

“Islamization” and Crackdown in Ningxia: Another Xinjiang?

Abstract

Since late 2016, Ningxia has drawn attention as a new target in Beijing’s drive to “Sinicize Islam.” The removal of overt signs of the Islamic faith and Arab influences is viewed as representing a new front in the CCP’s sweeping rollback of religious freedom. Is Ningxia another Xinjiang as both the party and its critics fear? This paper argues that it is not at the empirical level but shares with Xinjiang key underlying dynamics at the systemic level. At the empirical level, Ningxia’s “Islamization” stemmed largely from local authorities’ use of the Islamic part of Ningxia’s heritage as a developmental strategy, leading to so-called pan-Halalfication, Saudization and Arabization. In contrast to more complex social dynamics in Xinjiang, Ningxia’s “Islamization” can be more easily dealt with by withdrawing the local state’s own promotion. At the systemic level, the rise and fall of Islamization in Ningxia share with Xinjiang’s case the critical role of the state in affecting the fate of religion for significant ethno-religious communities.

Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (NHAR), one of the smallest and poorest Chinese provinces, is the largest settled area for China's Hui communities. Genetic studies suggest that a small minority of Hui people descended from West Eurasians (especially Iranian) who intermarried local East Asians, while a majority were native East Asian populations converted to Islam and culturally assimilated to Muslim ethnicities.¹ At 2.5 million people in 2020, the Huis comprise 35% of Ningxia's population.²

Since late 2016, Ningxia has drawn attention as a new target in Beijing's drive to "Sinicize Islam." The first round of religious crackdown followed Xi Jinping's first visit to the region in July 2016, and a second round came after his second visit in June 2020. The removal of overt signs of the Islamic faith, such as domes and minarets on mosques, and Saudi influences such as the black abaya and the Arabic script, is viewed as representing a new front in the CCP's sweeping rollback of religious freedom.³ As in Xinjiang, the party is anxious that "Islamization" (*yihua*) would produce fertile grounds for fundamental strains of Islam.

Islamization is defined in Ningxia's context as the tripartite phenomenon of pan-Halalification, Saudization and Arabization. Pan-Halalification refers to the extension of the Halal label beyond its conventional categories. Saudization refers to religious influences from Saudi Arabia and the Middle East in general. Arabization refers to the adoption of Arab language and

¹ Boyang Zhou Boyan et al., "Genetic affinity between Ningxia Hui and eastern Asian populations revealed by a set of InDel loci". *Royal Society Open Science*. 7.1 (2020): 190358. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7029925/>. Hong-Bing Yao et. al., "Genetic evidence for an East Asian origin of Chinese Muslim populations Dongxiang and Hui." *Scientific Reports*. 6 (Dec. 2016): 38656. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5141421/>.

² "宁夏回族自治区第七次全国人口普查公报," *Ningxia huizu zizhiq tongji ju*, May 25, 2021. Available at: http://tj.nx.gov.cn/tjsj_htr/tjgb_htr/202105/t20210525_2854292.html.

³ E.g., Steven Lee Myers, "A crackdown on Islam is spreading across China." *New York Times*, Sept. 22, 2019. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/21/world/asia/china-islam-crackdown.html>. Emily Feng, "Afraid We Will Become the Next Xinjiang: China's Hui Muslims Face Crackdown." NPR, Sept. 26, 2019. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2019/09/26/763356996/afraid-we-will-become-the-next-xinjiang-chinas-hui-muslims-face-crackdown?t=1614696071714>.

cultural practices.⁴ Sometimes the latter two terms are used interchangeably to refer to influences from the Middle East.

Is Ningxia another Xinjiang as both the party and its critics fear? This paper argues that it is not at the empirical level but shares underlying dynamics at the systemic level. At the empirical level, the surge of Ningxia's Islamization - in the decade preceding recent crackdowns - stemmed largely from local authorities' own sponsorship and indulgence, specifically their efforts to promote development by flaunting and enhancing the Islamic part of Ningxia's heritage. In contrast to more complex dynamics in Xinjiang, Ningxia's Islamization has been more easily dealt with by withdrawing the local state's own sponsorship. At the systemic level, Ningxia shares with Xinjiang's case the critical role of the state in alternatively promoting and curtailing religion as dictated by larger state goals.⁵ This state role constitutes the driving force underlying the rise and fall of Ningxia's Islamization.

The rest of the paper will cover the following: (1) the scholarly literature on the rise of Islam among Hui communities in post-Mao China and the analytical framework for this paper; (2) Ningxia authorities' promotion of Islamization during the decade of 2006-2016 and its catalytic effects; and (3) Chinese rationales for curbing this Islamization and a brief contrast with Xinjiang's case.

State Policy and Islamic Revival

Existing studies identify several sources of Islamic revival and surge among China's Hui communities in the post-Mao era. The first source has been internal. Since the late 1970s, the

⁴ Zhengben qingyuan, "严防宁夏'宗教沙化、语言阿化、清真泛化'," *Weibo*, Aug. 8, 2017. Available at: <https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404138429293164843>.

⁵ For this state role in Xinjiang's case, see Yan Sun, *From Empire to the Nation State: Ethnic Politics in China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), Chapter 6.

post-Mao policy of reform and opening ushered in freer religious atmospheres and restoration of religious activities and facilities.⁶ For Hui communities, Islamic revival has been elaborated through local practices which inform Hui religious belief and which have been diversifying and deepening partly in response to state-led reform. China's opening to the world has also facilitated domestic Muslims' contacts with the outside Muslim world and worldwide Islamic movements, through increased circulation of people, communication, information, religious training, economic interaction and educational exchange. These studies also show that the post-Mao revival of Islam has helped to enhance the ethno-religious identity of Muslim communities in northwest and other parts of contemporary China.⁷

A second source of Islamic revival for Hui communities has been external, especially Saudi Arabia. Since the beginning of the reform era, new channels of religious exchanges with the Kingdom, including the Hajj, the Saudi-Chinese diaspora, Saudi organizations and funding as well as preachers operating within China, and study opportunities in the Kingdom, have strengthened Salafisation tendencies and Wahhabism within Muslim Chinese society, Hui communities included, as well as sectarian fracturing amongst it.⁸ In the decade before 2017, an increasingly pronounced China-oriented missionary or *da'wah* impulse emerged in Saudi Arabia, thanks to a re-imagining of China as a new and fertile frontier for Islamic missionary work, a projection of Saudi sectarian anxieties and fears onto China and Sinophone (Muslim and non-

⁶ Donald E. MacInnis, *Religion in China Today: Policy & Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989); Hongyi Harry Lai, "Religious Revival in China," *Copenhagen Journal of Asian Studies* 18 (2003): 40-64; Jianping Wang, "Islam and State Policy in Contemporary China," *Studies in Religion* 45.4 (2016): 566-580; Sun, *From Empire to Nation State*.

⁷ Dru Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991); Michael Dillon, *China's Muslim Hui Community* (NY: Routledge, 1999); Raphael Israeli, *Islam in China* (MD: Lexington Books, 2002); Raphael Israeli and Adam Gardner-Rush, "Sectarian Islam and Sino-Muslim Identity in China," *The Muslim World* 90 (Fall 2000): 439-457.

⁸ Mohammed Turki A. Al-Sudairi, "Adhering to the Ways of Our Western Brothers: Tracing Saudi Influences on the Development of Hui Salafism in China," *Sociology of Islam* 4:1-2 (2016): 27-58; Julius Rogenhofer and Hacer Z. Gonul, "Wahhabism with Chinese characteristics," 2017, *ASIA Focus*, The French Institute for International and Strategic Affairs; Shan Wei and Ryan Ho, "Islam in China: Current Conditions and State Policy," *East Asian Policy* 10 (2018): 103-115.

