Summary

This is a collection of "Hui folktales" in translation. In this work, the term Hui refers to the group of officially-approved sinophone Muslims in China, i.e., to the group designated "Hui nationality" (minzu) by the modern Chinese state. The narratives in this collection are arranged thematically: genesis, quasi-historical, religious, didactic, and romantic themes are all represented. Whether 'historical' or 'modern', they are presented as authentic oral narratives.

The work is the result of a cooperative translation project between Southwestern Missouri State University and the University of Ningxia. Over half of the texts were collected in the 1980's by a team of researchers from the University of Ningxia's Nationalities Literature Center, directed by Professor Li Shujiang. The remaining texts were culled from previously-published Chinese-language collections of Hui literature.

Initially the texts were translated in Ningxia by Yu Fenglan, Hou Zhilin, and Wang Ganhui; the translations were then revised in the U.S. by Dr. Luckert with the assistance of Yu Zongqi.

This is apparently the first work in a series of Chinese minority nationality folklore in translation: additional collections of Kazakh and Uyghur folktales are planned by the American author.

The book is arranged as follows: theoretical and thematic introduction, pp. 3-33; photographs, pp. 35-71; topically-arranged stories in translation, pp. 73-446.

At first glance, the Hui, one of the largest groups in China to be accorded minority nationality (shaoshu minzu) status, defy facile categorization.

Many (but not all) are practicing Muslims; they inhabit every province in China, but are concentrated in the Northwest; they speak slightly idiosyncratic versions of local Chinese dialects; they are not physically distinctive from the local Han Chinese population; and the degree to which their customs (gustatory, sartorial, or ceremonial) differ from those of the local Han population depends largely on locale and where a Hui individual falls on the religious-secular continuum. The Huis generally claim Sino-Arab descent. Despite these wide regional variations, the group of people who currently call themselves Hui have developed a distinct group identity. In northwestern China, Hui identity is closely tied to Islam, while elsewhere this identity is secular and more nebulous.

As defined by the modern Chinese state, the Hui are Muslim and sinophone. Actually, a large number of Hui are secular, not Muslim; and a small number of people calling themselves Hui are speakers of Tibetan, not Chinese. What unites these people across China is that they have adopted and reinforced the Chinese state's definition of the "Hui nationality" (huizu).
In recent years in the West there has been a mild surge of interest in this group, including scholarship by Joseph Fletcher, Jonathan Lipman, Dru Gladney, and others. In addition, recent scholarship on ethnicity in China (particularly Crossley, Harrell, Keyes, and Gladney) has moved beyond the situationalist/primordialist debate and has advanced the notion that identity is processual, interactive, and localized, not static and objective. The Hui identity reflects an ongoing dynamic between the state, the Hui's own "ethnic consciousness", and the surrounding groups (Harrell 1994, Keyes 1976, 1981).

This conception of ethnic identity as an ongoing process contrasts sharply with the theoretical basis of Chinese ethnography. The considerable Chinese scholarship on the Hui is based, in fact, on the opposite premise: that ethnic identity is fixed, global, discrete, and objectifiable. In the view of Chinese academia, each of the 56 officially-recognized minority nationalities constitutes (and has always constituted) a bundle of immutable features: an ethnonym, a history, a language, a locale, and culturally-variant customs. The task of the Chinese folklorist, then, is to identify a discrete body of folk literature which links the group in question to the most salient feature(s) of its officially-defined feature bundle. For the Hui, this is unquestionably Islam. (Other popularly-accepted Hui features include their Sino-Arab ancestry, their business acumen, and, lest we forget, their white skullcaps.)

Li and Luckert's work reflects this Chinese theoretical model in tone, format, and content. About half of both the introduction and the texts was translated directly from published Chinese sources. To the authors' credit, this allows the non-sinophone reader access to both a wide range of official texts, and to some of the rationale behind folklore and nationality studies in the P.R.C. today. Indeed, The Mythology and Folklore of the Hui resembles a more comprehensive version of any of the numerous "nationality folk literature" books published in China since the late 50's.

The descriptive portions of the introduction were translated directly from "Chinese materials". The lengthy introduction synthesizes this descriptive information with an exposition of Lewis Henry Morgan-style evolutionistic theory. Luckert, clearly enthusiastic about his subject matter, urges the "serious" reader to embrace an evolutionist model in which folkloric motifs are linked to five "culture strata". "Traces of pre-Islamic notions" are linked to a hunter-gatherer phase, and Hui motifs are compared with Native American tales [8,10,11-19]. Hui creation myths are said to reflect two strata of domestication. Islamic folklore is equated with "universal salvation religions" stage; while non-Islamic and socialist-flavored stories are said to reflect the final stage of "secular democratic revolt" [10].

