Tourism and Urban Renewal: The Case of Xi’an’s ‘Hui Quarter’

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Tourism and Urban Renewal: The Case of Xi’an’s “Hui Quarter”

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1. Introduction

In recent years, tourism development has become commonplace throughout the world. Some scholars criticize the emphasis on tourism development for urban renewal (e.g., Kuppinger 1998; Crain 1996). In China, after the implementation of the 1978 “Open Door” policy, the national government shifted towards proactively promoting tourism development throughout the country (Han 1996). Meanwhile, as urban renewal for improved living conditions continues to be promoted throughout the country, China’s cityscapes are changing by the day.

Bai Youtao’s research in Nanjing’s Hui community indicates that all urban historical districts of the traditional Hui community are currently under threat of demolition (Bai 2005). His paper first introduced the results of urban renewal within the Hui community in Tianjin, Xi’an, Guangzhou and Shanghai. His analysis determined that Nanjing’s Hui community was set to make a difficult choice: either accept demolition, thereby rejecting their own traditional culture, or refuse demolition, thus accepting living conditions with inadequate infrastructure and squalid housing. Bai concluded that as these communities have yet to adapt to the modern city, therefore they must accept urban renewal.

Liang Jingyu researched in Beijing’s Niujie, famous throughout China for its large scale Hui district. Liang reported that some Hui communities face demolition for urban renewal (Liang 2006). In his report, the urban renewal of Niujie was promoted via discussions between the government, developers, and the local Hui people. Liang found that the result of urban renewal was a decrease in neighborhood ties in Hui communities, an increase in the mixing of Hui and non-Hui residents, and a decline in the sense of belonging to mosques.

The Hui are an ethnic minority group in China that believes in Islam. They speak Mandarin Chinese, and their physical appearance closely resembles the ethnic majority group, the Han Chinese. Yet the Hui’s practice of Islam has produced some striking cultural differences between them and the Han Chinese. Their population of 9,816,805 in the year 2000 is found throughout the country. We can find them in cities of relatively large size. In order to facilitate prayer five times per day, many of the Hui live in close proximity to mosques (“Qingzhensi” in Mandarin), forming the heart of their communities. This is known
as “Weisi er ju” (living around the mosque).

Bai (2005) mentions various Hui communities whose districts have begun to decline in Tianjin, Guangzhou, Shanghai and Nanjing, because they have not retained their official residential status. By contrast, the Xi’an local government has preserved the Hui community, shielding it from demolition (Bai 2005).

Xi’an has, in fact, a few Hui districts in the center of the city. In recent years, while the Xi’an city government has been actively promoting urban renewal projects to maintain tourism, they have not carried out demolition within Hui districts. The question is, why have Xi’an’s Hui districts been left intact? Have they adopted other methods for urban renewal?

This report seeks to shed light on one particular case in Xi’an, regarding changes made to the Hui district under the urban renewal project to protect tourism resources. The local government and developers are promoting urban renewal from a global perspective in order to attract tourism while encouraging the local Hui people to preserve their communities.

2. Tourism in Urban Xi’an and the “Hui Quarter”

Xi’an is the center of politics, economics and culture in Shaanxi province, the biggest industrial commercial city in Northwest China, and a famous international tourist destination (Xi’anshi Difangzhi Guan, Xi’anshi Dang’an Ju 1993). Covering a total area of 10,108km², including an urban area of 310.1km², Xi’an has a permanent population of 8.3752 million and registered population of 7.723 million. There are 9 districts and 4 counties within Xi’an1) (Zhonggong Xi’an Shiwei Bangongting, Xi’anshi Renmin Zhengfu Bangongting 2009:10).

Historically speaking, Xi’an boasts a history of over 1,100 years as the capital city of 13 dynasties2). In the Tang Dynasty period (618-907), one million people lived there at its height, making it the largest city in the world at that time. Today, the Xi’an City Wall, the Bell Tower and Drum Tower, all built during the Ming Dynasty, can still be found in the “Old District” of the city center. There are four roads dividing the old district into four parts, with the Bell Tower serving as the axis. This is a classic example of basic urban planning from the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644).

There are 72 imperial mausoleums in and around the city, the most prestigious being the Mausoleum of the Qin Dynasty Emperor Shihuang – “the first emperor of China”. In addition, over twenty palaces remain, which hold more than 700 ancient buildings (Zhonggong Xi’an Shiwei Bangongting, Xi’anshi Renmin Zhengfu Bangongting 2009: 43-44). In the year 2008, the number of overseas tourists to these historical monuments and ruins reached 632,000 visitor/visits while that of domestic tourists amounted to 31.69 million visitor/visits, generating 24.352 billion RMB in tourism revenue (Zhonggong Xi’an Shiwei Bangongting, Xi’anshi Renmin Zhengfu Bangongting 2009: 74).

