

A LIVING SITE, A LIVING PEOPLE:
THE GREAT MOSQUE OF XI'AN AND HUIMIN STREET

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Over two thousand years ago the rise of the first united Chinese dynasty, the Qin (from 221-206 BCE), led Xi'an to rise to prominence (UNESCO 2022). Within this context of early globalization, the Great Mosque of Xi'an was built. The Great Mosque largely serves the Hui community of Xi'an, an ethno-religious group that is one of the most long-standing in the country (Del Medico, 2017, pp. 1-2). While it is not listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, nor is it a national heritage site, it is nevertheless a "state-level heritage monument". The focus of this paper is to highlight a tourist engagement campaign centered on cultural photography.

Through the usage of community engagement, the aim is to bring together shareholders including the Hui community, the Chinese authorities and business groups in order to promote cultural tourism around the Great Mosque and the Hui residential areas that surround it by highlighting the site's importance as a living site with much more to offer than just static sightseeing or culinary delights.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over two thousand years ago the rise of the first united Chinese dynasty, the Qin (from 221-206 BCE), led Xi'an to rise to prominence (UNESCO 2022). Henceforth, the city of Xi'an would be crucial in the trade between China, Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe, though it would not be until the Tang dynasty that Xi'an would become one of the most important and dynamic trading zones in old China. Since the inception of the Silk Road, the Western parts of China have been quite cosmopolitan, becoming a mixture of countless ethnicities, religions, and cultures. This process allowed for early flourishing of exchanges not just in economic aspects but also in the form of cross-cultural processes such as the adoption of art forms, language and religion.

II. SITE

Within this context of early globalization, the Great Mosque of Xi'an was built. This mosque is unique not just for its architecture, which blends Chinese and Central Asian design elements but also for the people that it serves. The Great Mosque largely serves the Hui community of Xi'an, an ethno-religious group that is one of the most long-standing in the country (Del Medico, 2017). While it is not listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, nor is it a national heritage site, it is nevertheless a "state-level heritage monument" (Zhai, 2010). Due to its history dating back to the Tang Dynasty and its construction in 724 CE, it is regarded as one of the oldest mosques in China though the current buildings date to the 14th century (Archnet 2022). "Today, with its traditional architecture and surrounding gardens, the Great Mosque is a main tourist attraction of Xi'an, and the pride and the main sacred place of the Muslim people in Xi'an" (Zhai, 2010, pp. 205). The Great Mosque is not the only mosque in the area, in fact there are ten mosques within the boundaries of the Beiyuanmen area. Many of these mosques also date back several centuries though due to the sheer size and importance of the Great Mosque, these other mosques are not given as much importance.

The surrounding Beiyuanmen, also referred to as the Muslim Quarter or Huimin Street, is of equal importance in that both the mosque and the neighborhood are part of the cultural and touristic ensemble of old Xi'an. Their closeness serves as a testament not only to the history of the site but to the living culture that they relate to. Since the inception of the Silk Road, the Western parts of China have become quite cosmopolitan, with a mixture of countless ethnicities, religions, and cultures. This process allowed for early flourishing of exchanges not just in

economic aspects but also in the form of cross-cultural processes such as the adoption of art forms, language and religion (UNESCO 2022). The communities in Xi'an are descendants of early Muslim communities though they have since mixed with the local population, nevertheless, retaining distinct cultural and religious identities. The area has transformed gradually from one focused on business done for the local community towards one of particular interest to national and international visitors (Song, 2020).

III. POSITION

The position of this narrative is to be told from the point of view of a marketing consultant team which has been contacted by the local Hui community. In being an outsider party, this team can remain more impartial while also viewing the situation not just through one specific lens. Nevertheless, the position taken is more favorable towards the Hui community though a balancing act must be considered in order to ensure that the Chinese government does not see the initiative as a potential threat to its territorial integrity (Friedrichs, 2017). Our position as consultants means we can work as liaison, building bridges and attempting to mend relationships that have tended to be ambivalent towards each other. This is not to say that all issues will be fixed but that a basis for continued cooperation can be created through the collaboration envisioned within this project.

