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Networked Islamic counterpublic in China: Digital media and Chinese Muslims during global pandemic of COVID-19

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Abstract

How do Chinese Muslims have their own voices heard under China's tightening online censorship amid a global health crisis like COVID-19? Based on 13-month ethnographic fieldwork, this article examines the active participation and creative use of digital media by Chinese Muslims during the pandemic. This study uses multi-sited ethnography (MSE) and digital ethnography to identify major features of networked Islamic counterpublic in China. It shows how Chinese Muslims creatively blend Islamic discourses of hygiene, scientific discourse, official regulations, and global discourses of public health through digital media. It also examines how Chinese Muslims selectively use digital platforms to cultivate Islamic ethics and strengthening global connections to Muslim world both online and offline. Furthermore, this study shows how resilient the networked Islamic counterpublic in China has been in terms of strategically voicing dissent in the shadows of anti-Muslim sentiments and state policies during a major global pandemic of our time.

Keywords

China, Chinese Muslims, COVID-19, digital ethnography, digital media, multi-sited ethnography (MSE), networked counterpublic, networked Islamic counterpublic, online censorship, public health

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Introduction

On 2 April 2020, just 1 week before the 76-day lockdown ended, a team of reporters and photojournalists arrived in Wuhan. Their mission was to record what happened during the week when people were preparing for their life to "return to normal" (*huifu zhengchang*). Their report series came out between April and May 2020, featuring scenes from the intensive care unit (ICU) in local hospitals, public transport stations, business sites, and other public spaces. In one portrait report of Wuhan people, a photo featured a man praying in an urban park near Wuhan's East Lake: he seemed to be in his 20s or early 30s, kneeling under a small tree (Figure 1). The man wore plain clothes with long sleeves, long pants, and a white hat typically found among Chinese Muslims. But the caption did not mention anything about the young man's ethnic or religious background. When I interviewed the photojournalist in February 2021, he mentioned that it was actually "lucky" (*xingyun*) to have that one photo out amid other images in an officially recognized English-language news outlet. "There's nothing sensitive about the image." The photographer acknowledged, "But if we were just reporting [about Islam and Muslims] in a Chinese-language newspaper, it would probably have been impossible [to come out] at all."

The seemingly ordinary scene of a Muslim man praying in a park thus reveals something hidden in the plain sight—the invisibility, silence, and a woeful lack of in-depth understanding of Chinese Muslims' participation in fighting against the global pandemic in China's dominant official discourses around COVID-19. This visual documentation further urges us to ask the following: if most Chinese official media outlets consider topics of Islam or Muslims as "sensitive" and rarely follow up on their stories in detail, how about the Muslim-run media, whether individuals or organizations? What platforms are they using? How do Chinese Muslims have their own voices heard amid China's tightening digital surveillance?

This study centers around the mediated practices of Hui Muslims, also known as *Huizu* or Chinese Muslims, one of the 10 state recognized Muslim ethnic minorities in the People's Republic of China (PRC; Gladney, 1998; Jin, 2008; Lipman, 1998). Despite the lack of official media coverage of Muslim communities during COVID-19, Chinese Muslims have not been silent. The impetus to have their voices heard is particularly strong amid the global surge of racism and xenophobia toward various ethnic and religious communities. While people of Asian descent or heritage have been combating against racism around the world (He et al., 2021; Ziems et al., 2020), it is worth noting that various Muslim communities also have been living under constant pressures of Islamophobic discourses and policies (Awan and Khan-Williams, 2020; Poole and Williamson, 2021; Wang, 2021). However, apart from a couple of studies on Chinese Muslims' reactions during the 2002–2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS; O'Connor, 2012: 38–40; Wang, 2012), no systematic research has been conducted so far to explore how Chinese Muslims actively use digital media to engage with different discourses during a global health crisis like COVID-19.

Based on 13-month, mixed-method ethnographic research, this article explores how Chinese Muslims mediate Islamic discourses and official discourses, strengthen their connections to Muslim world, and cope with online censorship during COVID-19. In "Research framework and literature review," I situate China's networked Islamic

