The Voice Within: Chinese Muslims, Ethnic Identity, and Self-Representation in Hui Microfilms

ABSTRACT
The Hui (Chinese Muslims) have been either absent from or misrepresented in mainstream cinema in China. Between 2007 and 2016, a group of young Hui filmmakers actively used the wei dianying (often translated as “microfilm”) format to explore Hui identity, tradition, and everyday life. Through a close analysis of representative films, this article argues that Hui microfilms challenge mainstream representations, actively constructing the Hui’s ethno-religious identity and negotiating the tension between their twin identities—Chinese and Muslim—in a context in which the state enforces secularization and assimilation. This study shifts the existing literature’s focus on negative representation of the Hui in films by Han filmmakers to empowering narratives from the Hui themselves.

On June 20, 2014, at the Beijing premiere of Yiye lihua (Pear Blossoms in One Night, 2014), director Sayyid Shi Yanwei, a Hui Muslim writer and filmmaker, shared an experience with the audience. He recalled standing outside the reception hall at a literature award ceremony, debating whether he should put on his white hat (taqiyah), which was tucked in his pocket, to receive his award. Eventually, he listened to his inner voice, put on the

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1. Sayyid’s speech at the film premiere was recorded and is available on https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XOTUwODY1ODUy.html?spm=a2h0k.11417342.soreresults .dtitle. When I watched the video on February 19, 2020, the title was "Huizuticaidedianying Yiye Lihua Beijing shouying li" (The Beijing premiere of Yiye lihua—a Hui microfilm). When I revisited the link on February 20, 2024, the recording was shortened by about twenty minutes (it still includes the story Sayyid told). As of publication of this article, the title has been changed to "Yiye Lihua fangyingshi" (Screening of Yiye lihua—a microfilm).

2. The rest of the article will address Shi Yanwei by his Islamic name, Sayyid, as requested by the filmmaker during my interview with him on WeChat (China’s most popular social media platform) on March 11, 2021.


including Bai Yong, Ebrahim Ma Yulong, Wu Haiyi, and Ma Xin soon produced huizu wei dianying of their own.

Numerous media scholars have emphasized that the term *wei dianying* differs significantly from the genre long known as the short film. “Microfilm” has thus become the preferred English translation.⁶ There are two major types of microfilm in China. If the “branded” microfilm is “made for the purpose of constructing a brand image,” using short formats to commercially promote a product or an organization, the independent/artistic microfilm is “produced by independent directors motivated by self-expression and career development.”⁷ It is largely agreed that branded microfilms, which usually run from one to five minutes in length, form a different category from traditional short films.⁸ However the distinction between a traditional short film and an independent/artistic microfilm, which typically runs from five to thirty minutes, is harder to define. On one level, the differences between these genres have less to do with a film’s length and content and more to do with the distribution of microfilms on new platforms and the widespread enthusiasm for short films this has fostered.

The Hui short films studied in this article belong to the category of independent/artistic microfilm. Other than using online video websites as their main portal for distribution and circulation, the narrative and formal structures of these films largely follow those of live-action fiction shorts in general. Cynthia Felando summarizes four defining features of fiction short films: narrative compression, unity (“economical and narrowly focused narrative”), characterization (character development is spare, with characters less driven by clearly defined goals), and an intense or unexpected ending.⁹ These traits, which arguably characterize the Hui films, help us understand how these films differ from the broader category of wei dianying/microfilms. Yet the study of the Hui independent microfilm also requires more than a formalist approach that identifies similar narrative and formal strategies and highlights the genre’s distinctive aesthetics.


⁸ In fact, there is no common understanding of what maximum running time qualifies as a wei dianying (microfilm). Some consider the length should be within five minutes, whereas for others it’s thirty minutes. See Li, “China’s Micro Film”; and Leng and Jin, “Aesthetic Revolution.”

⁹ Cynthia Felando, *Discovering Short Films: The History and Style of Live-Action Fiction Shorts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 45–63. Felando is one of the first to call for serious study of live-action shorts. Short-format films, except avant-garde works, have largely been neglected or marginalized in film scholarship, in part because the short format has often been viewed as narratively less complex. Through a comprehensive study of representative films from early film history to the twenty-first century, Felando argues that “live-action fiction shorts have considerable artistic, narrative, and historical value.” Felando, 12. Another valuable book on short fiction film is Richard Raskin’s *The Art of the Short Fiction Film: A Shot by Shot Study of Nine Modern Classics* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002).
This article combines textual and contextual analysis to highlight the cultural significance of Hui microfilms. Their significance grows out of the Chinese sociopolitical environment that makes public expression of a minority group’s identity and culture difficult or even risky. This article thus focuses on those Hui filmmakers who actively use the microfilm format to explore Hui identity, tradition, and everyday life. Despite the sociopolitical risks, this genre challenges mainstream representations of the Hui, actively constructing the Hui’s ethno-religious identity and negotiating the tension between the Hui’s twin identities—Chinese and Muslim—in a context in which the state enforces secularization and assimilation. What’s more, Hui filmmakers have developed crucial strategies to sustain and advance Hui filmmaking and ethnic filmmaking in general.

This study builds upon the scholarship on the minority nationalities or minority ethnic groups (shaoshu minzu) in Chinese cinema. The existing literature focuses primarily on the films that are made by Han filmmakers and for a largely Han audience. A number of recent publications explore films made by minority filmmakers, but they include only feature-length films. This article intends to achieve two goals: shift the center from Han discourse to empowering narratives by the Hui filmmakers and call attention to the microfilm genre as a creative form for cultural and political voices.

10. This article, it should be said, is not an overview of Hui microfilms. For one thing, it is difficult to assess the total output of microfilms by Hui filmmakers. Most amateur filmmakers, who make up the majority of online content creators, do not necessarily identify their work as huizu wei dianying. Since the Hui are dispersed throughout China, determining the full extent of the Hui microfilm archive online, even by region, is a formidable task. Therefore, for the purpose of this article, I focus on works by a group of young filmmakers who have been trained in the art of filmmaking and who specifically identify their short films as huizu wei dianying. Among amateur Hui filmmakers that I researched, Jin Bao stands out for consistent output between 2012 and 2016, with an average of one microfilm per year. Almost all of his films follow a simple structure of a morality lesson, more specifically the theme of “redemption” and “awakening.” For example, his first microfilm Xinwu (Awakening, 2012) is about a morally corrupt and lost young Hui who is enlightened by people with strong Muslim faith and eventually redeems himself. Chi lai de ai (The love that comes too late, 2016) tells of a Hui woman’s discrimination against her granddaughter because of her preference for a grandson. When the granddaughter gets seriously ill from pneumonia, she refuses to spend money on her treatment. The Muslim neighbors start a donation event in front of the mosque. When the grandmother finally realizes her mistake and offers the money, it is too late to save the granddaughter. Jin’s films are more concerned with promoting Muslim values, such as faith and charity, than aesthetics. The overly preachy tone and lack of visual sophistication have limited the films’ circulation and impact.


