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Acknowledgements

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Interacting with the 'Himalayan *Ummah*:' The Case of Xidaotang, a Chinese Muslim Community from Lintan

Marie-Paule Hille

This short essay discusses whether Xidaotang, a Chinese Muslim community, may be considered as belonging to the 'Himalayan *umma*h'. Historically and until today, especially via trade, this community has been in close contact with the Himalayan region, understood as the mountainous zone of the Tibetan Plateau. By analyzing these trading interactions and the sociability they induce, it is possible to investigate to what extent Xidaotang members, with their own cultural background, religious practices and social experiences, have contributed to diversify the Islamic landscape in the Himalayan region, to which Amdo belongs.

Keywords: Amdo, Chinese Muslim community, trade relation, Himalayan region, *umma*h.

This short essay discusses whether Xidaotang, a Chinese Muslim community, may be considered as belonging to the 'Himalayan *umma*h'. Historically and until today, especially via trade, this community has been in close contact with the Himalayan region, understood as the mountainous zone of the Tibetan Plateau.¹ By analyzing these trading interactions and the sociability they induce, it is possible to investigate to what extent Xidaotang members, with their own cultural background, religious practices and social experiences, have contributed to diversify the Islamic landscape in the Himalayan region, to which Amdo belongs.² Combining historical and anthropological ethnography, I endeavored in previous articles to explore the Xidaotang Muslim merchants' trade activities and their specific relations with Amdo Tibetan society starting from the beginning of the twentieth century up until today (Hille 2015).³

The aim of this short essay is to question the generic notion of an Islamic community (*umma*h) in this specific geographic and cultural crossroads by focusing on a localized experience, namely trade interactions. During my fieldwork in Amdo⁴, whereas my research has focused on interactions between Chinese Muslims and Tibetans, I started to collect elements that have enabled me to set out exploring this topic. These initial findings have encouraged me to further investigate how Chinese Muslims share local experiences with Muslims belonging to other Islamic cultures in the Himalayan region, and the ways in which the notion of 'Himalayan *umma*h' may make sense to them. These issues call for a dedicated field inquiry.⁵

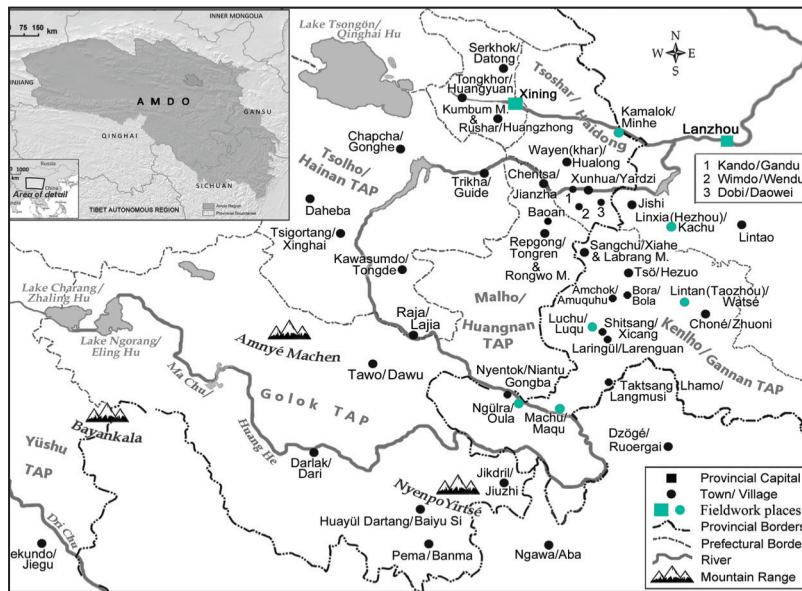


Figure 1: Map of Eastern Amdo and Adjacent Areas.

(Map draft: B. Horlemann; map designer: A. Gruschke; inset: Tsering Wangyal Shawa (published in *Muslims in Amdo Tibetan Society. Multi-disciplinary Approaches*, ed. Marie-Paule Hille, Bianca Horlemann, and Paul K. Nietupski, Lanham (Md), Lexington Books, 2015))

The Xidaotang, founded by Ma Qixi (1857–1914) at the dawn of the twentieth century, grew in the multicultural and multi-ethnic atmosphere of a small trading town, Old Taozhou (today’s Lintan, in southern Gansu), at the intersection of cultural China and cultural Tibet. The walled town of Old Taozhou (Watsé in Tibetan) was an important trading center where for centuries Muslims of many languages and backgrounds, non-Muslim Chinese from different places, and Tibetans, both sedentary and nomadic, met to exchange highland and lowland products. Like other Gansu Muslim communities, the Old Taozhou Muslims were involved in these trade activities as middlemen, importing agricultural and artisanal products from China and trading them in exchange for a wide variety of Tibetan goods.

