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Diasporic before the move: China's Hui Muslim's trade and ties with Iran and Muslimness

Introduction

In the winter of 2020, I met Mr Su at his office in a Muslim neighbourhood in Yiwu, a city near the eastern coast of China. Yiwu is a major trading hub that exports Chinese goods all around the world and hosts the world's largest market for small commodities – the Yiwu International Trade Market. Mr Su is the co-owner of a trade and logistics company in Yiwu who studied Persian in Iran in 2000 and came to Yiwu in 2003. He used to run a company that facilitates trade between China and Iran and his customers were primarily Iranians. Since the Trump administration tightened sanctions on Iran in 2018, his company has seen a decline in business with Iranian clients and he began to collaborate with another Hui Muslim entrepreneur to expand his enterprise. Today, his customers include wholesalers from a range of Middle Eastern countries, such as Iraq, Palestine, Morocco and Iran, and he also provides shipping services for numerous Chinese trade companies, some of which are run by returned Hui migrants in Yiwu. After a few rounds of polite greetings, Mr Su asked me how long I had been in Yiwu and how many and which Hui Muslim merchants I had interviewed. I was surprised to hear that he knew most of the Hui informants I had contact with, many of whom are returned migrants from Iran. He said jokingly, 'well, you don't need to talk to me anymore, our stories are all the same'.

Indeed, Mr Su's migration and entrepreneurial trajectories share many similarities with other Hui Muslims in Yiwu. Many of them studied Arabic or Persian at Islamic schools in China, had similar experiences of working and studying in the Middle East and all returned to Yiwu to participate in international trade. In this chapter, I argue that this shared experience has become a basis for a group of Hui Muslims to develop diasporic social ties and to construct an imagined community to which they belong – one that extends beyond their geographic location in China. Mr Su's story is a tale that illustrates how, in the last three decades, many Hui Muslims have strategically deployed the resources in their ethnic and religious community to become mobile entrepreneurs. It is also a story of the formation of new transnational networks and symbolic connections between Hui Muslim migrants who have become active participants of social-economic exchanges between China and the Middle East. These transnational social spaces (Faist, 2015), I argue, are building blocks that aid in the development of their diasporic identification and forms of belonging (Levitt, 2001).

In his critical assessment of the concept of diaspora, Brubaker (2005, p. 12) contends that diaspora should be understood as 'a category of practice, project, claim and stance, rather than as a bounded group'. The constructive approach to diaspora directs attention to the ways in which the diasporic condition is embodied through an individual's everyday practice and claims-making and through the process of diaspora identity and community formation (Butler, 2001; Brubaker, 2005). While diaspora and transnationalism have much overlap in their focus on cross-border connection and social identification that transcends nation-based identity (Faist, 2010, pp.

9-24), a distinctive dimension of diaspora is its emphasis on the connection between geographically dispersed populations and the sense of global identity that extends beyond homeland and hostland attachments (Abdelhady, 2006).

I build on these theoretical arguments to investigate the experiences of Hui migrants in China and Iran. With a few exceptions (for example, Ho, 2013; Wang, 2018), Chinese Muslim diasporas remain underexamined by scholars of Chinese migration. Moreover, existing studies of Chinese Muslim diasporas tend to focus on migrants' participation in exchanges between their various host societies and the homeland, and their negotiation of the 'dual' ethnic identity as Chinese and Muslim, paying less attention to the interconnection between geographically dispersed Chinese Muslim migrants and identification with a diasporic community. Furthermore, few scholars of Chinese diaspora have considered how diasporic connections and consciousness can exist among prospective and returned migrants, whose everyday life is just as much an embodiment of transnationalism and de-territorialised belonging as that of migrants.

In this chapter, I expand current studies of Chinese Muslim migrants through a diasporic perspective. My analysis shows that the concept of diaspora has analytical purchase for us to understand Hui Muslim migrants' experiences beyond the focus on transnationalism and their 'dual' identity. Moreover, I move beyond a view of migration as unidirectional processes and shed light on the circular movement and multidimensional global engagement of Hui Muslims. Chan's (2015) theorisation of diaspora as a series of historical moments that produce diasporic identity provides a fruitful analytical framework for the discussions in this chapter. The conception of 'diasporic moment' allows us to think of diaspora as processes and specific junctures that reveal diasporic members' complex senses of belonging and strategies to engage with national development and global change (Chan, 2015).