Before we can examine the Hui microfilm as a form for cultural identity formation and risk-taking, we must first consider the history of the Hui, especially in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As I will demonstrate, Chinese mainstream cinema has played a significant role in shaping public perception about Hui identity. More precisely, the representation of the Hui in Chinese mainstream cinema reveals two major problems that Hui microfilmakers must confront. The first is propagated by a genre known as the minority film—that is, films that “subjugate” minority ethnicities in China “to the Han and make it impossible to have minority subjectivity.” The second is unique to the representation of the Hui: the erasure or obscuring of the Hui’s religious identity.

The Hui, often referred to as Chinese Muslims, Chinese-speaking Muslims, or Sino-Muslims, are the descendants of Muslim merchants, militia, and officials who traveled to China from Arab and Central Asian countries between the seventh and fourteenth centuries. These progenitors were Sinicized through intermarriage with Han Chinese over many generations. According to the 2010 national census, the Han Chinese, the majority nationality group, account for over 91 percent of the total population of China, while fifty-five state-recognized minority nationalities make up the remaining over 8 percent (with a population of about 114 million). The Hui occupy a unique position as the second-largest of the minority ethnicities (approximately 10.5 million people) and the largest of China’s ten Muslim ethnic groups (the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs in Xinjiang are the second largest). The Hui’s ethno-religious identity and status in socialist and post-socialist China have aroused great interest among scholars of religion, ethnicity, and cultural studies.

Scholarship on Hui Muslims has pointed out that the PRC’s ethnic classification of the Hui is problematic. The Chinese term hui or huihui was originally used to designate Muslim identity. During the Republic of China (1912–1949), Sun Yat-sen, the founding father of the Republic, announced that the country belonged equally to the Han, Man (Manchu), Meng (Mongol), Hui (Muslim), and Zang (Tibetan) peoples. Hui was an umbrella
appellation encompassing all the Muslims in China. After the founding of the PRC in 1949, the new government identified fifty-five minority ethnic groups, including ten Muslim ethnic groups. The Hui were recognized as one ethnic group and thus differentiated from the other Muslim groups. The ethnonym Hui “de-emphasizes Islam and inserts an ethnic element into an otherwise religious identity, despite the fact that most Hui are ethnically indistinguishable from the Han.”19 If, according to the PRC’s classification system, ethnicity is determined by a common territory, language, form of economic livelihood, and psychology, then the Hui fail to meet the four criteria.20 What’s more, the Hui are spread across all provinces, with the highest concentrations in China’s northwest and southwest. Most Hui people live in physical proximity to non-Muslim Chinese neighbors, speak the local Chinese dialects, and intermingle with their neighbors in daily life. The majority of the Hui can hardly be distinguished from the Han Chinese in language, locality, and economy. Among the state-identified nationalities in China, the Hui “are the only ones for whom religion is the ‘only unifying category’ of their identity.”21

The state’s separation of religious attributes from ethnicity is reflected in the PRC’s conflicting laws and regulations regarding religion. On the one hand, Article 36 of the Chinese Constitution grants Chinese citizens freedom of religious belief.22 On the other hand, the government’s policy toward religion has “for the most part, sought to relentlessly enact the classic version of secularization thesis into reality to make religion irrelevant to public life.”23 The government imposes particularly strict scrutiny over foreign religions (i.e., Christianity and Islam) in the public sphere as well as religious content in media.24 For example, mainstream media, including film and television, rarely use visual and narrative references that evoke Christian or Islamic identity. The PRC’s attempt to render Islam irrelevant to the Hui identity is conspicuous in the mainstream genre known as shaoshu minzu dianying (the minority film).

The minority film is a fictional genre created and gradually instituted from the late 1950s onward. This genre tells stories about state-recognized minority ethnic groups in order to bolster the nation-state and its discourses. It was partly a result of and a cultural response to the ethnicity identification project, which the new PRC government launched as part of its nation-building campaign.25 Affiliated with the ethnic identification project was a pro-

gram researching ethnic minorities’ social history. The research was used in creating the Cultural Palace of Nationalities, built in Beijing in 1959 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the PRC. Information about ethnic minorities produced under the state’s guidance focused on two main themes: “First, the importance of minority people’s group membership in the construction of national history. Second, all great changes had taken place among those people under the leadership of CCP [the Chinese Communist Party].”

These themes are reflected in many minority films produced during the seventeen-year period prior to the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), including *Huimin Zhidui* (*The Detachment of the Hui*, Feng Yifu and Li Jun, 1959). *Huimin Zhidui* is the key text for imagining the Hui in the PRC. This feature film is loosely based on a historical figure, Ma Benzhai (1901/1902–1944), who took his Hui troops to join the Communist army’s fight against the Japanese invasion during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). Yet, if the film’s narrative affirms the Hui people’s contribution to the creation of a new China, it grants a more heroic role to the army’s political commissar, a Han Communist Party member. The primary conflict that drives the narrative is strife within the Hui army. The commissar helps Ma solve the internal obstacles and consolidate the Hui detachment. The film ends with the heroic death of the commissar, whose last words to Ma are “[y]our application to join the party is approved.” Ma salutes his body and solemnly swears his loyalty to the Communist Party and his commitment to leading the Hui detachment to defeat the Japanese invaders. As a result, the film focuses less on the numerous victories of Ma's troops and more on the Hui’s transition from an independent military unit to a Communist army detachment.

Like many other minority films made during this period, *Huimin Zhidui* served a political function of promoting the unity and solidarity of all nationalities under the Communist Party’s leadership. Minority films created a variety of stereotypical ethnic characters to easily fit into the socialist discourse. In these films, as Zhang Yingjin puts it, “The object (in this case ethnic minorities) would never become a full-fledged subject of knowledge. In other words, minority people hardly if ever occupy the subject position in minority films. Instead of acting as agents of change in their own right, minority people are always directed to pay their homage to the nation-state.” In *Huimin Zhidui*, Ma’s change is completed only under the guidance of a party leader, and his growth is manifested by his transition from a Hui commander to a Communist soldier.
Another criticism that minority films have received emphasizes the genre’s narrative and ideological dichotomy of minority/majority. Dru Gladney contends that “the objectified portrayal of minorities as exoticized, and even eroticized, is essential to the construction of the Han Chinese majority, the very formulation of the Chinese ‘nation’ itself. In other words, the representation of the minorities in such colorful, romanticized fashion has more to do with constructing a majority discourse than it does with the minorities themselves.”

Gladney even states that minority films have in effect participated in some kind of “internal colonialism” and “internal orientalism,” effectively establishing Han cultural hegemony.

Most of the critiques of the minority film can be applied to Huimin Zhidui, except for the use of evocative images and sounds to eroticize or exoticize the ethnic minority and the landscape they inhabit. In popular films and mainstream media, there seems to be an effort to de-exoticize or obscure the Hui’s specifically Muslim culture and traditions. Their attire (white round hats for men, headscarves for women), their adherence to qingzhen (halal) dietary and other restrictions, their observance of Ramadan (the Muslim month of fasting), their daily regimens of cleansing and praying, and their places of worship (mosques) would only evoke tension between the Hui’s religious identity and the state ideology (communism and atheism).