Ma Qixi made Xidaotang into a collective corporate business, in which economic, cultural, spiritual, and religious life were closely intertwined. During the first part of the twentieth century, it flourished economically thanks to its specific social and religious structure. The people believing in Xidaotang belonged to two different groups: the faithful who lived collectively inside ‘big compounds’ (Figure 2), and those who dwelled outside.

The unique collective, socio-economic organization of the Xidaotang structured around ‘big compounds’ and relying on agriculture, forestry, and manufacturing, was the basis on which the brotherhood could expand commercially during the first half of the twentieth century. These commercial activities eventually gave birth to a dense network of trade relations connecting the Tibetan outlying regions to the coastal towns. The Xidaotang’s

trading network in the Tibetan regions was shaped both by long-distance caravan trade and retail shops situated at trading posts. The Xidaotang’s trading company, under the corporate name of Tian Xing Long, became an important player in the brokering, transporting, and selling of many types of goods. Thus, a network of shops was also established across all the culturally Tibetan regions and reached out into other Chinese provinces. At the end of the 1920s, the Xidaotang established their monopoly over wool, hides, and skins market in Taozhou.

For Muslim merchants from Taozhou, establishing trade relations with Tibetans was neither original nor unusual, but this religious minority comprising merely a few thousand people managed to not only create an extensive and solid trade network with Tibetan nomads in Amdo, but also to maintain long-lasting relationships with their Tibetan counterparts. Various social and economic processes show how Xidaotang traders succeeded in establishing contacts with different actors of Tibetan Amdo society. The ‘guest-host relationship’ is one of these processes through which they achieved a high degree of familiarity with their Tibetan hosts.⁶ Xidaotang’s inherent characteristics as a religious and socio-economic organization also played a role in building up the trade networks; their way of doing trade was intimately intertwined not only with religious and moral principles, but also with an original socio-economic organization that contributed to strengthening their social relations with the Tibetan society.

During my fieldwork, all of the former Muslim traders I interviewed emphasized that their Tibetan hosts extended a high degree of hospitality and consideration to them,



Figure 2: 3-D Plan of Xidaotang Compound in Taozhou Old City in the 1930s.

(Plan made and provided by Xidaotang management committee in Lanzhou)



Figure 3: Xidaotang trade network in the 1930s.

(Map Maker: Andreas Gruschke (published in *Muslims in Amdo Tibetan Society*))

almost an intimate friendship. Their status as high-ranking guests was also stressed by my Tibetan informants:

They [i.e., the Xidaotang traders] couldn't travel around to trade on their own, and as a result they approached the monastery for assistance. [. . .] The reason they approached the monastery was that the monastery was quite independent [could do things on its own (*mgo na 'dra bo thon no*)]. [. . .] When they traded, when they transported money, they could get robbed, and they wouldn't earn anything. When they traded things [with a Lama], they could get robbed of their money during their travels and would not be able to recoup it. So, to protect them, wherever they went, they were escorted. When our monks helped them, they wouldn't get robbed. Afterwards they came back with yaks (*zog*) and horses they had exchanged [for money]. [. . .] No, they wouldn't have paid for these services! We had contact (*'brel ba*) with them in order to escort them there. Anyway, we wouldn't be allowed to ask for fees. We escorted the travelers (*'grul ba*) well. It was the *nangchen's* (Buddhist master) request. When the *nangchen* requested us [to do this], the mounts, including horses, would belong to the *nangchen* (Interview with a ninety-year-old monk at Ngülra Monastery, May, 2012).

This guest-host relationship reached its peak in 1929, after Taozhou was sacked, when a group of Xidaotang refugees from Lintan fled into the Tibetan region and was welcomed in Larenguan (a Tibetan village with a lamasery near the county of Luqu). There, they started to build a school and a mosque. This migratory flow contributed to making Islamic culture and religious life more visible in this Himalayan region; many Tibetan women converted to Islam when marrying Muslim men. Over the last two decades in Larenguan the Muslim population has decreased drastically. Indeed, the elderly are passing away, whereas the youngest generations have been striving to make a living in Luqu and other towns. The mosque of the village has closed its doors, but a new one was built in Luqu, where many Xidaotang members hailing from Larenguan moved to. As a result, the Muslim inhabitants have deserted the village of Larenguan.

At the beginning of the 1980s, in the wake of the reform policy and the opening-up of the country under Deng Xiaoping policy, trade relations resumed, first by means of traveling peddlers. The majority of the Xidaotang merchants from Lintan followed the footsteps of their forebears backwards, by returning to the Tibetan regions.

A major event, however, marked a turning point for the brotherhood's economic development: the reestablishment, at the beginning of the 1990s, of the Tian Xing Long trade company by the current religious leader (*sheikh*) to establish an actual monopoly on the 'satin and silk' textile trade. Nowadays, the types of cloth categorized under 'satin and silk,' which are nonetheless for the most part made of synthetic fiber, are sold mostly to the Tibetan populations of Kham and Amdo. the wholesale market has remained in Linxia and a myriad of retail shops have been reestablished in Kham and Amdo.

