

HUI CULTURE—PERSONAL INTERVIEW

Understanding Hui Culture in China through a personal interview with Frank Li, assistant General Manager at the Tunhe Hotel, Urumqi, Xinjiang, China, June 14th 2001

By Steven Andrew Martin

After breakfast at the Tunhe Hotel in Urumqi, China, a confidant, well-dressed woman approached me with several questions. She was the General Manager and offered to have the hotel's assistant General Manager, Frank Li, show me around town. I soon learned that Frank was Muslim from the local **Hui** culture, one of China's 55 national minority cultures, and the following interview was conducted with his permission.

Frank was born in Hotan in Xinjiang Province (formerly Chinese Turkistan) and moved to Urumqi when he was one year old. His father worked in the government as a translator, and Frank felt fortunate to receive an education. Frank believes that education depends on the parents: "If the parents don't care, rarely will the children care—that's the problem." Frank said that there is a local Urumqi joke, "Hui are all just street vendors in the markets, selling thin yellow noodles (a Hui trademark), because that's all they know how to do."

Hui culture is dispersed widely throughout China. Frank said that during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) Muslim traders came to East China by sea. Often stranded due to weather, technical difficulties with the boat, financial reasons, or even love for a Chinese girl, these men never left East Asia. Arab men occasionally had children with Han wives who intern bore children deemed to be Muslim. During subsequent generations these children dispersed throughout China. Such was the case of Frank's family. Many generations ago, Frank's ancestors, who he believes were discriminated against, headed toward the rural areas and deserts of West China. The desert oasis lifestyle of Xinjiang was a familiar landscape to the Central Asian and Middle Eastern Muslims.

Hui culture stemmed mainly from the coastal province of Fujian in Eastern China. At first, the culture disseminated from south to north, then from north to west, taking root in Ning Xia Province. Originally most Hui spoke Iranian or Persian, but evolved to Han dialects as new generations emerged.

Frank's great Grandma came to Urumqi from Ning Xia, as did most Hui in Urumqi. Ning Xia, also called Hui Autonomous Region (south of Mongolia and adjacent to Gansu province), is a relatively poor area supporting small villages and mountain life. Other Muslim cultures in the Ning Xia area include *Sala* culture the *Dong Xiang* culture, each with languages similar to Arabic. Due to their geographic location, which is dry and with little usable water, agriculture is very hard and people are very poor. Most children must take care of the animals and never attend school.

Hui culture can be found throughout China and has interesting differences to traditional Islam. When I asked Frank if he followed Sunni or Shia Islam, he said he wasn't sure but expressed his view in this way: "Sunni was the big way and they follow all the words of the Koran, whereas Shia was the small way and they have a stronger connection to Muhammad."





The Hui of Urumqi city are a little different from those in the countryside, and some pursue education and a more integrated lifestyle. City populations of Hui are small and many individuals still avoid education, often conducting business only with family members. Frank's cousin, a 'city' Hui, never liked to study and he dropped out after primary school and became a taxi driver.

Frank told me about an area of Urumqi called *Er Dao Qiao* where Hui and Uyghur are more traditional and religious. They are street traders who often open their front doors of the residence to the curbside. Hui parents in this part of town tend to be strict regarding orthodox Muslim principles, yet the children remain uneducated and have a reputation for crime. Frank said, "These children have little chance to enjoy life."

Frank said that 15 years ago Urumqi's tallest building was only 4 stories tall. Things had changed considerably since he was a boy. Frank grew up around mainly Han Chinese children. His father was very busy and didn't take time to explain. He did say to Frank, "A true Muslim needn't pray 5 times a day, you just need to be obedient to God, don't do hurtful things to people or be immoral." Yet according to Frank, other more business-orientated Hui say, "Just pray the 5 times a day, then you can do what you want without following normal Islamic social rules. You can make your own lifestyle." Frank said that he believes it's okay to drink a little, although he rarely ever does. Frank goes to the mosque only on Fridays.

I was curious to ask Frank about Hui weddings. He told me that Hui marriages are a combo of Chinese and Islamic traditions. Normally weddings follow Han social procedure and arrange a banquet, yet as Muslims they go to the Mosque to get the appropriate permission from the Imam. Frank said that in his own family, the wedding formalities depended on the individual views and wishes of the parents.

Frank feels that Hui in the countryside are more religious, compared to the city Hui who are less religious. Rural villages have many mosques, dress is more traditional, and parents arrange all marriages.

In Xinjiang, Muslim culture is more tightly segregated as compared to Ning Xia Province. Other cities in China, such as Beijing, etc., the Hui are much less traditional, not praying 5 times daily, eating pork, drinking a little, etc. Traditions and cultures affect each other. Some Chinese Muslims and Hui became influenced by the Han culture around them, so they changed and have become so little Muslim that perhaps they are not Muslim at all ■

