Power and Pride:
A Critical Contextual Approach to Hui Muslims in China

by Enoch Jinsik Kim

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As one "lives and moves and has their being" among another people there develops a growing sensitivity to certain cultural themes that characterize how that people thinks, what they value and why they do what they do. This emerging sensitivity has been my experience over sixteen years with the Muslim Hui people of China, and in this article I want to explore the cultural themes I've become especially sensitive to among them. In my more recent research[1] I've isolated some cultural themes that suggest a biblical message that will speak to the Hui people and which provide the contextual stepping stones for more culturally appropriate church planting among the Hui.

The Significance of Culture Themes

People groups develop cultural themes through shared history and experiences, and express them through various forms—from art to language, from social structures to traditional events commemorating significant cultural passages (Hiebert 1985, Chapter 2). When missionaries enter a new cultural zone, they must be alert to the signs and symbols that typically express these underlying themes to discern these integrated and systematized structures of meaning, and to understand the social dynamics that undergird these themes. Insight into these cultural themes should be a primary focus because they represent a group's history and are repeatedly practiced and confirmed in people's lives. They provide the context for deeply rooted, familiar aspects of their lives, and inform us of the mental, spiritual and emotional identity of a people.[2] They move our understanding beyond mere lineage and ethnic origin and allow missionaries to competently develop a contextual insight into God's deep, fundamental solutions to problems of pride, self esteem, and historical sentiments. Their message will be constructed on familiar cultural themes that enable the people group to both understand the gospel and to regard it as their own.

Critical Contextualization Method

From among the many contextual theories, I chose to use Paul Hiebert's critical contextualization method since it offered four clear guidelines for exegesis of both the Bible and the Hui context. Those four forms of exegesis are of the culture, Scripture, critical evaluation of past customs in light of new biblical understandings, and development of new contextual practices (1987, 109–11; 1999, 21–29).

As part of the contextualization process, I screened and collected Hui cultural symbols and signs which I interpreted as representative of their cultural themes. By analyzing the underlying meaning of those cultural expressions, I extracted the theme and clarified its meaning. Then I chose corresponding biblical terminologies and themes that addressed the same cultural meanings. The resulting message became a biblically-based cultural bridge, a new contextual message and strategy laying a foundation for contextual church planting, based on a Hui theme. In this way, the biblical message resonated with familiar, traditional, cultural themes without compromising the message or identity of either.

Who Are the Hui?

The Hui represent a population of Muslim Chinese, one of 56 ethnic groups in China. They have lived in China for about 1,300 years and have functioned in a variety of social and vocational roles, including merchants, nomads, and soldiers. The many cultural influences on the Hui originate in Central Asia and Middle Eastern regions, including Persia, Pakistan, Turkey, Mongolia and Uygur. Since the Hui mainly lived among Mongolians, Tibetans, Han Chinese, and other peoples in northwestern China, their culture, architecture, economic systems, worldview, and cultural habits reflect those cultures.[3] During their more than

1,300 years in China, Hui Muslims have also developed many socio-cultural and religious sects based on the various origins of their ancestors.[4]

Paul Hattaway, whose report motivated me to undertake this research, noted, "The Hui are probably the largest people group in the world without a single known Christian fellowship group" (2002, 219). Similarly, the Joshua Project estimated that among the 12.6 million Hui, Christian believers comprise 0% of the population (2011). While I have actually had many experiences discipling and sharing the gospel with Hui believers, nevertheless, it remains that there are very few Christians among the Hui.

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Cultural Theme from a Few Representative Hui Symbols

As I mentioned, the first step in contextualization is to carefully analyze a people's symbols and signs. Then, as similarities become apparent, meaning becomes more discernible. Public signs, symbols and cultural themes intersect with individual messages. For the research, I conducted interviews, reviewed research literature and drew upon my 16 years of field experience in China. Through these efforts I could extract the following six traditional Hui cultural themes, which I will summarize below: (1) *Qingzhen* (2) ethnic community (3) the restaurant and mosque (4) ceremonies and rites of

passage (5) spiritual power and sense of superiority, and (6) endogamy.