IV. PROBLEM

There are many limitations to the marketing of the Great Mosque and its association with the Huimin Street area. One of the key issues in regards to the Great Mosque is the lack of publicity over its continued cultural importance to communities such as the Hui. Often the focus of marketing is either on the Muslim Quarter or on the mosque rather than the interwoven relationship of the two. Therefore, to visitors unfamiliar with the history of the site, there may not be an apparent connection. While Xi'an is home to several sites of importance especially in relation to the Silk Road, these sites are part of ancient history. Thus, rather than focus on living histories and people, the traditional emphasis on monuments has continued thereby limiting the possibilities. Even when there is a connection made between the Huimin Street and the Great Mosque, the information can often be misleading with some of the top tourist websites providing incorrect information such as UNESCO inscription (China Highlights 2021). Typically the government has viewed this area less as an opportunity for heritage tourism but as an economic area that requires greater tourist services. The focus on redevelopment has as such often targeted

areas that should be transformed, though, the implication would be of clearing houses, monuments and religious sites protected by the government (Zhai, 2010). If the very institutions that are supposed to protect are part of the issue, then the likelihood of change is very difficult yet despite such challenges there are avenues for change.

From a tourist management perspective, the site is afflicted by large amounts of tourists, which can be beneficial but unfortunately the benefits of tourism are not distributed evenly. Moreover, current strategies over heritage tourism reflect more antiquated practices such as the focus on static sites over more cultural experiences (Song, 2020). Considering the fact that the Hui people and Huimin Street are both part of living cultures, there is a marketable opportunity here that has not been addressed. Song highlights the importance of the Huimin Street and its surroundings to tourists as being linked to their overall experience of the city in that a negative impression of the Muslim Quarter often leads to a negative view of the city; inversely, better services and management of the site could provide a more authentic experience which would reflect positively on both Huimin Street and Xi'an (Song, 2020). As it currently stands, there has been exponential growth of tourists in the past decade (Zhai, 2010) which, aside from a large decrease due to the COVID-19 pandemic, is expected to continue to grow in the coming years.

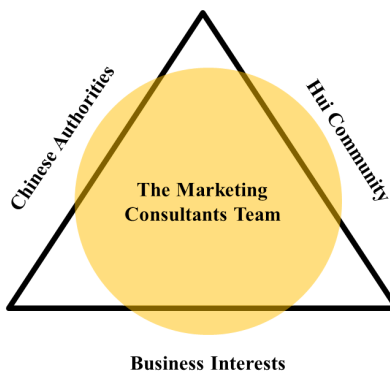
V. SITUATION

An analysis of official government websites from the city of Xi'an shows an effort for increased tourism campaigns. These are centered around the historic importance of the city as well as the UNESCO status of places like the Terracotta Army, Wild Goose Pagodas and City Wall (Xian 2022). Likewise, the website of the state of Shaanxi also tends to highlight similar sites though notably they do mention both the Muslim Quarter and the Great Mosque. Interestingly, these mentions are not at the forefront of marketing yet the description of the location and its importance is highlighted despite the religious implications, which would suggest an increased willingness to engage with the community (Shaanxi 2022). However, there seems to be a disconnect between the city government and its promotion of culture versus the province of Shaanxi which does include Hui cultural sites. At an international level, initiatives like the Silk Road Programme attempt to bridge the divide between nations and promote the historic cross-cultural ties that have continued for centuries; yet despite growing cooperation between various nation-states, the need for cultural institutions to work under the framework of nations also leads to certain communities being left out (UNESCO 2022).

Furthermore, by focusing primarily on other sites of Xi'an relating more broadly to the history of the Silk Road, there is a lost opportunity to engage visitors as well as to provide a more equitable relationship with the Hui community. The continued ambivalent relationship between the government and the Hui has largely led to this lack of exposure. On the other hand, their semi-privileged position in comparison to other ethnic minorities, including other Muslims in China, has historically offered the Hui with avenues for dialogue and change in policy with the Chinese government (Friedrichs, 2017). This complicated relationship between Hui people and the government parallels the historic conflict across multiple imperial dynasties since the first Muslim settlements of the 8th century. Yet, recent efforts by the government, especially in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative that aims at forging greater connections between China, Central Asia and the Arab World, have increased opportunities for dialogue and community organizing. The Hui as a result have become quite a crucial part of this process acting as “cultural bridge” between China and communities of Muslims abroad (CECC 2022); in fact religious sites, ethnoreligious museums, hybrid forms of architecture and cultural objects have increasingly been the subject of promotion by the government (Gladney, n.d.). Although it is also crucial to be critical and skeptical of government attempts to nationalize minority cultures, this situation also offers the Hui potential avenues for expression, dialogue and increased awareness both within China and abroad.

VI. GOAL

With the goal of increasing awareness and visibility of Hui culture, a photo contest is to be put together in cooperation with Chinese authorities, the Hui community and business interests. By engaging all three of these groups, the aim is to foster and strengthen the relationship between them, opening up the potential for further cooperation.