According to city statistics, the majority of Xi’an residents are Han Chinese. The ethnic minority population is approximately 85,300, making up 1.15% of the city’s total population. There are 64,000 Hui, making up 75.28% of the total ethnic minority population (Zhonggong Xi’an Shiwei Bangongting, Xi’anshi Renmin Zhengfu Bangongting 2009: 127). In terms of sheer numbers, the Hui are clearly the dominant ethnic minority in Xi’an. In addition to
the numerous mosques within the City Wall, we can easily find Islamic restaurants offering (Islamic) Halal fare, while frequently encountering Hui people with their white caps outside the local mosques.

Today, Xi’an has 20 mosques, of which 15 can be found in the old district. Moreover, 12 of these mosques are in the northwest of the old district (See Table 1). There are 30,000 Hui living this area\(^3\). They live close to their mosques, which constitute the centers of their communities. These communities are independent of each other; every mosque has its own management committee. While the Xi’an Hui are all Sunni Muslims, the various communities are divided in terms of religion into three distinct sects, differing in the manner of prayer and so on. Each mosque is a basic unit of an Islamic sect; fundamentally, there are no religious contacts between the varying sects.

It should be noted here that there are indeed some communities with no unifying public opinion or organization. There is however, in contrast, the district known locally as the “Hui Quarter” (Huifang) or “Hui Street” (Huiminjie). The size of this district is approximately 1.5 km from east to west, 1.2 km from north to south (these numbers are disputed). It has yet to be determined when exactly the Hui began to live in this area, but it is believed that the local mosques were built during the Ming dynasty.

The American anthropologist Maris Boyd Gillette, who carried out research on this district during the 1990’s, indicated that the Hui Quarter was not an official zone, but rather part of the larger Lianhu District (Gillette 2000: 29). In fact, the Hui Quarter was not mentioned in Xi’an guidebooks, maps and official documents until around 2000\(^4\).

So why is it that only the Hui Quarter has been registered as a historical preservation district by the Xi’an government? Here we examine the unfolding of urban renewal in Xi’an, and its influence on the Hui Quarter.
3. Urban Renewal and the Hui Quarter

One reason demolition has not been carried out in the Hui Quarter is that there are a number of historical structures whose value the government recognized relatively early on. Certain Hui Quarter mosques in particular have been registered as cultural landmarks. In other words, in order to preserve cultural landmarks, the Hui Quarter has not been targeted for demolition.

The two oldest mosques in the Hui Quarter are the Huajuexiang Mosque and the Daxuexixiang Mosque. These two mosques are known as the “East Great Mosque” and “West Great Mosque” due to their location. Huajuexiang Mosque is also known as “the Xi’an Great Mosque” as it is the largest in the city. However, it is more commonly known as the “Huajuexiang Mosque”, in reference to its location at Huajuexiang, northwest of the Drum Tower. The stone monument of the mosque was built in 742 AD during the Tang Dynasty\(^5\). There are many stone monuments and architecture in Chinese traditional style. It is the only “open-door” mosque in Xi’an, attracting numerous tourists from around the world. Meanwhile, Daxuexixiang Mosque is located in the heart of the Hui Quarter on Daxuexixiang Street. A stone monument, this mosque was built in 705 AD during the Tang Dynasty. The Daxuexixiang mosque has its stone monuments and was built in traditional Chinese style. These two mosques are the oldest in Xi’an; additionally, some mosques found today were built in the Ming and Qing Dynasties.

The government was quick to register mosques as key protected cultural relics. Before Huajuexiang Mosque was registered as a national-level key protected cultural relic in 1988,
It had already been registered at the provincial level in 1956. This is earlier than all the other mosques. In 1956, Daxuexixiang mosque was also registered at the provincial level. Xiaopiuyuan mosque was registered at the provincial level in 1983 (Wu 1998: 125).

The government provided architectural repairs for some mosques in the 1980's. Although it had already been partially renovated in 1973, the Xi’an city government decided to undertake an exhaustive renovation of the Huajuexiang Mosque once again in 1984. It is particularly worth mentioning that it took three years to renovate the prayer hall (Ma Ximing 1988: 35-36). Also, the Shaanxi Province bureau responsible for key protected cultural relics provided 30,000 RMB to renovate the nearby Beiguangqijie Mosque in 1989 (Wu 1998: 124).