Qingzhen: Pure and True

Qingzhen [chingjun: 请真] is a Hui concept meaning "clean and true," or "pure and authentic." Beyond its symbolic meaning, *qingzhen* has been integrated into the Hui way of life in practical ways. As an example, the Hui use *qingzhen* as an adjective when referring to restaurants *(qingzhen can ting:* 清真餐厅) and mosques (i.e. *qingzhen* temple: 清真寺). Likewise, they attach a small green *qingzhen* tag on house gates and even mark this term on food packaging.

Qingzhen differentiates Hui concepts and products from those of the majority and other ethnic groups. For example, when inquiring whether something is *halal* (or ritually pure), most will now ask, "Is this *Qingzhen?*" This cultural theme subtly assures people that their core identity is being preserved within their social control system. Additionally, in the larger context of the Hui's social rivalry with the majority Han population, the term is closely tied to the Hui's sense of ethnic superiority. For example, in mid-conversation, if the subject of the Han arises, a Hui might say, "Han are dirty but we are clean. They don't know the truth but we know!" So, *Qingzhen* is a complex cultural theme reflecting feelings of ethnic superiority and an assurance of community and ethnic pride.

Ethnic Community

Within the larger Hui community are sub-groups. Among these are the Sunni, who live in neighborhoods called *ge-dimu*, and the Sufi, who live in *menhuan*. Each of these communities also have their own religious systems and social networks within boundaries that overlap.

Outside of traditional rural communities, the population of Hui living in urban enclaves has also grown. These urban ethnic enclaves are not new, but have formed over several hundreds of years.

The ethnic community has provided a convenient system for the Hui lifestyle. Through a communal system of ethnic restaurants and markets offering pork-free ethnic foods, cultural and social necessities are readily available. Likewise, useful information, communication and reliable ethnic trade networks have grown and flourished. In the Hui community individuals can have a sense of belonging and feel united as a people, and I noticed that many of my friends who graduated from school, who had very nice job opportunities outside their communal system, actually hesitated to leave. This type of ethnic-centered behavior became obvious when conflicts between members of the Hui and the Han would erupt. A crowd would quickly gather with the two sides encouraging their own members.

The Hui have developed social control systems ranging from small-scale informal systems of praise and gossip between neighbors, to more complex social networks whether in relation to the government or independently (Shaw 1988, Chapter 7). The complexity of that control requires leaders who carry multiple roles. For instance, the Hui *ahong* is not simply a cleric, but also must serve as a schoolteacher, judge, counselor, political leader, and sometimes even a war leader (Leslie 1986).

The Restaurant and Mosque
Both ethnic restaurants and mosques carry deeper meaning among the Hui and in this sense must be considered cultural symbols. Two important functions of ethnic restaurants are to control the flow of money and to be the center of production and manufacturing. When the Hui establish a new community in a new area, a restaurant will be the first small business to open.

Food distribution closely follows cash flow. As previously mentioned, the Hui's concern with *halal* prevents them from frequenting restaurants outside of their communities. Conversely, this is not the case among the Han, who practice more liberal eating habits. One outcome of this cultural difference is cash flow.

*R*estaurants and mosques are not only places to eat and worship, but are fully-functioning social centers supporting their spiritual and social needs.

Among the Hui it is largely in one direction, building prosperity in the community. Therefore, their ethnic restaurants directly contribute to a reservoir of financial power for the Hui because of the community's eating habits.

As with Hui restaurants, mosques are centers for socioreligious activities and information networking. Erich W. Bethmann summarizes their function as religious and educational centers, shelters for the poor and migrants, and as philanthropic institutions where the sick may rest until they recover (1950, 98). The Hui also have educational programs, counseling, and community activities in the mosque. It is the center of their community.

> People go to the mosque to meet with friends. People eat at the mosque and travelers sleep there. Community is experienced in the mosque. (Brislen 1996, 357)

According to one report, some Hui use ethnic restaurants to engage in Qur'anic studies. So, restaurants and mosques are not singularly eating places or sites reserved for specific religious activities, but are integrated, fully-functioning social centers supporting the Hui's spiritual and social needs.

Ceremonies and Rites of Passage
Like many Muslim regions around the world, Hui communities mingle religious and social activities. They do not display any interest in Han cultural ceremonies, but have developed their own rituals, commemorations, and life-cycle ceremonies. For instance, the internationally-celebrated Chinese New Year festival is officially recognized and celebrated by the Han, but not by the Hui.

