

EERMAILI AS LIVING ISLAM: RITUAL PRACTICE AND RELIGIOUS TRANSMISSION AMONG THE HUI MUSLIMS IN CHINA

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Abstract

This article examines Hui Ermaili as a form of “living Islam”—a ritual practice that integrates theological intentionality, communal devotion, and embodied transmission of Islamic knowledge within China’s minority Hui Muslim context. Ermaili, derived from the Arabic term *‘amal* (righteous deed), encompasses Qur’anic recitation, prophetic eulogy chanting, supplication, charity, sermons, and communal meals. Far from being a syncretic or folkloric tradition, Ermaili is framed here as *da‘wah bi’l-ḥāl*: a performative invitation to Islam through lived example rather than verbal preaching. Drawing on Talal Asad’s concept of discursive tradition and Catherine Bell’s theory of ritualisation, the study interprets Ermaili because of religious agency through which Islamic knowledge and values are transmitted across generations, Islamic faith is strengthened, and communal solidarity is reinforced. Methodologically, the research combines insider ethnography with textual analysis and comparative ritual studies. The author approaches the topic as both researcher and participant-observer, drawing on experience as a Hui Muslim raised within the Ermaili tradition. The article challenges reductionist readings that treat Ermaili as cultural adaptation, arguing instead for its theological authenticity through examination of Sufi genealogies and scriptural foundations. Despite reformist critiques from movements like Yihewani that view certain Ermaili practices as *bid‘ah* (innovation), the study demonstrates Ermaili’s persistence as authentic Islamic devotion. By foregrounding Ermaili’s pedagogical, ethical, and spiritual dimensions, the study contributes to broader discussions in the anthropology of Islam, minority da‘wah, and ritual theory. It affirms Ermaili as a vital expression of living Islam – where belief is enacted, theology embodied, and religious agency cultivated in everyday life.

Keyword: Hui Muslim, Ermaili, Living Islam, Religious transmission, China



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INTRODUCTION

In the Qur'an, the Arabic term *ʿamal* (عمل), meaning deed or act, is frequently paired with *īmān* (faith), emphasising the profound connection between belief and righteous conduct. The Qur'anic phrase "those who believe and do righteous deeds" reveals that faith in Islam is not a passive state—it is inherently embodied and actively enacted. Allah declares, "Whoever does righteous deeds—whether male or female—while being a believer, we will surely grant them a good life and reward them according to the best of what they used to do" (Qur'an 16:97). Traditionally, *ʿamal* refers to acts of worship and moral behavior – prayer, charity, fasting, and ethical conduct – but among China's Hui Muslims, the concept has acquired a broader and more nuanced meaning.

For the Hui, Eermali – Chinese transliteration of the Arabic *ʿamal* – has evolved to designate a distinctive form of ritual gathering that embodies this Qur'anic principle of faith-in-action. These ceremonial assemblies, which typically include Qur'anic recitation, prophetic eulogy chanting, supplication, charitable distribution, sermons, and communal meals, serve as comprehensive expressions of *ʿamal* in its most integrated sense: righteous deeds that simultaneously fulfil religious obligations, transmit sacred knowledge, and strengthen communal bonds.

In minority Muslim contexts – particularly under secular and restrictive regimes—the preservation and transmission of Islamic knowledge often rely on such subtle, embodied, and contextually adaptive forms of practice. Among China's Hui Muslims, Eermali has long served as a key mechanism for sustaining faith and Muslim identity. Although it is sometimes mischaracterised as a sinicised or syncretic custom due to its formal resemblance to certain Buddhist or Daoist commemorative rites, Hui Eermali is more accurately understood as *da'wah bi'l-ḥāl*: the invitation to Islam through lived example and embodied devotion, rather than through verbal preaching (*da'wah bi'l-lisān*).

This article positions Hui Eermali as a form of "living Islam"—a theologically grounded and spiritually intentional mode of ritual *da'wah* that both reflects and responds to the conditions of minority life in China. Through its integrated acts of remembrance, charity, and communal solidarity, Eermali enacts Islamic principles in a quiet yet resilient manner, offering a space where belief is performed, ethics are embodied, and religious identity is renewed. Drawing on Talal Asad's concept of the discursive tradition and Catherine Bell's theory of ritualisation, the study interprets Eermali as a strategic and ethical enactment of divine command—one that transmits Islamic values intergenerationally, fosters communal bonds, and operates as an informal pedagogical space.