In Huimin Zhidui, for instance, the characters wear no Muslim attire, nor are they shown performing religious practices. The only time that Islamic practice is referenced is when the political commissar instructs his Han assistant to be mindful that the Hui do not eat pork. This scene shows that the Communist Party, represented by the commissar, respects the Hui tradition. However, that tradition is reduced to a superficial association with a non-pork diet. To this day, this is how most Han Chinese view the Hui. Sayyid criticizes this essentialist view, which equates qingzhen (halal) culture with qingzhen food alone, as “shallow” and “embarrassing.”

The trivialization and concealment of Hui religious identity is evident in the film’s title: Huimin Zhidui. The original script, by Ma Rong, a screenwriter of Hui ethnicity, was titled Musilin de zidi (The Muslim soldiers). The

32. Gladney, 53.
33. Qingzhen (literally “pure and true”) is a Mandarin expression of the Islamic concept of halal.
34. A quick Google search of the keywords huimin fengshu (the Hui traditions) shows results of a number of Chinese forums discussing why the Hui people do not eat pork. In a blog post, an author, who is a Han, writes about his and most Han people’s shallow understanding of the Hui culture. “Lun qingzhen shipin yu shipin an’quan de guanxi” [About the relationship between qingzhen dietary and food safety], Huaxia miaoyi tianxie fenghuang (blog), March 9, 2016, https://weibo.com/p/1001603951095280984387.
36. In a documentary about the making of the film, Li Jun talked about the original script and the name change. Koushu lishi pindao, “Dianying chuanqi 067 zhi Ma Benzhai” [Legends of cinema series no. 67: Ma Benzhai], July 30, 2020, YouTube video, 30:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gF07DN4shho.
production company behind the film, August First Film Studio, eventually assigned the production to two Han directors. One of them, Li Jun, would become a specialist in the genre, having directed another famous minority film, *Nongnu* (*Serfs, 1963)*, a story about the Communist Party’s liberation of exploited Tibetan peasants. Slated for release to celebrate the PRC’s tenth anniversary, Li and his co-director renamed the film, replacing *Musilin* (Muslim) with *huimin* (Hui), thereby shifting the signifier of Islam to the signifier of state-defined ethnicity and reinforcing a growing trend—that of erasing Hui religious identity.

The erasure of Islamic references has become a norm in mainstream films. In 1988, *Musilin de zangli* (Muslim funeral rites), by Hui woman writer Huo Da, won the Mao Dun prize, the highest literary award in China. The novel was an immediate sensation, building a large non-Han readership for a work by a Hui writer. The story follows several generations of a Muslim family, from the early twentieth century through the Second Sino-Japanese War, and culminates in the early 1980s. When an adaptation, *Yue luo Yu changhe* (*The Moon Falling on the Jade River*), was commissioned in 1993, the film was given to another Han Chinese director, in this case the renowned Xie Tieli, and *Musilin* was again removed from the title, replaced by a vaguely poetic one. Not surprisingly, the film excises most of the religious references contained in the novel. Huo’s original novel is extraordinarily rich in its depiction of Hui history (particularly the Hui’s jade trade) and of many aspects of Islamic culture, which provide an essential context for understanding the lives of this Muslim family. Except for a tragic subplot in the final act—in which a Hui mother rejects her daughter’s love affair with a Han professor—the characters and their lives are largely decoupled from their religious identity, rewriting Huo’s novel as a simple family drama.

*Yue luo Yu changhe* remains the only non-revolution-themed feature film about the Hui people. Since the 1980s, while most minority films have shifted to contemporary settings and moved away from socialist themes of class struggle and liberation stories, the Hui people continue to be associated with China’s revolutionary phase. Two films produced in the twenty-first century, *Tong Xin* (United, He Xiaojiang, 2008) and *Xuezhan Qianqingwa* (*The battle of Qianqingwa, Nie Jun, 2012)*, draw on themes first developed in *Huimin Zhidui*—namely, patriotic stories about the Hui during the Second Sino-Japanese War. Hui protagonists within these narratives are still defined by their faith in the Communist Party, thereby serving the state’s discourse pertaining to the solidarity of all nationalities.

The Hui short films created by a group of young talented filmmakers, as
analyzed in the next section, challenge these mainstream representations by foregrounding Hui subjectivity and asserting the relevance of their distinctive religious identity in both domestic and public spheres. Their individual minority voices have merged to form an empowered collective “minority discourse,” which Homi Bhabha defines as “a much more substantial intervention into those justifications of modernity—progress, homogeneity, cultural organicism, the deep nation, the long past—that rationalize the authoritarian, ‘normalizing’ tendencies within cultures in the name of the national interest or the ethnic prerogative.”

**THE BEGINNINGS OF THE HUI MICROFILM**

Hui filmmaking can be traced to 2007 with two film students and their thesis productions—Sayyid’s *Xihaigu Sanbuqu* (The Xihaigu trilogy) and Bai Yong’s *Jinnian kaichun* (This spring). When they made these films, Sayyid was studying screenwriting and directing as an undergraduate at Northeast Normal University in Changchun, a city in northeast China, and Bai was being trained in film directing at Hohai University in Nanjing, the capital city of Jiangsu Province. Disappointed by the scarcity of films about or made by the Hui, Sayyid and Bai intended for their films to initiate change. Bai in particular has made this clear in interviews: “Chinese Muslims’ lives, their extraordinary culture and spirit, need to be presented through film and television.”

Through their thesis films, Sayyid and Bai revealed a similar passion for and investment in Hui culture and ethnicity, and though they had never met before completing these projects, they were able to come together to play a central role in the development of huizu wei dianying. Above all, their films defined this burgeoning genre by foregrounding Hui subjectivity and exploring Hui identity through authentic slice-of-life depictions of ordinary Hui people’s everyday reality.

Sayyid’s Xihaigu trilogy consists of three freestanding short fiction films: *Shazao* (Oleaster), *Han nian* (The drought), and *Qingshui li de daozi* (Knife in the clear water). The first is an original story written and directed by Sayyid, while the latter two are literary adaptations for which Sayyid shared screenwriting credits with their director Wang Xuebo/Sean Wang, a classmate at Northeast Normal University. Wang, of Han ethnicity, supported and collaborated with Sayyid on a production that was far more ambitious than the average student film. They formed a crew that consisted of volunteers, most of whom were Hui, coming from different parts of China. They traveled from the northeast of China to a remote Hui village in the northwest to shoot on location. With almost no budget, the team created an original and profound work that set the foundation for future Hui filmmaking.

As an admirer of Shi Shuqing, one of his favorite Hui writers, Sayyid had selected two of Shi’s short novels, *Han nian* and *Qingshui li de daozi*, to adapt.