As in many other cultures, Hui festivals fall into two general categories: religious ceremonies and individual rituals. Among religious ceremonies,

the Hui have developed three major social practices: Korban, the day of sacrifice, also known as *Kuerbangjie* (古尔邦际); or *zaishengjie* (宰牲祭); Ramadan, also known as *Fengzhai* (封斋); and the final day of Ramadan, *Kaizhaijie* (开斋祭).

Among individual rituals, every Hui engages in several rites of passage. For the most part, these are community activities with religious overtones. My research indicated that there are significant events to be celebrated annually in each community. Here are some examples:

- Parents invite the *ahong* (cleric) to celebrate the gift of a new baby, whose religious name is given thirty days after birth. This is called *qijingming* (起经名).
- On the fourth day of the fourth month of the baby's fourth birthday, the parents invite the *ahong* to witness the child reciting a few verses from the Qur'an. This celebration is called *yingxue* (迎学).
- At age twelve, parents invite the *ahong* and circumcise their son. They call this *geli* (割礼).
- A fourth type of ceremony is for engagements and weddings, which are both a social and religious activity.

The Hui recognize these as the four most important ceremonies in a person's life, and categorize them as *xidananxingyishi* (四大男性儀式).[5] Of course funerals, which both the community and the family commemorate, are also part of Hui lifecycle rituals (Gladney 1998, 142–43). All these rituals and ceremonies have historically contributed to the Hui sense of belonging and ethnic pride.

Spiritual Power and Sense of Superiority
The Hui value a power-oriented religion. The Hui, especially the

Sufis, believe that *Baraka* (a spiritual blessing or force for power and enrichment) comes from the physical shrine and tomb of a saint. These enshrined tombs, called *gongbei,* hold the remains of the spiritual heroes or founders of various sects. Those seeking enhanced spiritual capability will pray in the mosque, but they will also pray at a *gongbei* because they believe the benefit is greater there, i.e., power flows more from the *gongbei* than the mosque. As traditional Islam accepted Sufism in the 17th century, some Sunni also came to be seekers of spiritual power. Additionally, some Muslims believe that religious ancestors, as well as mosques, have powers (Dillon 1996, 47–49).

Power-centered faith not only encourages the Hui to be more spiritual, but also gives them a sense that they are closer to supernatural realms and are therefore superior to the Han. Spiritual power defines strength and control over weakness as they face oppression and discrimination under the Han, and as they individually search for the means to overcome helplessness from problems arising in their daily lives (Geertz 1968, 79; Gladney 1987b, 516).

Endogamy

Most Hui prefer to marry within their ethnic boundaries.

> Endogamy is one of the most important ways Hui in this community express their descent from foreign Muslim ancestry. They keep their community pure by not marrying their daughters to non-Hui and not bringing in Han women. (Gladney 1998, 249)

As in other communities, guilt, shame, logic, and gossip are well developed social control systems (Kraft 1996, Chapter 21) and the Hui use these systems to sustain their endogamic traditions (Shaw 1988, 97–102). Through endogamy, the Hui have been able to maintain their ethnic identity, sense of power and cultural pride through thousands of years.

The Dominant Cultural Theme: Power and Pride

The six significant cultural themes summarized in the previous section symbolize self-protection, unity for survival's sake, opposition to the majority, ethnic pride, power for daily survival, and a sense of belonging. However, I propose that these themes can be further abstracted into two categories: power and pride. These two concepts combine to comprise the dominant cultural theme. So, one may ask why the Hui culture has attached itself to the theme of power and pride? Of course, power and pride are basic human needs, and people rely on them in their daily lives in order to carve a place in society and to function

The Han "big brother" mentality has provoked the Islamic Hui.

therein. But beyond this general need, the Hui seek power and pride in order to survive their sociocultural subjection under China's Han. Like many minority groups, their survival and cultural identity has been threatened through the years by conflicts and wars with the majority government and people.

In the early period of Hui history in China, during the Tang, Song, Yuan, and Ming Dynasties, the Hui maintained supportive relationships with those monarchs. Only a few small riots or highway robberies occurred in areas where the Hui settled: Yang Chow City, in Canton province (758–760), in Shansi province (1343), and in Chwan Chow City (1357–1368) (1986,

129–30). These harmonious relationships with the Han Chinese government functioned relatively well by all obvious accounts. However, during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), as the Hui population and its forces grew, conflicts increased (1986, 129–30) and the Hui and Chinese saw each other as competitors. Economic, social, and religious systems fell into conflicts (Leslie 1986, 129).