Methodologically, the research integrates scholarly analysis with lived experience. As both a Hui Muslim raised within the tradition of Eermali and the son of a late imam who regularly led such gatherings, I approach this topic from the dual vantage point of researcher and participant-observer. This insider perspective—grounded in years of direct engagement with the theological content and communal rhythms of Eermali—is complemented by textual

analysis of Hui Islamic writings, comparative ritual studies (particularly from Southeast Asia), and critical engagement with anthropological and theological scholarship. The study's interdisciplinary approach situates Hui Ermaili at the intersection of the anthropology of Islam, ritual theory, and minority da'wah studies, foregrounding it as a site of both devotional continuity and religious agency within a complex socio-political environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of Islamic practice among minority Muslim communities has increasingly emphasised the role of localised ritual forms in preserving theological authenticity while engaging with specific cultural contexts. Among China's Hui Muslims, the practice of Ermaili represents a distinctive expression of "living Islam" that fulfils both devotional and pedagogical functions. This review examines existing scholarship on Hui Muslim ritual practices, theoretical frameworks for understanding "living Islam", and mechanisms of religious transmission in minority contexts.

Talal Asad's seminal theorisation of Islamic discursive traditions provides a crucial lens for analysing how ritual practices operate as vehicles of religious transmission. Asad (1986) conceptualises Islamic traditions as "discourses that seek to instruct practitioners regarding the correct form and purpose of a given practice that, precisely because it is established, has a history" (p. 14). Within this framework, Hui Ermaili can be interpreted as a legitimate articulation of Islamic tradition, simultaneously sustaining historical continuity and adapting to contemporary realities. Catherine Bell's (1992) concept of "ritualisation" further complements this perspective by highlighting how ritual activities distinguish themselves from ordinary actions through their privileged relationship to authority. This framework allows us to analyse Hui Ermaili not merely as a cultural performance but as an enactment of religious authority through embodied practice, often independent of formal institutional structures.

Historically, Chinese Muslim practices have reflected both theological fidelity and cultural engagement. Ben-Dor Benite's (2005) *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China* illustrates how Chinese Muslims cultivated distinctive expressions of Islam that preserved orthodoxy while conversing with Chinese intellectual traditions. Similarly, Lipman (1997) demonstrates the strategic resilience of Hui communities in negotiating relationships with state authority while safeguarding Islamic identity. More recent studies observe that Hui Muslims continue to "fuse Islamic and Han practices" while maintaining religious distinctiveness (Foreign Policy Centre, 2019). Broader analyses of "religious pluralism of Muslim practices in China" also provide comparative frameworks for situating Ermaili within diverse trajectories of Islamic adaptation (Cambridge Core, 2024).

Beyond the Chinese context, Mandaville's (2001) work on transnational Muslim politics underscores how Islamic knowledge is often transmitted in minority contexts through family networks, ritual gatherings, and embodied practices, rather than exclusively through formal institutions. This insight is directly relevant to Hui Ermaili, which functions as a mechanism of religious pedagogy and communal devotion, ensuring intergenerational transmission of Islamic values in contexts where institutional support may be limited.

Some Chinese scholars have also examined Ermaili, notably Yang and Ma (2010) and Ma and Zhao (2012). These works provide detailed ethnographic descriptions

of Ermaili practices and their social functions. However, a fundamental limitation characterises this body of research: Ermaili is often interpreted primarily as a cultural ritual or folkloric activity rather than as a religious act. Such interpretations obscure the theological intent of Ermaili and underplay the religious agency of Hui Muslims in sustaining it. By framing Ermaili as a product of cultural borrowing or adaptation, these studies overlook its religious origins and its role as a vehicle of Islamic piety and transmission.

