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SPECIAL ISSUE

Recognition through Numbers: Muslim Population Numbers and the Hui in Modern China

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Islam and Muslims have been in China for over a millennium; however, it was during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that their demographic situation came under various kinds of scrutiny. Previous scholarship has focused on the reconstruction of "correct" statistics of the Muslim population in modern China. This paper, inspired by the sociology of quantification, aims at an investigation into the "making" and "doing" of Muslim population numbers in late-Qing and Republican China. It presents case studies regarding how the Muslim demographic numbers were produced, in which socio-political contexts they emerged, and what purposes and meanings they imply for those who produced them. The article will focus on the relations between the Muslim population numbers and the identity construction of the Hui Muslims in the context of China's transition into a modern nation-state. Particular attention will be given to the production and circulation of the number of 50 million.

伊斯蘭教及穆斯林在中國的歷史淵源可追溯至千年以上，然而，直至 19 世紀末 20 世紀初，穆斯林人口狀況才開始受到各方關注並得以系統研究。既往研究多聚焦於重構中國近現代史中穆斯林人口的"正確"統計數據。本文則從計量社會學（sociology of quantification）的理論出發，探討清末與民國時期穆斯林人口數據的"建構"與"運作"機制。通過案例研究，本文分析穆斯林人口數據的生成過程、其背後的社會歷史背景，以及這些數據對其生產者的實際意義與功能。本研究特別關注穆斯林人口數據與回族穆斯林身份建構之間的關係，並將其置於中國傳統社會向現代民族國家轉型的宏觀歷史背景中加以考察。此外，本文著重討論了"五千萬"這一關鍵數字的形成及其社會傳播機制。

Keywords: Muslim population; Republic of China, the Hui nation

關鍵詞： 穆斯林人口，中華民國，回族

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1 Introduction

On 23 August 2004, the Lifa Yuan 立法院 (Legislative Yuan) of the Republic of China (Taiwan) announced that the "provision of Article 135 ... of the Constitution shall cease to apply" (憲法第 ..... 一百三十五條之規定，停止適用).[1] The Article in question was promulgated in 1947 when the Guomindang 國民黨 (Nationalist Party, hereafter GMD) was still based in mainland China. It stipulated that "for those living in Inner China (*neidi* 內地)[2] with special living habits, the number and the election of their members in the National Assembly shall be stipulated by law" (內地生活習慣特殊之國民代表及選舉，其辦法以法律定之). According to the *Guomin dahui daibiao xuanju bamian fa shixing tiaoli* 國民大會代表選舉罷免法施行條例 (Implementation regulations for the election and recall of the members of the National Assembly), the so-called citizens "with special living habits" referred to the "Hui people living in various places" (*juzhu gedi zhi Huimin* 居住各地之回民).[3] As will be shown later, one of the reasons why these people were recognised by state law as a collective group had something to do with the belief that they had a huge population.[4] The present paper is about these people, the Hui 回, or Chinese-speaking Muslims,[5] and the ways in which they made use of their population numbers so as to be recognised as a collective group of people during the late-Qing and Republican periods (up to 1949).

Previous scholarship has shown that, alongside the introduction of the concept of *minzu* 民族 (variously translated as nation, nationality, race, ethnicity, etc.) in the late-Qing and Republican periods, come various Chinese nation-state building projects. These projects have also affected Muslims in China, especially the Hui, who constantly tried to negotiate their identities and positions between the Islamic *jiao* 教 (religion) and the Chinese *guo* 國 (state).[6]

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[1] See *Lifa jilu* 立法記錄 (legislation records) of the Legislative Yuan published on 23 August 2004, also available on the website of the Legislative Yuan, https://lis.ly.gov.tw/lglawc/lglawkm?@@423861377 (2 December 2022).

[2] The term *neidi* has several English translations, including inland, the interior, China proper, mainland, etc., depending on the context. Here it represents the territory of present-day China, excluding Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang, Tibet, and Qinghai.

[3] See the website of the Legislative Yuan. Available at https://lis.ly.gov.tw/lglawc/lawsingle?06206C013C00C6E6206C003790C607026D003D8CC606A06C843C0 (2 December 2022).

[4] For the legal-political context of the law in question, see Eroglu Sager 2021, 825–858.

[5] It has to be pointed out that the term Hui as perceived in late Qing and republican China has multiple meanings, referring to all Muslims as a religious group, various ethnic Muslim groups in today's Xinjiang, or to Islam, etc. This issue will be discussed again in the following text.

[6] The term Hui has encompassed multiple meanings that have shifted over time and among different groups. To a large extent, the term Hui, recognised as an ethno-national group by the Chinese Communist Party in its early period (the Hui-hui nation, 回回民族) and later as an officially designated ethno-religious minority group by the Chinese government since the 1950s (Hui nationality/ethnicity, Huizu 回族), is closely intertwined with the concept of Muslim as a religious identity in contemporary China. For instance, the National Religious Affairs Administration (*Guojia Zongjiao Shiwuju* 國家宗教事務局) of China identifies ten ethnic minority groups, including the Huizu, as "traditionally, in principle, believers in Islam" (傳統上基本信仰伊斯蘭教). During Republican times, the term Hui was often used broadly to refer to all Muslims in China, including those in Xinjiang—though not necessarily the Uyghurs. This was also a time when Muslims in China, particularly Chinese-speaking Muslims, engaged actively in redefining their identity within the framework of a Hui/Muslim nation (*minzu*) in

Generally, two main opinions existed among the Hui: some regarded Muslims in China, together with those in other parts of the world, as one nation (*min* 民 or *minzu* 民族); some denied the nationhood of Muslims in China and considered them as a group of Han Chinese who believed in Islam.[7] Whatever position they took, they saw themselves, the Hui, as a collective of people, distinct from the Han Chinese. One common reference or strategy they adopted in constructing their collectiveness was an overstatement of the number of their people whenever an estimation of the Hui population was needed.[8] The number of "50 million" appears particularly ubiquitous.

During the Republican period (1912–1949), Muslims from diverse backgrounds contributed to our knowledge of the issue in question. Among those participating in the construction of a collective identity of the Hui were Muslim and non-Muslim scholars associated with different research organisations, Islamic clerics, Sufi followers, members of various Muslim associations, teachers and students from new Islamic educational institutions, editors of prominent journals and magazines produced by Muslims, etc. By tracing the biographies, that is, the emergence and dissemination, of the numbers for the Muslim population in nineteenth- and twentieth-century China, this article will explore why and how demographic numbers of a minority group were constructed, used, and became relevant for different groups with different aims, especially in relation to the Hui as a nation (*minzu*) of 50 million. As will be shown later in this article, diverse Muslim population estimates existed in modern Chinese history among both Chinese and foreigners, Muslims and non-Muslims, ranging from a couple of millions to over 100 million. However, it seems that for many, if not all, of them, what mattered was not the accuracy of the number but the agency of a number to legitimise their agenda, be it religious, social, or political. Their use of population numbers offers an example of the making of a group of people which took place, among other means, through the description of numerical data. In other words, the counting of the Muslim population in China presupposes a shared identity of Muslims, and the result of the counting will in turn contribute to the establishment and reinforcement of a collective identity of Muslims.[9] To this end, the paper will be based primarily on documents from the late-Qing to the Republican periods, including reports of missionaries, interviews conducted by Arab newspapers with Chinese Muslims, talks delivered by Muslim elites in and outside China, as

response to the sociopolitical transformations of Chinese society. In this article, the terms Hui, Hui Muslims, and Chinese Muslims are used interchangeably to denote Chinese-speaking Muslims, unless otherwise specified. For discussions on the identity negotiation of the Hui, see Gladney 1991 and Li 2021.

[7] For a discussion of the Hui Muslims' nationhood, see Li 2021, 115–138.

[8] Based on the data provided by the last three Chinese national population censuses conducted in the twenty-first century, the combined demographic numbers of the ten ethnic groups officially recognised as predominantly Muslim are as follows: 20,320,580 in 2000, 23,142,104 in 2010, and 25,951,094 in 2020. It is important to note that China's national censuses do not record data based on religious identity. Instead, these figures pertain to ethnic groups traditionally associated with Islam, namely the Hui, Uyghur, Kazakh, Dongxiang, Kirgiz, Salar, Tajik, Baoan, Uzbek, and Tatar. For detailed information on these censuses, refer to the official website of the National Bureau of Statistics of China at www.stats.gov.cn/.

[9] For a study on national census and minority groups, see Petersen 1987, 187–234.

well as articles published in the newspapers, magazines, periodicals, and other forms of publications produced by Muslims in China.