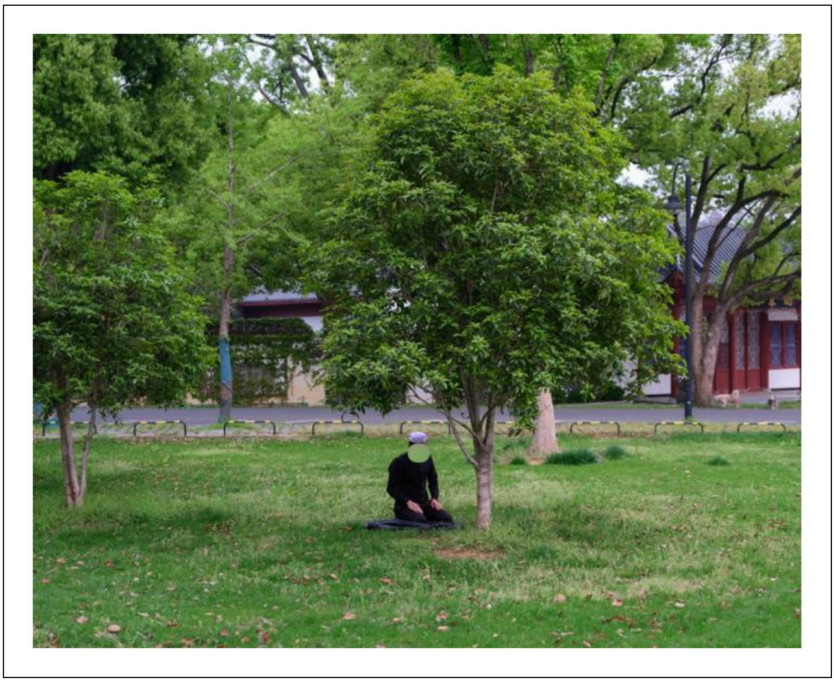

Figure 1. A man praying in a park near the East Lake in Wuhan on 3 April 2020. Photograph by Henry. Used with permission.

counterpublic within the interdisciplinary research of emergent counterpublics in both Global South and North. I also review how this study of Chinese Muslims' digitally mediated practices during COVID-19 contributes to better understanding how marginalized ethnic and religious communities use digital media for self-expressions and media representations in an authoritarian regime like China. The "Approaches and methods" section shows how I use a combination of multi-sited ethnography (MSE) and digital ethnography to identify major themes based on grounded theory and collect ethnography data for discourse analysis. The themes and ethnography materials will be further analyzed in detail in the "Findings and discussions" section. This article concludes with some preliminary observations of future challenges faced by Muslim communities in China, particularly pertaining to the expanding online censorship and digital surveillance infrastructure in the post-pandemic world.

Research framework and literature review

Networked Islamic counterpublics and digital landscape in post-Mao China

This study draws from an interdisciplinary body of literature on the emergent networked counterpublics and Islamic counterpublics in media studies, cultural studies, and cultural

anthropology. In the past two decades, social media has facilitated the emergence of networked counterpublics created by socially or politically marginalized groups (Jackson et al., 2020; Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2015). Such digital infrastructure further enables the self-expressions and organizations of what Nancy Fraser (1990) calls the "subaltern counterpublics" (p. 67). Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian, feminist, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+) communities have been producing, sharing, and shaping alternative activist networks and discourses against racist, misogynous, homophobic, and xenophobic trends across platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram (Gutiérrez, 2022; Hill, 2018; Jackson et al., 2018; Jenzen, 2017; Kim, 2021; McCann, 2011; Trott, 2021). These digitally networked efforts for self-representation echo with the development of China's digital Islamic landscape in post-Mao China.

Since the 1990s, the expansion of digital infrastructure and media networks has enabled of more creative religious and ethnic expressions both online and offline in China (Palmer, 2004; Schein, 2000; Yang, 2008). From the 1990s to the mid-2000s, the Chinese-language Islamic websites developed rapidly, "connecting Chinese-speaking Muslims in the Greater China and enhancing global religious solidarity with the Muslim world" (Ho, 2016: 189). The Internet boom has also paved the way for the Muslim usages of social media platforms in the 2010s. WeChat, a Chinese mobile social media app developed by Tencent since 2011, has emerged as a major platform for fostering Muslim cyber communities both within China and beyond (Harris and Isa, 2019; Weng, 2015).

However, religious and ethnic communities in China also need to constantly adapt to the evolving digital infrastructures of censorship and surveillance in an authoritarian regime (Travagnin, 2016). Scholars specifically note how digital surveillance and censorship has expanded from the regulation of online content to every aspect of social life among the Turkic-speaking Muslim minorities in Xinjiang (Byler, 2021; Roberts, 2020). For the Chinese-speaking Hui Muslims and other Muslim minorities outside Xinjiang, the impact of online censorship has also been felt more heavily in recent years (Ma, 2019; Wang, 2019). For instance, the online censorship of religious contents has led to a sharp decline in the number and influence of Chinese-language Islamic websites since the mid-2010s (see Supplemental Material Part I). By mid-2008, about 50 to 60 were active and stable websites (Ho, 2010: 68); by 2015, the number went down to around 40 (Ho, 2016: 195). Then, a turning point came when Chinese Muslim website (*zhongmuwang*), one of the largest Islamic websites based in mainland China, was abruptly shut down in December 2016 after a netizen posted an open letter to criticize the PRC President Xi Jinping. One of my Muslim interlocutors from Shaanxi lamented, "there was not even enough time to preserve the contact information in [those] online communities."[1] Even some local officials in charge of religious and ethnic affairs confessed that the closure of the zhongmu website was a "loss for [our] work" (*gongzuo shang de sunshi*) as they constantly checked in the offline activities mediated through the online communities in the zhongmu website and other Islamic websites.[2] Although the website-based mediation has been under stricter censorship in recent years, websites still constitute as a crucial cyberspace today with its connection to other social media platforms such as WeChat.