In sum, existing scholarship offers valuable historical, theoretical, and ethnographic foundations for understanding Hui Muslim ritual practices. Yet significant gaps remain in analysing Ermaili as a form of “living Islam” that maintains theological authenticity while responding to the cultural and political conditions of contemporary China. The present study seeks to fill this gap by foregrounding the devotional and pedagogical dimensions of Hui Ermaili, situating it as a dynamic expression of embodied Islam and a central mechanism of religious continuity among the Hui.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: HUI MUSLIM AND THE ORIGINS OF HUI AMAL

The Hui Muslims, China’s largest officially recognised Muslim ethnic group, trace their ancestry to Arab, Persian, and Central Asian traders, soldiers, and scholars who began settling in China during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). Their numbers grew substantially under the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), when Mongol military campaigns facilitated the migration of large Muslim populations from the Islamic heartlands into China. By the end of the Yuan period, a distinct ethnic category had emerged—designated by the Yuan government as “Hui”, a term indicating the followers of Islam (Yu, 2012). As Hajj Yusuf Chang (1987) aptly observed, “the Chinese Hui minority is the ‘child of Islam’. Without Islam as its religion, it is a multi-racial group, not a Muslim minority.”

The Ming dynasty (1368–1644) marked a pivotal era in the formation of Hui ethnic identity. Confronted with aggressive Sinicisation policies—including the imposition of Han Chinese surnames, dress codes, and a ban on foreign languages—Hui Muslims were compelled to assimilate into Han cultural norms. They adopted Chinese names and attire, abandoned their native languages, and transformed mosque architecture to resemble traditional Chinese temples (Yu 2012). Yet this acculturation remained largely external. To preserve their religious identity, Hui Muslims innovatively established the mosque-based *jingtang jiaoyu* educational system, which employed traditional Chinese pedagogical methods to transmit Islamic knowledge and sustain their faith.

Under the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), Hui Muslims faced intensified racial discrimination and religious suppression. In this climate of marginalisation, religious life became increasingly discreet, and survival often depended on strategic invisibility. It was within this fraught sociopolitical context that Sufism gained renewed prominence among Hui communities.

Sufi influences reached China as early as the 10th century and expanded remarkably during the Yuan period (Zhou, 2002). However, their most significant impact unfolded during the Ming dynasty, particularly through the *jingtang jiaoyu* system—an Islamic educational framework created by Hui scholars that adapted traditional Chinese pedagogical methods to teach Islamic knowledge. Within this system, Sufi thoughts and practices were not only widely

embraced by Hui Islamic scholars but were also actively disseminated by these scholars beyond the confines of the educational framework. During the Qing dynasty, Sufi influence reached its peak with the establishment of formal Sufi orders. Among them, four were the most prominent: *Khufiyyah*, *Jahriyyah*, *Qadiriyyah* and *Kuburiyyah*. These orders flourished in the 17th and 18th centuries in northwest China, where Muslim populations were most heavily concentrated (Ma, 2000). The discrete nature of Sufi practices, combined with their extensive spiritual and social networks, provided Hui Muslims with vital channels for maintaining religious continuity. In an era of heightened persecution and vulnerability, these networks fostered both spiritual resilience and communal solidarity.

The origins of Hui Ermaili remain historically opaque; no definitive archival records or textual sources document its initial emergence. Nevertheless, its ritual structure strongly suggests a Sufi genealogy. Hui Ermaili incorporates core elements of Sufi devotional practice—Qur’anic recitation, poetic praise of the Prophet, and collective supplication—not merely as stylistic echoes but as integral components. Crucially, Hui communities employ widely circulated Sufi poetic eulogies of the Prophet within the Ermaili. These texts are not peripheral; they are embedded within the ritual fabric, indicating that Ermaili may have originated as a Sufi devotional form or was significantly shaped by Sufi spirituality before evolving into a broader communal tradition.

RITUAL TYPOLOGIES AND STRUCTURE OF ERMAILI

The Hui Ermaili tradition can be broadly categorised into private and communal forms, each manifesting across domestic and public settings. These gatherings function as multifaceted vehicles for religious expression, spiritual instruction, and social cohesion within Hui Muslim communities. In private homes, families convene Ermaili to mark important life-cycle events—such as the birth and naming of children, male circumcision, engagements and marriages, the celebratory return from *hajj*, and most prominently, funerals and memorial services.

Posthumous commemorations hold ritual weight, following a structured schedule of remembrance on the seventh, fourteenth, twenty-first, fortieth, and one-hundredth days after death, with annual observances continuing thereafter. In addition to these life-event and memorial Ermaili, Hui Muslims also practice specific supplicatory gatherings—known as *Qiuji* (seeking assistance) and *Pin’an* (seeking peace and safety)—during times of hardship or uncertainty.