Since the 2000s, some shopkeepers have set up their business in Lhasa where Lintan Muslims are present in large numbers (Ding 2009).⁷ In Linxia, two brothers opened a wholesale shop that specialized in raw silk fabrics dyed and manufactured in India by Muslim villagers and brokered by Nepali merchants. These high quality fabrics enjoy an immense success among Tibetans, despite their steep price. But what is more significant for demonstration purposes is that this new kind of market elicited relationships between Muslims with different cultural backgrounds. My first fieldwork findings tend to show that Islamic tradition facilitated contact and relationship between Chinese, Indian, and Nepali Muslim counterparts. One of the two brothers reported to me some scenes of sociability in Nepal where Chinese Muslims are the object of jokes as their 'true' Islamic culture is questioned by their Indian or Nepali counterparts, especially regarding the pilgrimage to Mecca. A young Xidaotang shopkeeper told me:

In India, the merchants I deal with are Muslims. Why do they allow me to purchase fabrics on credit? That is because I am a Muslim too. There, during the fast for Ramadan, they pray first, and eat after. They think Chinese Muslims are not righteous. [...] Fabrics are manufactured in India, in the workers' houses. [He shows me pictures on his mobile about the dying process, insisting on the poor working conditions.] Then Indian merchants go to Nepal to sell the fabrics. I've been to India twice, in New Delhi and Varanasi [a city well known for its silk]. I would like to go back to India and see whether it would be possible to purchase fabrics directly from there, without going to Nepal. The *hadj* merchant I am acquainted with is from Varanasi. [After this discussion, the shopkeeper showed me a little movie he took in Nepal. It showed a Maoist demonstration in the street. He said that lot of people participated to this demonstration in a quite peaceful way] (Interview at Silk and Satin retail shop in Linxia, June 2009).

Today, in the context of globalization, Chinese Muslims developing trade activities in the Himalayan regions are confronted with Muslims who belong to another Islamic culture from the other side of the Himalayas and who, like them, are, historically, go-betweeners between the Himalayan region and the valleys. These encounters enlighten them on what Islam is in its plurality, and how Islamic cultures cross the Himalayan region from east to west and vice versa. Studying circulations and interactions generated by trade contacts may be a way to comprehend the ‘Himalayan *ummah*’ as a meeting point between various Islamic cultures and practices, both inherent to the Islamic peripheral world.

From an anthropological point of view, what is difficult to determine is how people are connected, how perceptions of one another diverge, how practices are assessed, and how ideas circulate. There is still fieldwork needed to better understand to what extent Chinese Muslims of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands, and historically linked to the Tibetan plateau, are part of the ‘Himalayan *Ummah*.’

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Endnotes

1. In Tibet, Islam is represented by two communities: (1) the Kashmiri merchants who settled at the beginning of the seventeenth century (and also after 1841) and, (2) the Hui (Chinese Muslims) who built the oldest mosque of Tibet in 1776 (Triposi 1989, Gaborieau 2016, Bray 2016, Moevus 1995). During the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), commercial exchanges began between China and Tibetan areas through the well-known ‘Tea and Horses Market,’ but historical sources are missing to assess the importance of Chinese Muslims in these trade activities. For the late imperial period, Claude Moevus stated in his article that “commerce with Tibet and its borders was dominated by Chinese Hui Muslims from the end of the nineteenth century” (1995: p.118). Muslim merchants in Nepal were studied by Gaborieau (1993). Concerning studies on Islam in the Himalayan regions see Sijapati (2011), Aabedi (2009), Bouillier and Servan Schreiber (2004), Papas (2016), and Zarcone (2005).
2. Amdo here is understood both in a geo-historical and in a cultural-linguistic sense. Geo-historically, Amdo designates the northeastern part of the traditional ‘three provinces’ (*chol kha gsum*) of greater Tibet and is situated on the so-called Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. It is sparsely populated, and traditionally largely supportive of a nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoral economy and lifestyle with agricultural communities on its eastern fringes. Since the 1950s, under the rule of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), Amdo has become divided administratively, the larger part belonging to Qinghai, smaller part to Gansu and Sichuan provinces.
3. Concerning this study, see Hille (2010, 2015).

4. I conducted fieldwork in Amdo (Machu/Maqu, Luchu/Luqu, Laringül/Larenguan, and Ngürä/Oula) in 2005 (6 days), 2006 (24 days), 2007 (20 days), 2008 (5 days) and 2012 (5 days).
5. I have previously dealt with this notion of *umma* inside the community of Xidaotang by questioning how this global notion meets the local definition of a community (Hille 2018).
6. This relationship comprised, first of all, of mutual protection. It is referred to as 'zhurenjia' (literally, 'host family') in Chinese and as 'sangtsa' in Tibetan. It consists not only of being hosted but also of being protected and assisted by the host.
7. A survey implemented in 2007 showed that there are in Lhasa about 150 shops run by Muslim merchants originally from Lintan. At the beginning of the 2000s, The Great Mosque of Lhasa was enlarged to welcome 3,000 faithful on the Friday prayer (Ding, Min and Ding 2009).

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