Apart from the introduction and some concluding remarks, the paper will be organised in three sections. First, I will present a contextualised analysis of various population numbers of Muslims in China, starting from those offered by missionaries during the late Qing to a variety of numbers provided by Muslims throughout China in the first half of the twentieth century. It offers concrete case studies showing a wide range of occasions where numbers were used as a reference point to legitimise differing projects. The contextualisation of various population numbers of Muslims in China shows how numbers are embedded in, and intertwined with, diverse domains, especially in relation to the construction of modern China as a nation-state and its impacts on the identification of the Hui Muslims. The article aims to prove that numbers not only "represent" the things they measure, but indeed, in the case of Muslims in modern China, also "produce" things they aim to measure. Through the efforts made to count Muslims, new identity categories will be created. This will be detailed in section three of the article, which focuses on the major attempts of Muslims in China to search for the correct number of their population. The article shows how these numbers were employed for the construction of a unified Muslim identity, and it highlights, in section four, the creation of a fictive, but widely shared, number of 50 million, and examines the effect this number, a cipher for the Muslim population, may have had upon the self-perception of the Muslims.

2 Slippery Numbers: Estimations of Muslim Demography in Modern China

2.1 Problematising Islam in China: Initial Attempts of Missionaries

Before the first national census conducted by the Manchu Qing government in the first decade of the twentieth century,[10] several attempts had been made to come to grips with the number of Muslims in China. In this regard, Western missionaries were among the first to dig into the issue in question. However, their interests in the population of Muslims in China were closely related to their missionary work, although with differing motivations.

One of the members of the Russian Orthodox Mission to China, Vasily Pavlovich Vasilyev (1818–1900), who provided "the earliest Russian contribution on Chinese Muslims" (Loewenthal 1960, 1) was concerned about the possibility of "whether China is ever to become a

[10] Regarding the Chinese population during the Qing period, see Ho 1959, 65–100, Cao 2001, and Croddy 2022.

Muslim state" (Vasil'ev 1960, 4). Having spent ten years in China,[11] Vasilyev delivered a speech in 1867 at the University of St. Petersburg, in which he reported on the situation of Muslims in China. While he claimed to have "a very clear idea about the distribution of Muslims in China", he was not able to come up with any specific number regarding the actual population of Muslims. His final conclusions incorporated comments such as "the Muslim population there must be very considerable," "the number of Muslims there is not small," or "the followers of the Prophet... are quite numerous" (Vasil'ev 1960, 8–11).

Vasilyev's lack of reliable and solid sources, hence the absence of specific demographic figures, besides being a general problem in late-Qing China, may also have resulted from the fact that he did not travel much in China but spent the entire ten years in Beijing. However, this did not stop him from problematising China's growing Muslim population, nor diminish his concerns about the possibility of "whether China is ever to become a Muslim state". The answer to that question "would be of world-wide importance", in that if China were to become a Muslim state "it would alter all the political relations of the countries of the old world." This, for Vasilyev, would lead to the unwanted expansion of the Muslim world, which would "once more threaten Christianity" (Vasil'ev 1960, 5). In that case, the "peaceful activities of the Chinese nation", Vasil'ev (1960, 5) believed, would be transformed "into a heavy yoke... under the influence of an energetic and fanatical [Muslim] policy" (Vasil'ev 1960, 5). What is more, for Vasilyev, a Muslim state was inherently incompatible with ideas that originated in the Occident, "ideas which have triumphed over the spiritless speculations of the Orient" (Vasil'ev 1960, 5). For Vasilyev, Muslims were not only potential threats to Christianity but also to the Chinese regime. He was surprised that "the conversion of millions of Chinese to Islam went unnoticed" in Chinese texts even if they included such detailed observations as the height and width of each city wall (Vasil'ev 1960, 6). He thought this problematic, for the lack of attention to the expanding Muslim people reminded him of "the destiny of all great cataclysms" (Vasil'ev 1960, 5).

As a Russian Orthodox missionary, Vasilyev believed that the Chinese were not serious religious believers. Religion for them was less about faith but more about daily needs. If China were to become a Muslim country, the Muslim conquerors would "alter the spirit of the country" (Vasil'ev 1960, 28), which, presumably, would render it more difficult for missionaries to convert the Chinese to Christians.

This type of narrative that treats Muslims in China as a "problem" is perhaps most explicit in the pioneering and path-breaking book authored by the British Protestant Christian missionary, Marshall Broomhall (1866–1937). One of the main problems Broomhall had in mind was the issue of Muslim population in China. He dedicated an entire chapter to the issue of the "Mohammedan population in China". What distinguishes Broomhall's work

[11] For his activities in China, see Zhao 2007.

from that of others who endeavoured to figure out the "fact" of Muslim population in China is perhaps the methodology that he applied.

Broomhall sent more than eight hundred questionnaires to his friends, other missionaries, commissioners of Customs, etc., in almost all parts of China. This made it possible for him to work out a "careful estimate" of the figures for the Muslim population of China. The territory Broomhall covered included the 18 provinces in China proper (*Handi shiba sheng* 漢地十八省) plus Manchuria, Xinjiang, and Mongolia. His informants were asked to provide, as accurately as possible, an estimate of the local Muslim population in its minimum as well as maximum.

Based on his research, Broomhall concluded that "the Moslem population of the Chinese Empire lies somewhere between the minimum and the maximum figures of 5,000,000 and 10,000,000" (Broomhall 1910, 216). Broomhall was aware of the methodological limitations of his estimate and admitted that he "only hopes to throw a little more light upon what will still remain a debatable issue," and that all he had achieved was just "a careful estimate based upon such data as is obtainable" (Broomhall 1910, 193). Nevertheless, his research became widely cited not only by other missionaries interested in Islam and Muslims in China[12] but also by Chinese scholars.[13]

Broomhall distinguished himself from Vasilyev not only in terms of the methodology he applied but also with regard to the significance it had for the success of Western missionary work. Compared with the non-Muslim Chinese, some missionaries found more similarities with Muslims in China, especially in terms of each other's religious tradition: a God in heaven, notions of sin and righteousness, rituals and the familiarity of Biblical/Quranic stories. In Vasilyev's case, the "problem" of Muslims in China lay in the incompatibility of Islam with Western civilisation characterised by Christianity. In Broomhall's case, even though Muslims in China might rightfully "consider themselves more enlightened than those [Chinese] around them" ("The Moslem Problem in China" 1913, 1), they were still "problematic" and more missionary work should have been devoted to them. Broomhall pointed out at the end of his chapter that:

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[12] In 1921, a decade after Marshall Broomhall's pioneering book on Islam in China, British missionary William Francis Rhodes, based in Yantai 烟臺, Shandong 山東 province, undertook a similar survey. Rhodes described his research as being based on "the best data possible under the existing limitations." His sources included: (1) figures from earlier investigations, (2) more recent data, (3) responses to questionnaires distributed to missionaries, foreign officials, and carefully chosen Chinese scholars familiar with Muslim communities, and (4) statistics provided by cooperative Muslim leaders. Rhodes also offered reflections on factors that may have impeded the survey's accuracy. He identified three primary challenges: (1) the limited personnel available in mission stations across China, (2) the restricted geographical scope of mission work in regions with significant Muslim populations, and (3) political instability in certain areas, which made detailed investigations unfeasible. Despite these limitations, Rhodes's findings aligned closely with those of Broomhall, estimating the Muslim population in China at approximately 10 million. For further details, see Rhodes 1921, 53–68.

[13] One year later, Broomhall's chapter was republished in the first issue of the journal, *The Moslem World*, founded in 1911 by Samuel Marinus Zwemer (1867–1952) with the Christian Church in Egypt. For Zwemer and *The Moslem World*, see Tuoheti 2021, 61–76.

> The Moslem population of China is certainly equal to the entire population of Algeria, or Scotland or Ireland; that it is in all probability fully equal to that of Morocco, and possibly not less than the total population of Egypt or Persia.... It may, therefore, be said that within China there is a special people equal in number to the population of any of China's dependencies, for whom practically nothing is being done, and whose presence hitherto has been almost ignored. (Broomhall 1910, 216–217)

Missionaries were among the earliest to conduct research aimed at estimating the Muslim population in modern China. Their efforts revealed the relevance of Muslim population to missionary work. Although both missionaries here regarded Muslims in China as a "problem" that needed to be tackled for the sake of their missionary work, they apparently did not find it a "problem" to identify the Muslim population in the first place, nor did they pay any attention to the self-perception of Muslims in China. However, the fact that they constantly referred to local Muslims as sources for their investigation indicated that a certain self-perception as a collective religious group did exist among Muslims in China. As Espeland and Stevens (2008, 406) have pointed out, the "purposes and meanings of numbers change as they travel across time and social space." Like the missionaries who were surprised at the unnoticed large population of Muslims in China, Muslims' own discussions regarding their demographic situations also highlighted their large number of populations, oftentimes with higher numbers than those estimated by the missionaries, but their concerns were largely related to the discussions around their collective identity.

