses them of becoming Han, they argue against it. They do not start celebrating Han festivals they did not celebrate before. They do not say 'I have no *minzu*' (民族, ethnicity) either.⁴ There is no concept of a Chinese person who has no *minzu*. You cannot simply be Chinese. You have to be Han Chinese, or Hui, or Uighur. You can change *minzu* but you cannot be without a *minzu*. Hui believers all still self-identify as Hui, but they vary in how much they still identify as Muslims and whether they differentiate between these religious and ethnic classifications.

Most accept the titles of both Hui and Christian. When it comes up in conversation, most will identify themselves either 'Hui' or 'Christian,' and if asked, will also claim the other title. But putting the two words together as 'Hui Christian' somehow sounds a little strange.

The most common expression used by Hui believers to describe their faith is 'Jidutu 基督徒,' which is simply the word for 'Christian' used by the Han church. 'Follower of Jesus 跟随耶稣/尔撒的人' is quite rare, and 'Muslim follower of Jesus 跟随耶稣/尔撒的穆斯林' is very rare. What is more common is a change in the vocabulary used by an individual, depending on who he is speaking with. Sometimes this may be a deliberate choice of words based on relationship factors. More often than not it is not something a Hui believer has thought a lot about, and even if they have strong opinions, old habits die hard. For example, Sister Wu from my hometown proudly says 'I'm Hui, but I do not believe in Islam' and 'I believe the Bible' but when speaking with me, a fellow Hui Christian she still refers to herself and to me as 'we Muslims 我们穆斯林.'

In the cities at least there is awareness that Christian vocabulary can change without necessarily changing what or who it represents. Even different cultures that share a language (such as the Han and the Hui) can use different names for God and Jesus, use different place names, and use different words for common concepts such

⁴ In China, there are fifty-six officially recognized *minzu*. All Chinese citizens have their *minzu* on their ID cards. The majority of Chinese people, about 90%, are classified as Han. Hui is one of the fifty-six recognised minorities, as is Uighur (another group of predominantly Muslim people in China). The concept of *minzu* is so deeply ingrained in the Chinese identity that it is difficult to understand how foreigners (such as my wife Johanna) could not belong to one. Johanna has a nationality (as shown on her passport) a home country (where she visits her parents) a country of origin (where her ancestors came from), a racial (genetic) identity and a religious affiliation (protestant Christian), but none of these adequately encapsulates the sense of ethnic and cultural identity of a Chinese *minzu*.

as grace, thanks and the church. For the Hui, the name of Jesus is defining. Some prefer *Yesu* (耶稣, the name Han Chinese use) and others prefer *Ersa* (尔撒 a Chinese transliteration from the Arabic name in the Qur'an). A couple of years ago I witnessed heated arguments among brothers about which name was the right one. In at least one area of China, the Hui community of believers has divided along these lines. The word they use to describe the division (*'pai 派'*) is the same word used for Christian denominations and Muslim sects.⁵

Recently there is increasing interchange between Hui and Han spiritual vocabulary. This year, a sister posted on WeChat (Chinese Twitter) 'Christmas is the birthday of *Yesu/Ersa*' (圣诞节是耶稣/尔撒的生日). Another shared a link to the song 'In Christ Alone,' giving it the two titles 'Only *Ersa*/Only *Yesu*' (唯有尔撒/唯有耶稣).

Relationship with the Han Churches

For some Hui believers, opportunities for corporate worship are only available in Han churches. For others, there is a Hui-led group especially for Hui, or at least organised with Hui people in mind. As far as I know, where Hui churches exist, they tend to be founded by Han churches, or missionaries associated with Han churches. No matter which kind of gathering they are part of, the relationship between Hui and Han believers is troublesome, full of misunderstandings, and absolutely crucial to the Hui.

Hui believers, while maintaining their identity as Hui, have a distinct sense that they have left Islam, and to some extent, that they have left a part of their Hui-ness behind. They used to define themselves as 'not Han but Hui, because I'm Muslim.' Now they are 'not Han, but not truly Hui either, because I'm not Muslim.'

Before they were believers, the Hui compared themselves to the Han for their identity. Now they are Christians, they look to the Han as much, if not even more, to tell them who they are. The Han are the majority people group in China, and the majority of the church in China. For smaller groups like the Hui, Han Christians are the closest thing they know to the universal church. To be accepted by them is to be accepted by 'the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.'

Most Hui believers do not get the chance to experiment with contextualised worship styles. Most are individuals in Han churches. They use Han spiritual vocabulary, read the preferred Han Bible translation (HHB, 和合本) and most of their friends are Han Christians. But they still feel in a subtle way they are different from the others in their church. They can grow and do well in a Han church but

⁵ Some Hui believers have started referring those who use *Ersa* as *Ersa Pai* 尔撒派, and those who use *Yesu* as *Yesu Pai* 耶稣派

they have an itch. It is an itch for empathy. They long for empathy that can only come from another misunderstood minority.