Muslim) populations and, a consolidation of Sino-Saudi Salafi transnational links over the preceding decades.⁹

The third source of Islamic revival for Hui communities has been a mix of internal and external factors. In this perspective, Hui Muslims of Ningxia – rather than Uyghurs of Xinjiang - were mobilized to foster Sino-Arab trade as they represent “good citizens” on the one hand and play the role of “cultural ambassador” mediating between China and the Muslim world along the new Silk Road. This way the revival of Huis’ cultural and religious practices serves both ethnic harmony at home and a key foreign strategy in improving China's global image, given ethnic unrest in Uyghur Muslim regions and the Chinese state's initiative in strengthening foreign relations with the Arab world.¹⁰

Yet another source of Islamic revival has evolved out of contentious relations with the Chinese state. Studies show a hierarchy among China’s Muslim groups, thanks to the Huis’ Sinification¹¹ and accommodation with the host culture and the state¹²: a juxtaposition of Huis and Uyghurs as “good” vs “bad” Muslims, informally if not in official policy. But even for Huis, the Islamic issue remains tricky for China’s central government, as religious and ethnic issues are intertwined. Contention often revolves around cultural issues that become political or political issues involving cultural identity, such as rights to practice religion and related cultural practices, or to exercise local autonomy based on ethnic and religious distinctions.¹³ Expansion of ethno-religious practices can provoke state policies to prevent the penetration of Islamic

⁹ Mohammed Turki A. Al -Sudairi, “China as the New Frontier for Islamic Da‘wah: The Emergence of a Saudi China-Oriented Missionary Impulse.” *Journal of Arabian Studies* 7.2 (2017): 225-246.

¹⁰ Wai Yip Ho. “Mobilizing the Muslim Minority for China's Development: Hui Muslims, Ethnic Relations and Sino-Arab Connections.” *Journal of Comparative Asian Development* 12.1 (2013): 84–112.

¹¹ Jörg Friedrichs. “Sino-Muslim Relations: The Han, the Hui, and the Uyghurs.” *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 37.1 (2017): 1-60; Erik Durneika, “China’s Favored Muslims? the Complex Relationship Between the Chinese Communist Party and the Hui Ethnic Group.” *Sociology of Islam* 6.4 (2018): 429–48; Wei and Ho, “Islam in China.”

¹² Dru Gladney, “Islam in China: Accommodation or Separatism?” *The China Quarterly* 174 (Jun., 2003): 451-467; Matthew S. Erie, *China and Islam: The Prophet, the Party, and Law* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹³ Gladney, *Muslim Chinese*; Erie, *China and Islam*.

rituals into secular life as well as overseas Islamic influences and movements. Indeed, studies increasingly observe that the securitization of ethnic identities and religious practices have expanded from Uyghur to Hui groups.¹⁴ Harsher religious policies on the Huis, in turn, can have the effect of increasing their disenchantment with the CCP.¹⁵

The above scholarly studies provide general explanations for the revival of Islam in Ningxia. However, they do not account for the decade between 2006 and 2016, when local state policy played a major role. This role is central to understanding religious developments in China's authoritarian system. Studies of China's religious policy in general and for ethno-religious communities in particular suggest that the state is crucial in creating and shaping the social context in which religion fares in the Chinese system. In general the state tolerates religion when official orthodoxy and state capacity are secure, but curtails it when religious activities deviate from official ideology or challenge the state.¹⁶ In ethnic majority regions with core religious traditions, such as Uyghur and Tibetan regions, the primacy of official ideology imperils those traditions by constraining alternative belief systems.¹⁷ When dictated by larger state goals, the state has alternatively facilitated and curbed religion in those two regions. It actively promoted religious revival in the early post-Mao era, to repair damaged relations with local ethno-religious majorities. When that revival evolved in unintended and undesired ways, the state has curbed it in subsequent years.¹⁸

¹⁴ Durneika, "China's Favored Muslims?" Wei and Ho, "Islam in China;" Hacer Gonul and Julius Rognhofer, "The Disappearance of the 'Model Muslim Minority' in Xi Jinping's China: Intended Policy or Side Effect?" *Philippine Journal of Public Policy: Interdisciplinary Development Perspectives* 2 (2020): 1–36.

¹⁵ Wei and Ho, "Islam in China," 104–105.

¹⁶ Yanfei Sun, "The Rise of Protestantism in Post-Mao China: State and Religion in Historical Perspective." *American Journal of Sociology* 122.6 (2017): 1664–1725.

¹⁷ Yan Sun, "Debating Ethnic Governance in China," *Journal of Contemporary China* 28.115 (2019): 122.

¹⁸ Sun, *From Empire to Nation State*, Chapter 6.

This paradoxical role of the state provides a useful framework for analyzing the rise and fall of Islamization in Ningxia. The local state, with acquiescence from the central state, facilitated Islamization when it served the larger goal of economic development during 2006-2016. However, after Xi Jinping tightened control on religion policy in 2016,¹⁹ provinces in northwestern China began to rein in Islamization that had proliferated in the preceding years. Ningxia stood out thanks to the local state's vigorous sponsorship of Islamization earlier that required equally vigorous crackdowns after 2016.

The section below will provide evidence that local state promotion contributed to Ningxia's Islamization, by examining three areas of local policy during 2006-2016: state support for halal industries, Islamic tourism, and opening to the Arab world. These policies led to the manifestations of Islamization that became the targets of subsequent crackdowns. The methodology of my analysis combines the use of official documents, official and semi-official media, as well as social media, along with local participant observations.

Developmental Policy and Islamization

Impetus to exploit the Islamic part of Ningxia's heritage originated from the region's lag in economic development and pressures to catch up to more developed provinces. For Ningxia, a key barrier is its geography. Land-locked and poorly endowed, it does not have the advantages of coastal provinces for attracting FDI, missing out on opportunities to develop since the 1980s. The Great Western Development program, launched by the central state in 2000, created opportunities for Ningxia to seek central support for its developmental initiatives. But what would be Ningxia's initiatives? By the early 2000s, local authorities came to the realization that

¹⁹ “习近平出席全国宗教工作会议并发表重要讲话,” *Yanguang wang*, April 23, 2016. Available at: http://news.cnr.cn/native/gd/20160423/t20160423_521963470.shtml.

being the region with the largest Hui concentration and the only Hui autonomous region, Ningxia's unique advantage lay in the Muslim part of its heritage. It should exploit this local niche, to look westward and open up to the Middle East where the Islamic faith is shared and potential investment seemed abundant. These economic rationales characterized local official thinking about the role of Islam in Ningxia's developmental strategy. Wang Zhengwei, a Hui native who was Ningxia's deputy governor from 2004 to 2007 and its governor from 2008 to 2013, was instrumental in promoting and implementing this strategy.²⁰

Halal Industries and "Pan-Halalification"

The first component in this new strategy was to promote Ningxia's Halal industries. The idea was to build Ningxia into the leading source of Halal products domestically and globally. The catalytic effect was the rise of so-called pan-Halalification that the state later abhors.

The municipal government of Yinchuan, the capital of Ningxia, initiated the pan-Halal drive in 2006. Traditionally, Ningxia's Halal foods was produced by small-scale, family businesses. In 2003 a local scholar first proposed a large-scale expansion of Halal food industries as Ningxia's developmental strategy.²¹ Selected for funding by Ningxia's Social Science Foundation, his proposal caught on with local officials. With provincial backing, Yinchuan issued the first official decree in December 2006, "Implementation measures for developing industries for Halal foods, Halal health supplements and other Islamic products."²² The latter two product categories in the decree's title, deliberately or not, entailed a license to expand the Halal

²⁰ "王正伟：转化让宁夏资源发生'裂变'", *Zhongguo renda wang*, March 15, 2008. Available at: http://www.npc.gov.cn/zgrdw/huiyi/dbdh/11/2008-03/15/content_1417765.htm.

²¹ Li Deguan, "宁夏'清真产业'发展战略研究," *Ningxia daxue faxueyuan*, March 30, 2012. Available at: <https://law.nxu.edu.cn/info/1042/1459.htm>.

²² "促进清真食品保健品和穆斯林用品产业发展的实施意见." Yinchuan municipal government, Dec. 30, 2006. Available at: http://finance.sina.com.cn/money/bank/bank_yhpl/20061230/16243211378.shtml.

label beyond conventional food categories. The decree's stated goal was to establish Ningxia as the leading source of Halal products for national and international markets, with Yinchuan as the pilot site. This decree was unprecedented in promoting industries associated with a religion.

