

The Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in Northwestern China is one of the five ethnic minority autonomous regions in the country. In 1914, Ningxia was merged with Gansu Province, but was detached and became its own individual province in 1928. Later, in 1954, it was again administratively merged with Gansu until 1958 when it was separated and established as the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, with some degree of self-governance granted to the Hui ethnic group.

The Hui are afforded greater representation in local government positions, and every chairperson of the regional government since the establishment of the autonomous region has been Hui. Local policies are also meant to support the preservation of Hui culture, traditions and Islamic religious practices, however in practice real power remains with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which continues to oversee and regulate religious activities.

Approximately 20% of the Hui people reside in Ningxia, accounting for approximately one-third of the total population of the region. The remainder of the population in Ningxia comprises largely Han Chinese and other smaller ethnic communities, such as Manchu, Mongols and Tibetans. As of the 2020 census, Ningxia's total population was approximately 7.2 million people.

Hui is one of the 56 officially recognised nationalities of China, and one of the country's largest ethnic groups outside of the Han majority, along with Manchu, Uyghur and Zhuang. Their origins are linked to Muslim traders, diplomats and soldiers who went to China from Arabia, Central Asia, and Persia as early as the 7th century and throughout the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1279) Dynasties. Over time, Hui intermarried with local Han Chinese, and their descendants adopted Chinese language and customs. As such, they do not have their own language, unlike some other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups such as the Uyghurs who speak a Turkic language.

Due to their heritage, the Hui are predominantly Muslim, and their culture revolves around Islamic practices. Approximately 44% of the estimated 26 million Muslims in China are Hui.¹ While Islam remains the dominant and defining religious identity of the Hui, their history of living in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious environment has seen them adopt cultural influences from Chinese folk beliefs, Confucianism and Daoism. There are also a small number of Hui who are of Christian faith.

While Ningxia is the only province-level Hui autonomous region, they are scattered across China. Major populations

exist in provinces including Gansu, Henan, Qinghai, Shaanxi and Yunnan, as well as the capital Beijing.

Repression of Hui

Like other Muslims and religious minorities in China, the Hui have faced periods of oppression by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). They experienced widespread repression during the Cultural Revolution between 1966 and 1976, alongside religious groups. The CCP relaxed its policies on religion in the 1980s and early 1990s while maintaining ongoing state control and regulation of religion. However, the situation began to deteriorate from 2017 when the CCP proposed a 'Five-Year Plan for the Sinicisation of Islam',² which set out to remove the influence of three '-sations' in China: 'Arabisation', 'Saudisation' and the 'generalisation of halal'.

According to a report on the CCP's Sinicisation measures published by Human Rights Watch, ever since President Xi Jinping called for the 'Sinicisation' of religions in 2016, the authorities have sought to comprehensively reshape religions to make them consistent with CCP ideology and to promote allegiance to the party and President Xi.³

'Mosque consolidation' is referenced in an April 2018 party document that instructs party and state agencies to 'strengthen the standardised management of the construction, renovation and expansion of Islamic religious venues' across the country.⁴ Available government documents suggest that the Chinese government has been 'consolidating' mosques in Gansu and Ningxia Provinces, which have the highest Muslim populations in China after the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.

The Chinese government has also revised or added new laws to tighten religious control, including the 'Measures on the Administration of Religious Activity Venues', which came into force on 1 September 2023.⁵ The measures require religious venues to indoctrinate followers in CCP ideology. Article 3 stipulates that religious activity venues should uphold the leadership of the CCP, and those at the activities must uphold the socialist system and adhere to Sinicisation. Articles 28 and 36 require the venues to establish performance evaluation systems for their employees where CCP will then indoctrinate these members with policies of communism, national laws and regulations.