Beyond the domestic sphere, Ermaili takes on expanded public dimensions through mosque-centered and shrine-centered gatherings. These communal events serve multiple commemorative purposes: honouring the Prophet and his family, marking significant occasions such as ‘*Āshūrā*’, memorialising revered local Sufi leaders, and acknowledging historical tragedies that have affected the broader Hui community. While these public ceremonies retain the fundamental elements of family-based Ermaili—including Qur’anic recitation, devotional poetry praising the Prophet, and the practice of communal hospitality—they are distinguished by their grander scale and the inclusion of extended scholarly sermons delivered by respected *ahongs* (imams or Islamic scholars).

QUR'ĀN RECITATION

Central to the Ermaili ceremony is the recitation of the Qur'ān, which serves as a conduit for divine mercy and intercession benefiting both the living and the deceased. Unlike the *selamatan* and *majlis tahlil* practices in Indonesia and Malaysia, which involve the recitation of specific chapters, Qur'ān recitation in the Hui Ermaili is not confined to any chapter or verses. Two distinct methods of recitation are generally employed.

In the sequential approach, the *ahong* and invited religious students take turns reading aloud, with each participant reciting half a page to two pages while the congregation listens in reverent silence.

The distributed *juz'* method involves dividing the Qur'ān into thirty separate booklets, each containing one *juz'*. These booklets are distributed among participants—primarily the *imām* and students—enabling simultaneous recitation of different sections. The ideal outcome is the complete recitation of the entire Qur'ān during the gathering, though time constraints may necessitate reading only part of each assigned *juz'*.

PROPHETIC EULOGY CHANTING

Following the Quranic recitation, participants collectively chant poetic eulogies in praise of Prophet Muhammad. The eulogies are drawn from books written by Sufi scholars, which strongly indicates the Sufi origins of the Hui Ermaili. However, the types of prophetic eulogies and especially their melodies show certain differences, reflecting the diverse influence of Sufi orders and regional practices across China's Muslim communities.

The practice varies significantly based on the scale and context of the ceremony. In private Ermaili ceremonies, participants typically chant *Mawlud Sharif*—a typical prophetic eulogy employed by the *Khufiyyah* Sufi order—following the Quranic recitation. In certain regions of northwest China, especially Xinjiang, another distinctive form of eulogy called *mukhammas*, which originates from the *Jahriyyah* Sufi order, is also frequently employed. *Mawlud al-Barzanji*—a celebrated work that enjoys widespread recognition and recitation across the global Muslim community—is almost routine in larger Ermaili gatherings, especially those held in mosques. *Awrad Fātihiyyah*—an important eulogy collection of the *Qadiriyyah* Sufi order—is mostly chanted by its followers but sometimes by non-Sufi followers as well.

Unlike prophetic eulogy collections found in other Muslim countries such as Pakistan, which have been translated into local languages, the prophetic eulogies in China are all preserved and chanted in their original Arabic textual form. The preservation of Arabic textual forms—whether *mukhammas*, *Fātihiyyah*, or established *mawlud* literature—indicates a deliberate maintenance of authentic Islamic devotional expressions within the Chinese cultural context.

The melodic traditions accompanying these eulogies reveal patterns of both continuity and adaptation that illuminate the practice's origins and transmission. In the northwestern provinces, the melodies of *mawlud sharif* demonstrate remarkable consistency with only minor variations between regions. These northwestern melodic patterns bear striking similarities to those found in Malaysia and other Muslim countries, providing compelling evidence that

Hui Ermaili represents a product of transnational and intergenerational transmission rather than local cultural adaptation. In contrast, the central and eastern regions of China exhibit melodic traditions that have been deeply localized, often resembling regional opera or, in some areas, Buddhist chant.

Apart from *Yihewani* and Salafi groups, who categorically reject prophetic eulogy chanting, virtually all other Islamic sects within China incorporate this component into their Ermaili ceremonies, regardless of formal Sufi affiliation. This pattern of adoption demonstrates how devotional practices originally confined to specific Sufi orders have organically diffused across sectarian boundaries. Such diffusion underscores how Sufi-derived practices have become integral to broader Hui religious expression, transcending their origins to become defining features of communal Islamic identity in China.