In this primordialist vein, the introduction serves primarily to defend the authors' uncritical use of Chinese folklore theory and terminology. This approach raises interesting issues about ethnicity studies in general and objectivity in scholarship. The American author correctly anticipates the objections of Western scholars; in his view,

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1 Variant from the Han Chinese, who are assumed to be the "unmarked" group.

2 Presumably the authors are referring to the prefaces of Hui folklore books published in the P.R.C. No references are cited.
"Western 'anti-minzu' scholars" insist on using religion as a classificatory criterion for nationalities. Defining Hui as "Muslim", they demand that Hui folklore be exclusively Islamic [32].

A cursory glance at ethnicity literature of the last two decades shows that the focus of ethnicity studies has long since shifted away from blanket stereotyping and classification ("Are they Muslim?") to an multi-dimensional interactive approach ("How do local conditions affect ethnic identity?"). If protests come from Western scholars, it will be over the author's assumption that Hui identity as delineated by Chinese publications has objective reality. That is, this book is comprised of 123 narratives with little background information about them. In such a format, we have extensive exposure to one dimension of the Hui folktale: the narrative or story-line. Yet "folklore" has at least two other crucial dimensions, function and performance. What role did these tales play in perpetuating values? Whose values are being represented? What conventions does the storyteller use to communicate effectively with his or her audience? What are the attitudes and intonations of the performer? Without reference to the social and performative context of these Hui folktales are unmoored in both time and space and are essentially uninterpretable.

Whose interpretation of "Hui reality" is being presented here? One wonders if these "Chinese Muslims" would indeed select such texts as representative of themselves and their lives. Are the modern Hui, as Luckert states, really participants in "universalistic reactions to re-overdomesticated religious universalisms" [10]?

One positive effect of a book of folklore like this is that a little-known group is shown in at least some of its complexity, thus potentially breaking down stereotypes in the Islam-shy West. Unfortunately, the authors at times achieve just the opposite effect, reinforcing some of the West's less palatable stereotypes about Islam. Even the Chinese government would surely flinch at: "Some large cities have special sections or 'ghettos' designated for Hui people" [4-5]. More seriously, "Islamic jihad or "holy war" has not been among the means by which the religion founded by Muhammed has spread in China. This is not to say that Muslims in China were less warlike than their counterparts in Central Asia or in the Near East. Rather...the jihad ethos of Islam, as occasionally it was activated during the spread of Islam around the globe, was filtered along its journey into China through variegated layers of other types of herder and warrior religiosity."[26]

One is hard-pressed to imagine how the neighboring Mongols and Han Chinese were any less "warlike" than the Muslims in China. The reference to warlikeness no doubt alludes to the so-called Chinese Muslim rebellions of the 18th and 19th centuries. Jihad implies a crusade against non-believers, generally non-Muslims. If a trans-Eurasian "jihad ethos" was largely responsible for the Muslims in China being "warlike", then why were most of these conflicts in Northwest China originally between Muslims alone, often over Islamic doctrine? It is puzzling that here Islam is presented as centrally-controlled (by the Near East) and monolithic across the entire Eurasian continent. Geographic distance, combined with local conditions, guaranteed that the various Muslim peoples across Eurasia would be heterogeneous.

Finally, in a footnote the authors remark that "Chinese Muslims are committed to monogamy perhaps more devoutly than are some of their brothers in the faith elsewhere" [241]. Aside from the question of how the brothers elsewhere might feel, one wonders just how such information about Chinese Muslims was ascertained.
Considerable space is devoted to the question of a proper English-language ethnonym for the sinophone Muslims. They state: "the authors of this book...have chosen — and we think wisely — to subscribe to the current Chinese official definition. We use the name 'Hui' as the secular designation of a Chinese nationality" [9].

Given that the texts in this collection represent official "Hui literature", and "Hui" is the official group designation, it is consistent to prefer the term "Hui" over, say, "Chinese Muslims". The authors defend this preference, arguing that "Chinese Muslim" and "Muslim Chinese" are blanket terms referring to all Muslim groups in China. Yet these objectionable ethnonyms ("Muslims", "Muslim Chinese", "Chinese Muslim", and even "Hui Muslim") are nonetheless used throughout the introduction in reference to the Hui [3,5,6,7,9,28,32,73].

The authors are to be commended for their considerable efforts to give English-language readers a broad glimpse at Hui culture. While the introduction does orient the reader, it would be enhanced by more careful editing. China has actually recognized fifty-six nationalities, not fifty [3, ft.1]. Of the nationalities whose principle religion is Islam, the authors claim that the like the Hui, the "Dongxiang, Salar, and Baoan nationalities for the most part speak Chinese" [5, 8 ft.3]. Actually all three of the latter groups have independent languages which are unintelligible to speakers of Chinese: Dongxiang and Baoan are Mongolic languages, and Salar is a Turkic language. The Hui are, in fact, the only 'Islamic nationality' who are principally sinophone.