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41. Xiao, “Huizu wei dianying.”
42. Sayyid talked about the process of making the Xihaigu trilogy at a panel discussion. See “Minzu wenhua jianianhua Qingshui Li de Daozi fenxianghui,” Youku video, January 15, 2018, https://v.youku.com/v_show/id_XMzMxOTU3OTEwOA==.html?spm=a2h0j.11185381.listItem_page1.510-=A.
The author generously granted them the right for free.\textsuperscript{43} Shi’s novels are set in Xihaigu, an impoverished and largely Hui-populated region in northwest China, encouraging Sayyid to shoot his trilogy on location. He posted an advertisement on a website oriented toward Chinese Muslims, calling for volunteers. He also asked for sponsors who could provide accommodations for the crew. Mu Pengtao, eventually credited on the film as producer, responded to the ad. He invited Sayyid and his crew to his village, where principal shooting took place. Sayyid pulled together a production team, including classmates and volunteers who also replied to his call. Bai Yong was among them. Carrying equipment borrowed from the university, this team traveled by train to Xihaigu, which has the reputation for being one of the world’s least suitable places for human life, as evaluated by the United Nations World Food Program (WFP).\textsuperscript{44} With limited resources and relying largely on the enthusiasm and devotion of his young volunteers, Sayyid and his team, including Wang and Bai, completed principal photography for the Xihaigu trilogy in the fall of 2007.

A theme common to the three films is how the Hui peasants maintain spiritual purity and moral integrity despite their everyday life struggles with poverty and basic survival. \textit{Shazao} follows a young girl who has to quit school to take care of her sick pregnant mother. When the family runs out of food, she steals some bread to feed her mother, but the mother refuses to eat it. She teaches her daughter to be an honest Muslim no matter how difficult life is. At the end of the film, the mother dies giving birth, leaving the fate of the girl unknown. In \textit{Qingshui li de daozi}, an elderly Hui farmer plans for a memorial ceremony to be held on the fortieth day after his wife’s death. With no money to purchase meat to serve the guests, he must slay the family’s only bull, to which he is emotionally attached. The bull seems to understand the situation and stops eating three days before the ceremony—as if to have a clean body at the time of dying. The widower leaves his son to hold the ceremony and walks away.\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Han nian} centers on two Hui women: a young housewife who lives a comfortable life alone in a nice courtyard house while her husband works in a distant city for most of the year and a beggar of similar age from a nearby poor village who is a devout Muslim. Through two brief encounters between the characters, the housewife in particular gains a deeper appreciation of their shared Islamic faith. The film ends with a long shot of her performing \textit{wudu} (body washing as ritual purification).

\textsuperscript{43} All the specifics of making the trilogy that I summarize in this section are included in the recorded panel discussion cited above.
\textsuperscript{44} For a summary of Xihaigu’s fight against poverty, see “Xihaigu, the Poorest Prefecture in China is Eradicating Poverty,” CGTN, September 23, 2018, https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d514d304d7a4d7a457a6333566d54/index.html.
\textsuperscript{45} Among the three short films, \textit{Qingshui li de daozi} is the most sophisticated in its philosophical contemplation on life and death. The short film does not fully execute the message in the novel. Sean Wang remade the film and turned it into a feature-length film of the same title. The 2016 film more clearly tells of the elderly widower living a \textit{clean} way of life (i.e., following the Muslim rituals such as body cleansing and daily prayer) and the bull not eating to keep his stomach clean for his death. The film provides an ethnographic depiction of the Hui people maintaining a bodily and spiritually clean life through following the Muslim traditions, despite their constant struggles with harsh living conditions.
*Han nian* is the most explicit of the three shorts in highlighting the importance of Islamic faith, through the narrative of the housewife’s transformation and the visual presentation of Islamic rituals. The film eschews a voyeuristic or exhibitionist mode of presentation by integrating Islamic traditions into narratives of mundanity and by relying on careful staging, camera angles, and sound design. This is evident in a two-minute scene of the beggar woman praying. The prayer scene is shot with the beggar’s back toward the camera (see Figure 1). The camera twice cuts from the beggar to the young wife, who watches and is moved to tears (see Figure 2). The scene is almost silent except for low ambient sound from outside the house, adding solemnity to this moment. The act of praying carries narrative meaning beyond Islamic tradition, revealing the beggar’s unwavering faith. She piously follows daily

![Figure 1. A beggar woman prays in *Han nian* (Muslim Audiovisual Studios and the School of Media of Northeast Normal University, 2007).](image)

![Figure 2. The camera cuts to the young wife watching the praying woman in *Han nian* (Muslim Audiovisual Studios and the School of Media of Northeast Normal University, 2007).](image)
religious rituals, even in the face of starvation. The viewer watches the prayer ritual from the housewife’s point of view, invited to identify with her feelings. Sayyid has admitted that the Hui experience is not defined by poverty and struggle, even in a remote Hui community in one of China’s poorest regions. Indeed, later huizu wei dianying abandon these themes. Nevertheless, the Xihaigu trilogy puts in place the genre conventions of the Hui microfilm: the use of local Hui non-professional actors and local dialects, location shooting, the focus on ordinary Hui people, a narrative emphasis on naturalistic depictions and authentic slices of life, and plots that reveal Islamic culture and tradition as an integral part of Hui identity. The mosque, the practice of collective and individual praying, and an attention to rituals such as ghusl (full-body ritual purification) and wudu (ritual washing), which are rarely present in minority films or public media, would, thanks to the Xihaigu trilogy, come to define the iconography of the Hui microfilm.

Another early Hui microfilm is Bai Yong’s Jinnian kaichun, a profound work that addresses sensitive Hui subjects through a family narrative. Bai grew up in Weizhou, a rural town with a majority Hui Muslim population located in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. His microfilms are often set in his hometown, observing the town’s changes as well as the lives of ordinary Hui residents. Bai’s thirty-minute Jinnian kaichun follows Sophia (played by Bai Juan, Bai Yong’s sister), a college student studying in Beijing who returns to her hometown to spend the winter break with her parents (played by Bai Yong’s mother, Wu Shengxia, and his father, Bai Xiaode). During her stay, her parents are busy redecorating their house, preparing for their son’s wedding “this spring,” while Sophia spends most of her time studying at her desk, preparing for an upcoming trip to France. When their redecorated home is complete, the parents are notified that their house and others in the neighborhood will be demolished to make room for a government-sponsored industrial park. The film ends with Sophia’s parents walking her to the local transportation center, where she will depart for her trip abroad. They never tell her what is slated to happen to their home.