As is typical of China's industrial policy, state policies were instrumental in the speed and scale of Halal growth in Ningxia. They contributed to four critical factors: financial investment, research and development, market expansion and human development. The Yinchuan decree stipulated funding for "three industrial parks, two developmental zones and cultivation areas" for Halal products. Importantly, the decree promoted not only traditional Halal products, such as meat and dairy products, but also products not traditionally associated with Halal, such as drinks and snacks, spices and condiments, grains and nutrition supplements. On the list for promotion were also Halal catering and non-food items now referred to as "Islamic:" products for personal hygiene, skincare and makeups, household cleaning and personal wear. Another policy consisted of preferential policies that Halal industries already enjoyed before the Yinchuan decree, including support for agriculture, industrial development, and science and technology, and bank loans for small and medium businesses. A third form of state support was a special fund set up by Yinchuan since mid-2006, earmarked for developing Halal and Islamic products, production sites, international certification, and new markets.²³ Together, the multiple sources of funding were unconditionally granted as long as the Halal label was present.

Local state support came in many additional forms. One comprised financial rewards for successful Halal businesses. In Dec. 2016 Yinchuan announced subsidies and financial prizes for businesses whose products would "enhance the Halal label," e.g., winning brand-name recognition, international certification, new domestic and export markets, and prominent retail

²³ “银川：清真产业发展新政出台，小企业获多项优惠，” Yinchuan municipal government, Dec. 30, 2006. Available at: http://finance.sina.com.cn/money/bank/bank_yhpl/20061230/16243211378.shtml.

placements; for Halal catering businesses that expanded outside the province on scale and those that brought home well-known Halal restaurants; and for local Halal industries that opened sales offices overseas.²⁴

Another form of local state support involved promoting name recognition and business opportunities for Islamic products. For three consecutive years from 2006 to 2008, the provincial government convened the Ningxia International Halal Food Festival, along with investment and trade fairs. In August 2007, it hosted the World Forum on Halal Industries in Yinchuan. In September 2008, it hosted the Muslim Business Conference of China in Yinchuan, the first of its kind in China. In 2010, Ningxia initiated the Sino-Arab Economic and Trade Forum. After three annual conventions between 2010 and 2012, it was elevated to the China Arab State Expo in 2013, held bi-annually since then. By August 2021, five expos had been held.

Yet another form of local state support was to promote Halal certification. In 2009, Ningxia became the first province to officially issue Halal standards.²⁵ The stated rationale was economic: China's Halal industries had yet to reach global Muslims who accounted for 20% of the global population and 60% of Asia's population. As of 2009, China captured just 2% of the \$500 billion Halal trade globally. A lack of authoritative Halal certification was a major hurdle, as China's Halal exports had to secure internationally recognized Halal certification from Malaysia.²⁶ In 2012, Ningxia initiated a regional alliance for Halal certification, joined by four provinces with sizeable Muslim populations: Gansu, Qinghai, Shaanxi and Yunnan. The alliance adopted general rules for Halal certification, which went into effect in January 2013. In 2014, the

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ “宁回族自治区清真认证通则,” *Ningxia minzu zongjiao wang*, Aug. 27, 2012. Available at: <http://www.foodmate.net/zhiliang/halal/164005.html>.

²⁶ “中国六省开启统一清真食品认证标准进程,” *Xinhua wang*, Sept. 2009. Available at: <https://wenku.baidu.com/view/ec0320b1e63a580216fc700abb68a98271feac1e.html>.

Ningxia Center for Certification of Halal Foods for International Trade was established, the first of its kind in China. Within months, the agency reached mutual recognition arrangements with 15 Halal certification agencies in 12 countries, most of them in the Middle East.²⁷ Between September of 2014 and early 2016, Ningxia provided Halal certification for over 130 businesses across China, covering both traditional and non-traditional Halal categories.

The State Council, China's executive branch, supported Ningxia's developmental strategy. In September 2012, it granted the Special Economic Zone (SEZ) status to Ningxia on a provisional basis.²⁸ Its announcement came with endorsement for using Ningxia's "special characteristics" to expand Halal industries and create an Islamic product center for western China and China itself. Ningxia followed up with three provincial decrees during 2013 and 2014, each affirming the growth of Halal industries as a key developmental strategy.²⁹ In early 2016 Ningxia moved to promote Halal standards for the entire country. The motive was again economic: since Ningxia had a head start, its Halal products would have a competitive edge across China.

Despite support from the State Council, the new party leadership under Xi Jinping had different priorities. Shortly after Xi came to power as the CCP's top leader in late 2012, Wang Zhengwei, Ningxia's governor since 2008 and the leading force behind its Islamic driven strategy, was transferred away in early 2013. As is the usual practice, controversial local minority leaders would be assigned a post in Beijing, where it is difficult for them to pursue independent policy. From 2013 to 2016, Wang headed the State Ethnic Commission. Although

²⁷ [“一带一路”建设助力宁夏清真产业“走出去”], *Xinhua she*, Aug. 26, 2015. Available at: http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-08/26/content_2920102.htm.

²⁸ The State Council, “国务院关于对宁夏内陆开放型经济试验区规划的批复,” [(国函) 130 号], Sept. 10, 2012. Cited at: <http://www.scio.gov.cn/m/xwfbh/gssxwfbh/xwfbh/ningxia/Document/1254598/1254598.htm>.

²⁹ NHAR, “关于加快推进农业特色优势产业发展若干政策意见的通知,” Jan. 2013; “关于加快产业转型升级促进现代农业发展的意见,” May 2014; and “宁夏清真产业中长期发展规划 (2014 年—2020 年) 的通知,” Dec. 2014.

his departure did not immediately change Ningxia's course, the move was locally seen as a rebuke to his signature policy that was becoming increasingly unpopular. The turnabout came about in Spring, 2016. At the National Work Conference on Religion on April 22-23, held every five years, Xi Jinping called for "separation of church and state," "adaptation to socialist society," "resisting foreign infiltration and religious extremism" and "upholding *Zhongguo hua*."

³⁰ Pointedly, Ningxia was one of four provinces - affected by problems with Islam or Christianity - to speak at the conference.³¹ Days later, when reporting the conference back home, Ningxia's party leader spoke of vigilance against pan-Halalfication while respecting ethnic customs.³²

Around this time Xi Wuyi, a senior researcher at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), played a key role in openly criticizing Ningxia's pan-Halalfication drive. As the head of the Center for Science and Atheism at CASS and a deputy head of the Chinese Atheism Society, she is an ardent advocate of scientific atheism (evolutionism), separation of church and state, and separation of religion and education.³³ In May 2016, she published a fierce critique of Ningxia's pan-Halalfication drive.³⁴ A month later she delivered a similar critique at the Fourth Conference on Scientific Atheism convened by the CASS and the Atheism Society. Given CASS' role as the party-state's think tank, it was possible that she had earlier submitted internal reports to top political circles, alerting them to the perils of Islamization in Ningxia. Xi Wuyi sees pan-Halalfication as a slippery trend towards de-secularization, not only in Ningxia but also

³⁰ "习近平出席全国宗教工作会议并发表重要讲话。"

³¹ The other three provinces were Henan, Jiangsu and Guangdong. See above.

³² Yushan, "小议'清真泛化'," *Zhongguo minzu bao*, Aug. 16, 2016.

³³ "习五一" (Xi Wuyi), *baidubaike*. Available at : <https://baike.baidu.com/item/习五一/13023950?fr=aladdin>.

³⁴ Xi Wuyi, "我国伊斯兰教出现的逆中国化倾向," *Weibo*, May 19, 2016. Available at: <http://www.wywxwk.com/Article/shidai/2016/05/364041.html>. The article also appeared as "坚持我国宗教中国化方向," *Kunlunce*, May 15, 2016 and *Zhongguo minzu bao*, 991 (June 2016). See also Xi Wuyi, "防止清真泛化 遏制极端思潮," *Kunlunce.cn*, Aug. 20, 2016. Available at: <http://www.kunlunce.com/gcyj/jjjs/2016-08-20/107142.html>.

nationwide. While acknowledging commercial motives in Halal expansion, she points to the political dynamic of pan-Halalification that serves to enhance religious identity and drive a wedge between Halal and non-Halal communities. As examples she cites the emergence of “Halal access,” or “Muslim only signs” in public spaces, such as shopping malls, retail stores, sightseeing sites, hospitals, schools, involving checkout counters and lines, restrooms and shower rooms, patient rooms, and public buses. This line of critique resonated with many local residents perplexed by even more mundane things, like Halal bottled water and tooth paste.

