

Field and Practice

The Sinicisation of Islam in China – Field trip to Yunnan, China (March 2025 – April 2025)

Vivien Markert: Final Report DGA-Small-Grants-Programm

Introduction

At the 2016 National Conference on Religious Work, Xi Jinping declared that religions in China should “sinicise” (*Zhongguohua* 中国化) and adapt to traditional Chinese culture and socialism. Xi further stressed the importance of religious work for China’s national security. The shift in religious policy has been implemented most severely in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), where it forms part of a wider, security-driven campaign against Uyghurs and other predominantly Turkic Muslim groups. This has materialised not only in the mass internment of these groups but also in the broader repression of religious and cultural practices, which scholars have described as “cultural genocide” (Alpermann 2022). This development increasingly affects other Muslim groups in China, such as the Hui ethnic minority, who were previously considered highly assimilated and politically loyal to the Chinese Party-state. Looking at Hui Muslim communities, several scholars have analysed the Sinicisation of Islam through case studies of mosque demolitions, shifting urban policy, and the curbing of religious expressions (Malzer 2019; Stroup 2019; Brown and O’Brien 2020; Ridgeon 2020; Yusupov 2024; Stroup and Theaker 2025). This thesis aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the Sinicisation of Islam by examining how Hui Muslim identity is constructed and securitised in contemporary Sinicisation discourses and practices. The study investigates three interrelated levels: the national discourse on Sinicisation, subnational implementation with Yunnan as a case study, and the transnational impact on the Hui diaspora with Cairo as a case study. It further examines how Hui communities engage with and resist the Sinicisation of Islam.

This report presents findings from fieldwork conducted in Yunnan in March and April 2025 as part of the dissertation project titled *The Securitisation of Hui Muslim Identity in Contemporary China: Sinicisation Discourses and Practices*. The research was supported by the DGA Small Grants Programme.

Framework

The thesis draws on Critical Security Studies (CSS) and methodologically applies a remote ethnography approach. Remote ethnography is particularly well-suited to authoritarian contexts, where access to the field is often severely restricted (Remote Ethnography XUAR, n.d.). The approach aims to establish a comprehensive picture despite these constraints by triangulating various methods and data. For this study, government documents, newspaper reports, academic texts, social media content, and satellite imagery were collected and examined. The data corpus is complemented by on-the-ground fieldwork, including qualitative interviews and participant observations. By triangulating these sources, the analysis moves beyond the state-centred perspective typically found in security studies and emphasises the lived experiences of Hui Muslims.

The first two field trips for my dissertation in 2023 and 2024¹ led me to Cairo, Egypt, where I conducted interviews with the Hui diaspora. The diaspora provides an increasingly important access point for understanding sensitive topics in China, and the interviews provided important contextualisation for my fieldwork observations in Yunnan. Later in 2024, I conducted a brief two-week exploratory trip to Yunnan and visited places where some of my interlocutors from Cairo migrated from. Islam has always been a sensitive research topic in China. Although conducting fieldwork in Yunnan is by no means as sensitive as in Xinjiang, research into Islam has been increasingly difficult, particularly since the start of the Sinicisation campaign and the media attention that the demolition of mosques attracted internationally. After consulting with my supervisors and other academics researching Islam in China, as well as my interview partners in Cairo, I planned a research trip that focused primarily on participant observation to gain further insights that complement my existing research. I adhered to this approach when conducting the second round of fieldwork in Yunnan in 2025. During my approximately four-week stay, I visited both rural and urban areas around Kunming, Dali, Lijiang, and Yuxi. One of the main interests that I focus on in this report is the transformation of mosque space and how mosques constitute central sites of Sinicisation discourses and practices. For this purpose, I examined architectural and aesthetic changes, propaganda, and surveillance practices to understand how mosques become places of identity construction and securitisation.

Field observations: The Mosque as a Site of Sinicisation

Two nationwide Sinicisation campaigns focus on the mosque, both of which started in 2018: the “mosque rectification” (*qingzhensi zhenggai* 清真寺整改) and the “four enterings” (*sijin* 四进). As part of the “rectification” campaign, mosques that are

1 My trips to Cairo in 2024 and to Yunnan in 2025 were generously funded by the DGA-Small-Grants-Programme. I would therefore like to express my sincere gratitude to the DGA, as both trips would not have been possible otherwise.

considered “Arab style” are demolished and rebuilt in what is deemed “Chinese style”. The “four enterings” campaign further mandates the incorporation of the following:

1. the national flag and anthem,
2. the constitution, laws, and regulations,
3. core socialist values,
4. traditional Chinese culture.