In the following sections, I situate Hui Muslims' transnational movement in the broad context of the new Chinese migration to Iran since the 1980s and discuss the historical and current socio-economic conditions that give rise to this migration flow. Then, I shed light on three moments that shape the Hui diasporic community and consciousness: education at Islamic schools in China, migration to Iran and return migration and settlement in Yiwu, China. By incorporating diasporic experiences prior to and following their migration to Iran, my analysis emphasises the processual formation of diaspora communities and identification that are concretised in daily experiences traversing nation-state boundaries beyond the actual experience of migration.

This chapter draws on data collected from participant observation and interviews undertaken between June 2019 and December 2020 in China and Iran. My informants include Chinese exchange students in Iran and employees at state-owned enterprises (SOEs) dispatched to Iran for work. The exchange students are Chinese undergraduates and graduate students majoring in Persian at prestigious universities in China and went to Iran to study for 6–12 months. Another group of participants are self-employed entrepreneurs, self-funded students who went to Iran voluntarily, of whom Hui Muslims are a major component of this category of Chinese migrants in Iran. This chapter also draws on data I collected in Yiwu, China in 2020. I interviewed many Hui Arabic and Persian interpreters and Hui entrepreneurs involved in trade businesses with the Middle East in Yiwu. A large proportion of my Hui informants are returned migrants from Iran and other Middle Eastern countries.

The new Chinese migration to Iran and the role of Hui Muslim migrants

The new Chinese migration to Iran began in the 1980s and peaked in the 2000s. Since the 2000s, US and international sanctions on Iran resulted in a significant amount of trade diversion on Iran's side (Habibi, Alizadeh and Hakimian, 2014) and China replaced many of its former trade partners, such as Japan, South Korea, India and European countries, to become the top exporter to Iran and the main importer of Iranian oil and gas (Bhat, 2012; Habibi, Alizadeh and Hakimian, 2014). The increase in bilateral trade between Iran and China is not only a result of China's rising energy demand but also Iran's increasing imports of consumer goods from China (Bazoobandi, 2015).

The emerging trend of new Chinese migration to Iran is a manifestation of the growing economic relationship between the two countries. Large Chinese SOEs and private Chinese companies began to invest in Iran in the late 1990s, sending Chinese managers and contract labourers for projects to help to build a range of infrastructure projects such as highways, metro systems and dams throughout the country (Lu, 2017). There is also a sizeable stream of migration to Iran by Chinese entrepreneurs, students and independent labourers (Ji, 2015; Lu and Huang, 2016). The influx of Chinese private businesses to Iran reached its peak in 2016 after the signing of the Iran nuclear agreement which temporarily lifted international sanctions. Following the agreement, Chinese hotels and restaurants sprung up in Tehran and the number of Chinese travellers to Iran reached about 70,000 in 2017, of whom 60 to 70 per cent travelled for business purposes (Hu and Qu, 2019).

As China deepened its economic relationship with Iran in the past three decades, there has been an increase in demand for people with Persian language skills to work for Chinese SOEs, government agencies and private firms trading with Iran. However, Persian language training has been underdeveloped in Chinese higher education – only four universities in China offered a Persian language major up until 2010. These market dynamics explain the increased number of Chinese students who go to Iran to study and the continuation of trade migration over the past three decades.

Hui migrants have been the main participants in trade and cultural exchanges between China and Iran during the last three decades. Since the 1980s, an increasing number of Hui Muslims have travelled to the Middle East to study or conduct business (Armijo, 2008; Ji, 2015). Historical connections and present political dynamics shape the distinctive position of Hui people in the contemporary relations between China and Iran. The Hui people are commonly understood as descendants of Persian and Arab immigrants who settled in China since the seventh century (Lipman, 1997). The exchanges between China and the Middle East emerged when traders from Central Asia and the Middle East travelled to China and established the ancient Silk Road. Since then, a conspicuous number of Arab and Persian merchants have visited and settled in China (Zhu, 1978; Ma, 2019). Their presence led to the formation of the Chinese-speaking Muslim or Hui ethnic group and shaped the unique linguistic, religious and social practices of the Hui people.