2.2 Demographic Figures among (Muslim) Chinese

Muslims were already referred to as sources in missionaries' reports. For instance, Broomhall in his chapter mentioned a "Chinese Moslem official of Yunnan", Seyyid Sulayman, and a "Chinese Moslem scholar", Abd ur Rahman. Both of them reported the demographic situation of Muslims in China. Sulayman gave a number of 70 million in 1894, and Rahman gave a number of "one-twelfth of the whole population, or 34,000,000" (Broomhall 1910, 194).

Seyyid Sulayman provided the number when he was interviewed in Cairo by a local newspaper. According to the interview,[14] he travelled from China to the Muslim world, studied Turkish and Persian, and also knew Arabic. When he was in Turkey, Sulayman visited Jamal

[14] The interview was initially published in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Mu'ayyad* (The supporter), one of the influential dailies in Egypt from 1889 to 1900. It was then republished in the Lebanese biweekly periodical, *Thamarat al-Funun* (Fruit of the arts), in 1894. For the interviews, see *Thamarat al-Funun* 20, no. 968–977 (1894). For the information regarding Sulayman, see (ḍayfu ṣīnīyu 1894, 3). A full-text digital copy of the periodical from 1875 to 1908 is available at the American University in Beirut (AUB) Libraries. The author would like to thank Ms. Nabila Shehabeddine at the AUB, who kindly provided access to these sources.

al-Din al-Afghani (1838/1839–1897), a prominent Muslim legal scholar and Islamic reformer. It was during this encounter that a journalist, who was also paying a visit to Afghani, conducted an interview with Sulayman. Sulayman held that there were in total 400 to 450 million people in China, the then popular estimation of the Chinese population.[15] As far as the population of Muslims was concerned, he maintained that China had a population of 70 million Muslims, out of which over 12 million lived in Yunnan (ʿal-muslimūn fī ʿal-ṣīn 1894).

The Muslim scholar Abd ur Rahman whom Broomhall mentioned was probably the well-known imam Wang Kuan 王寬 (1848–1919), also known as Wang Haoran 王浩然. Broomhall did not give any details about Rahman in his chapter.[16] However, we know that Wang Kuan's Islamic name (*jingming* 經名) was Abd al-Rahman (Abudu Laheman 阿卜杜拉合曼) (Huang 1982, 13), and that he visited Egypt and Turkey during his Hajj journey from 1906 to 1907.[17] However, differing from Broomhall's account, the Chinese sources gave the following information with regard to Wang Kuan's visit to Turkey:

> Imam Wang Haoran...went to Constantinople [Istanbul], capital of Turkey... At that time, the King of Turkey... was Abdul Hamid... [The King] asked Wang about the total number of the followers of Islam in China. Wang replied that there were 40 or 50 million, or one ninth of the complete population of China.
>
> 王浩然（寬）阿衡……赴土耳其京城君士但丁堡……當時土耳其國皇，便是……阿布頓哈米特……問王氏中國回教教徒總數有多少？王氏答稱有四五千萬，約居全國人口九分之一。(Sun 1939, 15–16).

Although neither the percentage, nor the actual number, found in the Chinese sources are the same as those recorded by Broomhall,[18] they are both much higher than Broomhall's final estimation. This high estimation of the Muslim population in China could also be found among other Hui Muslim elites.

For example, Huang Zhenpan 黃鎮磐 (1873–1942), one of the founding members and secretary of the *Liudong Qingzhen Jiaoyuhui* 留東清真教育會 (Islamic educational association in Tokyo, hereafter the Educational Association), who was studying Political Economy at

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[15] Regarding the "400 million Chinese", see Jasper Roctus' article in this issue.

[16] Broomhall mentioned in a footnote that the information he got came from a report published in *Revue du Monde Musulman* in January 1907. However, he did not mention the Arabic sources, though he said Abd ur Rahman gave the figure in his interview in Cairo.

[17] According to Zhang (2013, 5–14), Wang Kuan was making a transit in Hong Kong in October 1906, which was probably still the month of Ramadan. It is likely that Wang paid a short visit to Cairo or Istanbul before he visited Mecca.

[18] Interestingly, during the late Qing, it seems that the number of 30 million was shared by other Muslims in China. For instance, Ding Baochen 丁寶臣 (1874–1914), a student of imam Wang Kuan and founder of one of the earliest newspapers published by Muslims in China, the *Zhengzong aiguo bao* 正宗愛國報 (Newspaper of authentic patriotism), mentioned a similar number. In his 1906 article, Ding (1906) maintained that, "investigating [the number of] the Hui, there are approximately 30 million, almost one thirteenth of the entire population of the country."

Waseda University, maintained that "those of us in China who believe in Islam number over 80 million" (吾中國宗回教者計八千餘萬人) (Huang 1908, 31). Another member and accountant of the Educational Association, Zhao Zhongqi 趙鐘奇 (1878–1970), who was studying at the Imperial Japanese Army Academy, held a similar opinion. He wrote that "today, the number of the (Hui) Muslims who are scattered over the provinces is above 80 million" (今日散處各省之回教，其數在八千萬以上者也).[19] The estimates of Huang and Zhao were much higher than those of the Qing government produced a couple of years later. In 1911, the Qing Ministry of the Interior (Minzheng Bu 民政部) issued national statistics in which they maintained that the population of Muslims was 35.4 million (Yue 1933, 67).

Notably, members of the Educational Association were not primarily concerned with the issue of Muslim population in modern China. They referred to the population number, without providing any sources, as evidence supporting their argument of a modern Islamic revival through educational reform. Studying in Japan and being members of Sun Yat-sen's 孫中山 (1866–1925) Revolutionary Alliance (*Tongmeng hui* 同盟会),[20] these students must have known about the nation-building project of the revolutionaries that aimed at the establishment of a China where all the non-Han Chinese would potentially be excluded.[21] It is, therefore, only natural that these Muslim students rejected the idea of the Hui as an independent race/nation,[22] in order to protect themselves from being marginalised or excluded from the future Republic of China. However, they still tried to establish themselves as a collective group defined in relation to Islam, distinct from the Han Chinese. And an overestimation of their population fitted perfectly into their argument that the Hui Muslims were not an alien race/nation, but a religious group with a large population, and therefore, perhaps more importantly, should not be excluded from the future Han Chinese nation-state that the revolutionaries aimed to establish. Similar strategies that defined the Hui through numerical data could be found in other groups that argued for the nationhood of the Hui. This became explicit with the establishment of the Republic of China, which claimed to be a nation-state constituted by the five races/nations (wuzu gonghe 五族共和).[23]

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[19] See Zhao 1908, 63. It seems that the opinion that China had 80 million Muslims was shared by members of the Association. See also an article by Bao Tingliang 保廷樑 (1874–1947), president of the Association (Bao 1908, 31–40).

[20] Among the 36 Muslim students of the Educational Association in Japan, there were at least fourteen students who were at the time (founding) members of the *Tongmeng hui*. See Li 2022, 217–258.

[21] On Han Chinese nationalism in the late-Qing and Republican periods, see Schneider 2017 and Matten 2012, 63–106. For a detailed discussion regarding the dynamic relations between the Hui Muslims and this Chinese nationalist discourse, see Chen 2018, and Li 2021, 104–140.

[22] Yee Lak Elliot Lee argued that there were two directions in formulating the Hui identity among the Muslim students in Japan: one regarded the Hui as a *minzu* and the other saw the Hui as a religious identity (Lee 2019, 226–263). But it has to be noted that these two directions are not independent from each other; they are rather closely intertwined.

[23] As noted at the beginning of this article, the Chinese term *minzu*, introduced from the Japanese term *minzoku*, encompasses a range of meanings and associations, similar to those expressed by the English terms "race", "people", "nation", "ethnic group", and "nationality". Regarding Sun Yat-sen's conception of *minzu* and its adoption by members of the *Tongmeng hui*, including his Muslim followers in Japan, see Leibold 2004, 173–183, Cieciura 2016, 107–146, and Li 2021, 104–140.