Jinnian kaichun is one of the few films to touch on the impact of government urbanization projects on the rural Hui community. The subject of demolition and relocation resulting from China’s rapid urbanization has been addressed in New Chinese Documentary films and in features by China’s sixth-generation filmmakers (particularly Jia Zhangke). Jinnian kaichun depicts the impact of urbanization from a minority perspective. Relocation in their case means, in addition to the same logistical problems faced by Han residents, the dissolution of a traditional Hui community, and more significantly, it disrupts the performance of daily rituals (like going to the mosque to pray) that are integral to the Hui identity, particularly to the older generation. In a survey David R. Stroup conducted with Hui communities in five Chinese cities, some respondents attributed a decline in Hui identity, particularly among young people, to displacement from the mosque-centered

communities. Demolishing Hui residences and businesses that once adjoined mosques and replacing them with “secular amusements” have caused “a general loss of interest amongst younger Hui.”

The mosque plays an important role in Hui Muslim life, and living within proximity to the mosque (wei si er ju) defines the spatial structure of a Hui neighborhood. Many mosques were demolished during the Cultural Revolution when the state condemned religion as a superstition. The 1980s and 1990s saw a resurgence of Islam and renovations and constructions of mosques in the Hui quarters. The revival, however, has been put to halt in the last two decades, a result of increasing urbanization and more restrictions on religion. Large-scale demolition of mosques and widespread conversion of Islamic architecture to Chinese-style buildings have swept Hui-populated areas. “Many of the Hui customs and traditions have been ‘Hanified.’ There is not much left to claim the Hui identity,” Sayyid explains: “The mosque is really important to the Hui community and the continuity of the Hui tradition.”

Bai Yong embeds the subjects of demolition and relocation within a story about familial love, and he shows the vulnerability of the Hui community through strategic use of sound, image, and editing. Jinnian kaichun portrays a close relationship between Sophia and her parents: scenes show her mother bringing her snacks while she is studying and the family sitting together reading testimonials from Sophia’s graduation yearbook. A clock motif links these intermittent scenes of family bonding. When Sophia arrives home, she gives her parents gifts she bought in Beijing, including a modern clock. Noticing that her parents prefer to use their old clock, Sophia hides the key that is needed to adjust its time. Nevertheless, her parents keep the old clock. At the end of the film, on the way to the transportation center, Sophia confesses to her parents what she had done and tells them where she had hidden the key. Her mother explains that the old clock has been with them for a long time and that they have developed a deep attachment to it. The clock motif thus evokes love, nostalgia, and tradition. Structurally, it provides unity and a sense of symmetry to the narrative: Sophia’s arrival and gifting of the new clock begins the film; her departure and the conversation about the old clock ends it. In contrast, the renovation of the house followed by its pending demolition suggests disruption and crisis. The clock motif wraps up the story safely, with the theme of familial love. However, the stark contrast between the devastating situation for the parents and their sentimental goodbye to their daughter leaves a dramatic and emotional hole in the film’s narrative, undermining closure and a felt sense of safety.

50. Sayyid, interview.
Visually, *Jinnian kaichun* records with detachment the painful moment when the family realizes that their home will be destroyed, evoking its emotional impact indirectly. The camera remains at a distance, as if it were a neutral observer of these events. After receiving the demolition notice from an officer, Sophia’s mother says, “We just finished the decoration. My son will get married this spring.” Looking around the courtyard, the officer replies in a nonchalant tone, “It is a pity, really. But the industrial construction is more important. I need to inform the other households of this news now.” The mother sighs and walks back into her house. A static long shot shows the nicely cleaned yard and the house’s exterior with warm light coming from the windows (see Figure 3). Accompanying this image is the sound of chanting from the mosque. The film leaves personal emotions offscreen and uses silence and ambient sound rather than words to present the predicament of the mother.

Similarly, when Sophia’s mother tells her husband about the notification, the scene cuts away from them and moves outside. We see the evening sky and hear the sound of thunder. When the camera moves back inside the home, the conversation about relocating has ended. Perhaps employing what might be called self-censorship, Bai removes voices of distress and frustration over the state’s policy and absolute power.51 The father asks the mother not to tell Sophia. Then he leaves to pray in the mosque, while the mother walks out

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51. Self-censorship is a common strategy that Chinese filmmakers use to avoid their films being banned, particularly if their films touch on sensitive subjects. During the production, they evaluate the risk of censorship and remove elements that may raise red flags. For example, they remove certain dialogues that include direct political commentaries or use symbolic motifs to get the intended messages passed. Edmund Lee, “Tibetan Filmmaker Pema Tseden on Self-Censorship, Chinese Art-House Film, and His Late Start in Movies,” *South China Morning Post*, July 10, 2019, https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/entertainment/article/3018038/tibetan-filmmaker-pema-tseden-self-censorship-chinese-art.
to clean the exterior wall. The scene leaves the viewer to construct for themselves the words exchanged in the private space. The contrast between the devastating situation and the couple's silent acceptance (or concealed resistance) reflects both the Hui’s vulnerability and their resilience. Following their daily routine is how ordinary people cope with an imposed disruption.

*Jinnian kaichun* employs a similar strategy when an apprentice photographer comes to the house to take a family portrait. The young man explains that the principal photographer has gone to the capital city of Ningxia to petition against the government’s plan to demolish the Weizhou Grand Mosque. Sophia’s father tells them the history of the mosque, which was built during the Ming dynasty, destroyed by Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution, and then rebuilt. He fondly recalls his childhood days spent in the old mosque. Then, following a short silence, the conversation abruptly shifts to Sophia’s success in college, and they walk out to the courtyard to take the family photo. Just as we see in the relocation notification scene, Bai’s film introduces a crisis and then abandons it, the restrained tone heightening the vulnerable status of Hui Muslim heritage within the nation-state.

**THE PEAK OF THE HUIZU WEI DIANYING, 2012–2016**

The production of microfilms in China grew rapidly after 2010. By 2012, a number of amateur and professional Hui filmmakers were exploring the format. Many of these films rely on the conventions Richard Raskin associates with short fiction films, including a balance between character-focus and character-interaction, as well as between consistency and surprise, simplicity and depth, and economy and wholeness.52 Witnessing this growth, Sayyid coined the term *huizu wei dianying*. Not all of the films would have Islamic tradition and contemporary religious practices as their overarching themes, but religion inevitably provides at least a context. Bai Yong’s *Shaonian* (Weizhou boys, 2013), for instance, depicts the friendship of five teenage boys and the impact of China’s urbanization on their lives. The characters’ dual identity as Hui and as Muslim is underscored at the beginning, with the film’s title superimposed over a shot of the Weizhou North Mosque. The mosque never appears in the film again, although the opening frames the story (and the viewer’s understanding of the story) from the perspective of the boys’ Muslim identity. Ebrahim Ma Yulong’s *Hasan* (Hassan, 2015) explores Islamic cultural heritage through the allegory of a Hui folktale. A teenage boy named Hassan travels in search of Khidr, a revered figure described in the Qur’an, to petition him to cure his mother’s blindness. During the journey the boy’s faith is tested, but by keeping his faith and being a dutiful son, he is able to receive a blessing from Khidr, and his mother is cured.