Due to the tightening censorship of Islamic expressions online, Chinese Muslims have been under even greater pressures to situate themselves within—rather than opposed

to—the Chinese state's official discourses of ethnicity and religion (Ho, 2016; Leibold, 2011; Xu and Campbell, 2018). This mixture between Islamic expressions and official discourses is also found among other Islamic counterpublics around the world. In his pioneering research of cassette sermons in Egypt, Hirschkind points out that the voices in the periphery do not necessarily contradict the dominant discourse. A counterpublic, while having "an awareness of its subordinate status" (Warner, 2021: 119), is interdependent in relation to dominant publics since the latter often lay the infrastructural foundation and set the boundaries of discursive transgression. Hirschkind (2006) contends that the idea of an Islamic counterpublic reveals how "the practice of the virtues and the deliberation of the issues of public concern were fused together in a unique manner" (p. 107). This emphasis on the mutually constitutive nature of the relationship between publics and counterpublics has been further advanced by scholarly works on Muslims' digitally mediated practices in Muslim-majority countries like Morocco and Muslim minority, liberal states such as Germany and the United States (Eckert and Chadha, 2013; Eckert et al., 2021; Elsheikh and Lilleker, 2021; Lien, 2022; Salime, 2016). Yet, more critical studies are needed to examine how networked Islamic counterpublics are formed and transformed in a Muslim minority, authoritarian state like China.

Building upon these previous studies, I define a networked Islamic counterpublic as an alternative, digitally mediated public across multiple platforms through which Muslim individuals and communities interpret and practice Islamic ethics, negotiate with the state, and connect to Muslim world. Specifically, I see the study of the networked Islamic counterpublic in China during COVID 19 as contributing to the interdisciplinary studies of networked counterpublics in three distinctive ways. First, this study shows how Chinese Muslims creatively blend Islamic discourses of hygiene, scientific discourse, official regulations, and global discourses of public health through digital media during the pandemic. Second, it examines how Chinese Muslims selectively use digital platforms to cultivate Islamic ethics and strengthening global connections to Muslim world both online and offline. Furthermore, this study shows how resilient the networked Islamic counterpublic in China has been in terms of strategically voicing dissent in the shadows of anti-Muslim sentiments and state policies during a major global crisis like COVID-19.

Approaches and methods

To explore the networked Islamic counterpublic in China, I approach this work through interdisciplinary frameworks of cultural anthropology and digital media studies. I conducted thirteen-month ethnographic research by combining multi-sited ethnography (MSE) and digital ethnography during COVID-19. For data analysis, I used grounded theory and discursive analysis. The protocol for this research project was approved by the university Institutional Research Board.

Multi-sited ethnography (MSE)

While Marcus' (1995) seminal approach focuses on following people, things, and processes across regional and national boundaries, scholars across different disciplines have

Table 1. Short-term field trips and interviews across different regions in mainland China, conducted between May and December of 2020.

Month(s)	Total duration	Region	Province/ city	Number of cities, towns, and villages	Number of interviewees
May, July	1 month	Northwest	Shaanxi	1	9
July	1.5 weeks	Northwest	Gansu	2	6
August	1 week	Northwest	Qinghai	3	5
July	1 week	Southwest	Sichuan	5	7
June, September, November	2 weeks	Southeast	Shanghai	1	2
October	1 week	Southeast	Zhejiang	1	1
December	5 days	South	Guangdong	1	3

The 33 interviewees include six Chinese Muslim content creators in websites and social media, three local Islamic Association officials, nine imams, three Muslim scholars, two staff from local Bureau of Ethnic and Religious Affairs, six small business owners, and four college students.

long problematized the MSE method and applied it in multiple sites—both physical and virtual—to address a given set of research questions (e.g. Airoldi, 2018; Falzon, 2016; Hine, 2015; Wittel, 2000). During COVID-19, ethnographic fieldwork across multiple physical sites has become even more difficult, contingent upon factors such as the fragmentation of time, unpredictability of access, financial and political constraints, and public health risks (Krause et al., 2021). Yet, MSE is still applicable under such conditions when ethnographers incorporate a "patchwork" approach to explore "ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits" (Günel et al., 2020). This adaptation of MSE increased the flexibility of my research agenda amid the constantly changing COVID-19 regulations. This method also enabled me to directly build rapport with interlocutors, observe daily lives, and discuss emergent topics among Chinese Muslim communities across different regions.

