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“Sectarianism in Islam and Muslim Communities”

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ABSTRACT

“Where is Allah? Sectarian Debate, Ethnicity, and
Transnational Identity among the Salafis of Northwest China”

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The Chinese Communist Party defines the Hui people as an ethnic group based on shared customs related to Islam and descent from Muslim immigrants who arrived centuries ago, but sectarian revival movements have destabilized this conflation of religious and ethnic identity. Lengthy periods of isolation under imperial dynasties and Maoism have incubated syncretic sects and practices among Chinese Muslims, but as more of them have begun traveling abroad for study, business, and pilgrimage, sects critical of syncretic Chinese Islam have grown. Historians and anthropologists have traced several waves of Islamic revival, but few have focused on the growing Salafiyya movement and its conflict with other Chinese sects. This paper, based on eleven months of anthropological interviews and participant observation in the urban Hui community of Xining, Qinghai Province, examines sectarian conflict between the locally dominant, Wahhabi-inspired Yihewani sect that developed at the turn of the twentieth century and a rapidly growing Salafi minority. Fierce debate between Salafis who argue that Allah is above Heaven versus Yihewani and other sects who argue that Allah is omnipresent also represents disagreement about where in the world the “real Muslims” are located, whether religious authority is located in imams or the understanding of individual believers, and whether Chinese Muslims should perpetuate ethnic religious traditions or aspire to a universal Muslim identity and transnational sense of orthodoxy. In achieving independent understanding of Islamic texts, Hui Salafis attempt to transcend local structures of power to forge a direct connection with an imagined transnational *ummah*.