During the Qing Dynasty, several feuding sects developed conflicts with the government (1781, 84) and these sects evolved into warring factions against the rulers (Lipman 1990, 71–73). Recent political collisions include the 1975 conflict in Yunnan Province in which the Red Army shut down Hui religious activities during the nation's Cultural Revolution (Dillon 1999, 164). Over the years, continual ethnic conflict and a crisis of survival have driven the Hui to seek power.

When Muslims settled in China, they had to live among the majority Chinese Han, which the majority government counts as the only people (*minzu*: 民族) who "constitute the story of Civilization [and] Culture itself and thus represent the Chinese version of history" (Lipman 1997, xxi). Consequently, minorities were forced to assimilate into this "superior culture." Throughout Chinese history, most minorities, including the Hui, were forced to accept *hanhua* (汉化), which means sinification, (i.e., the linguistic and/or cultural assimilation into the Chinese culture). This form of acculturation has been "one of the most common terms applied to the Hui and their relationship with the rest of the Chinese" (Dillon 1999, 4). This Han "big brother" mentality has provoked the Islamic Hui to search for internal sources of pride in opposition to the non-Islamic Han, who have tried to acculturate minority groups, including the Hui. In the past, when the pressure for sinification was strong and the Hui believed that they were

being forced to give up their identity because the government was transforming "all the people [groups] of China into Han" (Winters 1997, 39), they became rebellious and began riots (Israeli 1980, 122).

As the Chinese have proceeded into modernization, this traditional older brother dynamic has driven the Chinese government to find ways to civilize and modernize ethnic minorities (Gillett 2000, 8-14). For many generations, over thousands of years, the Hui have been shamed with the label of inferiority by the majority. To overcome this imposed identity, they have sought to establish themselves through power and pride. This effort to develop a sense of empowerment and cultural pride, formed within their inter-ethnic relations with the Han, has strengthened self-esteem among the Hui. Self-esteem, in turn, has served as a safeguard of their ethnic resources.

Biblical Concepts and Themes

To create a bridge to Hui cultural themes, I compare the specific concepts of power and pride in both Hui and biblical lexicons to learn which biblical terms share the closest meanings to the terms used today by the Hui.[6]

First, regarding the term "pride," the Bible dips into a broad etymological family. In addition to "pride," related terms may be "glory," "honor," "boasting," and "shame." Many words may denote negative situations, such as "arrogance" or "spiritual blindness," while terms referring to "glory" may seem more neutral. In particular, it seems that both Hebrew terms *kabod* and *tiphə'ereth* share a similar denotation for the term "pride," a familiar term in the Hui context. Though there are exceptions, *kabod*—translated into Greek as time (τιμη) and *doxa* (δοξα)—is usually used to refer to the "glory of God." Since *time* generally denotes "dignity," as associated with an office or position in society, it better aligns with the meaning of the Hui concept of "pride."

The Bible offers a new and divine meaning to quigzhen—that Jesus is the core of this purity and truth.

Second, the terminology for "power," as Colin Brown[7] summarizes, can be divided into two categories: *exousia* (εχουσια) and *dunamis* (δυναμιφ). *Exousia* denotes unrestricted freedom of action, power, authority, or right of action. In contrast, *dunamis,* denotes any potential strength based on inherent physical, spiritual, or natural powers, and is exhibited in spontaneous action, powerful deeds and natural phenomena. Specifically, *exousia* denotes the power that may be displayed in legal, political, social, or moral affairs. It often means (a) official power, (b) despot, (c) the office appropriate for specific authority, or (d) office-holders and "the authorities" (Brown 1983, 606-07).

Between them, *exousia* is closer to the Hui concept of power than is *dunamis*. This is because the Hui concept of power denotes a more tangible concept found in the legal, political, and social arenas. The Hui's search for power revolves around the political arena as they seek political power to ensure survival and ethnic identity.

Biblical Messages to the Hui

I suggest six messages from the Bible as appropriate responses to the Hui's cultural themes to help the Hui embrace the gospel as their own. First, as an introduction to Jesus, it would be helpful to share that he was born to marginal members of society and lived among them. Rather than in the city of Jerusalem, Jesus was raised in a small town, Nazareth, and worked with people in Galilee who were oppressed and likewise marginalized (Hertig 1995; Karris 1990). Jesus' experience mirrors the heartbreaking history of the Hui, that although they have lived in China for more than a thousand years, they are still familiar strangers—a marginal group among the Chinese majority (Mt. 4:25, 5:3; 10:1–4, 11:19, Jn. 15:4–5).