One typical example are the documents and correspondence that Li Qian 李谦 (dates unknown) collected in his *Huibu gongdu* 回部公牘 (Official documents of the Hui region) from 1916 to 1924. Li Qian, also known as Dawud (Dawude 大悟德), was a government officer and Muslim political activist who served as Plenipotentiary Representative of the Hui Region (*Huibu quanquan daibiao* 回部全權代表).[24] His main activity was to lead campaigns, appealing to the Republican government and the legislative institutions to fix a certain quota for the Hui parliamentarians in the National Assembly. According to the *Guohui zuzhi fa* 國會組織法 (Organisation law of the national assembly, hereafter Organisation Law), issued in 1912, quotas for members in the National Assembly were allocated to Mongolia 蒙古 (27 seats), Tibet 西藏 (10 seats), and Qinghai 青海 (3 seats).[25] However, no specific arrangements were made for Muslims, irrespective of their ethnolinguistic diversity, such as those groups now recognised as Hui and Uyghurs. In order to support his initiative, one of the arguments he put forward was the large population of Muslims.

Based on the Organisation Law, which stipulated that one representative would be elected for every 800,000 people, Li Qian (1916, 3) argued that there were 72 million Muslims in the Hui Region, and therefore, he suggested (1916, 3), "in particular, over 70 representatives shall be elected among the [people in the] Hui Region" (回部尤宜選出議員七十餘名). Apparently, in this petition, Li was speaking on behalf of the Muslims in Xinjiang. However, his initiative and strategy received widespread support from Muslims across China. An analysis of the *Huibu gongdu* reveals that supporting letters were sent from almost all corners of China. These included not only major urban centres such as Beijing, Shanghai 上海, and Guangzhou 廣州, and the Muslim-concentrated regions of the northwest such as Shaanxi 陝西, Gansu 甘肅, and Xinjiang, but also from provinces with smaller Muslim populations, such as Anhui 安徽, Zhejiang 浙江, Hebei 河北, Henan 河南, Hubei 湖北, Hunan 湖南, Shandong 山東, Shanxi 山西, Jiangxi 江西, Sichuan 四川, and Yunnan 雲南, among others. This widespread support highlights the remarkable geographical reach and solidarity of the Muslim community in China during this period.

For instance, Ma Yuanchao 馬元超 (1859–1929), great-grandson of Ma Mingxin 馬明心 (1719–1781), founder of the Jahriyya Sufi School (*menhuan* 門宦) in China, claimed that the petition Li Qian led would be beneficial to his 80 million fellow-Muslims (Ma 1924, 137). Muslims from Shanghai participated in Li Qian's campaign by arguing that the number of

[24] Prior to this, Li Qian was appointed representative of the hereditary Muslim prince of Hami 哈密, Shah Maqsud. See David Brophy, "Five Races, One Parliament? Xinhai in Xinjiang and the Problem of Minority Representation in the Chinese Republic," *Inner Asia* 14, no. 2 (2012): 353–358.

[25] For Mongolia, Qinghai, and Tibet, the same seats were allocated in both the *Canyiyuan* 參議院 (Legislative court) and the *Zhongyiyuan* 衆議院 (House of representatives). For parliamentary representation in late-imperial and modern China, see a recent study by Moniz Bandeira (2022, 23–37).

the Muslim population was no less than that of Mongolia, Tibet, and Qinghai, exceeding 90 million (*Shanghai Huimin quanti qingyuan shu*, 144). Furthermore, Muslim representatives from western Henan province argued that the lack of Muslim parliamentarians was unfair to the Hui people, who had a population of 100 million (*yi wanwan* 一萬萬) (*Yuxi Huimin daibiao qingyuan shu*, 161). One hundred million is definitely an exceptionally high estimate, which fitted nicely into the political argument here. However, it was not uncommon then to assume that China had several million Muslims. Even Kang Youwei 康有爲 (1858–1927) wrote in his preface to the *Huibu gongdu* that, "It has been over a thousand years since the Mohammedan religion came to China and their population numbers tens of millions" (穆護[26]之教入中國千餘年人口以千萬計).

This broad support from Muslims across China demonstrates that the campaign led by Li Qian was not merely rooted in a "territorialised notion of Muslims as inhabitants of a distinct part of China, the Muslim Territory (Huibu)" (Brophy 2012, 355). Instead, it reflects a reimagining of the inclusive term "Hui" as a unifying identity that encompassed both Chinese-speaking and Turkic-speaking Muslims. Furthermore, Li Qian's campaign transcended geographic boundaries, highlighting not only the shared solidarity among Muslims but also shedding light on the broader "political aspirations of Muslims within the Chinese state" (Theaker 2022, 1029).

Li Qian and his supporters' first attempts resulted in the admission of four Muslim representatives, including imam Wang Kuan, into the National Assembly in 1915.[27] However, they were not successful in legalising a certain quota of seats for the Hui in the National Assembly. Their efforts represented a strong self-consciousness of Hui as a collective identity for all Muslims in China. They explicitly referred to themselves as the Hui nation mentioned in Sun Yat-sen's theory of the Republic of the five races/nations. Their pragmatic approach shows that the new political settings of a modern Chinese Republic strengthened the Hui Muslims' identification as active political participants. In their efforts to seek an equal status in the arena of the Chinese nation-state, they actively made use of the legal and political framework to define their positions, claiming that the Hui Muslims were a nation recognised by the government and should be treated equally according to the Constitution. Again, one notable strategy they used was claiming to form a large part of the population.

These are some examples that highlight the existence of various demographic estimates of the Hui during the Republican period.[28] The chances are that these figures, much like those

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[26] Scholars generally agree that the term *muhu* refers to a Zoroastrian *magus*, a "wise man or leader of the Mazdeans (i.e. the Zoroastrians)." See Leslie 1981–1983, 279. However, for Kang Youwei here, it seems that he used the term for Islam or Muslims. This can also be seen in his other writings. For instance, he maintained that "there is an old temple in Constantinople [Istanbul] for those who respected Jesus, which now turns to a place for *muhu* [Mohammedans]." Later in the same work, he described Islam as "the religion of *muhu* [Mohammedans] in Mecca." See Kang (2009, 712 and 728).

[27] This could be seen in Da zongtong piling qingyuan guohui zengjia yiyuan you 1924, 1–2.

[28] Other examples could be seen, for instance, in Shui 1923, 4 and Mengyang 1929, n.p.

provided by the Republican government regarding China's demographic situation at that time,[29] were either "self-deception" or "guesswork" (Ho 1959, 79 and 86). This is probably why Jin Jitang 金吉堂 (1908–1978), one of the most prominent scholars of the history of Islam in China, after years of meticulous research, refrained from specifying an exact number for the Muslim population in China, instead stating only that there were "millions" (Jin 1935, 25).

Although none of these numbers were scientifically grounded, they demonstrate the constitutive power of numbers. These figures, regardless of their accuracy, played a significant role in shaping and reinforcing a collective identity for the Hui Muslims.

In addition to the numbers provided by missionaries and (Muslim) Chinese, some local governments during the Republican era also produced statistics on Muslims. While these statistics were far from comprehensive and never on a national scale, they nonetheless reflected localised efforts to quantify Muslim populations. One notable example is the Shanxi local government, which offers a glimpse into such attempts at quantification, as shown in the following figure.

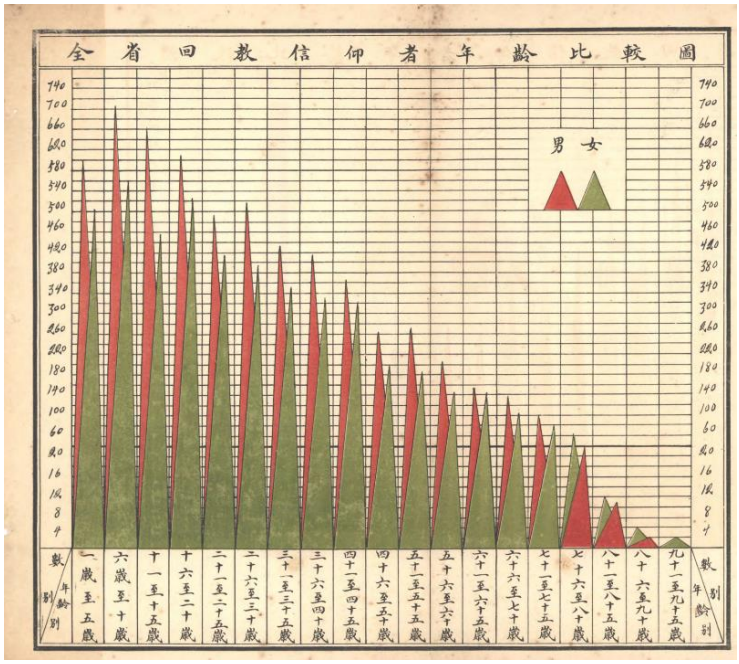

Fig. 1: "Age Distribution Chart of Muslims in the Province" produced by Shanxi Province in 1924[30]

[29] Among various nation-wide endeavours, there also existed provincial attempts to come up with statistics on Muslims; see the contribution by Bréard, Christ, and Tang to this special issue.