Whereas the Hui people predominantly speak Chinese, they maintain some Arabic and Persian phrases in their language, especially in denoting religious activities (Abidi, 1981; Ding, 1999). I heard many fascinating stories when I asked my informants about the first time they heard or learned Arabic and Persian. The most memorable tale comes from Mr Ma, a Hui Muslim trader in Yiwu. Mr Ma is from Ningxia province, a Hui autonomous region in northwestern China. He said that his grandparents used a Perso-Arabic script named ‘Xiao Er Jing’ (小儿经) to write Mandarin because they are illiterate in Chinese but learned Arabic and Persian at mosques. These linguistic practices reveal the mixed cultural heritage of the Hui and the deep historical connections between Chinese Muslim communities and the Middle East. They are also moments that my informants constantly revisit and grapple with and are important for their process of identification and awareness of their linkages with the Middle East.

In the next section, I discuss how historical ties and a mixed cultural identification facilitate the ability of members of the Hui community to capitalise on the opportunities offered by China-Iran trade. In the process, their diasporic identifications and communal belongings extend beyond imaginations based on shared ancestry and linguistic heritage to include concrete experiences of travel to and global encounters with the Middle East.

Connecting to the diasporic community: Islamic education in China

Many theorists emphasise a historical approach to the study of diaspora. For example, Alexander (2017) argues that historical and current conditions intertwine to produce a range of ‘mobility capital’ that shapes the construction of diasporic networks and membership. In the last two decades, a range of historically shaped conditions in Hui communities generated new forms of mobility capital that enable the Hui to venture abroad and to become brokers and entrepreneurs in China-Iran trade. In particular, Islamic education, a legacy of the Silk Road exchanges, plays a crucial role in Hui people’s migration to the Middle East.

Persian and Arabic have been part of the Islamic educational system in China since at least the thirteenth century, and Chinese Muslim scholars have taught Arabic and Persian and translated Arabic and Persian works into Chinese (Ding, 1999; Ding, 2004). Today, Arabic and Persian languages are taught at Chinese Islamic schools and are used by Hui Muslims in their religious practices (Ma, 2012; Yang, 1996). As part of China’s counterterrorism policies, however, the Chinese government has imposed restrictions on the practice and study of Islam in China and connections between Chinese and foreign Muslim groups (Dillon, 2003). Nevertheless, these restrictions are not evenly applied to all groups of Chinese Muslims (Gladney, 1996). Hui people – who share the same language and closer cultural affinity with Han Chinese, the ethnic majority in China – have enjoyed more freedom in expressing their ethno-religious identity compared to other Muslim groups such as Uyghurs (Bird, 2017, p. 124; Wang, 2018).

Islamic schools in China are important sites for the formation of Hui cultural and religious identity. My research highlights the role of two particular types of Islamic schools in Hui Muslim’s migration: *madrasas* (经堂学校) and private language schools (阿语学校). Classes at *madrasas* often involve the teaching of Arabic and sometimes Persian and the foundations of Islamic beliefs (Ding, 1999). Language schools are also established and funded by local mosques. Yet they tend to integrate Islamic education with vocational training to benefit

students' opportunities for future employment (Alles, 2003; Ma, 2014). Madrasas and language schools in China place equal weight on the dissemination of Chinese and Islamic culture (中阿并重) and often offer courses such as classical and modern Chinese alongside Arabic and Persian training and combine classes about the history of Islamic religion and civilisation with courses on the history of Islam in China and of the Hui ethnic group (Ma, 2013, pp. 104-128). As previous research shows, this curriculum design fosters Hui students' mixed cultural membership in the Chinese and Islamic communities (Ma, 2013).

Education at Islamic schools provides the first chance for some of my informants to gain a deeper understanding of their religion, setting the foundations for them to develop global ties through shared Islamic beliefs. A few informants stressed that not all Hui are Muslim, and many Hui people are secularised – they neither understand Islamic religion nor practice it. Mr Sha, a Hui trade businessman in Yiwu who learned Arabic at a language school said, 'before studying at Islamic schools, most Hui youths attend national schools and do not receive religious education. We may know that we are Hui, we believe in Islam, but in fact, we are not so different from Han people.' The construction of Muslim identity through Islamic education has an impact on Hui people's future development of cross-cultural relationships with Muslims from other countries. According to the Hui students and merchants that I met in Iran and Yiwu, being Muslim allows them to establish trust and rapport with Muslims from the Middle East because Islam entails a shared worldview and business ethics that facilitate their communication and mutual understanding. This suggests Hui people's view of Islam as a world religion and the influence of Islamic identity on the development of their diasporic connections beyond the Chinese and Chinese Muslim communities.