Three compelling microfilms from this period do focus on the importance of Islam in the daily lives of ordinary Hui: Sayyid’s *Yiye lihua*, Wu Haiyi’s *Zanzhu* (Tasbih, 2015), and Ma Xin’s *Maiyan de qinshi* (Maiyan’s wedding, 2013). Sayyid wrote, directed, and produced *Yiye lihua*, self-financed with a budget of RMB 30,000 (about USD 5,000). The film is largely

52. The other three parameters are causality and choice, character and object and décor, and image and sound. See Raskin, *Art of the Short Fiction Film*. 

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autobiographical, with the first-person narrator, Shi Guang, based on Sayyid himself. It follows Shi Guang as he visits his deceased grandfather’s hometown, Botou, a city on the Grand Canal in Hebei Province, which at one time had a large Hui population. Shi’s voice-over narration is mournful, expressing a sense of emptiness left by the loss of his grandfather. During his visit he meets ninety-year-old Grandma Yang, his grandfather’s cousin’s wife, who becomes the focus of the film.53

*Yiye lihua* is de-dramatized and devoid of conflict and thereby differs from the conventional short film. Half of the film uses documentary-style camerawork to present a realistic and unscripted depiction of street scenes and daily life in the Hui neighborhood. The other half uses highly structured and symbolic mise-en-scène to highlight Grandma Yang’s Islamic faith and her way of life. Her devotion to Islam and her pursuit of cleanliness (a core practice of Islam) are captured in evocative images that grant the character moments of solemnity and sublimity. The camera frames Grandma Yang praying while wearing a white hijab (headscarf), as the moment has the quality of a still-life oil painting (see Figure 4). Grandma Yang’s body in the solemn space of the mosque has an otherworldly aura, separate from the noisy and polluted material world.

Grandma Yang’s devotion, as well as her pursuit of spiritual cleanliness and purity, is amplified by the film’s central visual motif, pear blossoms. Because of its white color, this flower often is used in Chinese literature to symbolize purity. When Shi Guang arrives in Botou, one of the first questions he asks people is where he can see Botou’s famous pear blossoms. His search for the flower (and, metaphorically, for faith) merges with his search for Grandma Yang. The association between pear blossoms and Grandma Yang is particularly emphasized through the juxtaposition of shots of her praying in the middle of the night and Shi’s dream, in which

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53. Grandma Yang was indeed Sayyid’s grandfather’s cousin’s wife. She was still alive when Sayyid made this film. She passed away in 2021. Sayyid wrote a memoir about Grandma Yang, “Botou baisui nainai Yang Ruiian” [100-year-old Grandma Yang Ruiian of Botou], FreeWeChat, March 8, 2021, https://freewechat.com/profile/MzizNTc1MDY0NA==.
he joyfully runs through the pear trees in full bloom. Grandma Yang’s body wrapped in her white hijab and robe transitions to a full screen of white blossoms.

At the end of the film, Grandma Yang passes away. On this occasion, Shi does not feel a void but rather a sense of completeness. Through Grandma Yang he has reconnected with his ancestry and his Hui Muslim heritage. The film ends on a hopeful note about the continuity of Hui Islamic tradition, beautifully and symbolically registered in its final mise-en-scène: an overhead view of the courtyard of the Botou Mosque, where Grandma Yang’s casket lies in the foreground, a girl holding a pear blossom bouquet stands in the middle, and Shi, dressed all in white, sits in the rear, looking at the girl and smiling (see Figure 5).

The girl appears only twice in Yiye lihua, but she plays an important symbolic role. When Shi first meets her, she is playing with a group of Han children. This is one of the film’s few scenes showing interactions between Hui and Han characters, and it suggests that the girl is not an outsider but is fully accepted within the group. At the end of the film, the girl runs to the mosque to tell Shi that the pear trees are in bloom. The mise-en-scène links three Hui generations in the mosque, conveying the central position of Islamic faith and tradition in Hui identity. If Shi Guang represents the present, the girl represents the future. As Jörg Friedrichs explains, “The Hui are Chinese and Muslim at the same time, and this obliges them to constantly negotiate the tension between their twin belongings.”54 The girl represents Sayyid’s ideal of the Hui’s “twin belongings,” a harmonious mingling with the Han majority while maintaining the Hui Muslims’ distinctive identity.

Wu Haiyi’s Zanzhu, a powerful short film exploring the generation gap between members of a Hui Muslim family, is based on the filmmaker’s memories of her grandparents. Set in contemporary Beijing, the story follows an elderly man as he tries to find a replacement for a bead missing from a tasbih (a strand of prayer beads) that he had given to his late wife. The

54. Friedrichs, “Sino-Muslim Relations”.

Figure 5. The final mise-en-scène of three generations in Yiye lihua (Sayyid Shi Yanwei, 2014).
search becomes more poignant after the man learns from his doctor that he does not have much time to live. The old man is determined to mend the tasbih before Eid al-Fitr, the holiday celebrating the end of Ramadan. His obstinence about fixing the tasbih and his piety for Islamic traditions are not, however, shared by his Hanified son and daughter-in-law. The film ends with the man attending the celebration of Eid al-Fitr alone, and he later passes away while mourning his wife.

The generational differences that define Zanzhu’s narrative are evident in two scenes. During a family dinner at the father’s apartment, the old man asks his son and daughter-in-law to take home some pancakes that he has made for Eid al-Fitr. They respond that they do not need them and that their father should share the pancakes with his Muslim friends. The next day, the father calls each of them by phone to remind them about the food, but both give excuses that they are busy at the moment. In another scene, the son and daughter-in-law pick up the old man at a police station. He tells them he got lost while following a young man who wore a beaded bracelet that looked similar to the one his wife had. As they drive the father back home, the son and daughter-in-law talk about hiring a housemaid for him. At the same time, the father, sitting in the back seat, speaks about the history of the tasbih, how he made it himself and gave it to their mother on Eid al-Fitr long ago. But the young people are too absorbed in expressing their own concerns to listen to him.

The importance of the Eid al-Fitr is revealed in a flashback. In a crane shot, the camera moves across a large courtyard where women and men, young and old, are dressed in Muslim attire, talking and laughing while they sit at a long table covered with food. In the background we can see the father’s younger self speaking to a young woman in a black hijab. In the subsequent medium long shot, the father presents the tasbih to the woman, who takes it and joyfully returns to the celebrating crowd. The flashback scene contrasts with the rest of the film, in which the father is seen alone or simply feeling lonely, even when he is with his son and daughter-in-law. In the end, the old man sits alone in the prayer hall. The tasbih falls from his hands; he has passed away (see Figure 6).