From May to December of 2020, I conducted short-term, multi-sited fieldwork among various Chinese Muslim communities (Table 1). All field trips were carried out in accordance with local pandemic regulations regarding mask-wearing, COVID-19 testing, QR code scanning, and online health information registration. Two trips overlapped with the Islamic holidays of Ramadan and Eid al-Adha, during which I observed closely the transition from mosque closure to partial openings in multiple locations. During multiple field trips, I interviewed—both formally and informally—33 Chinese Muslim interlocutors in total. Most questions I asked included how to deal with the physical closure of mosques, how to get public health information (online or in-person), and what content they appreciated and liked sharing during the pandemic.

Digital ethnography

Besides the short-term field visits across multiple physical sites, I used digital ethnography to examine the mundane, mediated practices across different platforms both online and offline (Coleman, 2010; Florini, 2019; Hine, 2015). The online-offline convergence has long been a critical feature of civic participation and online activism in China (Tai,

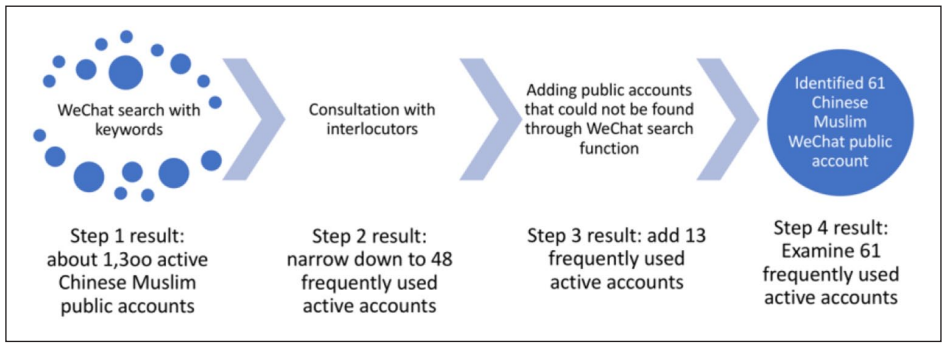

Figure 2. The flow chart illustrates the process of identifying Chinese Muslim public WeChat accounts. In Step 1, the number constantly fluctuated since some were closed and new ones were opened. In Step 2, some accounts became inactive in the duration of this study.

2015; Yang, 2013; Zhang, 2014). During COVID-19, such convergence has become ever more important for Chinese netizens to connect with family and friends, mobilizing volunteers, and protest against the wrongdoings of local governments on a daily basis (Yang, 2022: 131–133). In this study of China's networked Islamic counterpublic during the pandemic, I analyze how three major clusters of discourses (as identified through MSE and grounded theory) are mediated across different physical sites and virtual spaces.

From January 2020 to February 2021, I collected online data mainly from the Chinese Muslim websites and the social media platform WeChat. For the Chinese Muslim websites, I focused on the major websites Ho (2010, 2016) outlined in his studies of China's Islamic cyberspace. Among the 15 major Chinese Muslim websites, only seven have been open while eight were closed down before and during the pandemic (Supplemental material Part I). While there is no public or official data available for Chinese Muslim WeChat accounts.

I used WeChat's search function with a list of keywords such as "Muslim" (*musilin*) and "halal" (*qingzhen*) to identify such accounts (Supplemental material Part II). In Step 1, I collected about 1300 active Chinese Muslim public accounts by February 2021. In Step 2, I narrowed down to survey 48 active accounts frequently visited, cited, or shared by my interlocutors. In Step 3, as some Muslim public accounts did not contain the keywords in my list, I observed the frequently shared posts in chat rooms, double-checked with some recommended lists of public accounts as shared in some Islamic WeChat posts, and solicited recommendation from Muslim interlocutors who shared their favorite or often visited accounts. In total, I followed and examined 61 WeChat public accounts, accumulated 32 audio recordings of sermons and talks, observed and participated in online discussions during 13 months in 2020–2021 (Figure 2).

Approach to data analysis

For data analysis, a two-pronged approach is adopted. First, I applied grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1997) to identify major themes emerging from multiple field trips,

interviewees, and participant observation. Based on this mixed approach of MSE and digital ethnography, I found that my interlocutors' feedback tended to congregate around three major discursive clusters regarding state regulations, Islamic discourses, and transnational connections. In total, 30 out of 33 interviewees constantly referred to Islamic websites and WeChat which they used on a daily basis. This approach helps shed light on marginalized groups' use of digital media such as WeChat whose data are less publicly available and harder to gather through large-scale data scraping (widely used in studying platforms such as Weibo, Twitter, and Facebook).

Then, I adopted the "discursive analysis of counterpublic meaning-making" beyond a quantified identification of online media materials and networks (Jackson et al., 2018: 1873). I used NVivo, a software program designed for qualitative and mixed-methods research, to code interview transcription data and digital media content. In the next section, I will specifically analyze how a resilient Islamic counterpublic has been sustained through digitally mediated, alternative discourses to engage with official propaganda, Islamic ethics, and transnational Muslim communities during COVID-19.