Some local Islamic Associations (IA) at the provincial level, including the Yunnan IA, introduced a fifth aspect, turning selected mosques into “ethnic unity and demonstration zones” (*minzu tuanjie shifan qu* 民族团结示范区).

The analysis shows that while both campaigns were implemented nationwide, their local outcomes varied considerably, revealing the ambiguity of what a mosque in “Chinese style” is actually supposed to look like. What constitutes traditional Chinese culture is defined by drawing boundaries against what appears “foreign” and therefore, conversely, not Chinese.

Architectural and aesthetic choices reflect both the financial resources available and the negotiations between local governments and mosque committees. The renovations of the Najiaying Mosque in Yuxi, Tonghai County, one of Yunnan’s largest and most prominent mosques, and the Wenming Mosque in Yuxi, Eshan County, exemplify this (see Figure 1). The dome and minarets of the Najiaying Mosque were replaced with a wooden, hexagonal, multi-tiered roof, which is typically associated with traditional Chinese buildings. However, the original structure of the minarets and dome, as well as the arch-shaped windows, were retained. Although the crescent moon on top of the dome was removed, the Arabic script that reads a verse from the Qur’an was also retained. The political slogan “listen to the Party, be grateful to the Party, follow the Party” (*ting dang hua, gan dang en, gen dang zou* 听党话、感党恩、跟党走) is prominently featured in a propaganda installation in front of the mosque. In comparison, the Wenming Mosque has been “rectified” in a very different manner: the entrance of the mosque has lost its former dome-shaped roof, crescent moon on the top, and arched windows.² The roof is now flattened and showcases a clock on top. From the outside, no Islamic symbols are visible, and the building remains identifiable as a mosque only through the Chinese inscription that reads “Wenming mosque” (*wenming qingzhensi* 文明清真寺).

2 Satellite and social media imagery were used to determine the mosques’ previous appearances.



Figure 1: Najiaying mosque (left) and Wenming mosque (right), Yuxi, April 2025, photos by author.

Not only does the architectural style vary across different locations, but there are also local variations in the removal of Islamic symbols. In some areas, mosques were able to retain a small crescent moon or Arabic script, while in other areas, local authorities mandated that all symbols be removed.



Figure 2: Yazitang Mosque, Zhaotong, September 2024, photo by author.

Despite these local variations and the ambiguity of “Chineseness”, the mosques are clearly marked as sites of national territory. The national flag is typically placed in a central position in front of mosques (see Figure 2). While mosques used to be easily identifiable for Muslims through their minarets, this Islamic symbol has now been largely replaced by a symbol that territorialises the site of the mosque. Security cameras placed at the entrances or in the courtyards are meant to ensure adherence to the new regulations, and breaking the law leads to high financial penalties.

While all mosques display posters about the most important religious regulations, at some sites, posters specifically address terrorism prevention (see Figure 3). They are reflective of the construction of Islam as a potential security threat in the context of religious extremism and terrorism. The posters proclaim what type of terrorist attacks exist, how to react in case of an attack, and encourage the public to report any incidents that might be related to violent terrorist crimes. The reward for reporting ranges from 5,000 RMB to 200,000 RMB.



Figure 3: Propaganda poster, mosque in Weishan County, March 2025, photo by author.

My field observations also show the various ways in which Hui Muslims engage with Sinicisation discourses and practices. While some mosque committees actively showcase compliance with the campaign by displaying posters and public exhibitions of the renovation of mosque, others engage in different forms of resistance. Besides public protests that have been reported in the media, this includes more subtle forms of contesting Sinicisation, such as concealing or repurposing propaganda installations or safekeeping religious symbols after their removal in non-public spaces. In comparison to open protests, these everyday forms of resistance highlight how Hui communities preserve religious boundaries despite ongoing state repression.

Conclusion

Overall, the field observations highlight that the mosque has become a central site in the Sinicisation of Islam. They further show how official discourses materialise in everyday security practices: the use of modern surveillance techniques, the incentivisation of reporting supposed suspicious behaviour, and the symbolic territorialisation of religious space through the national flag and propaganda. Since

field access in Yunnan was largely restricted to participant observation, these findings were triangulated with interviews conducted among the Hui diaspora in Cairo and with other qualitative data, which provided important contextualisation. Taken together, the fieldwork offers insight into how the discursive securitisation of Islam is reproduced in practice and shapes the everyday lived experiences of Hui Muslim communities.

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