Islamic schools are also crucial sites in which Hui people establish social ties with other diasporic members that make their migration possible. During my fieldwork in China, I met Mr Li, a Chinese Muslim from Gansu province in northwestern China. After graduating from middle school, he went to study at a mosque in the province through a friend's recommendation. This mosque offers both Arabic and Persian classes as part of its religious training and many teachers are returned migrants who studied Persian in Iran. Mr Li said that his teachers 'know the admission officers at Al-Mustafa University in Iran well' and they 'helped to send Chinese students to the university every year'. He told me that the teachers from Iran's Al-Mustafa University visited China regularly to recruit students. By his teacher's connection, he attended the admission exam in 2015 and was accepted. Mr Li's experience represents many Hui people's pathway of migration to Iran. Besides Iranian universities, educational institutions in other Middle Eastern countries, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, also visit cities with Chinese Islamic schools to recruit students. Many teachers at Islamic schools are themselves returned migrants who studied in the Middle East, some of whom have ongoing contacts with the overseas universities they attended. Islamic school can thus be seen as a critical constituent of the Chinese Muslim diasporic network. This network connects prospective Hui migrants in China, returned Hui diaspora and educational institutions overseas and plays a crucial role in channelling Hui people's migration to the Middle East.

In his reflection on the Chinese diaspora, Ma Mung (1998; 2004) emphasises that the geographical dispersal of diasporas in multiple countries and the interconnection between diasporic members constitute a form of spatial resource. Hui students' migration manifests their

deployment of diasporic networks as a resource to enable their migration. Mr Li, for instance, utilised his social ties with the returned diaspora to pursue an educational opportunity in Iran.

Moreover, as Ma Mung (1998) suggests, the use of diasporic networks as a resource signifies and induces a diasporic perspective because it transforms the meaning of locality and the ways in which one sees the world. Ma Mung argues that diasporic consciousness arises when one becomes aware of and knowledgeable about the places where one's peers live and realise the opportunity of migrating to these places due to one's peer's presence. Many Hui informants told me that they have aspired to study overseas from a young age because they have acquaintances in the Middle East who can help them go there, and they were motivated by the migration stories of these pioneers in their communities to follow suit. For example, Mr Li said that he decided to go to Iran when he began to study at the mosque school because 'it was a common thing among students there' and his teachers encouraged him to go abroad. A diasporic consciousness is embodied in these accounts because they illustrate how one learns about different places through diaspora stories and comes to see the world through diasporic networks that transcend national boundaries. This view of the world manifests a sense of extraterritoriality – a key feature of diasporic consciousness (Ma Mung, 2004). Both Mr Li and Mr Su, the Hui entrepreneur whose story I share at the beginning of the chapter, told me that they knew very little about Iran before going there. It is not so much their knowledge about Iran but rather the presence of their peers in the country that determined their choice to travel. When Mr Su described his migration decision to me, I was surprised by how easy it seemed to be. He said: 'I had relatives in Malaysia and Iran, so I considered going to either of the two countries.' This seemingly 'unthoughtful' decision-making process nonetheless reveals how diasporic networks allow distinctive localities, such as Iran and Malaysia, appear similar and transform a foreign land into a potential 'home'. This way of imagining the world through diasporic connections, rather than a nation-based framework, is an integral part of diasporic consciousness.

Migration to Iran: negotiating marginality

Despite the diasporic imaginings that are initiated in the context of the language schools, most Hui informants see their decision to go to Iran as a strategic choice that allowed them to capitalise on their own social resources and opportunities that emerged as part of the expanding China-Iran trade market. Many Hui youths at Islamic schools who subsequently went abroad are from poor families in rural China and had dropped out of public education at primary or secondary school (Ma, 2013; Mu, 2013). Some of them chose to study in Iran due to the relatively low cost of living and the free education at Iranian public universities.