Findings and discussions

Mediating public health information through Islamic discourses

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 in 2020, digital media has been playing a major role in disseminating the public health information mediated through Islamic discourses of health and hygiene across China. During the early stages of coronavirus outbreak in 2020 when mosques were closed (Figures 3 and 4), most interlocutors during in-person interviews referred to digital media platforms (such as WeChat and websites) rather than broadcast media to gather information, interpret official policies, and connect to families and communities.

According to imams and Islamic Association (IA) officials, one main information source is the Islamic Association of China (IAC) website and WeChat account. Between January 2020 and July 2020, the IAC issued 16 news articles online, among which 12 articles were directly related to the pandemic. In its very first official news announcement of the pandemic outbreak on 27 January 2020, the IAC laid out the general guidelines for the local IAs to carry out the state regulations. It stated,

> To strengthen the education and guidance of the Muslim masses of all ethnic groups, the local Islamic Associations can use the WeChat public accounts, Weibo, and other means of network media (*wangluo meiti*) to disseminate the correct prevention and control measures . . . We should encourage imams (*ahong*) to maximize their advantage of being close to the masses. They can use the WeChat groups, WeChat friend circles, and other ways to guide Muslims to maintain good personal hygiene habits, avoid going to the crowded places, and trust the Party and government's initiatives. (IAC, 2020a, author's translation)

Many tech-savvy imams responded swiftly. For individual imams, the most commonly used media were website posts, WeChat public account posts, and audio files (either embedded within the WeChat posts or circulated as an independent file in WeChat groups).



Figure 3. According to a local imam, a temporary tent was set up early during the pandemic as a site for testing and observation in a mosque courtyard in Sichuan Province. Photograph by the author in June 2020.

During and after the 2020 Ramadan, several imams from Northwest and Southwest China told me that social media has become one of the major ways for them to reach to individuals and communities. "Fewer people are coming to mosques now," one imam at his 40s commented, "Even before the pandemic, many young people were reluctant to go to mosques. Now that people are keeping social distance and mosques still closed for most of the time, online communication becomes even more important."

To explain the regulations of lockdown in their online sermons, imams not only used the state regulations of public health or the scientific discourse of epidemiology. They also resorted to the Islamic discourse of health and hygiene for promoting public health information. The Qur'an, Hadith (*shengxun*, or the traditions or speeches of Prophet Muhammad), and Sunnah (*shengxing*, or the traditions and practices of Prophet Muhammad) were deployed by the Islamic institutions, organizations, and individuals and spread through online channels.

One most frequently cited hadith across websites, WeChat posts, and audio sermons is a specific section from Sahih al-Bukhari, one of the six major hadith collections of Sunni schools of jurisprudence which the majority of Chinese Muslims follow. To legitimize the physical lockdown and other social distancing policies issued by the state, imams often cited in their sermons what Prophet Muhammad said (narrated by Saud), "If you hear of an outbreak of plague in a land, do not enter it; but if the plague breaks out



Figure 4. When the lockdown was gradually lifted across China, a print-out poster of specific regulations was put up at the left side of a mosque gate in Qinghai Province. At the entrance, several tables were set up to place disinfectant bottles. Photograph by the author in August 2020.

in a place while you are in it, do not leave that place" (Al-Bukhari, 1997). For instance, Imam Ma (2020) from Gansu published a post in Muslim Online website:

> . . . the hadith [above] proves that the measures to prevent the spread of the epidemic are divinely inspired guidance, for God has affirmed the words and deeds of the Prophet (peace be upon him, PBUH) in the Qur'an . . . Reducing travel and enforcing quarantine are the best ways to prevent the spread of the virus. Even though the person being controlled might feel uncomfortable, it is worthwhile for their own safety and the safety of others. This is not a question to control one's freedom to travel; this is a divinely inspired method to ensure the peace of the place. (author's translation)

While urging Muslims to follow the state policies of lockdown and quarantine, Imam Ma legitimized such measures as a "divinely inspired method" rather just as secular policies, thus enhancing the legitimacy of state health regulations. Later, the messages in these website posts were often circulated through WeChat public account articles and audio sermons in chat groups.

This interpretation of official health regulations through religious discourses is not new among Chinese Muslim communities. During the SARS outbreak between 2002 and 2003, imams in mosques and madrasas (religious schools) would remind

their congregations of the hygienic benefits in Islamic teachings, such as ritual ablution, abstinence from pork, animal blood, and dead animals (Wang, 2012: 81). Yet, the impact of SARS was mostly regional rather than global—most-affected cities were Guangzhou, Hong Kong, and Beijing, while other places across China took various preemptive measures (Kleinman and Watson, 2006; Powers and Xiao, 2008). One Muslim WeChat account owner who used to work in Guangzhou during SARS told me in July 2020, "People were nervous in the city [of Guangzhou], but not comparable to what is happening now, you know. Few families had computers. No smart phones. We mainly got information from places like TV, neighborhood communities (*juweihui*), friends, or mosques." In contrast, the scale and severity of the COVID-19 have rendered digital media ever more crucial in mediating public health information between official regulations and Islamic discourses across different digital platforms.