Just as state support boosted its swift rise, withdrawal of this support put a quick stop to Ningxia’s pan-Halalification. On Oct. 11, 2017, NHAR announced the abolition of 18 decrees and the expiration of 10 decrees related to promoting Halal industries and Halal certification. This means that items that were not traditionally Halal could no longer be labeled Halal in future production. Sub-regional governments revised their Halal decrees and terminated Halal industrial parks. The end of state Halal certification here was followed by Gansu and Shaanxi provinces, both members of the regional alliance for Halal certification led by Ningxia.³⁵

This setback aside, the result of Ningxia’s Halal promotion managed to stamp “Islamic” on the local economy. In the five years from 2006 to 2010, Halal food industries enjoyed the highest rate of growth among Ningxia’s industries - 20% annually, accounting for 80% of the growth of all food industries in the province during that period. By 2012, 15% of Ningxia’s 655 Halal food industries accounted for 77% of all large-scale food industries and 82.23% of the total output for all food industries in the province.³⁶ Other achievements included six large-scale Halal industries becoming “pillars” of the local food industry, opening of three industrial parks for

³⁵ “宁夏：去年已废止《清真食品认证通则》” *Guancha wang*, Dec. 2018. Available at: https://www.guancha.cn/politics/2018_12_21_484165.shtml.

³⁶ Tian Xiaojuan, “西北五省区清真产业发展现状及对策研究,” *Ningxia shehui kexueyuan zonghe jingji yanjiusuo*, Feb. 4, 2014. Available at: http://www.muslimwww.com/html/2014/rrr_0205/21611.html.

Halal production, and a comprehensive chain of Islamic products. By 2012, Ningxia's Halal products reached over 50 major cities in China and several overseas markets.

With state nurturing, thus, Ningxia's Halal sector evolved from small family businesses to large-scale regional industries. However, like other state backed businesses in China, commercial success depended on preferential policies and exclusive rights.

Islamic Tourism and "Saudization"

Islamic tourism was another instrument in Ningxia's developmental strategy to capitalize on the Hui's heritage. This drive emphasized creating Islamic themed attractions and landscape in order to appeal to Muslim tourists from abroad. The catalytic effect was a proliferation of other constructions with Islamic themes or elements, especially new and renovated mosques. This last phenomenon is referred to as "Saudization," in the sense of Saudi and other religious influences from the Middle East.

The rationale for promoting Islamic tourism was to make Ningxia "Dubai of the East," with bustling tourist and cash flows. In the words of Ma Ping, key member of Ningxia's Expert Committee on Inland Economic Opening and former director of the Islamic Research Center at Ningxia's Academy of Social Sciences, Ningxia must first get foreign visitors to come, especially those from Arab countries and other Muslim countries, before it could attract their "petro dollars." He wanted to Ningxia to build the "destination of Arab tourism" and a regional "belt of Islamic featured tourism."³⁷

The local state heralded Islamic tourism with massive projects. Yinchuan's municipal government took an early initiative to build the first Islamic themed tourist attraction in Ningxia.

³⁷ He Shanshan, "用好涉阿政策的重点在哪里- 访宁夏社会科学院回族伊斯兰教研究所原所长、研究员马平," *Ningxia ribao*, May 8, 2013. (Ma is a common Hui surname derived from Mohamad).

In 2002, it invested ¥500 million and 165 acres of land in the Cultural Park of Hui Homeland. To cultivate Arab ties and tourists, the park's exhibits emphasized the Huis' Arab origins and heritage while ignoring Persian and Central Asian legacies.³⁸ In 2005, the provincial government followed by launching the International Muslim Trade City, a 175-acre multifunctional complex intended as the Yiwu city of western China for international Muslim tourists and traders. Backed by provincial leadership, the project saw the personal involvement of Wang Zhengwei, then deputy governor, in planning and launching the project.³⁹

The State Council, again, endorsed Ningxia's strategy. In the "Opinions on Ningxia's development," issued in Sept. 2008, it supported Ningxia's development of tourism, including financial incentives to promote "Ningxia's special characteristics."⁴⁰ In a decree in Sept. 2012, the State Council approved NHAR's fifth Five-Year Plan (2011-2015), which included plans for Islamic themed projects. It was the same decree that granted the provisional SEZ status to Ningxia.⁴¹ These central decrees gave local officials greater leeway to promote Islamic tourism. Two more NHAR's decrees followed in 2012 and 2013 to strategize "cultural tourism."⁴² Specific initiatives included building Hui business streets, Hui customs and cultural villages, Halal food streets, Hui rural eco-tours, Hui culture expo parks, and Hui themed souvenirs. Projects receiving special state support were the International City of Islamic Culture, the Cultural Park of Hui Homeland, the International Muslim Trade Center, the International Halal

³⁸ The outer structures and some exhibits may be seen here: <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/484419088>.

³⁹ "2007年中国宁夏伊朗旅游合作双边推介会实施方案," May 15, 2019. Available at:

<https://www.xixiebang.com/a14/201905156/7bb2750ed77c89cc.html#>.

⁴⁰ The State Council, "关于进一步促进宁夏经济社会发展的若干意见," [国发 (2008) 29号], Sept. 12, 2008. Available at: http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2008-09/12/content_1748.htm.

⁴¹ The State Council, "宁夏内陆型开放经济试验区规划," *Tengxun*, May 3, 2013. Available at: <https://www.docin.com/p-1607173618.html>.

⁴² NHAR, "自治区党委人民政府关于做强做大文化旅游产业的决定," [宁党发 (2012) 3号]. Cited at:

https://www.nx.gov.cn/zwgk/qzfwj/201801/t20180115_669068.html; and "宁夏回族自治区人民政府关于印发宁夏回族自治区服务业发展“十二五”规划的通知," [宁政发 (2013) 52号]. Available at: http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2013-03/30/content_5044970.htm.

Food City, and International Muslim Commercial Street. Yinchuan played an active part in adding Islamic landmarks to its landscape, aiming for a “Hui wonderland.”⁴³ The best known was the Sino-Arab Axis, a 1.3-mile long avenue leading to a square with dazzling Islamic-styled and themed monuments and statues.⁴⁴ It opened to the public in Sept. 2013.

These local state drives had an “Islamizing” effects, so to speak. That is, they enthused other sectors and actors to emulate by adding Islamic structures or elements to new (and non-religious) public constructions or renovation projects. One incentive was commercial, e.g., for businesses to attract potential Arab tourists. Another was financial, i.e., to apply for state subsidies allocated for promoting Islamic tourism. Yet another was administrative: to obtain building approvals more easily by capitalizing on Islamic tourism. During the decade of 2006-2016, Islamic structures or features sprang up, especially in Yinchuan: on shopping malls, convention centers, stores and store fronts, sightseeing sites, hospitals, schools, airports, rail stations, bus and subway stations, residential buildings, and even government buildings.⁴⁵ Moreover, the Arabic script appeared on many street names, road signs and advertisements, reinforcing an Islamic flavor.

The “Islamizing” effects were especially impactful on religious organizations. They seized the political climate to construct new mosques and renovate existing ones, all with distinctly Islamic architectural designs not traditionally associated with indigenous mosques. The mushrooming of green domes and tall minarets soon transformed Ningxia’s landscape, giving it a religious and non-indigenous flavor. As such they gave tangible meanings to the term “de-

⁴³ “回乡乐园,” *Yiwang [Kanke]*, 524 (July 26, 2016). Available at: <http://news.163.com/photoview/3R710001/2187918.html>.
<https://new.qq.com/omn/20191030/20191030A0FINV00.html>

⁴⁴ “探访融合中阿文化的中阿之轴,” *Ningxia xinwen wang*, Aug. 15, 2013. Available at: <http://www.jiaodong.net/news/system/2013/08/15/012003664.shtml>.

⁴⁵ Zhang Heng, “转型期银川城市景观的伊斯兰特征变迁,” MA thesis, Lanzhou University, 2016. DOI : 10.7666/d.D01033670.