Among the Hui students, some are self-funded. They mostly study at the Persian language centres in Tehran and Qazvin. However, a significant number of Hui students attended the religious programme at Al-Mustafa International University in Qom and the other five branches of the university in Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, Gorgan and Qeshm. These universities charge no tuition fees and provide free accommodation, meals on campus and a monthly stipend of around 100 USD for foreign students. According to Al-Mustafa University's official website, the main objective of these programmes is 'disseminating Islamic teachings' (Al-Mustafa International University, 2017). However, many Hui informants told me that they went there mainly to learn the Persian language so that they would have better opportunities to find employment.

The disadvantaged class background of Hui students prompts them to look for jobs throughout their study in Iran. Participation in part-time work during student years shapes Hui migrants' complex position in the Chinese migrant community, their knowledge of the Iranian host society and their role as the economic and cultural middlemen between China and Iran. Hui students' involvement in part-time work often came up in my interviews during my fieldwork in Iran. A few Hui informants joked apologetically that they were 'bad students' because they took on many part-time interpreter jobs and barely attended school. This view is also shared by the more affluent Chinese migrants. A remark that I heard several times from Chinese exchange students (who are from prestigious universities in China) and elite migrants describes Hui students as low *suzhi*, because they often skipped classes or failed to complete their studies in Iran. *Suzhi* is a Chinese word that refers to 'physical, psychological, intellectual, moral, and ideological qualities of human bodies and their conduct' (Jacka, 2009, p. 524) and serves as a form of distinction and social differentiation (Lam, 2017). Hui students' background and practices in Iranian educational institutions do not conform to the conventional expectation that knowledge mobility is an elite exercise to accumulate high cultural capital. As a result, they are seen as inadequate students disrupting the reputation of Chinese students in Iran.

Part-time jobs, however, provide opportunities for Hui students to acquire deeper knowledge about Iran and become cultural translators and brokers in China-Iran trade – a position that ultimately helps them to obtain upward mobility. Hui informants told me that their jobs as interpreters sometimes took them on week-long trips to marketplaces and trade expos in different Iranian cities. This provided opportunities for them to gain insights into Iranian society and international trade business. They also expanded their social networks through interactions with various Chinese and Iranian merchants and professionals during part-time work. Moreover, working as an interpreter requires Hui students to assume the role of cultural middlemen and brokers in the China-Iran trade market. In this process, they learn to live 'in translation', to switch between Chinese and Iranian cultures and develop cross-cultural competencies that are crucial for their future ventures in transnational trade.

Many scholars of Chinese overseas studies have criticised the use of 'diaspora' as a totalising concept implying a uniform 'Chinese' identity and nationalist loyalties (Shih, 2013; Hsu, 2019). These critiques lead to attempts to move beyond a nation-based understanding of Chinese diasporas and to pay more attention to the heterogeneity of Chinese overseas. Recent studies have investigated how various factors, such as class, religion, regional identities and dialect, shape Chinese diasporic networks and belonging (McKeown, 1999; Lam, 2017; Le, 2019). Hui Muslim's experiences with cultural brokerage and marginalisation in Iran demonstrate social distinctions among the Chinese migrant community in Iran and reveal a diasporic condition that cannot be accounted for by either their nationality or ethno-religious status alone. On the one hand, many Hui informants had close ties with the larger Chinese migrant community in Iran and they capitalised on resources in this community for employment. For instance, some informants said that the Chinese Student Association in Iran and the Chinese Embassy were important sources of information about part-time jobs. Mr Bai is a Hui entrepreneur who runs a trade company in Yiwu facilitating export from China to Iran. He went to Iran in 2003 and spent twelve years studying and working in the country before returning to China in 2015. Mr Bai told me that he frequently attended events at the Chinese embassy in Tehran, and sometimes worked

or volunteered as an interpreter at these events. On the other hand, Hui Muslims' participation in part-time jobs marks their disadvantaged status within China, a position that followed them in Iran and informs their fragmented belonging to the Chinese migrant community in Iran.

Migration not only reveals Hui Muslims' complex position and sense of belonging to the Chinese community but also generates new ties with the host country. Hui migrants develop Persian language skills, complex knowledge about Iranian society and a sense of affinity with Iran. When I conducted my fieldwork in Tehran, I met Mr Gao, a Hui student who was completing a degree in Iranian studies at the University of Tehran. He told me that he wanted to become a scholar of Iranian studies in the future. He believes that there are deep cultural linkages between China and Iran and that the Persian culture has a profound influence on the Hui community in China:

We are the descendants of Persian Muslims; our religion is *Persian* Islam. For instance, we say our daily prayer and the prayer before *Iftar* partly in Persian language, we still use the Persian classic book *Golestan* in many Chinese mosques. Sufism also has an important influence on Chinese Islam. These cultural similarities make it easier for us to understand Iranian culture.