Though it is only twenty minutes long, Zanzhu evocatively captures the

![Figure 6. The father prays in the mosque in Zanzhu (Youth Film Studio, 2015).](image)
reality faced by Hui families living in large cities, where the Hui are widely dispersed instead of living in a Hui quarter. While the mosque plays a crucial role for older generations, giving them a sense of community and belonging (going to the mosque and reciting Islamic scriptures are an important part of the father’s daily routine), the younger Hui have largely been assimilated within the Han majority culture. They do not wear Muslim attire, attend services at the mosque, or celebrate Muslim festivals. Zanzhu ends with the son and his wife cleaning out the father’s apartment after his death. When the son opens a drawer, hundreds of tasbih beads fall to the floor. This powerful final image evokes reverence and empathy for the father, but it also raises the question: Will the children change and reconnect with Hui tradition? Zanzhu leaves this question open.

Ma Xin’s Maiyan de qinshi is arguably the most watched Hui microfilm. Its popularity led to two sequels and at least one spinoff. The short film is set in contemporary Tong Xin, a largely Hui-populated town in the Hui Autonomous Region of Ningxia. Maiyan, a college-educated young woman of Hui ethnicity, reluctantly goes on a blind date arranged by her family and ends up falling in love. However, when Maiyan’s grandfather finds out who her boyfriend’s family is, he objects to the marriage. He knows that the young man’s father has a reputation for dishonesty and laziness, traits that run counter to Islamic values the Hui people hold dear. Maiyan de qinshi consists primarily of three scenes: Maiyan’s blind date at the food court in a department store; Maiyan’s mother and sister-in-law preparing food for the Eid al-Fitr festival; and a quarrel between a matchmaker and Maiyan’s grandfather at the old man’s house. The film won over audiences with its comic tone and authentic depiction of an ordinary Hui family, using non-professional actors, local dialect and slang, and a characteristically Hui family setting.

Maiyan de qinshi highlights the presence of Hui culture and tradition in everyday life. The five-minute scene of preparing food for the Eid al-Fitr festival seems irrelevant to the plot, but it adds cultural relevance to the story and frames our understanding of the characters within a traditional Muslim community. The transition from the food court scene to the kitchen scene is marked by shots of the local mosque, with its minarets and dome, linking the mosque to the family’s living space. In the third scene, a framed shahada in Arabic and Chinese translation is hung in the center of the living room: “There is no divinity but God,” it reads, “and Muhammad is the Messenger of God.” When the matchmaker and Maiyan’s grandfather are arguing about the wedding, the viewer can hear the call to prayer from the mosque in the background. Later, when the argument does not lead to a solution, they set it aside and walk together in good spirits to the mosque to pray. The film makes the viewer feel the warmth, humor, and good nature of ordinary Hui people.

In China’s public media and official discourse, Islamic piety and practice are seen as a potential cause of political division and even violence.

55. The two sequels are Maiyan de qinshi 2 (Ma Xin, 2014) and Maiyan de qinshi 3 (Wu Jinman, 2019). Su Lai xioudian ji, (Wu Jinman, 2016) is a spinoff, with the story revolving around Maiyan’s father-in-law.
rather than “as an expression of individual and collective choice, a manifestation of long and deeply held values.” Aware of the state’s censorship of Islam-related content, Hui filmmakers have had to carefully strike a balance, asserting their ethno-religious identity and Muslim heritage while generally avoiding explicit references to the majority/minority and dominance/submission dichotomies that shape Hui life in modern China. They rarely depict Hui-Han conflicts, and they often interweave themes of Hui identity and tradition into family narratives that emphasize values shared by Chinese viewers of all religions and ethnicities, such as respect for the elderly and filial duty. These approachable films humanize and perhaps even universalize Hui traditions. Religious practice is depicted as a way of life. Islamic norms are “ethical guidelines through which Muslims hone pious dispositions in order to inhabit this world meaningfully.” And Islamic tradition connects Hui individuals and families within a warm and peaceful community.

**REGULATION, CENSORSHIP, AND THE DECLINE OF THE HUI MICROFILM**

The production of Hui microfilms dropped significantly after 2016. There are three main reasons for this. The first is the inability of the microfilm infrastructure to develop strategies that would allow independent, non-branded microfilms to turn a profit. Online video sites have inspired many amateur filmmakers to create and share their works, thanks to low entry fees and the ability to reach a vast internet audience. Nevertheless, most independent creators fail to make a profit online and “have no choice but to sadly bow out of a cruel and tumultuous market.” Shared advertising revenues and viewer subscriptions are the main sources of income on video streaming websites. As Yu Xing, the CEO of Dashitang Media, a Nanjing-based production house specializing in creating streamed content, states, “We can only expect to break even if we invest more than 200,000 yuan [USD 30,000] in a project and have more than ten million viewers and one or two advertisers. Online filmmaking is mostly for the sake of brand promotion now.”

For young independent filmmakers, that amount of money is almost impossible to raise. It is common to spend one to two years raising money and putting together a crew in order to produce a high-quality microfilm. Bai Yong’s *Shaonian* took more than three years to complete. In 2010, he obtained permission to adapt the novel of the same title; he began production in July 2011; and he finished postproduction in February 2013. Bai worked various jobs to support himself while assembling the film’s budget.


59. Quoted in Dong.
All the characters in the film were played by his family members, friends, and friends of friends.60 Using amateur actors not only lowered production costs; it gave Shaonian a realistic feel. For high-quality creative microfilms like Shaonian to survive through online distribution, however, online platforms need to develop a financial structure that shares revenue with independent creators. In the past five years, video website companies have increased the earning potential for online filmmakers, but the system still favors branded filmmaking and well-established professional production companies over independent creators of artistic microfilms.61

The second reason for the decline of Hui microfilm production is tightened regulation of online content. Digital media, and the internet in particular, have been credited with providing an alternative to the state-controlled mediascape, functioning as a democratic cultural platform for public debates and grassroots creativity.62 When online video sharing platforms, such as Youku and Tudou, emerged around 2005, modeling themselves after YouTube, they immediately attracted amateur creators sharing original videos. Some of these works were socially and politically controversial, generating huge online followings and public discussions.63 However, the popularity of online videos soon drew the attention of the state. The government ordered a large-scale crackdown on online video streaming sites in 2008.64

Recognizing the rapid spread of wei dianying since 2010, the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) issued regulations in 2012 to establish entry criteria for microfilms and online dramas. This was followed by a supplementary notice two years later further tightening the content review process.65 Regulations now require video sharing websites to review the content before distributing a microfilm and to verify the identity of content creators. Only filmmakers using authenticated names and ID information can apply for online streaming of their microfilms. In addition, the state has co-opted digital entrepreneurs, “a longstanding strategy of the

63. Examples include Yige mantou yinfa de xue’an (The bloody case that started from a steamed bun, 2007) and Wangyin zhanzheng (The war of internet addiction, 2010).
party-state, which has proved to be largely successful, mainly because of its shared interest in promoting economic growth and private entrepreneurs’ stake in preserving the political system that has allowed it to prosper.” As a result, the large video sharing companies have adopted self-regulation to filter out material that might raise red flags.