Sinification,” or “Saudization.” Historically mosques across China took traditional Chinese architectural designs, including those in Ningxia.⁴⁶ Due to the sparse concentration of Hui communities across rural and often inhospitable areas, local Muslims did not regularly visit mosques. The high per capita mosque rates in the early 1950s, in Table 1, reflected that sparse and rural concentration.⁴⁷ During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Ningxia’s mosques suffered damages as elsewhere in China. In the 1980s, the central and local states provided funding for repairs, but on a much smaller scale than for Tibetan and Uyghur regions.⁴⁸ The increase in the number of mosques by 1990, shown in table 1, were likely built in the 1980s, a period of redressing radical excesses and restoring religion in minority regions. But they were made of bricks and mud, and in traditional Chinese styles. Impoverished farmers had scanty time and resources for religion or mosques back then.

Table1. Hui Population, Estimated Hui Rural Population and Mosque Rates in Ningxia

Year	Total Hui population	% in local population	Estimated % of rural Huis	Total number of mosques	Per capita mosque rates
1958	629797 ¹	32.54%	(90.15) ²	1888 ³	334
1990	1.54 million ⁴	33.05%	87.65 ⁴ (75.97) ²	2584 ⁵	595
2008	2.22 million ¹	35.95%	63.2 ⁶ (55.02) ²	3760 ³	590
2015	2.40 million ¹	36.05%	53.79 ⁶ (46.77) ²	4203 ⁷	572

Sources:

1. An Ruili, ed., “第四篇：人口,” *Honghei renkou ku*, 2019. Available at: <https://www.hongheiku.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/1584631872-宁夏统计.pdf>.
2. The ratio in brackets refers to the percentage of Ningxia’s rural population as a whole, not just the Huis. The ratio of rural population for Huis has remained higher. Data from An Ruili, ed., “第四篇：人口.”
3. “宁夏每 577 名穆斯林拥有一座清真寺,” *Xinhua wang*, May 9, 2008. The number of mosques was from the early 1950s.

⁴⁶ Photo contrasts are provided in Yuanfang qingmu, “拆除圆顶，中国清真寺全面中国化,” *Sina kandian*, July 5, 2022; Available at: https://k.sina.com.cn/article_5622417668_14f1f490401901ay11.html.

⁴⁷ Based on data from 2002, 80% of Ningxia’s Hui people lived in the two least populated cities in the province. See “宁夏回族自治区民族和人口概况,” *Guowuyuan xinwen bangongshi*, Aug. 21, 2009. Available at: <http://www.scio.gov.cn/ztk/dtzt/04/08/4/Document/391875/391875.htm>.

⁴⁸ “宁夏每 577 名穆斯林拥有一座清真寺,” *Xinhua wang*, May 9, 2008. Available at: <http://news.sohu.com/20080509/n256759631.shtml>. (

4. National Census Bureau and Economic Bureau of the State Ethnic Commission, “中国民族人口资料” (Beijing: Zhongguo tongji chubanshe, 1994). P. 12.
5. “宁夏清真寺概况,” *Zhishi beike*, July 1992. <https://www.zsbeike.com/bk/103658.html>.
6. The ratio is estimated on the basis of the percentage of the rural Hui population for 1990, which was 15% higher than the ratio of rural population for Ningxia as a whole. Data from An Ruili, ed., “第四篇：人口。”
7. “2015 最新中国清真寺数量及分布,” www.chinaislam.net.cn, March 3, 2015. <http://www.chinaislam.net.cn/cms/news/media/201503/03-8001.html>.

The decade of 2006-2016 saw a proliferation of new mosques and renovated ones across Ningxia. What distinguished this surge was not just the numeric growth, but the extravagant and distinctly Islamic structures - domes, minarets and archways. One impetus was local state indulgence and even funding support. Established mosques were allowed to add Islamic structures and features, such as the Nanguan Mosque. Located in the old section of Yinchuan, it is one of Ningxia’s oldest and biggest mosques. First renovated in 1981 with state funds and again in 2008-09, the second renovation was done in lavishly and Islamic styles, losing its traditional appearance. Its re-opening in 2009 was greeted by congratulatory cables from the Islamic Association of China (IAC) and the embassies of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan.⁴⁹ Islamic styled mosques, newly built by Hui groups with community raised funds, also received official endorsement.⁵⁰

In a climate of Islamic promotion, local officials turned a blind eye to problematic funding sources, leading to more mosque constructions. Given the continued concentration of Hui communities in rural areas (Table 1), many of the new mosques were built in poor rural townships and villages. Tongxin county, an impoverished region of 400,000 people and per capita income of ¥2300 (about \$350) annually, built some extravagant mosques during the period. Known for a few large mosques historically, the county saw the number of mosques

⁴⁹ “有近 400 年历史的宁夏银川市南关清真寺修葺一新,” *Xinhua she*, July 12, 2009. Available at: http://www.gov.cn/govweb/jrzg/2009-07/12/content_1363390.htm.

⁵⁰ “宁夏清真寺赏析,” *Zhongguang wang*, Nov. 30, 2008. Available at: https://www.cnr.cn/2008zt/cl/hxfq/200806/t20080612_504827989.html.

exceed 390 by 2016, outnumbering the 167 public schools here.⁵¹ The county is also known for a major controversial renovation, the Grand Mosque in Weizhou township. Begun in 2015, the project exceeded its officially approved scales and designs by adding major expansions and elaborate Islamic exteriors, including 8 green domes. Local officials attended the opening ceremony of the renovation but failed to have monitored its progress.⁵² Lavishly built mosques were not uncommon in impoverished counties like Tongxin during the decade of Islamic promotion. Corruption was often present, such as the use of anti-poverty funds for mosque construction.⁵³

Another funding source was external. Since 2008, funding from Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait contributed to the construction of 560 new mosques in Ningxia, Xinjiang and Shaanxi, training of 1450 Islamic clergy, and sponsorship of 3280 students to study in Arab countries. The returnees, deemed more authentic than home-grown Islamic clergy, presided in foreign funded mosques but increasingly also in other local mosques.⁵⁴ These developments correspond with studies outside China on the surge of Saudi influences and activities in China's Muslim communities, especially the Hui communities, in the decade preceding 2017.⁵⁵ These studies also attest to the welcoming attitudes on the part of local authorities and the IAC towards Saudi missionary work. Importantly, what the "authentic Islamic clergy" brought back was often the Wahhabi sect of Islam from Saudi Arabia, contributing to a more serious form of Saudization.

⁵¹ Cited in Xi Wuyi, "警惕我国伊斯兰教逆中国化的倾向."

⁵² "治理违规宗教建筑应力争有力、平稳," *Huanqiu shibao* Aug. 11, 2018. Available at: https://www.sohu.com/a/246584204_419351.

⁵³ "宁夏一干部违规将扶贫资金建设清真寺被处分," *Zhongguo wang*, May 10, 2018. Available at: http://news.china.com.cn/2018-05/10/content_51213026.htm. The problem may be widespread according to local netizens; see https://tieba.baidu.com/p/5828364843?red_tag=3301664646. (Accessed July 23, 2022).

⁵⁴ Cited in Xi Wuyi, "警惕我国伊斯兰教逆中国化的倾向." Given her position, Xi's data may be authoritative.

⁵⁵ Al-Sudairi. "Adhering to the Ways of Our Western Brothers;" Rogenhofner and Gonul, "Wahhabism with Chinese characteristics;" Wei and Ho, "Islam in China;" and Al-Sudairi, "China as the New Frontier for Islamic Da'wah."

Physically their influence could be also seen in the growth of Hui women wearing the Saudi abaya and Hui men wearing the Muslim beard.

Nominally, Ningxia's per capita mosque rates do not exceed historical levels (Table 1), but this comparison can be misleading. Concentrated settlements make a difference in contemporary times, as each mosque now congregates far more followers from nearby. Rather than matching demographic increases, new mosques often reach into new places in the countryside. Whereas before villagers did not bother to travel far to visit mosques and did so only for holidays, nowadays many villages have a mosque, strengthening religious influences. The intensifying religious atmosphere, along with rising income, also allowed more local Muslims to make pilgrim trips to Mecca. Exposure to "more authentic" Islam, in turn, contributed to the human side of "Saudization." That is, an increasing spread of the veil, the Saudi abaya and the Muslim beard. The veil could even be seen on college campuses. These styles rarely existed before the 2000s.