DISPERSAL OF CHARITY

Following the chanting of prophetic eulogies, the host—or, in the case of communal Ermaili held in a mosque, a member of the mosque management committee—distributes monetary offerings to the imam and religious students. These offerings are referred to by various names: *ṣadaqah* (charity), *hadiyah* (gift), and *nieti* (intention). The diversity of terms underscores a shared understanding that the money is not a form of payment for labour, but rather a religious offering made with the intention of seeking divine reward—for both the deceased and the living.

The amount given is determined by the host's personal intention (*niyyah*), which further explains the use of the term *nieti*. This intentionality frames the act as a spiritual gesture rather than a transactional exchange, reinforcing its role within the moral economy of ritual charity.

SUPPLICATION (DU‘Ā)

Supplication forms an important component of Hui Ermaili. All participants join together in prayers for the deceased, seeking God's mercy, forgiveness, and the elevation of their spiritual rank in the hereafter. The supplication practice in Hui Ermaili follows a distinctive pattern: while one person leads the prayers, they do so silently rather than aloud—with the notable exception of the supplication following *Mawlūd al-Barzanji*, which is vocalised by the leader. This contrasts with supplication practices in other Muslim countries, where prayers are typically led aloud.

Supplications occur at several key moments throughout the ceremony: following Quranic recitation, after the chanting of prophetic eulogies, following the distribution of charity, and after the communal meal.

SERMON

The sermon constitutes the most important component of communal Ermaili, though it is also delivered in private Ermaili ceremonies based on the host's request. In communal Ermaili held in mosques, the mosque management committee typically selects an *ahong* from other mosques to deliver the sermon. These sermons usually last one to two hours and center around the

specific theme of the Ermaili. For example, during Prophet's birthday celebrations, the speaker will focus particularly on the holiness of the Prophet, his struggles, and his exemplary character. In some cases, a mosque may invite two *ahong* to deliver separate sermons to male and female audiences. In contrast, sermons delivered in private homes are considerably shorter in length, ranging from 10 to 30 minutes according to the host's specific requirements and preferences. The sermons rarely address issues related to Islamic fiqh but focus on tawhid and encouraging the Muslims to build and strengthen religious consciousness (taqwa).

COMMUNAL MEAL

The ritual typically concludes with a communal meal served to all participants. The order of dining follows established social protocols: when space is limited, the imam, religious students, distinguished guests, and senior relatives are served first, with other participants eating afterward. In larger venues or during group Ermaili held in mosques, participants generally dine together, with the host typically eating last as a mark of hospitality.

Gender-based dining arrangements are observed, with men usually eating before women when meals are served in succession. When simultaneous dining is possible, men and women are seated separately at different tables, maintaining traditional social boundaries while preserving the communal nature of the meal.

THEOLOGICAL INTENT AND RELIGIOUS AGENCY

Any attempt to understand Hui Ermaili that overlooks its theological intent risks missing the very heart of its meaning. While previous studies have focused on the ritual's formal structure, symbolic elements, or cultural continuity, these dimensions alone cannot offer a complete picture. The true significance of Ermaili lies in its religious intentionality—its grounding in Islamic theology and its function as a vehicle of religious agency.

For the Hui, whose ethnic identity is inextricably linked to Islamic faith, theological intentionality serves as the primary driving force behind Ermaili practices. Ermaili is performed not as a cultural inheritance but as a religious responsibility. It is a spiritually motivated act through which Hui Muslims seek divine mercy, fulfill their duties to the deceased, and reaffirm their commitment to God. Specific forms such as *Qiuji* (asking for assistance) and *Pin'an* (seeking peace or safety), often performed during times of hardship, vividly illustrate this theological orientation.

Yet beyond theological intent lies the deeper dimension of religious agency—the capacity of Hui Muslims to actively shape their religious lives through embodied, intentional practice. Ermaili is not a passive reproduction of inherited ritual; it is a deliberate enactment of faith, through which participants assert their theological convictions, respond to existential challenges, and cultivate moral and spiritual accountability. In this sense, Ermaili becomes a site of agency: a performative space where Hui Muslims negotiate divine-human relations, transmit religious knowledge, and reaffirm their place within the ummah.