Strengthening global connections with Muslim world

Since early 2020, governments in Muslim countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Malaysia expressed their concerns toward Chinese people, some of which sent medical equipment during the early stages of the Wuhan lockdown (Min, 2020). Since March 2020, the Chinese governments have also been providing various medical resources including test kits, surgical masks, and vaccines to countries and regions such as Pakistan, Iran, Algeria, Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain (Burton, 2020; Wang et al., 2020). In this section, I discuss the active role that Chinese Muslim communities played in strengthening global connections to Muslim world through selective digital media tools as a form of transnational aid and civic mobilization.

WeChat, combined with the usage of online payment methods and local websites, has become a major platform for coordinating volunteer work online and offline. During COVID-19, many non-state actors such as feminist activists, animal lovers, and online fan clubs resorted to both Weibo and WeChat for civic mobilization (Yang, 2022: 111–31). It is noticeable that the information of Muslim-led volunteering work and transnational aid have been virtually non-existent in Weibo, a major Chinese social media platform similar to Twitter. During several field trips, I asked the local organizers in Northwest and South China why they did not choose to post information in Weibo and what they thought about the lack of coverage in mainstream media reports. One Muslim organizer at his 40s told me in December 2020,

> It's better to be lowkey (*didiao*) online nowadays. Weibo has a lot of Muslim haters (*muhei*). It's risky to post there [because] some people might report (*jubao*) us and say we have connection with other [Muslim] countries . . . We only want to help our brothers and sisters. They also helped China when we were in grave danger.

Other volunteers shared similar concerns.

Their selective use of media platforms was influenced by the growing online Islamophobia in China in the past decade. Populist communities in platforms like Weibo and Zhihu (similar to Quora) have been inciting anti-Muslim sentiments mediated through

global and local topics (Luqiu and Yang, 2020; Yang and Fang, 2021; Zhang, 2019). Based on my long-term study of Chinese Muslim communities since 2015, I have also observed that most Chinese Muslims chose to remain silent in Weibo as they were concerned with the growing online anti-Muslim sentiments largely uncensored by the state.

During the nationwide lockdowns in early 2020, I started noticing the calls for transnational aid in WeChat. On 4 March, the Iranian Embassy in China posted its bank account, office addresses, and contact information in its official Weibo account. The message stated the items in dire need of donation, including surgical masks, respirators, surgical gowns, and testing kits. Below the text message were the following three images: one image with Chinese and Iranian national flags against a gray, cloudy sky, and two images of online payment QR codes for Alipay and WeChat. On the same day, this Weibo message was widely shared by my Muslim interlocutors in WeChat public account posts, friend circles, and chat groups.

To answer to the call for aid, Chinese Muslims mobilized through digital media to deliver aid through people-to-people (*minjian*) channels. Various Chinese Muslim WeChat public account owners self-organized to help donate to the Iranian Embassy across China. When I talked to Shitou, a Chinese Muslim from Beijing, he shared his experience that his co-founders and the readers of their WeChat public account quickly responded to the call.[3] For Shitou and his readers, "doing philanthropy is our zakat (*tianke*, an Islamic obligation to annually donate a certain proportion of wealth for charitable purposes)."

Another Muslim WeChat public account, Volunteer Aid Team for Syrians (VATS), used their platform to form a volunteer team. They posted an urgent call for donation immediately after the release of the Iranian Embassy's Weibo post. They also publicized its own contact information and WeChat QR code for collecting donation (VATS, 2020a). Shortly, the team made the information of donation public in their WeChat account, including digital copies of online payment and excel forms of individual donation. Over 1600 Chinese Muslims across China donated through their channel through WeChat, totaling about 340k yuan (about US$53,000) within 2 days (VATS, 2020b).

During my field trips to Shaanxi, I observed how Chinese Muslims used digital media and collaborated with Muslims from Central Asia to organize aid for the Dungans (Hui diasporas). In July 2020, 17 local organizations—mostly Muslim-led groups—formed a temporary aid team for the Dungans. The team put out a call for donation in several websites with photos from Dungan villages and online payment QR codes (e.g. An, 2020). Two of the organizers, Mr Sun and Mr An told me that their volunteering was done through personal networks, WeChat public accounts, friend circles, and chat groups. Some Dungan students who studied in Chinese universities also helped out to deliver the aid to their home villages (ZRYWG, 2020). Eventually, 150,000 Masks, medicines (about 50,000RMB or US$7800), and 120,000 RMB (US$18,750) were delivered to the Dungan villages in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.[4]