It is difficult to gauge if Islamic tourism helped to attract Muslim tourists from abroad. Based on available data, tourism did increase in Ningxia in during 2015-2017: the number of tourists grew annually from 16.75 million in 2014 to 31.03 million in 2017, an annual growth of 22.8%; revenues increased annually from ¥ 14.3 billion in 2014 to ¥27.8 in 2017, an annual growth of 24.9%. The revenues in 2017 amounted to 8% of Ningxia's GDP, making tourism a pillar of the local economy.⁵⁶ However, these figures do not show how many tourists were from Muslim countries or if Islamic tourism played a role. National data for 2014 shows a growth of tourists from Muslim countries, but this was for China as a whole and most of those tourists came from Asia: 1.13 million from Malaysia, 570,000 from Indonesia, and 340,000 from the

⁵⁶ "宁夏年接待游客数量首次突破 3000 万人次," *Xinhua wang*, Jan. 17, 2018. Available at: http://m.xinhuanet.com/nx/2018-01/17/c_1122270540.htm.

Middle East.⁵⁷ However, the first two countries have sizeable populations of Chinese descent, so many of their tourists may not have been Muslims.

Like pan-Halafication, Islamic tourism rose and fell with local state support and reversal since 2017. The Sino-Arab Axis was renamed “Unity Road,” its Arab themes and Islamic features removed, replaced by Chinese ones. The Grand Mosque of Weizhou township was demolished, as were many domes and minarets on recently constructed or renovated mosques. The Cultural Park of Hui Homeland is now Ningxia Folk Customs Park. The International Muslim Trade City, which was rather empty partly because many locals thought it was for Muslims, is now Ningxia Yinchuan Trade City. Critics lament the waste of sources and emotional damage to local Muslims, but also chastise the Islamic structures that remain on major landmarks, e.g., Ningxia International Convention Center, Sino-Arab International University, Sino-Arab Building, and International Muslim City.⁵⁸

Opening to the Arab World and “Arabization”

Opening to the Arab world was yet another instrument in Ningxia’s developmental strategy to capitalize on the Huis’ heritage. This drive included three major components: to attract foreign investment and trade, establish Islamic banking, and expand Arabic learning. The catalytical effect, characterized as “Arabization,” stemmed largely from the third component, as the first two failed to take off.

The impetus for opening to the Arab world was geo-economic. As early as 1985, local officials dreamed of an inland special economic zone that would open Ningxia to the Middle

⁵⁷ “中国扩大与穆斯林国家旅游交往,” *Xinhua wang*, Sept. 11, 2015. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015-09/11/c_1116532353.htm.

⁵⁸ Wang Cheng, “中阿之轴首当其冲 被消除和去沙化 阿化,” *Baijia hao*, Aug. 5, 2018. Available at: <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1607951347277804322>.

East. But China did not even have diplomatic relations with some of the Arab countries back then and Ningxia was not located near the equivalent of East Asian tigers. Two decades later, local scholars and officials saw opportunities. The Great Western Development program gave Ningxia good reasons to secure central approval for a SEZ friendly to FDI. The global financial crisis of 2008 gave hope to Ningxia that Arabs may want to find a better place to invest their money. Finally, the Belt and Road Initiative, launched since 2013, strengthened Ningxia's case for opening to the Arab world. Two of Ningxia's contemporary cities were key stations on the eastern end of the historical Silk Road.

To attract FDI from the Arab world, Ningxia sought central approval for the SEZ status, using its "special characteristics" as the pitching point. A SEZ would enjoy more autonomy in economic and fiscal matters, a key mechanism to have policies conducive to FDI. In Sept. 2009, the State Council finally granted Ningxia the SEZ status on an experimental basis. Known as "an experimental zone for inland open economy," it came with prerogatives similar to a regular SEZ.⁵⁹ The new SEZ status, however, did not do better to attract FDI. Ningxia had hoped, with FDI from the Arab world, to build petrochemical industries and establish itself as a key energy base for China. Domestically, it had hoped to attract manufacturers from the east coast and serve as their gateway to the Arab world. However, as a seasoned global investment specialist observes, Arab traders have a large and routine presence in Yiwu city of Zhejiang province, whereas many who came to Ningxia's Sino-Arab trade forums were first-time visitors.⁶⁰ One may add Guangzhou as another hub for Arab traders, without Islamic promotion either.

⁵⁹ "宁夏内陆开放试验:是宁夏所能 更是国家所需," *Dongfang caifu wang*, Nov. 24, 2012. Available at: https://www.cs.com.cn/xwzx/hg/201211/t20121124_3746795.html.

⁶⁰ The specialist is Ben Simpfendorfer. Cited in *ibid*.

However, local officials blamed failure to attract FDI on Ningxia's lack of Islamic banking, to which they turned next to promote. Local officials viewed Islamic banking as the "soul" to the new SEZ, or key to attracting and hosting Arab investment.⁶¹ Islamic banking is distinguished from regular banking by its adherence to Islamic law or Shariah law. One fundamental principle is the sharing of profit and loss and, and the second is the prohibition of interest collection and payment by lenders and investors. Islamic banking makes profits through equity participation, which requires a borrower to give the bank a share in their profits rather than paying interest. The fate of Islamic banking tells much about local officials' role in promoting Islamic practices as key to Ningxia's developmental strategy. This promotion was prioritized regardless of other considerations. Ningxia had sought central approval for Islamic banking when it lobbied for the SEZ, but the request was rejected for incompatibility with China's system of financial oversight. Undaunted, Ningxia decided to experiment Islamic banking first locally.

The provincial government moved swiftly to clear bureaucratic hurdles for this experiment. In January 2008, Governor Wang Zhengwei proposed the idea to Ningxia's legislature. By late 2008, it was sent to local branches of relevant central ministries for approval. By early 2009, the banking regulatory agency completed a feasibility report. In March, 2009, provincial and financial regulatory officials formed a group to coordinate implementation. In July an official study group visited Malaysia and the UAE to study international Islamic banking, a curious move because they did not bother to study Yiwu or Guangzhou's success in attracting Arab traders without Islamic banking. By the end of 2009, Bank of Ningxia received approval to undertake the experiment, the first of its kind in China. The bank set up a department of Islamic

⁶¹ Li Boya, "宁夏远景：设立伊斯兰金融中心," *21shiji jingji baodao*, Nov. 26, 2012.

financial business and a consulting committee made of experts on Islamic and commercial laws. It opened service windows for Islamic banking in five local branches. Local authorities hoped that the experiment would help make Ningxia's case for an Islamic financial center.⁶²

Islamic banking did not work magic wonders despite the local state's active promotion. Bank of Ningxia's experiment performed poorly. In the three years between 2010-2012, its Islamic services attracted less than ¥50 million in deposits, a fraction of the overall deposits of ¥472.7 billion that the bank received in 2011 alone. The combination of Islamic banking business at the five experimented branches was less than the business at one regular branch of Bank of Ningxia. Overseas business, the original justification for Islamic banking, also failed to materialize.⁶³ Rather than reassessing the validity of promoting Islamic banking, local authorities blamed the central state's rejection of their proposed Islamic financial center. Had it been approved, they argued, Ningxia would receive state funding to jumpstart Islamic banking: funding for Sino-Arab equity, Sino-Arab industrial investment, Halal industries and talent hiring. Wang Zhengwei, now governor, vowed to fight for more policy permissions and to experiment anything not forbidden by the state. As of late 2012, local officials still actively pursued state support for an Islamic financial center as the priority to set off the new SEZ.⁶⁴ Needless to say, it is doubtful if such a center could do more to attract FDI. More likely it would be a target of criticism for Arabization after 2016.

The third component of opening to the Arab world, expansion of Arabic learning, turned out to be more successful than either the SEZ or Islamic banking. Driven by Sino-Arab trade

⁶² “伊斯兰金融试点初定，宁夏银行先行,” *Jingji guancha wang*, June 19, 2009. Available at: <http://www.eeo.com.cn/2009/0619/140923.shtml>; and “宁夏银行获准首家试点开办伊斯兰银行业务,” *Yiwan xinwen*, Dec. 25, 2009. Available at: <http://news.163.com/09/1225/12/5RCKGUPG000120GR.html>.