A number of mosques in the Hui Quarter became objects of cultural preservation, and thus the east of the Hui Quarter was spared from demolition, becoming the only place in Xi’an that did not endure the demolition of old houses built during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) and the Republic of China period (1912-1949)

In the 1990’s, the government began preserving not only mosques, but also the area’s old houses. This followed a Norwegian professor’s preservation campaign, inspired by his 1985 visit to Xi’an where he noted the value of these old houses. In support of his campaign, Norway and the People’s Republic of China government agreed to a cooperative effort in science and technology, initiating a project to preserve these old houses. The targets of this project were three courtyard houses, located in 125 Huajuexiang Alley, 144 Beiyuanmen Street, and 77 Xiyangshi Street. The Norwegian government contributed 4,800,000 RMB to this project. As a result, the courtyard house of 125 Huajuexiang Alley received the 2002 UNESCO Asia-Pacific Heritage Award for Culture Heritage Conservation (Xiao 2006:19). This project also called for paving Beiyuanmen Street with stone.

**Picture 2** The prayer hall of Huajuexiang Mosque. Xi’an, China. 2008.
In the meantime, the entire Hui Quarter has been spared from any demolition. In the 1980’s, when the Xi’an city government initially started a large-scale urban renewal project, the Hui Quarter was included. However, because this project did not take into account the Hui’s custom of “Weisi er ju (living close to one’s own mosque)”, the Hui opposed the project. Ultimately, the Hui Quarter was spared (Xiao 2006: 18).

Gillette reported that officials had announced that they would begin demolishing Damaishijie Street, a Hui commercial area where they wanted to build a major traffic artery (Gillette 2000: 54). She noted that during the mid-1980’s, the state had selected this street as the “Hui food and drink street” (Huimin yinshi jie) and used “Islamic decor” to highlight this (Gillette 2000: 55). It appeared that the government had no plans for demolition in the area. However, there are no mosques registered as protected cultural sites to the north of Damaishijie Street. The demolition plan had yet to be executed at the time of Gillette’s visit to Xi’an. Finally, around the year 2000, the government demolished the southern half of Damaishijie Street; today, no structures remain.

Until around the year 2000, despite the government preservation of such historical architecture as mosques and old houses, other structures in the Hui quarter remained under threat of demolition.

4. From the Preservation of Cultural Properties to the Preservation of Historical Streets

In order to develop the tourist industry, the Xi’an city government frequently argued that they must overcome “having a historical city wall with no historical cityscape”. For this reason, the urban renewal plan of Xi’an began to change from only preserving historical sites and structures to preserving or rebuilding historical cityscapes. As such the Hui quarter had been registered as a “Historical Street”.

On August 1st 2002, the Standing Committee of the Xi’an Municipal People’s Congress issued “the Ordinance for the Preservation of the Xi’an Historical and Cultural City”. This ordinance aimed to preserve historical heritage and promote urban renewal and economic development. The ordinance targeted historical sites within the Xi’an city center known as “the Historical Streets,” including the Ming City Wall and the historical district within the City Wall.

Within the City Wall, five districts were registered as “Historical Streets”. One, known as “Beiyuanmen Street,” was registered in conjunction with the Hui Quarter. This ordinance decreed that all structures built in this district must be in harmony with old houses on Beiyuanmen Street. In addition, the Huajuexiang Mosque was listed as a target of preservation within the City Wall, and it was decreed that structures built around these sites must harmonize their height and façades.

When this ordinance was issued, the Hui Quarter roads were to be paved with stone and building façades were to be renovated. However, at the beginning, there were only select places targeted for renewal. Beiyuanmen Street and Xiyangshi Street were spared as they had old houses that had already begun to be preserved.

In this ordinance, although the Xi’an city government did not use the name Hui Quarter,
the inclusion of this district was very meaningful. An elder Hui told me that local Hui fiercely opposed the government’s attempts to demolish the entire Damaishijie Street in 2005. When the local Hui argued that the Hui Quarter was within the “Historical Street” borders, the government finally accepted their arguments, halting demolition plans.

The Hui Quarter has finally received recognition despite the fact that the government persists in not referring to it as the Hui Quarter, simply calling it Beiyuanmen Street; technically only just a part of the Hui Quarter.

5. Preserving the Hui Quarter

While the government still does not use the name, the media and websites frequently make references to the “Hui Quarter.” For this reason, some structures, such as the Gates, are marked at the boundaries between the Hui Quarter and other distinct districts.