A November 2024 study by academics Hannah Theaker and David R. Stroup details how Sinicisation policies have suppressed the religious activity and identity of Hui communities since 2017. It highlights that '*the foundation of*

1 Statista, 'Muslim population in China 2010 and 2020, by ethnicity', 13 February 2024 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/619931/china-number-of-muslims-by-ethnicity/>

2 China Islamic Association, 'Five-Year Planning Outline for Persisting in the Sinification of Islam (2018-2022)', translated by China Law Translate on 31 May 2019 <https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/islamsinificationplan/>

3 Human Rights Watch, 'China: Mosques Shuttered, Razed, Altered in Muslim Areas', 22 November 2023 <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/22/china-mosques-shuttered-razed-altered-muslim-areas>

4 Notice of the General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council on Printing and Distributing "Suggestions on Strengthening and Improving Islamic Work in the New Situation", 19 April 2018, published by the Uyghur Tribunal on 13 December 2021 <https://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Transcript-Documents-10.pdf>

5 Bitter Winter Magazine, 'The New Chinese Measures for Religious Activity Venues Come into Force on September 1: The Full Text', 7 August 2023 <https://bitterwinter.org/the-new-chinese-measures-for-religious-activity-venues-come-into-force-on-september-1-the-full-text/>

*Sinicisation goes beyond architecture, the campaign touches matters connected to theology, ritual, diet, dress, education, and mosque employment, among other things.*⁶

While the Hui have faced growing repression, it is important to note that up until now they have not been subjected to the same level of mass detention and forced labour experienced by Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim ethnic groups in Xinjiang. One reason for this distinction may be that the Hui are ethnically more similar to the Han and generally speak Mandarin as their primary language, making them appear more 'assimilated' in the eyes of the state. However, the extent of repression varies by region, with stricter control in areas like Gansu and Ningxia.

Case Studies

Ma Yan



Ma Yan is a 32-year-old Hui Christian pastor originally from Yunnan province who later served as a pastor of a house church in Ningxia. He was detained on 9 August 2024 when police officers from the Jinfeng District Public Security Bureau raided a gathering of no more than ten Christians at a guest house in Jinfeng District, Yinchuan for 'disrupting social order'. After spending ten days in administrative detention, Ma was criminally detained by the same bureau on the charge of 'organising illegal gatherings'. He was formally arrested on the same charge on 26 September and stood trial on 10 February 2025.

CSW sources report that Ma pleaded guilty during the trial because the charge of 'organising illegal gatherings' carries a lighter sentence compared to other charges and does not attract moral stigmatisation. The trial concluded without an immediate verdict, but if the court follows the prosecutor's sentencing recommendation, Ma will be sentenced to nine months in prison.

Ma Yanhu

Ma Yanhu is a Hui Muslim who originally trained as an Islamic theologian and worked for two decades as a tour organiser

for hundreds of Chinese Muslims looking to make the Hajj pilgrimage to the Islamic holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia.

Ma stopped leading tours himself in 2020, when new rules came into effect mandating that all Hajj pilgrimage trips must be organised by the Islamic Association of China, which falls under the authority of the CCP's United Front Work Department (UFW). This law was one of a range of measures introduced as part of a wider effort to 'sinicise' and control religious practice across the country.



Ma continued his work in tour operation but only helped with booking flights and arranging essential travel documents including Umrah visa which allows visits to Mecca for 'minor' pilgrimage which is not one of the pillars of Islam and can be undertaken at any time of the year. It differs from the Hajj visa required for the official Hajj pilgrimage visit.

Ma was detained on 20 March 2023 and accused by the authorities of 'organising others to illegally cross the border'. He was formally arrested on 24 April 2023 except at this point the charge against him had changed and he now stood accused of 'illegal business operations', another particularly common charge levelled religious leaders. CSW sources believed the charge was likely introduced to gain the Tongxin County Procuratorate's approval for Ma's arrest because the initial charge lacked evidence.

A prosecution letter was issued on 24 October 2023, however, contrary to standard procedure the court did not set a date for Ma's trial because it had been informed that the letter needed to be amended. A second prosecution letter was issued six months later on 15 April 2024, this time with the charges changed back to 'illegally crossing the border'. The case finally proceeded to trial, and on 21 June Ma was sentenced to eight years in prison.