When Hui believers are numerous enough or vocal enough to be noticed by the Han in their church, it most often gives rise to clashes, not empathy. The Hui complain they are not understood. The Han complain the Hui are choosy, particular and weird. Most Han think of Hui as ‘that other funny group’ and do not try to understand them. Because the Han are in the majority they behave like any majority people group would. However, the Hui understand the Han quite well. They have been comparing themselves to the Han majority their whole lives. I have a relationship with members of a Hui church in northeast China who started experimenting with Arabic chanting and other Muslim worship forms. The local Han church suspected this Hui church was a new kind of pseudo-Christian cult. Such cults are illegal in China, so this was a potentially dangerous situation for the Hui church. The solution? The Hui paid protection money to the Han church, who then welcomed them as a subset of their existing group.

Individual Hui believers in Han churches often think they became Christians by accident, by a freak of nature, and that this miracle cannot be repeated for other Hui. Perhaps they have borrowed this fatalism from Islam. Maybe they are discouraged at the small numbers of Hui believers and Satan has made it worse by whispering lies to them. A couple of years ago, my wife heard such lies from Satan, ‘Maybe God saved your Hui husband, but he won’t save other Hui. You may as well give up trying.’ She is not Hui, but what helped her was the same that helped many Hui to overcome this discouragement. It is not until their own eyes see a sizable community of Hui worshippers they truly realise Hui can and do come to Christ.

Mosque Attendance

You have probably read about the beauty of believers from Muslim backgrounds worshipping Jesus in mosques, and bringing light to their communities in doing so. We agree this is a wonderful idea, but so far we do not see it happening among the Hui. If Hui followers of Jesus go to mosques, it is only for annual festivals, when they want to be part of their family celebrations, or because they were dragged along. I have not met a single Hui who continues to attend the mosque regularly after having truly understood and believed the gospel. I suspect it is because believers do not get spiritually fed in mosques and they lose any motivation to go. Just as it is very common to lie to parents in order to get out of the house to attend church, it is equally common to lie to avoid attending the mosque. Hui who have believed the gospel but not yet revealed it to their family tend to pretend they are too busy, or simply no longer interested in attending mosque. Even the Hui I know who have become missionaries to other Hui and who embrace Insider Movement ideas do not go to mosques themselves.

How Do they Tell their Families?

Often they do not. It depends who evangelised them. If the gospel they received was minimally contextualised, they may go straight home and tell their families in insensitive ways. This gets them yelled at, confined to the house, or occasionally beaten. They might receive threats of disownment, cutting off material resources and threats to tell the rest of the family. The family may invite an Imam to come over to ‘re-educate’ them. If none of this works, parents may resort to speeding up arranged marriages in the hope of bringing their child back into Islam.

If they were evangelised contextually, Hui believers can use contextualised methods to soften the blow. Generally, this generates less persecution. Sister Dong married a Han believer against her family’s wishes. The family threatened her and threw away her clothes. Later she learned to share contextually. After this, one time she mistreated the Hui Bible (*Tian Jing*, 天经) by placing it on the floor and her mother criticised her for it, telling her that it was not the right way to treat a holy book.

Compared with what believers from a Muslim background experience in some other countries, the persecution suffered by Hui believers is relatively mild. There are cases of real persecution, but usually it is more the internal feeling of being a traitor, and the fear of persecution. Loyalty is an important moral value in China, and feelings of betrayal are common. The fear of being a traitor hangs over a Hui long before they accept Christ. They are not only asking ‘Do I want Christ to be my saviour?’ but also, ‘Is Christ worth more than my family?’ Such fear inhibits conversion and stunts growth. Biblical teaching on dealing with fears and sharing their faith in culturally sensitive ways can be helpful. But what really helps them break through this fear is seeing other Hui believers worshipping together, fearlessly living as Christians and sharing the gospel with other Hui.

Clothing and Rituals

The majority of Hui Christians come from backgrounds that never really wore head coverings regularly. Of those who did, they generally stop covering their heads after conversion. However, they might still cover when they go home or for family festivals, weddings etc. They do tend to maintain modest clothing in accordance with their previous habits (which vary by location). Likewise, the men generally cease to wear the white hat, but may choose to wear it on special family occasions. In other words, Hui Christians do not despise the old clothing, but just do not attribute as much importance to it anymore.

Some like to wash ceremonially before attending church services. This is not so much for the ritual, but because they want to give God their best. Since most people here do not bathe or change clothes daily, their ceremonial washing is simply rearranging their schedule so their bath day falls on a Sunday.

Willingness to Share with other Hui

Often they are first drawn to the gospel because it is not Hui. Christianity provides an escape, especially for women, from the absent father, domestic violence, anger, bickering, controlling grandparents, or the hypocrisy of their Hui experience. As they begin to walk with Jesus, some Hui loathe to do anything resembling Hui culture or Islamic rituals. Later, they develop a more balanced view of their past, and some receive a burden for their own people.