The theological aims of Ermaili are threefold: the commemoration of the deceased while seeking God's mercy on their behalf; the transmission of Islamic knowledge and cultivation of spiritual discipline across generations; and the strengthening of solidarity,

reaffirming communal bonds and sustaining a shared religious identity within a pluralistic society. These purposes are realized not through abstract doctrine alone but through lived, performative acts—making Ermaili a space where belief is enacted, theology is embodied, and religious agency is exercised in culturally resonant forms.

Far from being a static preservation of tradition, Ermaili is a dynamic expression of faith—an intentional, theologically grounded practice through which Hui Muslims fulfill religious obligations and nurture their spiritual community. It is not a symbolic echo of the past but a living act of worship. More than a reflection of cultural continuity, Ermaili embodies religious agency in its fullest sense: a performative *da'wah* through which faith is enacted, duties are discharged, and communal devotion is continually renewed.

ERMAILI AS LIVING ISLAM

The concept of "living Islam" transcends the conventional boundaries between belief and practice, sacred and mundane, individual devotion and communal responsibility. Hui Ermaili exemplifies this integrated approach to Islamic life, functioning not as a compartmentalised religious ritual but as a practical expression of faith that weaves Islamic principles seamlessly into the fabric of everyday experience. As Durkheim observed, commemorative rituals serve to sustain the vitality of religious beliefs and "revivify the most essential elements of the collective consciousness," through which "a religious group periodically renews the sentiment which it has of itself and of its unity" (Durkheim 1965: 420).

Ermaili demonstrates precisely this function within Hui communities, operating as both a spiritual practice and a mechanism for cultural continuity. Unlike formal religious instruction confined to specific institutional settings, Ermaili encompasses the full spectrum of human experience—from the joy of welcoming newborns and celebrating marriages to seeking divine assistance during hardship through *Qinji* and *s* gatherings. This comprehensive integration illustrates how Islam, for the Hui, becomes the interpretive framework through which life's pivotal moments acquire meaning and spiritual significance. The practice's expansion into new spheres of contemporary life—including business opening ceremonies and new house blessings—further demonstrates its vitality as living Islam, reflecting deepening appreciation among Hui communities for Ermaili's spiritual efficacy in addressing modern needs within their theological framework.

Central to Ermaili's role as living Islam is its capacity to cultivate collective identity and reinforce social solidarity among the dispersed Hui community. As one of China's most scattered ethnic groups, lacking a distinct language or script, the Hui rely on religious faith as their primary emotional bond, with Islam serving as both religion and the foundation of ethnic identity. Ermaili gatherings provide crucial opportunities for community members to come together amid busy modern lives, creating the strongest sense of belonging within the Hui collective. Through congregational participation in mosques or homes, the commemoration of deceased saints or family members becomes an act through which Hui collective identity is re-certified and social solidarity strengthened by shared religious duties that every participant practices and appreciates.

This communal dimension proves especially vital in contemporary contexts where rapid change threatens traditional bonds. During Ermaili preparation and participation, relatives assist

and coordinate with one another, strengthening emotional ties while investing personal feelings in collective activities—giving thanks together for joyful events, praying together for shared aspirations, and seeking salvation together for departed loved ones. As participants listen to the ahong's recitations together, they experience reinforced reverence and gratitude toward Allah, each person feeling themselves to be a member of a community united by shared faith. These experiences cultivate both belonging and group identification that sustains Hui identity across generations.

Pedagogically, Ermaili creates what might be called "Islamic subjects"—individuals whose religious consciousness is formed through embodied participation rather than abstract instruction. As Geertz noted, "engagement in some form of ritualised traffic with sacred symbols is the major mechanism by means of which they [believers] come not only to encounter a world view but actually to adopt it, to internalize it as part of their personality" (Geertz 1971: 100). Hui parents bring children to Ermaili ceremonies from a young age, where they learn appropriate behaviour and chanting through observation and imitation of adult actions. Through repeated exposure and gradual participation, children absorb ritual vocabulary, devotional postures, and ethical orientations, learning that charity expresses divine accountability, that supplication connects personal concerns with divine mercy, and that communal meals embody principles of hospitality and mutual responsibility extending far beyond the gathering itself.