Second, the representative symbol of the Hui's power and pride cultural theme is *qingzhen*. By recognizing its meaning as "pure and true," the Hui's general sense of this concept (i.e., superiority and unity) is not lost, but the Bible offers a new and divine meaning to *qingzhen*—specifically, that Jesus is the core of this purity and truth (Jn. 14:6).

Third, Jesus is not only mighty enough to give the Hui power and prosperity to survive among the majority, but he also wants to lift the Hui up among the nations as he raised the Galileans from their plight. This is what the Hui truly want and need. They need a means to truly realize pride and power (Mt. 4:15–16).

Fourth, the Hui need to know that God has a father's heart (Luke 15:11–32). The father's heart is wider and deeper than that of any Hui's, or of anyone else. God accepts the Hui with love before he judges them through religious legalism. The Hui need to know God, who can receive them unconditionally into his kingdom. Jesus wants to save the Hui from shame and recover their honor as the father recovered his prodigal son (Bailey 1973).

As a fifth point, the Hui must understand that Christ assumed the Hui's sin and shame on the cross because he desires to give real *qingzhen* to the Hui. The antithetical message of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt. 5:3–6:18; Neyrey 1998), and the biblical lesson from Hebrews, can lead the Hui to despise shame, and learn true honor in humility, an "honorable disgrace" (DeSilva 1995). Moreover, fear of persecution from the Islamic community shall turn into absolute reward from God. If the Hui suffer persecution for

following Jesus, they can expect to receive true honor on the Day of Judgment.

And finally, the Hui need to know the divine paradox. Though they are a minority, it does not mean they are weak in Christ. As Paul experienced God's power through weakness (2 Co. 12:7–10), he confirmed that God will divinely reveal his power through the Hui's weakness. The Hui need to understand that God has a plan for them and he wants them to be strong by the power of God. Jesus saves and empowers people by the power of God, and he will do the same for the Hui.

These six contextualized cultural messages can set a foundation for church planting among the Hui.

Conclusion

After analyzing six significant symbols and signs, I believe that the Hui's major cultural theme is their high regard for power and pride, as a people and as individuals, a theme that's been nurtured through thousands of years through a variety of cultural expressions.

As one from a minority, Jesus experienced what the Hui experienced, He understands why such a theme developed, and he can sympathize with them. At the same time, Jesus recognizes this cultural distortion and wants to provide the Hui with a new message and solution to their helplessness and sense of alienation. In the gospel, there are answers that can fundamentally transform cultural themes. It is the responsibility of missionaries and local leaders to introduce the gospel by contextually building on their same tradition, thereby touching the Hui's deepest needs with new alternatives to their existing cultural themes.

I believe this cultural theme can serve as a contextual stepping stone for more culturally appropriate church planting. I hope and pray that this modest effort to bridge cultural divides will be refined further by Hui local leaders in the Lord. My intention is that mission scholars and missionaries will embrace this initial strategy I have explored, and that this sociocultural study will serve as a resource for planting contextual churches among the Hui. **IJFM**

Endnotes

[1] This article is based upon a field survey undertaken for my Ph.D. dissertation on the Hui of China.

[2] Reminick 1983:13; Romanucci-Ross and De Vos 1995:13, 357.

[3] Dillon 1996, 15–19; Broomhall 1966, Chapters 3–4.

[4] Dillon 1996, 19–24; 1999, Chapters 7–9.

[5] Data collected from my personal interview with a Hui friend in his own home (May 2005).

[6] In addition to biblical dictionaries and encyclopedias, the interpretation of power and pride in a Muslim context is explained by Evertt W. Huffard, 1985, "Thematic Dissonance in the Muslim-Christian Encounter: A Contextualized Theology of Honor." (Ph.D. dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary) 1985; and Dudley J. Woodberry, "Contextualization Among Muslims: Reusing Common Pillars" in *The World Among Us: Contextualizing Theology for Mission Today,* ed. Dean S. Gilliland (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing 1989).

[7] Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, Zondervan, 1983).

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