In this account, Mr Gao emphasises the Persian influence on the Hui community, a belief that helps him to relate to the new host society and eases his adaptation to life in Iran. At the same time, the process of 'making home' at a new place produces sentimental ties with the host land. Mr Bai, the Hui entrepreneur I mention above, said to me: 'we lived in Iran for a long time. I may not understand a Chinese person as well as my Iranian friends and clients. It's almost like we've spent the best time of our life (青春) on the land of Iran.'

Cultural ties notwithstanding, few Hui Muslims see Iran as a permanent home, and many eventually return to China to participate in trade. Some informants explained that they chose to come back because living in Iran allowed them to see more clearly the rapid economic development and opportunities in China. Mr Su, for example, visited Yiwu for the first time during his third year of study in Iran and was 'amazed' by the scope of global trade businesses and the level of economic development he witnessed. He said he decided immediately that he would stay in Yiwu and he never went back to complete his studies in Iran. Because of the transient nature of their residency in Iran, many Hui migrants do not show a strong sense of belonging to Iran or the Chinese migrant community there. Their experiences in Iran, however, contribute to their diasporic identification as it informs their connection to a global entrepreneurial trade network spanning across China and the Middle East, as I describe in the next section.

Returning home: becoming diasporic entrepreneurs

When I conducted fieldwork in Yiwu in the fall of 2020, I met many Hui people who have lived in Iran and returned to China to run businesses facilitating trade between the two countries. Since the end of the 1990s, a rising number of companies, traders and merchants from the Middle East have come to settle in Yiwu, turning the city into one of the main nodes in the transnational commodity chain between China and Iran (Ma, 2012; Wang, 2015).¹ The growing presence of Middle Eastern merchants in Yiwu creates a demand for Persian and Arabic interpreters and intermediate agencies that facilitate trade activities between China and the Middle East (Ma,

2012; Wang, 2015). Hui Muslim returnees' Persian skills and first-hand knowledge of Iran become important assets for them to assume the brokerage role in China-Iran trade activities.

Mr Su is one of the Hui Muslim returnees who became successful entrepreneurs in Yiwu. As the story at the beginning of this chapter shows, Mr Su's clientele is not limited to Iranians but includes traders from many Middle Eastern countries as well as returned Hui migrants. Moreover, the diverse clientele also provides an opportunity for Mr Su to use his proficiency in Persian and Arabic that he acquired at the Chinese Islamic school. He told me that he has provided services of both Arabic and Persian interpretation for Middle Eastern traders.

As Mr Su's experience illustrates, returning to China does not mark the end of Hui migrants' transnational engagement. Instead, it opens up new opportunities for more extensive global connections beyond those between China and Iran. In her study, Guo (2016) conceptualises her Chinese Canadian informants in China as the 'double diaspora' whose transnational movement signifies a form of diasporic journey that is 'neither unidirectional nor final, but rather multiple and circular'. The mobile Hui Muslims in this study share this characteristic of the double diaspora. They left China after becoming engaged in a diasporic space created through Chinese Islamic schools and went to Iran and forged ties with other Chinese in Iran and with Iranian society. Upon their return, their diasporic connections are strengthened and performed on a daily basis.

The transnational lifestyle and what Guo describes as circular movement of these returned diasporans is illustrated in their frequent cross-border travels and continued relationship with Iran. Mr Su, for example, has regularly gone to Iran to visit his clients throughout the last twenty years. He also maintains contact with some Chinese friends in Iran and occasionally collaborates with them for business. Besides Iran, he has been to Iraq, Palestine and Morocco to explore new market opportunities. Apart from actual movement across borders, transnationalism and global engagement also characterises the everyday life of returned Hui diasporans like Mr Su. Because of their involvement in global trade business, they are keen observers of social and political events and market changes in Iran and other potential markets. Some of them regularly read Persian news on Iranian websites and BBC Persian. The main components of their daily job include communication with foreign clients online and hosting foreign customers when they visit Yiwu to purchase products. These activities are not only part of the demands of their entrepreneurial lifestyle but are also informed by their conceptions of themselves as a particular diasporic minority in China that has linkages with the Middle East.