As modern Hui families navigate intense social competition, many increasingly prioritise secular education, often at the expense of religious and cultural learning. This shift has contributed to widening gaps in religious knowledge among Hui youth. Within this context, Ermaili emerges as a vital site of experiential transmission, offering meaningful opportunities for young people to engage with their heritage. Participation immerses youth in Islamic practice and Hui tradition, providing deeper insight into Muslim life while teaching ceremonial protocols, traditional food preparation methods, and rhythms of communal devotion. The solemn ritual atmosphere fosters sacred presence, often experienced as spiritual purification, cultivating reverence toward Allah and strengthening personal faith while anchoring young participants within their religious and cultural identity.

For Hui Muslim women, particularly those with limited mosque access due to local traditions, Ermaili provides essential opportunities for religious agency and spiritual education. Through organising gatherings, preparing communal meals, and arranging ritual spaces, women exercise religious agency as devotional acts through which they seek thawab (divine reward), allowing them to realize their spiritual value and participate meaningfully in religious life. Equally important, Ermaili offers opportunities for direct theological instruction from ahongs through sermons, accessing foundational Islamic teachings that strengthen religious knowledge and spiritual capacity for women who do not regularly attend mosques or Islamic schools.

Similarly, for Hui Muslims who seldom attend mosque—colloquially referred to as Yue Hui Hui (monthly attendees) or Nian Hui Hui (yearly attendees)—Ermaili serves as a vital spiritual lifeline. These gatherings provide meaningful opportunities to reconnect with foundational Islamic teachings, refresh faith commitments, and receive religious knowledge in accessible and welcoming environments. In contexts where mosque attendance may be limited by work schedules, geographic distance, or sociopolitical constraints, Ermaili becomes a bridge linking individuals back to the mosque, the broader Hui community, and the spiritual rhythms of Islamic life. Through Qur'anic recitation, sermons, and communal meals, infrequent mosque-

goers experience renewal of religious identity and strengthening of ties to their faith tradition. This experiential transmission proves especially effective in conveying Islam's affective and spiritual dimensions that formal instruction often struggles to communicate. Participants witness and engage in expressions of reverence, humility, and communal solidarity that demonstrate faith as lived reality rather than abstract doctrine. The integration of theological reflection with practical charity, devotional poetry with domestic hospitality, creates comprehensive religious experience that addresses intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions of Islamic life simultaneously.

Through this holistic integration, Ermaili emerges as living Islam in its fullest expression: a practice where theological conviction becomes embodied reality, where individual devotion strengthens communal bonds, where sacred principles transform everyday circumstances, and where authentic religious response emerges from thoughtful engagement with contemporary challenges guided by revealed principles. It demonstrates that Islamic tradition is not a museum of historical practices but a living tradition that enables believers to respond faithfully to divine guidance while engaging constructively with their circumstances. In modern Chinese society, where the Hui face unique challenges as both ethnic and religious minorities, Ermaili provides a vital mechanism for maintaining Islamic consciousness, transmitting cultural knowledge, and fostering community solidarity across generations, serving as an exemplary model of how traditional religious practices adapt to contemporary needs while preserving their essential spiritual and social functions.

CRITIQUES AND RESILIENCE

Despite its important role in Hui religious life, Ermaili has not been without controversy. Since the late nineteenth century, reformist currents—most prominently the *Yihewani* movement—have questioned the practice's legitimacy and theological basis. These challenges reflect broader tensions within Chinese Islam between traditionalist approaches that emphasize local religious customs and reformist movements that prioritize strict adherence to perceived scriptural orthodoxy.

Reformist critiques have typically focused on three main points. First, they argue that Ermaili has no explicit foundation in the Qur'ān or authentic ḥadīth and therefore constitutes a religious innovation (*bid'ah*). Second, they object to the fixed-day memorials for the deceased held on the seventh, fourteenth, twenty-first, fortieth, and one-hundredth days after death, viewing these as borrowed wholesale from Buddhist custom. Third, they criticize the practice of distributing charitable funds to the *ahong* and religious-school students following their recitation of the Qur'ān, arguing that this constitutes a transactional exchange that contravenes the Qur'ānic injunction, "Do not sell the verses of Allah for a small price" (Qur'ān 2:41). In many communities influenced by *Yihewani* teachings, these criticisms led to the abandonment of the traditional Ermaili format, replaced by a modified form in which Qur'ān recitation was held separately from the communal meal—a pattern colloquially described as "eating without recitation, recitation without eating."