[30] No overall demographic information of Muslims was offered here, but it demonstrates the relevance of modern statistics in local governance. The diagram was published in the *Social Statistics of Shanxi*, fourth edition (山西省第四次社會統計) by the Shanxi Provincial Governor's Office Statistics Bureau (山西省長公署統計処). The author would like to thank Andrea Bréard for directing me to this source.

This diagram underscores the limited yet meaningful scope of demographic analysis undertaken by regional authorities. The visual representation also illustrates the fragmented yet persistent interest in understanding the demographic, socioeconomic landscape of Muslims at a local level.

Together, these various sources —missionary reports, scholarly estimates, and local government statistics —reveal the multifaceted and contested nature of demographic quantification concerning Muslims in Republican China. They underscore how numbers, even when imprecise, serve not only as tools of governance and research but also as symbols of identity and belonging.

Apparently, Muslims were aware of the lack of a correct number of their population, despite the existence of numerous figures that we mentioned before. But why did they need a correct number at all? Islam has been in China for over a millennium; however, no such discussions regarding a correct figure for the Muslim population in China could be found in its history until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[31] The discussions around the issue of quantifying the Muslim population cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration the socio-political context of modern China, along with the revival of Islam in China.

3 Muslims' Attempts to Establish an Accurate Number

In 1930, a young Muslim student who had probably just started his education at Tongji University in Shanghai, Lu Shaozhai 鲁少齋 (1912–2000),[32] published an article articulating the significance of correct demographic statistics of Muslims in China for the revival of Islam (Shaozhai 1930, 2–3). For him, a correct population number of Muslims was crucial for a wide range of issues, including the economy, education, and everyday life. Furthermore, to him, the lack of a solid and actual number of Muslims in China demonstrated the uneasy situation of Islam in China and represented the extent to which Muslims were (dis-)united. He acknowledged various projects that Muslims had developed and admitted that they had achieved some progress, including the establishment of associations, the publication of newspapers, the founding of schools, etc. However, he believed that what was still needed was demographic statistics about his coreligionists. He argued that properly organised surveys would not only lead to a correct figure of the Muslim population in China but could also have other social and economic effects. For instance, the correct figure would help elucidate the proportion of peasants, workers, entrepreneurs, academics, and soldiers in the overall

[31] See also Stefan Christ's article in this issue.

[32] For a brief introduction to Lu, see Guo 2015, 12.

composition of the Muslim population. It would also make it possible to have a better distribution of the *zakāt* (*tianke* 天課, almsgiving).[33] In a word, as he contended, the resolution to such issues as unemployment, children's education, marriage, election of imams and leaders for Muslim associations, etc., all depended on correct demographic statistics. In his opinion (1930, 3), a survey for the Muslim demographic situation was so fundamental that all those projects aiming for the revival of Islam depended on it, and it "is the prerequisite for [the settlement of] all the issues" (是一切問題的前提). He called for his fellow Muslim to make proper preparations for a future survey.

One year later, his appeal elicited a response. In 1931, the Muslim magazine *Yueh Hwa* 月華 (Moonlight) published an announcement calling on Muslims from various regions to contribute to an initiative aimed at "investigating local mosques".[34]

It seems that the investigation led by *Yueh Hwa* went well. Two years later, one author, Hu Fangquan 胡枋權, also known as Hu Enjun 胡恩均, published two articles in *Yueh Hwa* (Hu 1933a, 7–9; 1933b, 4–7) specifically discussing the issue of "statistics of Islam" (*Huijiao tongji* 回教統計). Hu was then studying at the Shanghai Islamic Teachers' School (*Shanghai Yisilan Shifan Xuexiao* 上海伊斯蘭師範學校) and was to be sent to study at Al Azhar University in Cairo in the following year, 1934.[35] In his article, he suggested the establishment of a "Committee for the Survey of the Hui People/Nation" (*Huimin diaocha weiyuanhui* 回民調查委員會) to be in charge of the demographic survey. Hu also designed a form (see fig. 2) to be used by the members of the Committee when conducting the survey (Hu 1933b, 5).

Hu's detailed plan suggests that the intention of the Hui Muslims to determine accurately the population of Muslims in China was becoming more concrete. The reason for this, in Hu Fangquan's case, was an immediate challenge from an article published by a non-Muslim Chinese. In that article, the author Yue Sibing 樂嗣炳 introduced a variety of Chinese and non-Chinese scholarship on Muslim population in China, including research conducted by Western missionaries, Japanese scholars, and the Chinese government (Yue 1933, 61–71). At the very end of the article, Yue maintained that the total number of Muslims in China was approximately six or seven million, constituting about 15 per mille (‰) of the whole population of China, much fewer than the estimations provided by Muslims themselves. Based on the numerical data regarding the Muslim population in China, Yue concluded, among other things, that:

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[33] *Zakāt*, together with *shahāda* (profession of faith), *ṣalāt* (prayer), *ṣawm* (fasting) and *ḥajj* (pilgrimage), constitute the five pillars of Islam. According to Islamic jurisprudence, it is obligatory for Muslims to give up a certain percentage of their property to the needy as *zakāt*.

[34] For this announcement, see "Diaocha gedi qingzhensi qishi" 1931, n.p..

[35] See "Di si jie liu Ai xuesheng Shanghai Yisilan shifan xuexiao qiansong wuming" 1934, 28). For detailed discussion of the Chinese Muslim students at al Azhar, see Ma 2011 and Benite 2013, 249–268.

Mohammedanism is a religion, and its followers are scattered all over the world. Since Mohammedanism is followed by many nations in the world, it cannot be said that the followers of Mohammedanism are a Muslim nation, not to mention confusing it with the Hui nation... to confuse Muslims with the Hui nation is a result of either a lack of common sense or a result of political conspiracy.

穆罕謨德教是一種宗教，教徒散佈全世界，穆教既為各民族所共同信奉，就不能說穆教徒就是穆民族更不能混淆稱回民族.....把回教徒混稱回民族由常識不足或政治陰謀所致。(Yue 1933, 71)

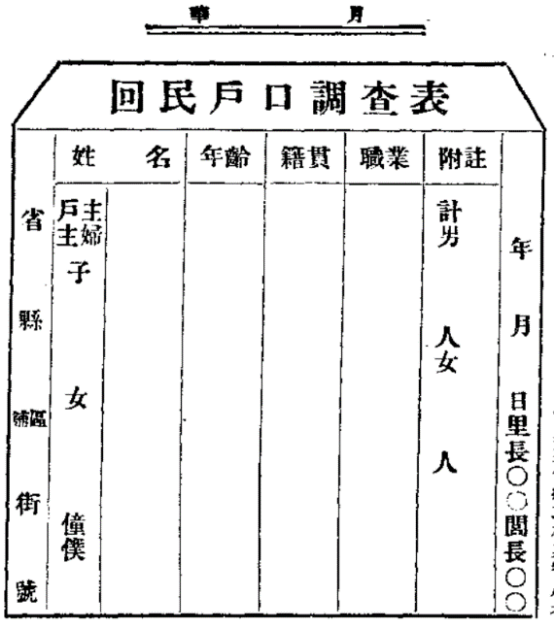

Figure 2. The Survey of Hui Households (*Huimin hukou diaocha biao* 回民戶口調查表) designed by Hu Fangquan

Obviously, the Muslim population number here served Yue's rejection of the Hui's nationhood. Hu, on the other hand, found Yue's conclusion problematic. He believed that his proposal to conduct a detailed demographic survey of Muslims in China would finally help to prove whether Yue's (under-)estimation, as well as his rejection of the Hui's nationhood, was right or wrong. Furthermore, he believed that accurate demographic statistics would contribute to the resurgence of Islam in China. He argued that:

Meanwhile, on the other hand, if we want to revitalise our religion... we have no other choice but to start with a demographic survey. Only after we know the living situation, social situation, economic situation, educational situation... etc. of the Hui people/nation in various places [in China], may we come up with a proper comprehensive plan to revitalise Islam in China.

> 同時另一方面：我們要想復興我們的宗教……非從統計人口做起不可，因爲知道了各處回民的生活狀況，社會狀況，經濟狀況，教育狀況，……等後，才能施以適當的整個的計劃，以振興中國的回教。(Hu 1933a, 8)

This suggests that Hu's objective was not merely to determine the correct population number of Hui Muslims but to use this as a foundation for the resurgence of both Islam and the Hui people or the Hui nation (Huimin 回民). In this regard, his stance echoed that of Lu Shaozhai, who had earlier asserted that an accurate population count of the Hui was "the prerequisite for [the settlement of] all the issues". Such statements underscore the existence of a clear collective identity among the Hui, an identity fundamentally rooted in their shared adherence to Islam.