Furthermore, the diasporic connections of returned Hui migrants are also multiplied, and, in the case of my informants, extend beyond Iran. Yiwu is a place where returned Hui migrants develop new social relationships with other Hui Muslim traders, many of whom have studied Arabic and sojourned to other Middle Eastern countries such as Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia. During my fieldwork, I was often invited to have tea at social gatherings of these Hui Muslim entrepreneurs. Some Hui traders talked about the many common links they share with their friends: they may be from the same hometown, have been at the same Islamic school in China or studied in the same country before coming to Yiwu. It is worth noting that the relationships between Hui Muslim traders in Yiwu are highly complex and are often characterised by competition and even mistrust. Nevertheless, the similarities they share do help them to establish

a certain level of trust, thus laying the groundwork for business partnerships and the creation of diasporic bonds.

The extensive connections among returned Hui diasporans with shared ethnic identity and migration experiences also lead to new forms of diasporic imaginations. Many Hui informants spoke proudly about the success of Hui entrepreneurs who are actively involved in trade business between China and the Middle East. For example, Mr Gao, the Hui student I met in Tehran, talked about the successful Hui entrepreneurs in his family and social circle. He commented on these stories emotionally:

These Hui entrepreneurs did not take up educational resources from our country, but they made huge contributions to China-Middle Eastern trade relations... Most people participating in Sino-Middle Eastern trade today are Hui. This is because as Muslims it's easier for us to communicate with foreign Muslims.

As I discussed in the previous section, Islam as a global religion provides a common ground for mutual understanding and trust between Chinese and Middle Eastern Muslim traders in the transnational market. In a time when Muslims are often depicted by Chinese public discourses and international media as risky subjects, Mr Gao's narrative portrays Islamic identity as an asset for Hui Muslims to become successful entrepreneurs and grassroots ambassadors between China and the Middle East. Moreover, Mr Gao's account constructs an imagined diasporic community constituted of accomplished Chinese Muslim students and entrepreneurs who have made significant economic and cultural contributions to their homeland. Against the prejudice of Hui Muslim migrants as low *suzhi* subjects, members of the Hui migrant community construct an alternative understanding of themselves as accomplished Chinese citizens with a heightened awareness of their Muslim identification and diasporic modes of belonging.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examine Hui Muslims' transnational migration between China and Iran. I discuss how different moments of Hui people's migration contribute to the formation of diasporic ties and imaginations. I argue that Hui Muslims become 'diasporic' even before they migrate to Iran. Experiences with migration allow Hui people to acquire cross-cultural competency and knowledge about global trade and complicate their sense of belonging to China and Iran. While in Iran, their inability to totally belong to a Chinese migrant community, as a result of their limited access to economic and cultural capital, marks their difference and estrangement from a coherent Chinese diaspora. At the same time, they rely on the Chinese migrant community as a source of social capital that grants them access to job opportunities while in Iran. These experiences contribute to their ability to succeed upon their return to China. Their transnational ties and diasporic connections do not end but expand after their repatriation, leading to a new imagination of diasporic communities. Throughout my analysis, I conceptualise migration as a circular, open-ended process rather than a unidirectional relocation. Furthermore, I argue that while diasporic disposition is closely connected to cross-border travelling, it is, more importantly, a way of being and of understanding the world that can be embodied by those who are not on the move and by migrants who returned and resettled in the homeland.

My analysis also contributes to studies of Chinese diaspora. I discuss how the historical legacy of China-Middle East exchanges produce new opportunities for Hui Muslims today to venture

abroad and become brokers and grassroots ambassadors between China and the Middle East. I use the concept of diaspora to illustrate Hui migrants' diverse social ties and complex senses of belonging to China, Iran and the diasporic community. This analysis reveals the need to move beyond an ethnic or nation-based framework for understanding the Chinese diaspora.

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¹ According to statistics from the Yiwu Government, Iran was among the top three importer of goods from Yiwu from 2012 to 2018. Source: http://www.yw.gov.cn/art/2014/3/26/art_1229146127_1853391.html