After registering Beiyuanmen Street as a “Historical Street,” the most impressive structures built to date are two Gates called “Paifang” built at the north and south ends of the street. The Gate built at the north end has three beams and four pillars, all made of white stone. The Gate, located on higher ground than its surroundings, is ringed by stone partitions. This Gate, with the word “Beiyuanmen” running across its central beam, was built by the Xi’an city government in the 1990’s.

On the other hand, the Gate built at the south end is very simple; it has only two pillars and one beam resembling the dome of a mosque, constructed of a material similar to plywood. The beam is decorated with a painting of a mosque with the words “Welcome to

Picture 3  The Gate at the south end of Beiyuanmen Street. Xi’an, China. 2008.
the Hui Quarter Historical Street” in Chinese and “Welcome to Beiyuanmen Street” in English. Its pillars are painted green with Islamic and political slogans, and advertisements for neighboring shops.

In the year 2000, construction of the Gate began with funds from a local Hui merchant. This merchant owns a shop close by the Gate. The Gate was erected to memorialize the main Islamic festival celebrating the end of the month-long fast of Ramadan, called “Kaizhajie” in Chinese. During the first few years of its existence, the Gate was not a permanent structure – the Hui would take it down after the annual festival. Year after year, the Gate became increasingly ornate, and after the 2005 festival the locals left it in place.

In the Hui Quarter, there are four Gates similar to the Beiyuanmen Street Gate. Surmising from the advertisements displayed on the Gates, three were constructed by various restaurant owners while the other was constructed by community members. They vary in form and the content of their slogans. However every Gate has the words “Hui Quarter” at the top, and all face away from the Hui Quarter. Damaishijie Street in particular, despite already having seen its southern half demolished, still has a Gate erected at the southern end of the street; a strong example of the local Hui people’s will to preserve their community.

However, there are twelve independent communities in the Hui Quarter, and for this reason community preservation varies from one to the other.

Local Hui began constructing a Gate at the southern end of Daxuexixiang Street in 2007. Construction was completed in 2008. Its appearance is considerably different from other Gates: it has three beams and two pillars, colored red, in addition to tiled roofing. Its appearance is very similar to the Gates built in other “Historical Streets”. It is noteworthy that this particular Gate displays the word “Daxuexixiang” rather than “Hui Quarter.”

The Xi’an city government provided the funding for the construction of this Gate. The director of the community committee, a Hui woman, negotiated with the Xi’an city government for funding. She emphasized the history of the Daxuexixiang Mosque in her appeal, based on the historical accounts found on the stone monuments of Daxuexixiang Mosque, recounting Zheng He’s Voyages of Discovery to Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East Africa. Funding went not only to the construction of the Gate, but was also used to improve the community’s living environment – namely the paving of roads and the renovation of building façades.

Meanwhile, in Xiaopiyuan Street, the Hui constructed Gates at each end. The Gate at the east end of Xiaopiyuan Street faces away from the Hui Quarter, while the one at the west end does not. The construction styles of these Gates differ from those of other communities in the Hui Quarter. It is important to point out that there is no mention of “Hui Quarter” found on these Gates. Also, there are no advertisements or political slogans over them. There are simply just Islamic slogans, and “Xiaopiyuan Mosque” written in small characters at the bottom of the pillars. This tells us that these Gates were constructed by the community of Xiaopiyuan Mosque for completely religious purposes.

The Hui Quarter area boundaries are very clear, yet there is no unified public opinion or organizational structure. Each Hui community has their own distinct approach to preserving the place in which they live.
6. Conclusion

In Xi’an, because of the Hui Quarter’s historical structures, demolition has not been carried out there. As a result, old houses of historical value have been preserved by the government. In addition, the urban renewal plan of Xi’an has begun to evolve from simply preserving historical sites and structures to preserving or rebuilding historical cityscapes. The Hui Quarter has been registered as a “Historical Street” and in effect is not currently under threat of demolition.

Although the Hui Quarter was registered as a “Historical Street” by the Xi’an city government, what the Xian government is executing is in fact a kind of project of visual unity just like those projects for restoring old buildings, uniting the historic spectacle and covering the roads in stone pavements as carried out in the other regions within Xian. In the newly named “Historical Streets”, the name “Hui Quarter” has not been adopted. So we can see that the Xi’an city government is not trying to emphasize the peculiar culture of the Hui based on belief in Islam. What is emphasized in the “Historical Streets” is the historical cityscape which matches the City Wall built during the Ming Dynasty.

Meanwhile, the Hui living in the Hui Quarter have constructed Gates, which are appealing visible boundaries for their quarter. We believe that this is a strong way of expressing the Hui people’s desire to preserve their communities.