Chinese Muslim communities' connection to the wider Muslim world during COVID-19 is a result of the expanding digital infrastructure in everyday life and transnational ties in the past decade (Harris and Isa, 2019; Weng, 2015). Based on my long-term observation since 2015, WeChat, websites, online payment methods, and apps for commercial activities have all been incorporated in daily use, especially among urban youth, traders

and merchants, and diasporic communities. Many Muslim business owners, for instance, would establish a WeChat public account through their companies, while maintaining an independent business website or having a page in a well-established web portal. Some Muslim traders also register in apps that allow online payment and online food ordering services. The online payment, in turn, plays an important role in boosting local businesses and strengthening global connections during the pandemic. For Chinese Muslims, the cross-platform usage of digital media enables them to explore more possibilities of establishing global connections to Muslim World.

From the cases and interviews analyzed earlier, we see how digital media both facilitates and constrains Chinese Muslim civic organization and transnational connection. Islamophobia online and the lack of censorship of anti-Muslim sentiments prevented Chinese Muslim volunteers, unlike many other non-state actors, from posting calls for civic organization in Weibo. Rather, they chose to either directly use WeChat and websites or repost Weibo information in other platforms for "lowkey" digital presence. This selective media use helps strengthen the connection between Chinese Muslim communities and the global Muslim world without triggering online censorship.

Voicing dissent in the shadows of online censorship

While continuing to demonstrate their support for state policies and carefully selecting media platforms for civic engagement, a networked Islamic counterpublic also means that Chinese Muslims strategically voice dissent in the shadows of online censorship. One contentious issue during a pandemic outbreak like COVID-19 centers around the burial practices of deceased Muslims. Typically, a deceased Muslim needs to be buried within 24 hours of death, first bathed and then shrouded, finally interned in earth. Cremation of the body is strictly forbidden, though certain exceptions could be reasoned within the framework of Islamic law based on Qur'an and the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (Daar and Khitamy, 2001). If handled inappropriately, a burial practice during an epidemic might lead to the local communities' distrust of government officials or medical personnel. Such distrust might further exacerbate the spread of an infectious disease if the family members of a deceased patient refuse to inform the authorities to take care of the body. In some situations, the inappropriate handling of burial might even lead to ethnic or religious conflicts (Al-Dawoody, 2017; Shabana, 2021).

For Chinese Muslims, such concerns were hard to ignore. On 1 February 2020, China's National Health Commission (NHC) issued an official guideline for the disposal work of human remains with novel coronavirus infection. Within the Muslim communities, one principle aroused particular anxiety—"cremation in the vicinity" (*jiujin huohua*). The Guideline specified that "in accordance with the provisions of the Communicable Disease Control Act (CDCA), the remains of ethnic minorities with novel coronavirus must be cremated. After cremation, the ashes may be placed in accordance with ethnic customs" (NHC, 2020). While the NHC (2020) guideline did caution government bureaus to "implement the general guideline based on actual situations", cremation was listed as the only option in the 2020 Guideline.

The initial responses from Chinese Muslim communities were mixed. In the IAC website and WeChat public account, the general attitudes were to strictly abide by the

state laws and the NHC Guideline (IAC, 2020b). Yet, this approach was contended among Chinese Muslim communities online, particularly through the strategic media tactics of anonymity and translation. Five days after the issuance of the NHC Guidance, an article directly addressing the principle of "cremation in the vicinity" circulated widely in WeChat (Bumin, 2020). The author assumed the pseudonym of Bumin, meaning almsgiving or spreading generosity. After explaining the basic principles of Islamic funerary practices, Bumin (2020) proposed to find a "middle ground" to "properly" deal with the deceased body during the pandemic:

> We suggest that the issue of handling the bodies of ethnic minorities should be treated with scientific rigor, but also compromised and properly handled to conform to ethnic customs. If a few religious people (*xinjiao renshi*) died of infection, we should report to and consult with relevant institutions such as the Ethnic and Religious Affairs Bureau and the Islamic Association. We should also discuss with the imam of the mosque to simplify the funeral process and leave it to professional handlers [medical staff] to directly dress the deceased in isolation and bury them deep underground. (deleted but stored in the author's archive, author's translation)

Bumin acknowledged the importance to abide by the general state public health regulations but also highlighted the necessity of handling the human remains with dignity according to the Islamic values. However, this article was soon deleted, as its suggestion ran counter to the NHC Guideline during a time of great anxiety across the nation over the handling of human bodies infected with COVID-19 (Qin and Li, 2020).