At the same time, Hui elites such as Hu and Lu were acutely aware that their identity as Hui was tied to the sociopolitical and economic contexts of broader Chinese society. For them, and for many Muslims, Islam was not regarded as a purely religious domain but rather a comprehensive way of life that intersected with critical issues such as education, social reform, and economic development. To revive Islam, therefore, was to address these interconnected aspects within the framework of Chinese society. Central to this revival was the need to ascertain the demographic reality of the Hui population. For these reformers, a clear understanding of the population's size and distribution was seen as one of the most fundamental prerequisites for addressing the broader challenges faced by the Hui community and for advancing the modernisation of Islam in China.

Hu went to study in Cairo the year after publishing his plan; we do not know if, or to what extent, his proposal was actually put into practice. At the same time, *Yueh Hwa* was unable to complete its statistical investigation. One reason might be the relocation of its producer, the Cheng-Ta Islamic Normal School (*Chengda Shifan Xuexiao* 成達師範學校, hereafter the Chengda School).[36] In addition, from the seventh volume onwards, *Yueh Hwa* also cancelled the Survey (*Diaocha* 調查) section and, instead, went on to publish articles introducing the situation of Muslim communities throughout China. Yet they informed the authors that what they wanted was not "something dry and boring as it used to be" but something livelier and more interesting ("Yisao wangri zhi kuzao chenmen" 1935, n.p.).

Another attempt to discover an accurate figure for the Muslim population was led by the National Salvation Association of the Hui Nation (*Zhongguo Huimin jiuguo xiehui* 中國回民救國協會, later known as the Chinese Islamic Association for National Salvation,

[36] The Chengda School was founded in Jinan 濟南, Shandong province, in 1925. However, due to the sociopolitical situation in China then, the school had to move and relocate to different places. In 1929, it moved to Beijing; in 1937, with the help of General Bai Chongxi 白崇禧, it moved to Guilin 桂林; however, it had to move again to Chongqing 重慶 in 1944, before moving back to Beijing in 1946. For a general introduction to the teaching activities of the Chengda School, see Lin and Lin 2019, 231–246.

Zhongguo Huijiao jiuguo xiehui 中國回教救國協會, hereafter the Islamic Association).[37] At the first plenary meeting of the Islamic Association held one year after its establishment in 1938, the Muslim general, Bai Chongxi 白崇禧 (1893–1966), who was also President of the Islamic Association, mentioned that upon the establishment of the Islamic Association one of the first things they set out to do was to investigate the status and distribution of the population of Muslims. He saw the lack of an accurate number for the Muslim population as part of a larger phenomenon that represented China's statistical deficiencies, weakness, and backwardness.[38] He argued that:

> China, when it comes to population numbers, has always been vague and general. Not only are there no accurate statistics regarding the exact number of our Muslim compatriots, nor are there for the national population. Although everyone says [that the national population is] 450 million (*si wanwan wu qianwan* 四萬萬五千萬), there has never been a rigorous survey. All this reflects how ill-organised our country is.
>
> 中國對於人口多寡，向來就籠籠統統的，不僅我們回教教胞確實人數沒有確切的統計，就以全國的人口而論，雖然大家都説是四萬萬五千萬，可是也沒有經過縝密的統計，處處都表現我們的國家，組織鬆懈。(Bai 1939a, 8)

Correct and accurate statistics for the Muslim population are crucial for the Islamic Association, because, as General Bai argued, "There is no way to figure out how much power we have within our religion, if we do not know how many Muslim compatriots there are" (不知道有教胞多少，就無法知道教內的力量) (Bai 1939a, 7). This is in line with the aims of the Islamic Association stipulated in the Charter of the Association for Chinese National Salvation of the Hui Nation (*Zhongguo Huimin jiuguo xiehui zhangcheng* 中國回民救國協會章程, 1938, 15), that is, to promote the teachings of Islam, to unite its followers, and to work in cooperation to save the country. For them, the ultimate purpose of the Islamic Association was to "work in cooperation to save the country", and for that reason it was necessary to "unite the followers of Islam", as they claimed: "There is no cooperation without unity, and without cooperation there is no way to save the country" (微團結莫能協力；非協力無以救國) ("Lun jiuguo de liliang" 1938, n.p.). Soon they established a department in

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[37] The Association was originally named as a national salvation association of the Hui nation (*Huimin*) in 1938, and was later renamed, upon the request of Chiang Kai-shek 蔣介石 (1887–1975), as a national salvation association of Islam/Muslims (*Huijiao*). It has to be noted that the late-Qing and Republican periods witnessed the debates, negotiations, definitions, and constructions of the idea of Hui as a collective group of people. In this regard, how to name them was an important issue, which already existed upon the establishment of the new Republic. For a discussion regarding the naming of the Hui's associations, see Wan 2015, 160–166 and Li 2021, 119–121.

[38] This was a common view held by a large number of people during that time. For the relationship between the production of social facts and the construction of the modern Chinese nation-state, see Lam 2011.

charge of conducting surveys (*Diaocha bu* 調查部), with Wang Yuebo 王月波 (dates unknown) and later Feng Qinghong 馮慶鴻 (dates unknown, also known as Zibin 子斌) as the director ("Benhui li jian shi lianxi huiyi jilu" 1938, n.p.), Zhang Zhaoli 張兆理 (1906–1997, known as Hajji Yusuf Chang) as the deputy director ("Benhui di shiliu ci changhui huiyi jilu" 1939, n.p.), and Hong Kuiyuan 洪奎元 (dates unknown) as the secretary ("Benhui ge buhui banshi renyuan mingdan" 1938, n.p.). At the end of 1938, the *Diaocha bu* published a brief outline of their activities, which included the purpose, scale, methods, and contents of the surveys they intended to carry out, including the forms and questionnaires they designed ("Benhui diaocha bu diaocha gangyao" 1939, n.p.). In total, they issued seven types of forms and questionnaires to the local branches covering surveys and statistics in terms not only of population and households, but also of local Muslim associations, educational institutions, mosques, publications, etc. ("Yinian lai gongzuo baogao" 1939, 19).

The Islamic Association was perhaps the most organised body among Muslims in Republican China, especially in terms of financial support. However, several factors limited their endeavour of conducting comprehensive surveys regarding Muslim populations in different parts of China. First and foremost, for any census, especially "doing it on a large scale requires well-funded bureaucracies with highly trained administrators" (Espeland and Stevens 2008, 410). This seems to have been challenging for the Islamic Association. As a matter of fact, they do not seem to have had enough personnel for the surveys at either the central or the local levels. According to the revised Charter of the Association in 1939, there were, at most, only three secretaries who were actually in charge of daily affairs of the department ("Yejing xiuzheng chengzhun shehuibu bei'an" 1939, n.p.). The number of personnel might be even fewer at the local branches of the Islamic Association, not to mention the expertise required for them to conduct such a large-scale survey. On the other hand, the local branches of the Islamic Association never covered all parts of China. In Xinjiang, for instance, no such local branches ever existed; nor did they exist in other provinces and cities that were under Japanese occupation. That was probably why in 1940 the Islamic Association turned to the government for help.[39] However, this turned out to be challenging for the government as well. In the end, only twenty provinces actually carried out surveys, still to varying degrees.[40] Although no statistics for the overall population of Muslims in China based on actual surveys existed during the Republican period – neither the various initiatives or endeavours of the Hui themselves, including those of the Association, nor the attempts made by the Republican government, led to a reliable figure of the demographic situation of Muslims in China – various individuals and organisations still claimed that there were, more or less, 50 million Muslims in China.

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[39] This record can be found in the archive of Academia Historica in Taiwan. See "Zhongguo Huijiao jiuguo xiehui cheng ni paiyuan souji youguan Huimin cailiao" 1940. See also the study in Zhao and Zhang 2019, 73.

[40] Even in those provinces where surveys were conducted, the results remain far from satisfying, due to limited personnel and the expertise required. See Wan 2019, 19–28.

4 Settling upon 50 Million Muslims

General Bai Chongxi admitted that there were no accurate statistics regarding the exact number of our Muslim compatriots, and he even stated explicitly that the most cited figure of 50 million was ungrounded (Bai 1939a, 8). He regularly ascribed the weakness of the Hui to the lack of population surveys. However, this does not seem to have stopped him from joining others in using the number 50 million on various occasions. When elaborating on the purpose of the Islamic Association, Bai Chongxi, being aware of the fact that no one knew the exact number of Muslims in China, still insisted that, "the Association aims to unite the 50 million Muslim compatriots ... so as to save the country" (這個會底目的就是要把全國五千萬教胞團結起來.....救國) (Bai 1938, 2). In another speech to mobilise Muslims for China's anti-Japanese war, Bai again reminded his fellow Muslims that they had a population of 50 million, who were not only great in number but had great characteristics, including unity, obedience, loyalty, etc. (Bai 1939b, 4–5). At the end of his speech, Bai made a *duʿā* (supplication to God in Islam), on behalf of the entire 50 million Muslims in China, that "the Real Lord will soon bring the ultimate punishment upon our aggressive enemies" (真宰速予暴敌以末日之制裁) (Bai 1939b, 5).