The Hui are said to communicate in "Mandarin": "throughout the centuries Chinese converts to Islam have continued to communicate with one another in Mandarin" [5]. Actually, only those sinophone Muslims in northern China speak varieties of "Mandarin" (more accurately Northern Chinese, since the term "Mandarin" wasn't in use before the Qing dynasty); sinophone Muslims elsewhere speak local Chinese dialects (e.g., Hui in Fujian speak a variety of Min).

While lambasting "anti-minzu Westerners" for their desire to suppress secular and/or twentieth-century folklore, the authors themselves are surprisingly adverse to discussing the influence of modern Chinese society on Hui life and literature. Political risk was certainly one factor in this decision [30]. Nonetheless, approximately 10% of the stories in this volume were told or recorded by a Hui cadre who, the authors warn us, often "create[d] brand-new 'Hui stories'" for propaganda purposes [73, ft.1]. But folk tales, given their didactic function, have always reflected the social reality of a given historical period. The authors needn't be apologetic; these selections, in fact, allow the reader insight into one functional dimension of Hui folklore: the societal and propaganda function of folklore in modern Chinese society.

Turning to the texts, we find that the narratives represent a temporally and geographically broad selection of Hui nationality literature: 48% of the selections are from Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, but with Qinghai, Xinjiang, Yunnan and some

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3With the important caveat that "Hui" refers only to the twentieth-century Hui nationality. Historically, "Hui" referred generally to any Muslim in China.

3Perhaps only the Chinese government would dare call a Kazakh a Chinese Muslim, and then only in the political sense of "a Chinese citizen who is a Muslim".
eastern provinces represented. These stories were published as early as 1932 (Minjian yuekan, Zhejiang), while some were recorded in 1991. Much of corpus is based on two collections of Li Shujiang's: Huizu minjian gushi xuan [A selection of Hui folktales], Shanghai: 1983, and Huizu minjian gushi ji [A Collection of Hui folktales] Yinchuan: 1988. Both these and the previously unpublished texts (collected by Li and his assistants) are presented according to Chinese format.

Each text is accompanied by a header with a location, date, narrator's name and the recorder's name. However, the information, which is often incomplete, is cursory to the point of being superfluous (e.g. Location: Qinghai). This was beyond the author's control, since the Chinese originals are equally vague. Ideally, the reader would benefit from information such as the narrator's age, sex, and literacy level. Still, toponyms and journal titles are occasionally misspelled (e.g. Qinhai for Qinghai [province]), or omitted altogether.

Stylistically, the text language is a bit stiff, perhaps so as to be as faithful to the original Chinese as possible. Still, there are occasionally clashes of register and anachronisms: "Du Wenxiu...had to return to Yunchang with nothing but his pent-up anxiety" [261].

The use of pinyin Chinese transliterations for non-Chinese lexemes can yield opaque and even entertaining results. The "Man people", for example, are the Manchus [214]. The title "The Raising of Bogota Mountain" tempts the reader to consider a Latin American origin for the Hui. Yet "Bogota mountain" is merely Xinjiang's Boghda peak (Ch. Bogeda). The Chinese transliterations in personal names contributes to the "government-sanctioned" feel of the book: Ayoubu for Ayub, Abudu for Abdu(l), Adan/Adang for Adam.

Yet overall, the texts are valuable for comparative purposes. It will be up to Asian folklore specialists to explore the relationship of this literature to other folklore of the region. Rather than calling these "Hui stories", it could be more appropriate to describe them as "some of the stories that the Hui tell". As in any other part of the world, the folktales of the various groups in northwestern China share certain similar themes -- illustrating the historical interrelations of these groups, often irrespective of religion.

To take just one example, "Horse Brother the Cultivator" [111], recorded and set in Xinjiang, matches, detail for detail, the Salar story Masenbo (ma-sheng-bao). Both stories are didactic-heroic tales of three brothers (born of a horse, born of a rock, and born of a tree). The eldest (Horse-Brother/Masenbo) defeats a nine-headed monster and ultimately defends himself against his treacherous brothers.

One might expect close parallels between Hui and Salar folklore given the close religious and economic contact (including intermarriage) these groups have enjoyed for the last six centuries. However, the more general themes of (in particular) the "non-Islamic" stories in this collection are found in the folk literature of most other groups in the region. Nine-headed monsters, for example, are typical of Central Asian folk literature (cf. the Mongolian mangus, Kazakh jalmawiz).

Examining these themes and motifs should be an extremely fruitful course of inquiry. And therein lies the greatest value of this volume.
In his introduction, Dr. Luckert declares that the "Chinese Muslim people are hereby given an opportunity to introduce themselves to the world, to speak for themselves." [5] While this is a noble aim, the book in effect provides the Chinese state an opportunity to introduce, in English, its folkloric framing of one of the largest and most influential national minorities, the Hui.

References