Despite the tightening censorship, other websites and WeChat public accounts quickly followed suit. Besides anonymity, the tactic of translation was also used to avoid the direct identification of authors' standpoint. In February 2020, a Muslim public account translated the full English version of the World Health Organization (WHO) Guideline for Ebola and Marburg into Chinese. Rather than making any direct comments on the COVID-related health regulations in China, the author highlighted the importance of consultation with the family and communities of the deceased to preempt any potential conflict as specified in the WHO Guideline (Shanjing, 2020, deleted but stored in author's archive). In late 2020, the tactics of anonymity and translation were also found in the Chinese Muslim websites such as the Light of Islam (*yisilan zhiguang*) where the news of respectful religious burials among the Muslim minority in Yangon, Thailand was translated (Yahyaa, 2020). Before some of those articles were censored and deleted, they were liked, shared, and reposted across different digital platforms.

When I asked an imam in March 2020 why the tactics of anonymity was so widely practiced, the imam commented, "it is not a question of gaining religious authority for any single individual but just to discuss important matters objectively." He made it clear to me that what at stake was the collective interests of Muslim communities across China. During multiple field trips when I asked whether cremation concerned my interlocutors, 20 out of 33 interviewees answered yes. When I showed Bumin's post to a small business owner from Gansu Province at her 50s, she told me in July 2020, "I don't know who this [person] is. But he has a point. . . . If there were a middle way, why not? [It's] a pity those [posts] got deleted . . . I dare not get sick these days!" Another college student from Shaanxi in his early 20s said in May 2020,

> I'm worried for my grandparents. What if anything bad happened to them? . . .. I am not sure whether this kind of online stuff works. You see, it was deleted so fast, even before I could see it. If you don't show me today, I don't know it ever existed. But even if I knew, what can I do?

Yet, even though most interlocutors I asked sighed or gave a resigned look when discussing the actual effect of those online posts, they still appreciated such efforts, no matter how futile it might seem at the moment.

In Muslim societies around the world, digital media has enabled the emergence of new forms of religious authorities, especially among imams and scholars who are more familiar with new media technology (Bunt, 2018). In the online posts analyzed in this section, however, authors adopted pseudonyms and used translation without any reference to a specific imam or scholar in China. The relinquishment of individual religious authority on a contentious issue reflects a delicate balance between dissent and censorship: when the stake is high, Chinese Muslims choose to voice their dissent more subtly in China's cyberspace. Yet, when asking people what they thought of online dissent in relation to daily realities, the effect of those anynomized efforts might have been rather limited.

Conclusion

While a global pandemic like COVID-19 has acerbated the existing racial and social stigmas through media, it is ever more important to understand the active roles undertaken by marginalized communities through their own use of digital media. In this article, I use the concept of "networked Islamic counterpublic" to examine the active participation of Chinese Muslims in fighting against the global pandemic of COVID-19. In general, China's Islamic counterpublic shows a strong tendency to conform to the state regulations and discourses. Chinese Muslims carefully cultivate digital pathways to promote Islamic ethics across different platforms. They selectively use digital media tools to promote civic mobilization and strengthen global connections to Muslim world amid anti-Muslim sentiments online. When certain official health regulations are not compatible with long-standing Islamic funerary practices, Chinese Muslims strategically resort to various digital platforms, media tactics, and global health discourses for voicing online dissent. Although the effect of online dissent seems to be rather limited, Muslim content creators never give up trying and their efforts are appreciated among fellow users.

What remains to be seen in the post-pandemic world is the growing trend of sinicizing Islam and the expanding infrastructure of online censorship and digital surveillance in China. Despite Chinese Muslims' overall accommodation with the official discourses, the state and big-tech companies still closely monitor certain Islamic contents in digital platforms. Self-censorship by Muslim content creators is also a commonplace practice. Moreover, China's expanding digital infrastructure has created more effective surveillance mechanisms in regulating religious sites through the very media platforms that Chinese Muslims seek to use during the pandemic. Besides the ubiquitous scanning of health QR codes across China during COVID-19, an online registration system has been integrated into the WeChat public accounts of local Islamic Associations through mobile devices to monitor attendees for Friday congregations in megacities like Shanghai and Guangzhou.[5] It is possible that this digital infrastructure might expand into more cities

and towns in the near future, not only in mosques but also in other religious sites such as churches and temples. How do marginalized ethnic and religious communities cope with the pervasive censorship and surveillance in daily life? How do they use digital media to create alternative spaces for self-expressions, representations, and networks without ruffling feathers with the state?. These questions demand further research for understanding China's evolving networked Islamic counterpublic in the post-pandemic world.

Author's note

I hereby confirm that I am the only author of this manuscript. The manuscript is submitted solely to *New Media & Society* and has not been previously published, either in whole or in part, nor have the findings been posted online. I confirm full access to all aspects of the research and writing process, and take final responsibility for the paper.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. Interview in December 2016.
2. Interviews in December 2016 and June 2020.
3. Both WeChat content creator groups also donated to Malaysia shortly after their donation to Iran. Phone interviews in Ma (2020).
4. Interview in July 2020.
5. Field visits in Shanghai in May, July, and October 2020; a field trip to Guangzhou in December 2020.

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