The belief in a population of 50 million Muslims was also shared by other members of the Islamic Association. For instance, Tang Kesan 唐柯三 (1882–1950), vice president of the Islamic Association, encouraged female Muslims to contribute to the Hui's project of national salvation and contended that if Muslim women, who constituted half of the 50 million, could not take on their responsibility for "religious revival and national salvation" (*xingjiao jiuguo* 興教救國), half of their strength would be wasted (Tang 1940, 13–14). For Tang Kesan, the 50 million Muslims, who were brave and enthusiastic for their religion and their country of China, should be the vital force for China's war with Japan.[41]

Despite the fact that no comprehensive figures for their Muslim compatriots in China had been provided, they still, it seems, felt confident about the number of 50 million. In a 1940 Open Letter to Muslim Compatriots throughout the Nation (*Gao quanguo Huibao shu* 告全國回胞書), the Islamic Association again confirmed publicly that there were 50 million Muslims in China ("Zhongguo Huijiao jiuguo xiehui gao quanguo Huibao shu" 1940, n.p.).

The figure of 50 million was actually not the invention of the Islamic Association. One of the earliest mentions of it could already be traced back to the sources provided by Western missionaries. Elwood Morris Wherry (1843–1927), an American Presbyterian missionary to India, mentioned that an Indian gentleman[42] reported a population of 50 million Muslims in

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[41] This could also be seen among other members of the Islamic Association, such as Sun Shengwu 孫繩武 (1894–1975), a prominent Hui politician and Islamist. See Sun 1940, 17.

[42] The person to whom Wherry referred here, an expert on Tibetan and Chinese literature, Rai Surat Chandra Das, C.I.E, is most likely the prominent scholar of Tibetan language and culture, Sarat Chandra Das (1849–1917).

China (Wherry 1907, 82). One of the first Chinese authors who claimed a population of 50 million Muslims in China was Sha Shanyu 沙善余 (1879–1968, also known as Shouyu 守愚), a well-known Muslim in Shanghai and founding member of the China Muslim Literary Society (*Zhongguo Huijiao xuehui* 中國回教學會).[43] In his *Foreword* to the journal of the Society, Sha maintained that, since there existed no detailed surveys concerning the Muslim population in China, with some saying it was 80 million and others saying it was 20 million, it would be reasonable to find a number in between, which was exactly 50 million (Shouyu 1926, 8). Subsequently, it became quite common to read in books, journal articles, and newspapers, published by Muslims and non-Muslims, that China had 50 million Muslims.

Thanks to the development of Muslim associations in modern China, Muslims at the time not only became better organised in China but were also able to be better connected with Muslims in other parts of the world, for instance, through the *Ḥajj* (Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca), international travel, business, and education in Muslim countries. Apparently, the number of 50 million also travelled with them.

Imam Ma Songting 馬松亭 (1895–1992), a founding member of the Chengda School, accompanied the Muslim students to Cairo in 1933, where he was invited to give a talk on Islam in China. After giving a brief introduction of Islam's long history in China, Ma Songting continued his speech with the population of Muslims in China. He stated:

> As for the population of the Hui people/nation in our country, we Muslims have not done any accurate surveys. According to the records of people from friendly countries in the East and the West, the numbers vary greatly: the minimum is said to be 8 million and the maximum 80 million, though neither is reliable. A reckoning shared by the majority is 50 million. Now, we Muslims, by calculating based on the density of the population in the 28 provinces in China, also believe that 50 million is indeed a reliable number.
>
> 全國回民總數，我們自家不曾有過精細的調查；據東西友邦人們的記錄，有很懸殊的數量：最少的說是八百萬，最多的說是八千萬，這些都不可靠；比較得大數人們同情的記錄是五千萬。現在，我們自家按照全中國廿八行省人口密度去推論，認爲五千萬是實在可靠的數目。(Ma 1933, 4)

His talk was given in Arabic in Cairo, translated by Ma Jian 馬堅 (1906–1978), and published later in *Yueh Hwa*. However, imam Ma Songting probably did not expect that his speech

[43] Many of the founding members of the Society were fluent in English themselves. For instance, Sha Shanyu studied English with Gilbert Reid (1857–1927), a missionary reformer in China and founder of the Mission among the Higher Classes in China. Sha also worked as an interpreter for Reuters in Shanghai, and served as editor of the famous *Shenbao* 申報, where he met Wu Tegong 伍特公 (1886–1961), another founder of the Society, who worked as an English interpreter at *Shenbao*. Therefore, my rendition of the title of the Society and the journal they published follows their own versions.

would later bring him great trouble. During the Anti-Rightist Campaign (1957–1959) under the Chinese Communist Party, he was frequently attacked,[44] and one of the accusations was that he supported the GMD when going to the Middle East under the pretence of being the "leader of 50 million Muslims in China" (Ma Huiping 1957, 13–14). As a matter of fact, Ma was not the only one who made such claims of 50 million Muslims in China when visiting other Muslim regions. To support their aim of "religious revival and national salvation", the Chinese Islamic Association for National Salvation launched several initiatives, including one that "involved employing linguistically accomplished, well-qualified Chinese Muslims as diplomats to make goodwill overtures to Muslim countries" (Chen 2016, 708). In 1938, *Yueh Hwa* reported on the activities of the Chinese Islamic Near East Delegation (*Zhongguo Huijiao Jindong fangwen tuan* 中國回教近東訪問團).[45] In the report, one member of the delegation told his Muslim coreligionists in Kolkata that there were 50 million Muslims in China (Ma 1938, 2). Interestingly, he addressed Muslims in India as "no strangers" (諸君非外人), even as his compatriots (*tongbao* 同胞). Therefore, he argued, "China is your [Indian Muslims'] China ... and India is our [Chinese Muslims'] India" (中國乃諸君之中國.....印度乃吾人之印度) (Ma 1938, 3).

As discussed in earlier sections, none of the above-mentioned cases provides a comprehensive explanation of how the figure of 50 million Muslims in China was calculated. This situation changed in 1947, when the Islamic Association finally established a more robust foundation for their claim. Their persistent efforts to ascertain the Muslim population in China, as well as to legitimise the figure of 50 million, should be understood in the context of the 1946 constitutional amendment. This amendment, the result of which was presented at the beginning of this article, formally recognised the Hui population—not as a pan-Muslim identity, but as a distinct group defined as "those living in Inner China with special living habits". This constitutional recognition was pivotal for the Hui, as it provided a legal-political framework for advocating for an "appropriate" quota of representation in the National Assembly, an endeavour that Li Qian strove for some decades before.

As noted at the outset of this article, Chinese Muslims' demands for parliamentary representation culminated in the creation of Article 135 of the Constitution of the Republic. Drawing on this provision, the Islamic Association argued that the Hui people/nation were entitled to at least 90 seats in the National Assembly ("Zunzhong yisanwu tiao lifa jingshen tichu Huimin xuanju fa juti yijian" 1947, 4). This proposal was grounded in the constitutional stipulations regarding representation and the estimated population of the Hui. However, the figure of 50

[44] Relevant reports could be seen, for instance, in Ma Mingji 1957, 9, Yishi 1957, 11, and "Quanguo Musilin jixu fanji youpai fenzi Ma Songting" 1958, 9–10.

[45] The Delegation was led by Wang Zengshan 王曾善 (1903–1961), officer of the government and member of the Legislative Yuan, together with imam Ha Decheng 哈德成 (1888–1943), government officials Ma Tianying 馬天英 (1900–1982) and Zhang Zhaoli, as well as Xue Wenbo 薛文波 (1909–1984). For the detailed activities of the Delegation, the Wang Zengshan Private Papers in the National University of Singapore Libraries are helpful. See https://digitalgems.nus.edu.sg/collection/140 (accessed February 10, 2023).

million Muslims did not result from years of diligent survey conducted by the Islamic Association. Instead, it was derived from statistics published by the Republican government's Statistics Department.

As the Islamic Association pointed out, the Statistics Department mentioned in the *Statistical Analysis of the Population Issue in China* (*Zhongguo renkou wenti zhi tongji fenxi* 中國人口問題之統計分析, 1946, 50), that China had a population of 48,104,240 Muslims. However, the Statistics Department also mentioned that this number was not based on their own survey but was taken from the *Chinese Year Book* (*Zhongguo nianjian* 中國年鑒).