However, numerous Hui Islamic scholars have mounted robust defenses of the Ermaili tradition that directly address these reformist concerns. Contrary to claims of innovative practice, defenders point to *hadith* evidence supporting commemorative gatherings, most

notably the Prophetic tradition “Have mercy on your dead through charity, supplication, and Qur'an recitation.”

While the authenticity of this hadith remains contested among Islamic scholars, its invocation demonstrates that Ermaili practitioners understand their ritual as grounded in prophetic precedent rather than cultural innovation. More fundamentally, they argue that each component—Qur'ān recitation, *ṣalawāt*, supplication, and acts of charity—has firm scriptural roots that validate the practice's Islamic authenticity regardless of its specific ritual configuration.

Regarding the practice of fixed-day memorials, traditionalist scholars contend that temporal commemorations have Islamic precedent, as evidenced by discussions in classical Chinese Muslim scholarship such as Liu Zhi's *Tianfang Xinli* (Liu, 1998). Furthermore, they argue that outward resemblance to Buddhist or other cultural practices does not necessarily imply direct borrowing or un-Islamic origin. Comparative examples from across the Muslim world support this position: the *selamatan* and majlis *tahlil* traditions widely practised in Indonesia and Malaysia (Fatimah, Masamah & Choriya, 2023), as well as Mawlid commemorations in Turkey (Tapper & Tapper, 1987), demonstrate that fixed-day memorial gatherings represent originally Islamic practices that have developed across diverse cultural contexts. These parallel traditions underscore that what reformists interpret as Buddhist influence may instead reflect shared Islamic commemorative principles expressed through locally adapted forms.

The persistence of Ermaili in both traditional and modified forms across Hui communities—with the majority preserving the original format despite reformist pressure—suggests that practitioners continue to find theological and spiritual value in the practice. This adaptive resilience highlights Ermaili's character as a living discourse rather than a static ritual: a practice continually negotiated between revealed guidance and contextual expression, demonstrating the dynamic nature of Islamic tradition in minority settings.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined Hui Ermaili as an expression of “living Islam”—a form of religious practice that integrates belief and action, sacred and mundane, individual devotion and communal responsibility within everyday life. The analysis demonstrates how Ermaili operates as a comprehensive religious discourse that sustains Islamic identity and transmits knowledge across generations within China's minority Muslim context. Ermaili's ritual components—Qur'anic recitation, prophetic eulogy, charitable distribution, supplication, sermons, and communal meals—function as integrated expressions of Islamic consciousness that permeate life's significant transitions. The practice transforms domestic spaces into sites of sacred encounter and generates “Islamic subjects” whose religious consciousness develops through experiential participation rather than formal education. The research challenges interpretative frameworks that reduce Hui religious practices to cultural adaptation or ethnic survival strategies. The hadith foundation invoked by practitioners—“Have mercy on your dead through charity, supplication, and Qur'an recitation”—combined with comparative evidence from analogous practices across the Muslim world, establishes Ermaili's emergence from within Islamic tradition rather than syncretic borrowing. The practice's Sufi genealogy further supports

its authenticity as Islamic religious expression adapted to Chinese contexts. The study's integration of insider perspective with scholarly analysis illuminates how Ermaili functions as a vehicle of religious agency where Hui Muslims actively shape their spiritual lives through intentional practice. The persistence of Ermaili despite external political constraints and internal reformist challenges testifies to its significance as authentic Islamic worship rather than mere cultural preservation. Ermaili represents a valuable model for understanding how Muslim minorities maintain religious authenticity within non-Muslim majority contexts. For scholars, this analysis suggests the importance of approaches that foreground theological intentionality while remaining attentive to social dimensions. For practitioners, the study affirms Ermaili as legitimate Islamic devotion connecting the local community with the broader ummah. Ultimately, Ermaili demonstrates that Islamic tradition is a living discourse enabling believers to respond faithfully to divine guidance while engaging constructively with their specific contexts. It exemplifies how religious authenticity emerges through thoughtful integration of revealed principles with local realities, offering insights into how religious traditions adapt and flourish within complex circumstances while maintaining their essential spiritual character.

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