⁶³ Jia Xiaotao, “中国的伊斯兰银行,” *Bloomberg Business Weekly* (Chinese), date unclear, 2013. Reposted at: http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_70b1e40c0101e1gq.html. (Accessed April 4, 2018. The blog is no longer available).

⁶⁴ Li Boya, “宁夏远景：设立伊斯兰金融中心.”

forums and the new SEZ, Arabic - rather than Arab trade or traders - became prolific in Ningxia. The role of the local state, again, was instrumental. Official policies were detailed in three strategic plans: NHAR's decennial plan for talent development (2010-2020), NHAR's 12th Five-year Plan (2011-2015) on service sector development, and NHAR's plan for the new SEZ (2012-2020). Specific policies included an "Arabic talent project" to train Arabic speakers, support for upgrading Arabic skills, and support for private Arabic schools.

These local policies set off a Great Leap Forward drive in Arabic education. Before 2008, Ningxia had just two Arabic programs, the Tongxin Arabic school and Ningxia Islamic College, both established in 1985. Other than Arabic use by the clergy in mosques, graduates had few job opportunities. This changed in the few years since Ningxia's Islamic promotion. By 2013 a mix of fifteen public colleges and private schools in Ningxia offered Arabic programs.⁶⁵ By 2017, five public colleges and nearly twenty private Arabic schools offered them.⁶⁶ These were remarkable numbers, because Arabic programs existed in less than two dozen colleges in the rest of China at the time. Moreover, of Ningxia's five public colleges with Arabic programs, Ningxia University and Northern Minzu University became the only two universities in China that established a School of Arabic, followed by at least three more local colleges.⁶⁷ Programs in Arab culture and history, and Sino-Arab cultural and religious exchange programs, were also established.

The provincial government backed Arabic programs with strong financial support. For the fiscal year 2013-14, it provided ¥ 41 million to Ningxia University to establish NHAR's "training base for Arabic." For 2013, it allocated millions for joint programs and exchange

⁶⁵ "阿拉伯语日渐火热 专家称学习阿语视野应再大些," *Yinchuan wanbao*, Sept. 25, 2011. Available at: <http://www.chinanews.com/edu/2013/09-25/5321892.shtml>.

⁶⁶ Zhengben qingyuan, "宁夏政协委员建议将阿语列为高考科目, 每年划拨一亿支持阿语教育," *Weibo* May 21, 2017. Available at: <https://www.weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404109742392915830&infeed=1>.

⁶⁷ Zhengben qingyuan, *ibid*.

programs between Ningxia's colleges and secondary schools and their Arab counterparts. Most importantly, the provincial government provided financial support and actively sought central funding for private Arabic schools, including assistance for free tuition and financial aid.⁶⁸ Due in significant part to state support, the private Ningxia International Arabic School became the largest Arabic program in China by 2014, four years after it first opened. In 2014, it boasted 1500 students, Arab instructors and instructors of Chinese descent with degrees from Saudi Arabia and other Arab or non-Arab Muslim countries.⁶⁹

What came to be characterized as Arabization involved three developments. First, the Arabic script became ubiquitous on the streets of Ningxia's urban centers, from street names, road signs to commercial posters, and in some Hui concentrated neighborhoods. Secondly, many private Arabic schools enticed applicants by marketing the ethno-religious value of Arabic. One pitch emphasized Arabic's utility for reading the Koran or becoming imams. The Islamic clergy, unpaid before, has become an attractive occupation with salaries, state subsidies and free skill upgrading. Another pitch hyped Arabic's utility for studying in Arab countries. Yet another espoused Arabic as the Huis' mother tongue. Thirdly, in a transformative trend, Arabic was increasingly treated as an ethnic rather than foreign language. In January 2014, the first Arabic language preschool opened in Yinchuan. It justified early Arabic education in terms of learning about Hui culture, stimulating language development, and cultivating multicultural awareness.⁷⁰ The trend was strengthening in other forms. With a proliferation of mosques, some ran afterschool and summer programs in the name of academic tutoring, teaching Arabic and the

⁶⁸ Zhengben qingyuan, *ibid*.

⁶⁹ “宁夏穆斯林国际语言学校,” *Baidu baike*, undated. Available at: <https://baike.baidu.com/item/宁夏穆斯林国际语言学校/7522194?fi=Aladdin>.

⁷⁰ “宁夏开办首家阿语幼儿园,” *Fenghuang wang*, Jan. 12, 2014. Available at: http://news.ifeng.com/gundong/detail_2014_01/12/32940954_0.shtml.

Koran to children. At a session of the provincial CPPCC in early 2015, one member even proposed that Arabic be a required second foreign language in public schools and a required subject in the college entrance exams in the province.⁷¹ Together, these developments seemed to push an Arab identity on Ningxia that did not exist before.

Arabization suffered a lesser setback after 2017, in part because state promotion was less successful in the first place. The new SEZ and Islamic banking did little to promote Islamic cultural practices, leaving the proliferation of Arabic as the main legacy of Arabization. Since 2017 the Arabic script has been removed from public spaces. Existing Arabic academic programs have continued, but new ones in the planning have been halted.

Impact of Islamization and Contrast with Xinjiang

Chinese critics of Islamization see three inter-related effects: divisive, de-secularizing and de-indigenizing. Despite official crackdowns, these critics do not enjoy a free license. Scholars and officials are more guarded, while concerned citizens and leftists are more vocal. The latter two groups usually circulate their critiques on social media. Representative criticisms from these groups shed light on Chinese rationales for crackdown on Islamization.

Critics of pan-Halalification focus on the perceived divisive/exclusionist and de-secularizing effects of over-expanding Halal boundaries. Ma Jin, a Hui official at the State Bureau for Religious Affairs, sums up the “pernicious consequences” this way: by expanding religious connotation of dietary customs, pan-Halalification pushes the reach of religion, heightens demarcations between groups and promotes segregation among them; by absolutizing religious prohibitions, it enables cultural conservatism and even religious extremism; and by

⁷¹ Zhengben qingyuan, “宁夏政协委员建议将阿语列为高考科目。”

compelling religious restrictions on public life, it justifies placing religious practices above secular laws and institutions.⁷² Shen Miaomiao, a scholar of ethnic conventions at Northwest University of Law and Politics, argues that the expansionist and exclusionist push of pan-Halalification harms both Muslim and non-Muslim residents, as both face more imposed restrictions and shrinking choices. In mixed areas where the two groups have long co-existed, she notes, non-Muslim residents are accustomed to Muslim conventions. However, when Halal boundaries arbitrarily and invasively expand and zealous devotees demand that all respect them, Islam becomes unfamiliar, threatening and even extremist to non-Muslim residents.⁷³

Critics of “Saudization” focused on the perceived de-indigenizing, divisive and potentially radicalizing effects of imported religious influences. Li Xuzhi, a commentator for the leftist forum *Kunlunce*, argues that mosque designs are not just a matter of native vs. foreign styles but also a matter of native vs. foreign religious sects. Traditionally Islam in northwest China was a localized form of old Sufism and mosques were in local Chinese styles, but imported Islamic styles embody Saudi Wahhabi influences. This is viewed as divisive because the omnipresence of strongly religious and foreign designs erect physical and psychological barriers between local Muslims and non-Muslims. Even if devotees do not know the difference between indigenous and imported sects, Li argues, the heavily religious styles and their affinity to those in the Middle East made it easy for local devotees to accept religious influences from that region, including conservative, fundamentalist and even radical ones.⁷⁴ These views are echoed by Xi Wuyi, as well as the blogger pen-named Zhengben qingyuan, an independent

⁷² Ma Jin, “警惕‘清真’概念泛化倾向,” *Zhongguo zongjiao* 8 (2016). Available at: <http://xasmzw.xa.gov.cn/zwx/tzgg/5d777a01de69b605ecfd8879.html>.

⁷³ Shen Miaomiao, “依法规制清真泛化问题论析,” *Minzu zongjiao yanjiushi*, undated. Available at: <https://mzzj.nwupl.edu.cn/rcpy/hxz/50805.htm>. (Accessed July 28, 2022).