Ma appealed his case to the WuZhong Intermediate People's Court shortly afterwards, arguing that the charges against him violate the Chinese Constitution and China's Anti-Monopoly Law by upholding a system in which all Hajj pilgrimages must be organised through the Islamic Association of China, which charges for its services. The appeal was rejected on 19 August.

⁶ H Theaker & D Stroup, 'Making Islam Chinese: Religious Policy and Mosque Sinicisation in the Xi Era', 1 November 2024 https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5130111

Pastor Geng Zejun, Church of the Rock



Credit: China Aid

Notably repression in Ningxia is not limited to the Hui people alone. Church of the Rock is a house church located in the Huinong district of the prefecture-level city Shizuishan, the second largest city in the province. The church is known for its reformed theology and has consistently refused to join the government-approved Three Self Patriotic Movement.

The church's pastor Geng Zejun, who is Han Chinese, and some other members were first detained on 5 December 2021 when police raided the church during a Sunday service.⁷ The group were charged with 'illegal gatherings' and 'disturbing the social order', both of which are common charges levelled against religious leaders.

Pastor Geng was reportedly held for 15 days and then released. But was summoned again on 4 January 2022. He was formally arrested on 25 January 2022, and stood trial on 13 July 2022. The prosecutor asked for a sentence of 11 months but confusingly and unusually the court went beyond the prosecutor's request and sentenced Geng to one year and 3 months in prison.

Geng was released from prison on 19 March 2023 after completing his prison sentence.⁸

Conclusion

The repression of the Hui people and others in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region exemplifies the CCP's broader effort to replace religion with Communist ideology. By promoting state atheism, enforcing strict control over religious practices, and implementing policies like the 'Sinicisation of religion', which mandates that religious teachings conform to socialist values and Chinese nationalism, the CCP seeks to suppress independent religious identity. Religious sites face censorship, demolition, or forced modification to align with Party directives, while religious leaders who resist

CCP demands risk punishment. Additionally, ideological indoctrination through education, media, and surveillance reinforces party loyalty over religious faith, advancing the CCP's ultimate goal of replacing religious belief with allegiance to the state.

Recommendations

To the People's Republic of China:

- Ratify the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and ensure national laws and relevant policies comply with ICCPR obligations, in particular regarding the right to life and security, protection from arbitrary deprivation of life; the right to a fair trial and due process; freedom of expression, association, and assembly; and protection from discrimination on the grounds of race, religion or other status.
- Guarantee the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion or belief, in accordance with Article 18 of the ICCPR and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). This includes revising all regulations and legislation pertaining to religion to ensure they align with international standards, in consultation with religious communities and legal experts.
- End the arbitrary detention and persecution of religious and ethnic minorities, ensuring fair trials and due process, and release individuals detained solely for their religious beliefs or ethnic identity.

To the United Nations and Member States:

- At every possible opportunity, in public and in private, urge the Chinese government to respect, protect and promote the human rights of the ethnic minorities, and to implement the recommendations provided above.
- Call on China to amend its regulations and administrative measures for religious affairs in line with international standards.
- Monitor developments in human rights and freedom of religion or belief policy and violations in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region and urge the High Commissioner for human rights, his office and all other relevant UN mechanisms, including the UN Special Procedures and Treaty Bodies, to include the right to freedom of religion or belief in their reporting on China, addressing the vulnerabilities and violations faced by religion or belief communities and those seeking to defend them.

⁷ *Church In Chains*, 'Detained house church pastor awaits trial, 30 June 2022 <https://www.churchinchains.ie/news-by-country/east-asia/china/china-detained-house-church-pastor-awaits-trial/>

⁸ *Rights Protection Network*, 'Geng Zejun, a preacher of Panshi Church in Huinong District, Shizuishan City, Ningxia, was released from prison after serving his sentence of 1 year and 3 months' (Chinese), 19 March 2023 https://wqw2010.blogspot.com/2023/03/13_19.html?m=1

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