In 1935, the Commercial Press in Shanghai published the premier issue of the *Chinese Year Book* in English. In his *Foreword* to the book, Cai Yuanpei 蔡元培 (1868–1940) specifically pointed out that the publication of the book was entirely under Chinese editorship and management (Cai 1935, n.p.). What is perhaps particularly relevant here is that Cai emphasised that "the present volume may properly pride itself upon the authenticity of all data embodied therein" (ibid.). The "authenticity" of the figures probably came from the fact that, according to Cai, the "chapters are specially prepared by renowned authorities in their respective fields" (ibid.). Cai Yuanpei's endorsement, the expertise of the contributors, and the reputation of the Commercial Press all seemed to guarantee the authenticity of the numbers offered in the book.[46]

In the *Year Book*, the chapter on Islam was titled "Mohammedanism". It was attributed to a certain Ha Guodong 哈國棟, an alleged authority on Islam in China, and most likely a Muslim too. Apparently, his ability to write in English indicates that he must have been well-educated. Ha Guodong introduced the history of Islam in China, especially Islam during the Qing and Republican periods, and the religious, commercial, and educational activities of Muslims in China. Several tables were contained in the chapter, in which the author provided us with information concerning not only the Muslim population in China, but also famous mosques, prominent Muslim elites, Islamic educational institutions, Muslim public bodies, popular publications, and a list of Chinese students in Egypt (Ha 1935, 1559–1565). As far as the table for the distribution of Muslims in China is concerned, the author, an expert and "prominent authority on Mohammedanism", as described in the book, did not provide any details about the basis for the figures. However, a brief look at the numbers in the table would lead one to suspect the "authenticity" that Cai Yuanpei promised, or at least, render them counterintuitive. For instance, Xinjiang or the Huibu 回部 (the Muslim region, if Hui is understood as Muslims), China's largest Muslim province, had around 2.3 million Muslims, which, unexpectedly, was less than that of many Han Chinese populated provinces, such as Sichuan 四川 with a number of 2.6 million Muslims. The author reported that the Three

[46] The editors of the book also emphasised the authenticity and even authoritativeness of the data they offered in the book. For instance, see Zhang's contribution that stressed the "Important Features of This Issue" (Zhang 1937a, vii).

Eastern Provinces, for instance, had a total number of 7.5 million Muslims, which was more than the total of the three traditionally Muslim concentrated provinces of Gansu, Ningxia 寧夏, and Qinghai.

The *Year Book* had a different editor for its following issues; it went through revisions, the content was reorganised, and other specialists and experts were invited to contribute to the book. However, the chapter on "Mohammedanism" remained unchanged until the sixth issue in 1943.[47] In that issue, the chapter was no longer titled "Mohammedanism" but "Islam". The contents were also largely different. The historical part was significantly reduced, and more contemporary information was added, especially from the work led by the Islamic Association. As a matter of fact, the chapter author, Zhang Qixian (Chang Chi-Hsien), who was also the editor of the book, noted at the beginning of the text that the data he presented was "furnished by the Chinese Islamic National Salvation Federation [i.e. the Islamic Association]" (Zhang 1943, 66).

When it comes to the data regarding Muslim population, the chapter quotes several numbers. It was reported that 300 million people in the world followed Islam and "out of this number some 48 million are Chinese" (Zhang 1943, 66). In the paragraph immediately following, the author wrote that "during the past 1,300 years, the number of Muslims in China had increased from a few thousand to nearly 50 million at present" (Zhang 1943, 66). Notably, the original table created by Ha Guodong was preserved in this chapter, giving a total number of 48,104,240.

It seems that everyone created their own numbers. As for the number 50 million, Sha Shanyu invented it simply by giving the average number between the highest (80 million) and lowest (20 million) figures that were available to him. The Islamic Association finally legitimised their claim by cross-referencing the data that they themselves "furnished". And for the rest, they just conveniently used the number, without justification. The number 50 million became even more widespread through the publication of the first issue of the *Chinese Year Book*. It was quoted by a large number of authors, such as Tao Xingzhi 陶行知 (1891–1946), Wang Zengshan, and Fu Tongxian 傅統先 (1910–1985).[48]

5 Concluding Remarks

The discourse surrounding modern Chinese Muslim demography is deeply intertwined with Hui identity politics, particularly in the context of China's nation-state building in the mid-

[47] From the third issue in 1937, the name of the chapter's author, Ha Guodong, was removed from the book.

[48] See Tao 1938, 7, Wang 1939, 21, and Fu 1940, 167–168.

twentieth century. The inclusion of Article 135 in the 1946 Constitution represents both a beginning and an endpoint for this phase of Hui identity politics. It can be seen as a beginning because, for the first time in the history of Islam in China, the Hui were formally recognised as equal citizens within a constitutional democracy. This legal-political framework allowed them to define themselves in relation to other groups, peoples/nations, and particularly the Han majority, under the principles of equality and citizenship within a modern nation-state. However, this constitutional identity also faced an abrupt end. Within just a few years, the political landscape in China shifted dramatically following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. This transformation precluded the Hui from actively participating in the nascent democratic framework or fully developing the constitutional identity envisioned under the 1946 Constitution.

While the constitutional recognition of the Hui marked a critical moment in the intersection of identity politics and the emerging Chinese nation-state, the quantification of Muslim populations further reflects the interplay between numbers and sociopolitical frameworks. Following the scholarship on the sociology of quantification, particularly Espeland and Stevens, who describe the "production and communication of numbers, and its consequences for the organization and character of modern life" (Espeland and Stevens 2008, 402), this article has traced the emergence and distribution of various Muslim population figures during the late Qing and the Republican periods.

Differing from previous scholarship that focuses on a "correct estimation" of the Muslim population in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century China, this article is more concerned with the historical context in which these numbers emerged and the social implications they had. I have analysed not only the "making" of different numbers for the Muslim population in China, but also the "doing" of these numbers, that is, "the different dimensions of what gets done by them in different contexts" (Espeland and Stevens 2008, 405). This approach of "numbers in context" highlights the purposes and meanings of numbers, instead of the accuracy and scientificity of numbers.

I have shown how numbers, which "easily circulate and seem straightforward to interpret" (Espeland and Stevens 2008, 415), serve as an authoritative agency and are used for different purposes, especially the roles which population numbers played in constructing the Hui Muslims as a collective group of people in the context of China transiting from an empire to a modern nation-state. The Hui's endeavour to identify themselves as a *minzu* of their own shows how numbers work in constituting the things they represent, especially through "directing attention, persuading, and creating new categories for apprehending the world" (Espeland and Stevens 2008, 404). My article also demonstrates that it was only during the last decades of imperial China that numbers became a relevant topic for scrutiny in the long history of Islam in China. Notably, the Muslims' case also reveals that, as Silvana Patriarca argued, the establishment of the modern nation-state brought it about that statistics, that is, in our case, the Muslim population number in China, "became a widespread practice and attracted the solicitous attention of ruling elites and reformers alike" (Patriarca 1996, 1).

I have demonstrated that the history of Muslim population figures in modern China is multifaceted, shaped by diverse religious, political, and social agendas. Across the various cases examined in this article, a key observation is that nearly all the actors involved recognised the "constitutive power of statistics" (Patriarca 1996, 240) in transforming the Muslim population into a collective entity. This is particularly evident in the case of the Islamic Association, whose public dissemination of demographic figures not only quantified the Muslim *minzu* but also reinforced its collective self-awareness. By making these numbers visible, the Association effectively facilitated a process of self-recognition among Hui Muslims, providing a demographic foundation upon which claims to distinct identity and political representation could be articulated. In doing so, population figures became more than just statistical data; they functioned as tools of self-definition, shaping both internal understandings of Hui identity and external perceptions of Muslims within the broader national framework. As Lam (2011, 172) has suggested, the publication of such numbers enabled the transformation of information about "who we are" and "what we want" into public knowledge, allowing for further dissemination and engagement with state authorities and wider society.

By tracing the production and circulation of these numbers, my research contributes to a broader understanding of how Islam and the Hui were conceptualised in twentieth-century China. Rather than treating demographic figures as objective reflections of reality, I have highlighted their role as socially constructed artefacts that were shaped by—and in turn helped shape—the shifting dynamics of Hui identity, state policies, and national belonging. In the context of China's transition from empire to nation-state, these numbers became a means through which Hui Muslims positioned themselves within the emerging political order, negotiating their status in relation to both the Han majority and the modern Chinese state. This study, therefore, not only re-examines the historical processes underlying Muslim demographic enumeration but also sheds light on the evolving interplay between statistics, identity politics, and nation-building in modern China.

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