It is important to be aware that there are twelve independent communities in the Hui quarter, all of whom differ in their approach to the preservation of their communities. This means that there is no unified public opinion; each community contains its own unique traits and features.

When visiting Xi’an in the summer of 2009, I noticed that urban renewal was rapidly being carried out in preparation for the widely anticipated 60th anniversary of the founding of the PRC (to be held October 1st). I found that as roads were repaved, certain Gates had been removed. In the face of such rapid change, we will continue to research and analyze the adaptations made by the people of the Hui Quarter of Xi’an.

Notes

1) Xi’an City governs 9 districts, named Xincheng, Beilin, Lianhu, Baqiao, Weiyang, Yanta, Yanliang, Lintong, Chang’an. In addition, it governs 4 counties, Lantian, Zhouzhi, Huxian, and Gaoling.

2) There 13 dynasties include Western Zhou (1050 BC-770 BC), Qin (221 BC-206 BC), Western Han (206 BC- AD 8), Xin (AD 9- AD 23), Eastern Han (AD 25- AD 220), Western Jin (AD 265- AD 316), Former Zhao (AD 319- AD 329), Former Qin (AD 351- AD 385), Later Qin (AD 384- AD 417), Western Wei (AD 534- AD 557), North Zhou (AD 557- AD 581), Sui (AD 581- AD 618), Tang (AD 618- AD 690, AD 705- AD 907).

3) There are various opinions about the population living in this area. Gillette wrote that the Hui Quarter’s physical boundaries were indeterminate, and that its population fluctuated (Gillette 2000: 31).

4) Feng Fukuang, who comes from the Hui Quarter, published a book about the Hui Quarter in the 1980’s. For this reason, we can see that local Hui used this name in the 1980’s (Feng1989).
5) There are differing opinions concerning when Huajuexiang Mosque was built. See Nakata (1996).

6) Except for Huajuexiang Mosque, Niujie Mosque (Beijing) and Tongxin Mosque (Tong xin, Ninxia) were registered as National-level key units of cultural relic protection in 1988. Niujie Mosque was registered as a City-level key unit of cultural relic protection in 1979 (Liu and Liu 1990: 126). Tongxin Mosque was registered as a Province-level key unit of cultural relic protection in 1958 (Wu 1995: 448). In fact, the first mosque to be registered as a National-level key unit of cultural relic protection was Shengyou Mosque (Chuanzhou, Fujian) in 1961.

7) Ma Jianjun reported that Dapiyuan Mosque and Beiguangqijie Mosque were registered as City-level key units of cultural relic protection. However, he did not state when they were so registered (Ma Jianjun 2008).

8) In recent years, there are some houses called “The Improved Quadrangle Dwellings (Gailiang Siheyuan)” where historical spectacles are regained by restoration (Cao 2008).

9) There are three mosques to the north of Damaishijie Street; Sajinqiao West Mosque, Sajinqiao Old Mosque, and Lushaan Mosque.

10) Apart from Beiyuanmen Street, they listed Sanxuejie Street, Zhubei Street, Defuxiang Street, and Xiangzixiang Street. Sanxuejie Street had also had its range prescribed.

11) Apart from Huajuexiang Mosque, they listed the Bell Tower, the Drum Tower, The Stele Forest, Baoqinsi Pagoda, Chenghuang Temple, Eighth Route Army Office Museum, and the Site of the Xi’an Incident.

12) Cao also argued about such conflict between the Xi’an city government’s synthetic plan of preserving or rebuilding historical cityscapes and actual development (Cao 2006).

13) A young Hui working at the Huajuexiang Mosque told me that this merchant is the head of the Beiyuanmen Street merchant association.

14) Those four Gates were built at the east end of Dapiyuan Street, the south end of Beiguangqijie Street, the south end of Damaishijie Street, and the north end of Sajinqiao Street.

15) I saw those Gates at Sanxuejie Street and Xiangzixiang Street during my fieldwork from 2007 to 2008.

16) Zheng He (about 1371-1435) was a Muslim in the Ming dynasty. He made seven voyages to Southeast Asia, South Asia, and East Africa from 1405 to 1433. The stone monuments in Daxuexixiang Mosque state that before he went on his fourth voyage in 1413, he came to Xi’an to look for someone to interpret Arabic, Persian and Singhalese, and who understood Islam. Finally, a Muslim named Ha San, studying at the Daxuexixiang Mosque, went on the voyage with him. After Zheng He came back, he reformed this Mosque (see Li 2004: 126-128).

17) The Gates of Beiyumen Street and Damaishijie Street were removed. And these two roads were paved again.

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