Perception of Hui Christians amongst Hui Muslims

The wider Hui community is in denial that there could be Hui who do not believe in Islam. They do not know any Hui who are Christians. They think it might be possible, but very unlikely. Occasionally you read or hear a Hui's account of meeting a Hui Christian, and it is full of shock and awe. They deny that it could be the Holy Spirit working. Instead they criticise the believer for being from a non-devout Muslim family, or blame intermarriage, going to a big city, being from a heretical sect, or even blame themselves for not providing good religious education. Families all pitch in together to bring a stray member back to Islam, but are very careful not to let the news get out. Perhaps this family effort and secrecy partially explains why Hui do not admit to ever having met a non-Muslim Hui. Undoubtedly, the widely-dispersed and apparently small numbers of Hui believers is another reason the majority of Hui do not know they exist.

On rare occasions, when a large number of Hui have become Christians, there have been violent clashes. But again, these are not widely known. This means it is hard to comment on how Hui believers are perceived by other Hui.

Thoughts about the Potential of Syncretism

The Hui believers I have met vary in how 'Hui' they are, along a sort of spectrum. Their degree of 'Hui-ness' is dependent not only on what they were like before they encountered the gospel, but also on who shared the gospel with them and with whom they now worship.

Towards the not-so-Hui end of the spectrum, there are some with distinctly Korean faith practices, some who are indistinguishable from Han Chinese believers, and I even met one Hui man who practices his faith as a member of the Church of England, complete with sung scripture, incense, robes and clerical collar!

In my experience, most Hui believers have lifestyles and worship practices that are more or less at this end of the spectrum. We could say that, apart from eating pork, many Hui have contextualised their practices to the non-Hui around them, rather than others contextualising to the Hui. This is not to say that missionaries are not trying to contextualise. Some Hui prefer non-Hui ways and reject attempts at contextualisation beyond simple diet changes. Others have adopted a few distinctly

Hui practices, but mostly live and worship the way the Han do. As with everything else about the Hui, there is wide variation.

Towards the other end of the spectrum, however, there exist markedly syncretistic Muslim followers of Jesus. They supposedly profess belief in Jesus, but continue to attend a mosque weekly and watch Qur'anic chanting on TV at home. Apparently whole families have believed, but they do not worship in gatherings outside their families so it is hard to gauge whether they truly believe, and whether these families actually meet together to worship Jesus regularly.

When I asked the head of such a household about this, his answers perplexed me. The chanting, he says, is to fill the air with beautiful sounds. He doesn't understand Arabic, but it makes him feel spiritual. He chose to listen to the Arabic Qur'an rather than the Arabic Bible, and to Arabic rather than Chinese, his mother tongue. He did not seem to be able to tell me why. At that time, the Hui contextualised version of the Chinese Bible (*Tian Jing*, 天经) was not yet available in audio form, so I could not suggest it as an option.

When it was time for Friday prayers this head of the household and his son left me to attend the mosque. When I asked, he said it would be 'inconvenient' to be seen not attending the mosque when he belongs to such a tight-knit community. While waiting at his house for him to return, I chatted with his neighbour who was pottering around in his garden. He was also a Muslim, but wasn't attending the mosque that day because he was 'busy.'

Meeting families like these makes me think that the extreme contextualisation methods used by the evangelist who reached out to this village can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, I praise the Lord that Jesus' name is known by people who can still live and be accepted in their communities, and who will happily host evangelists to continue visiting their homes and reaching out to their neighbours. On the other hand, it concerns me to think that these families are not aware of the universal church, the body of Christ, are not receiving regular feeding on God's Word and are not actively engaging their own communities for Jesus. If I am wrong, and they *are* aware they belong to two faith communities, attending church on Sundays and mosque on Fridays as it were, I wonder about them creating confusion for their children.

Conclusion

If there is one thing we have learned about the Hui, it is that they are defined by difference and diversity. The implication of this for ministry is that we should never assume, but always listen. We should listen enough that we know what questions to ask, then listen some more. We will find patterns in the answers, but then we will meet someone who does not fit the pattern. There are tools being developed for evangelising and discipling the Hui which are invaluable, but no one size will ever fit

all. Even as the Hui themselves develop tools, they differ from other Hui. Fostering unity becomes a big issue.

To listen and not assume is simple to say, but hard to do. For ordinary Christians trying to join God in cross-cultural mission, struggling with language, perceiving the unspoken cultural cues, not knowing which tool to pull out of the toolbox today, it can make the task seem insurmountable. But in the Hui church's story there is encouragement for Christ's struggling servants: the Hui are being saved!

Even though Han are evangelising their neighbours without consideration for cultural differences, Hui are being saved. Even though Koreans are attracting Hui to church with Korean pop culture, Hui are being saved. Even though Europeans struggle to acquire Chinese language, Hui are being saved. Even though there is persecution in one family and syncretism in another, Hui are being saved. Praise God!