There is a third reason for the decline of huizi wei dianying. The past five years have seen the CCP place more restrictions on, and display greater hostility toward, the public observance of Islamic practices and traditions. Beginning in 2018, there has been a state-led, top-down rectification campaign to “not only Sinicize religion but also diminish the public presence of religion, especially foreign-originated ones such as Christianity and Islam, in many different sectors of society and regions of the country.” The tighter regulation of Islamic practices has largely been attributed to the ongoing conflict between Uyghur Muslims and the government in Xinjiang, an autonomous region in the northwest of China. The Uyghurs face harsh religious restrictions and repression, since Chinese authorities associate the group with separatism and terrorism. By contrast, the Hui have enjoyed relatively greater freedom to practice their religion. However, in response to accelerated violent confrontations in Xinjiang, which the government has blamed on Islamic extremists, restrictions have been extended to neighboring regions with large Hui populations. In this political climate, Hui Muslim identity has become a more sensitive issue.

Recently, the removal and obscuring of Muslim references was obvious on Shan hai qing (Minning Town, Daylight Entertainment), one of the top-rated Chinese television dramas of 2021. The twenty-three-episode serial is set in the Xihaigu region (the same setting for the Xihaigu trilogy, Maiyan de qinshi, and Jinnian kaichun) and follows the tribulations of villagers who were relocated in the 1990s as part of the government’s poverty alleviation initiative. Xihaigu has the highest concentration of Hui Muslims in China, but the television serial makes no reference to Hui culture, with the possible exception that dinner scenes do not include pork dishes. This absence of Hui culture has been discussed in online forums. While a small number of commenters agree with the imposed restrictions, the majority of viewers (mostly Han) ridicule them, saying that the show is “not about ethnicity.” This argument reaffirms Han ethnocentrism, with its insistence that identity does not play a role in popular entertainment, even when a show’s narrative significantly impacts a particular ethnic group.

67. Cao, Chinese Religions, 3.
68. Some of the Uyghur attackers in the Kunming station knife incident of 2014, which killed thirty-one civilians, were found to have spent time in Shadian, a Hui-populated town, before the attack. After this incident official policy toward Shadian and other Hui-concentrated regions changed swiftly. See Yusupov, “Ban on Alcohol,” 57–73.
69. Out of a total population of 1.5 million, two-thirds are Hui. For more information on the migration program, see Fan Song, “Strategies for the ‘Aid-the-Poor’ Migration Program in Ningxia Autonomous Region,” Human Geography 15, no. 5 (2000): 47–51.
70. See the forum at Douban, accessed February 20, 2024, https://www.douban.com/group/topic/212179927/?_i=8755625zsIPGEB.
Shan hai qing has been praised by the government for its expression of zheng nengliang (positive energy), a term President Xi Jinping uses to call for “socialist art and literature” online and offline. At a Chinese Communist Party forum on arts and culture in 2014, President Xi stated that cultural creation should brim with zheng nengliang, with “positive and uplifting content and attitudes as opposed to critical and negative ones.” Since then, “positive energy” has become an important concept in news and official discourse and has impacted digital platforms as well. The few Hui microfilms made after 2016 reflect this.

Maiyan de qinshi 3 (Maiyan’s wedding 3, Wu Jinman, 2019) provides a good example. It follows Maiyan’s father-in-law, who is put in a hospital for a stomachache caused by overeating. He keeps refusing treatment because of his apprehension that he is going to die, resulting in a number of comic scenarios. In the end, the medical staff assures him that new medical technology has improved significantly and that he is in good hands. He accepts the operation, which, unsurprisingly, is successful. The microfilm advocates “positive energy” by showcasing advanced medical technology and highlighting the devotion of the hospital staff to patients. Regrettably, scenes that made the original Maiyan de qinshi culturally rich, like the scenes of food preparation for the Eid al-Fitr festival and the overheard call for prayer, are nowhere to be found. The sequel makes no reference to Muslim culture or tradition. Maiyan de qinshi 3 and other huizu wei dianying made after 2016 conform to the mainstream media tradition of Muslim erasure.

CONCLUSION: AN UNFINISHED JOURNEY
Despite these obstacles, the journey that began with the making of the Xihaigu trilogy continues. Sayyid has been working on a documentary series that focuses on the history of the Hui community along the Grand Canal (da yunhe). Ma Yulong has experimented with using branded microfilms to explore Hui subjects. For instance, Wan shouji de nüren (The woman who plays with cell phones) is a five-minute microfilm directed by Ma and written by Bai Yong. It won Best New Director and Best Public Service Microfilm at the 2019 Golden Lion Awards, China’s largest festival for branded microfilms. This microfilm tells the story of Ma Huijuan, a Hui peasant woman who began sharing her writings via her cell phone and later became a published

73. Zhao, “Professionalization of Amateur Production,” 5452.
74. Liu Mengyan, “Jilupian Huiwang Yunhe zai jing juxing kaiji yishi, Zhanxian yunhe liang’an huizu muslimin shenghuo” [The opening ceremony of the documentary Huiwang Yunhe was held in Beijing to show the life of Hui Muslims on both sides of the canal], China Daily, April 11, 2016, https://china.chinadaily.com.cn/2016-04/11 /content_24428285.htm.
Finally, Bai Yong is now in postproduction on his first feature-length film, which is set in Weizhou and tells a story unique to the Hui community.75

For Sayyid, the huizu wei dianying has encouraged Hui filmmakers to collaborate with filmmakers from other ethnic minorities who face similar obstacles as well as with Han filmmakers who genuinely support the cause of the minority groups. Sayyid worked with Wang Xuebo, a Han filmmaker, on Qingshui li de daozi in 2007. Nearly ten years later, Wang enlisted Zhang Meng, a Hui filmmaker, and Pema Tseden, a famed Tibetan filmmaker, as executive producers to help turn Qingshui li de daozi into a theatrical feature. Zhang, who directed the 2010 award-winning film Gang de qin (The Piano in a Factory), provided financial support for Wang, and Pema Tseden mentored him through different stages of the film’s creative process. Sayyid served as a consultant.76 This cross-ethnic collaboration proved fruitful. Qingshui li de daozi (Knife in the Clear Water, 2016) won the New Currents Award at the Busan International Film Festival and many other international awards. Soon after, it was released theatrically in China and distributed on video streaming platforms.

The success of Qingshui li de daozi, both as a microfilm and as a feature-length film, points the way to a more tangible space where filmmakers of different ethnicities can create an alternative to the mainstream and Han-ethnocentric media. Through a cross-ethnic alliance, isolated minority voices can converge to form a more empowered minority discourse. The ongoing efforts of Hui filmmakers to explore an alternative to official discourses on Hui Muslims—to at last articulate their silenced voices—may move them closer to a time when the question Should I put on my taqiyah or hijab? no longer needs to be asked, even when they stand up before a Han-dominated public audience.

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75. Sayyid, interview. Sayyid provided this information and shared with me some scenes from Bál’s film, with a temporary title “Hage de Xiaotian” (So long summer). The film foregrounds the Hui experience and the Hui culture and tradition.

76. Xiao, “Huizu wei dianying.”