⁷⁴ Li Xuzhi, “宁夏消除阿拉伯化, 重树中华文化自信,” *Wu you zhi xiang*, April 4, 2018. Available at: <http://www.wywxwk.com/Article/shidai/2018/04/388070.html>. See also Xi Wuyi, “警惕我国伊斯兰教逆中国化的倾向.”

thinking resident of Ningxia,⁷⁵ and the blogger pen-named Yuanfang qingmu, a nativist.⁷⁶ In essence, their worry is that the modifying and bridging effects of traditional mosque structures would be gone with their physical disappearance.

Critics of Arabization focus on the perceived de-indigenizing, de-secularizing and divisive effects of promoting an Arab cultural and language identity. One argument is that the Huis have long acculturated into Chinese language and culture, and their ancestors came from diverse places across west and central Asia. To emphasize Arab origins is historically inaccurate and thus de-indigenizing. Another argument is that Arabic is not just a language in the conventional sense but the language of religion required in mosques. This differs from English and western-styled constructions left from the colonial era, because they are not associated with religion. As the language of mosques, promoting Arabic also enhances an ethno-religious identity, hence de-secularizing. Thirdly, imposing onto public spaces a foreign script that is unfamiliar and unintelligible to the overwhelming majority of local residents is disrespectful, hence divisive.⁷⁷

Is Islamization in Ningxia as perilous as that in Xinjiang? Critics generally answer in the affirmative. The sharper critics emphasize two unique features of Islam, exclusionism and expansionism, which make it different from other religions. “Exclusionism” refers to the fact that Islam is the only religion that has gender, costume, dietary and nuptial restrictions. The last point refers to the requirement that one’s marriage partner be of the same faith, namely, non-Muslims must convert to be married to a Muslim partner. Such requirement, plus an increasing imposition

⁷⁵ Zhengben qingyuan, “严防宁夏‘宗教沙化、语言阿化、清真泛化’.” A Ningxia-based blogger, the author appears to be a journalist, alluded to in this blog: <https://www.weibo.com/tarticle/p/show?id=2309404109742392915830&infeed=1>.

⁷⁶ Yuanfang qingmu, “拆除圆顶，中国清真寺全面中国化。”

⁷⁷ Li Xuzhi, “宁夏消除阿拉伯化，重树中华文化自信;” Zhengben qingyuan, “严防宁夏‘宗教沙化、语言阿化、清真泛化;” and Xi Wuyi, “警惕我国伊斯兰教逆中国化的倾向。”

of religion on secular society, are viewed as “expansionism.” The nativist Li Xuzhi goes so far as to assert a third unique feature of Islam due to the first two features, irreversibility, or one-way religion: once a region is Islamized, it cannot return to its former state.⁷⁸ Xi Wuyi, however, compares Islam’s expansionist tendencies to the missionary strategies of Christian neo-conservatism in China.⁷⁹ Generally, critics agree that the claims of religious sanctity and universalism lead some radical devotees to challenge secular order, resulting in defiance of secular governance, laws, education and marriage laws. If unchecked, such tendency can evolve into the type of religious radicalism that plagued Xinjiang.

Placed in the framework of the state’s role, the rise and fall of Islamization in Ningxia do share underlying dynamics with the rise and curtailment of Islam in Xinjiang in the reform era. That is, a similarly critical role of the state in both processes in both cases. On the one hand, the central and local states actively promoted religious revival in Xinjiang (and Tibet) during the late 1970s and the 1980s, though not for economic goals but political objectives of redressing leftist wrongs of the Mao era and repairing damaged relations with politically sensitive ethno-religious majorities.⁸⁰ On the other hand, the central and local states have cracked down on perceived religious excesses in Xinjiang since 1997, though for different reasons than those in Ningxia’s case. If Ningxia’s counteroffensive was driven by the CCP’s new leadership, in Xinjiang it has been spurred by official concerns over the so-called “three evils,” namely, terrorism, extremism and separatism.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Li Xuzhi, “宁夏消除阿拉伯化，重树中华文化自信。”

⁷⁹ Xi Wuyi, “我国伊斯兰教出现的逆中国化倾向。”

⁸⁰ Sun, *From Empire to Nation State*, Chapter 4.

⁸¹ The “three evils” were first officially designated for crackdown in a central document in 1996, followed by a document from Xinjiang’s government in 1997. See Tables 6.3 and 6.4, in Sun, *From Empire to Nation State*, pp.171 and 172.

State sponsorship also made key differences in the nature of religious expansion in Ningxia and Xinjiang. First, pan-Halalification arose among Uyghurs from the late 1990s to the mid-2010s as an ethno-national movement, partly as a reaction to tightened official controls over religion and partly out of frustration with the plight of Uyghurs left behind by economic liberalization. As such Uyghurs were never in a position, as Ningxia did, to promote pan-Halalification regionally and inter-ethnically, let alone nationally. Since 2017, pan-Halal practices might even land individuals “reeducation centers.” Secondly, while Xinjiang experienced a proliferation of mosque constructions and renovations in the early post-Mao era, it did not experience a second wave sponsored by the state, not least styles emulated from the Middle East. On the contrary, Saudi practices received official censure after violent ethnic riots in July 2009. Finally, Mandarin learning has been vigorously promoted in Xinjiang after 2009 and Arabic teaching would be inconceivable in Xinjiang’s context. By contrast, Ningxia’s Islamization, in its tripartite manifestations, was driven by a mix of official, commercial, sectarian and ethno-religious forces during the decade of its growth.

Thus contrasted, Ningxia’s Islamization was more extensive but also shallower than Xinjiang’s. In Ningxia, Islamization involved large-scale and multi-faceted manifestations affecting Muslim and non-Muslim populations locally, but in a more passive way. In Xinjiang, it affected mainly the Uyghur rural population, involving pan-Halalification and Saudi practices among the socially disaffected or conservative Muslims, despite state disapproval. In hindsight, Ningxia’s course may appear puzzling given China’s current restrictions on Islam in Uyghur and Hui regions. But the state’s own ignorance about Islamic sects contributed in part to its earlier support for religious expansion in both regions. This expansion lasted longer in Hui regions

thanks to the absence of perceived security threats to the state, namely, ethnic violence and separatism.

Conclusion

This paper has shown the paradoxical role that the authoritarian state has played in the rise and fall of Islamization in Ningxia. In the decade of 2006-2016, the local state directly sponsored its rise, with acquiescence from the central state. The tripartite instruments in NHAR's developmental strategy – Halal industries, Islamic tourism and opening to the Arab world – each facilitated Islamization. That is, an expansion of ethno-religious practices and identities into consumer, secular and other areas of public life that were conventionally not associated with religion. However, with tightened ideological control over religion under Xi Jinping, the local state has had to rein in this expansion with a sweeping rollback after 2016.

The course of Islamization in Ningxia demonstrates not only the critical role of the state in this process but also the changing as well as constant features of China's authoritarian system in playing out that role. On the one hand, Xi Jinping's recentralization of power resurrects and strengthens the Leninist core of the party-state,⁸² allowing his tightening of religious and ethnic policy. On the other hand, decentralization and diversification of societal interests in the reform era have fractured China's political system, allowing diverse and incongruent policy agendas.⁸³ As shown in Ningxia's case, the Chinese party-state is less monolithic or cohesive than commonly perceived. There appeared to be no central coordination over managing the so-called problem of religious radicalization. Ningxia promoted Islamization during a period when control

⁸² Joseph Fewsmith, *Rethinking Chinese Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

⁸³ Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, *Fractured China: How State Transformation Is Shaping China's Rise* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

over religion tightened in Xinjiang since the late 1990s and further intensified after 2009. Even if the Huis were held as “good Muslims” who posed no violent and separatist threats, the degree of official indulgence in Ningxia was still striking given official over-sensitivity over the Islamic faith in Xinjiang. Additionally, the central party and the central state showed different agendas in regard to local development. The State Council approved Ningxia’s developmental strategy every step of the way, except for Islamic banking, which was rejected on technical rather than religious grounds. The central party, at least under Xi Jinping, was primarily concerned about ideational directions.

It is unclear what lessons Ningxia has learned. Despite official crackdowns, local citizens have little freedom to openly discuss Islamization or its rollback. Academic discussions by local scholars are forbidden. Perhaps local and central authorities want to avoid reminding the public who were responsible for inspiring it. Perhaps they want to avoid inciting interethnic discord. Given that a lack of public debates may have contributed to Islamization in the first place, it appears that real lessons have not been learned.