The Marketing Consultants Team will take the role of facilitator between Chinese authorities, the Hui community, and business interests to increase awareness and visibility of Hui culture. By examining the threat and opportunity factors in this area, and by considering the political, cultural, social, and economic aspects of the current situation, holding a photography festival can act as a cultural movement. Considering the culinary popularity of this site, there are good opportunities to promote the festival easily. Meanwhile, inscribed World Heritage Sites nearby, as well as local heritage sites, play another crucial role to attract attention. The opportunity for travelers or people in the neighborhood to explore and capture the unknown sides of the Hui as a living culture is crucial for the growth of awareness of the local community.

The purpose of running a photography festival is not only to create the opportunity to introduce the Hui neighborhood in a more cultural way but also to make an information bank



Xi'an Hui Street PhotoFest

Share Your "Unforgettable Moment" With Us!

Deadline: 15 May - 15 June
Location: The Silk Road Experience Center

Related Programs:	Awards:	
-Photography Tour	Professional:	Amateur:
-Walking Tour	1-500\$	1-200\$
-Food Tour	2-300\$	2-100\$
-Calligraphy Tour	3-100\$	3-50\$

+Exhibition of Selected Photos
Free for a year until Next Festival

from the outsider and insider point of view. As the main concept of this photo festival, people should send a picture related to the Hui neighborhood (which for the first year is designed by the subject: my unforgettable memory) with a caption, describing the picture and what is happening in it. In turn, this will aid the team which is working on this project to gather new aspects and analyze the known aspects of the cultural neighborhood. Additionally, cultural tours are designed to introduce cultural components of the area to visitors thereby mending the gap between Hui culture and the superficial tourism practices. Given the focus of photography on social media largely relating to the "Food

street”, tours related to local heritage buildings, authentic Hui food, calligraphy and art will be organized to shift the perspective away from a single narrative and widen the understanding of locals. By engaging with locals and allowing them to be the local cultural liaisons of these tours, a more equitable relationship can be formed, one that will also create more shareholders in promoting sustainable tourism within the Huimin Street borders. Successive photography festival-contest subjects will be chosen based on the information extracted from these tours and their output as well as the pictures and the captions that have been sent to the photo festival.

VII. SOURCES

In doing research on the topic, many sources were consulted. These include the official government websites of the province of Shaanxi and city of Xi'an as well as the UNESCO page for Xi'an in the Silk Roads Programme. The analysis of the Chinese government's webpages was valuable to discovering how, if at all, sites related to the Hui are portrayed. On a similar vein the Silk Roads Programme highlights the potential benefits of increasing the visibility of certain sites, groups and intangible expressions relating to the Silk Road both in the past and in current times. Yet, implicit within this is the continued structure of nation states which may continue to push certain narratives that may alienate vulnerable groups (Moon, 2010). However, this initiative also has excellent potential not just in promoting cultural, economic and social ties across the countries involved but also in the efforts to conduct and collaborate on research projects. While at the moment such initiatives are not targeted specifically towards the Hui community, recent writings, along with the growing importance of Hui groups across China, may be an indicator of potential positive change and greater relevance for the UNESCO initiative.

Aside from these sources, the thesis of Rui Song is valuable due to the analysis of social media posts relating to the Muslim Quarter. According to Song, the government of Xi'an understands many of the issues that are faced by the site, including the importance of marketing as well as tourist management; however, recent redevelopment plans have not been collaborative with locals and thus resulted in the failure of implementation (Song, 2020). Song's thesis highlights many of the issues that concern tourists who visit the site including “halal food taste; the service encounter and servicescape; and experiencing authenticity and helping community” (Song, 2020, pp. ii). For the purposes of our research, we are concerned primarily with the subject of authenticity and aid to the community as it relates more closely with the subject of culture, heritage and the importance of people to the site.

Zhai Binqing's PhD thesis is also important for the analysis of the site. Although the focus of Zhai's thesis relates to government plans for regeneration and redevelopment of the Muslim Quarter, the importance of community organization is addressed throughout the paper. This is vital to have in mind in order to ensure that residents are continuously informed about the attempted project and that the community also has a say in decision-making as the project gets underway. The necessity to involve all stakeholders is crucial, though in this case the entire community is part of the stakeholders. While not all stakeholders here share the same ideas, their high degree of community participation makes them an integral part of the project. Zhai discusses the example of Xi'an as an important example of communities expressing their needs and requiring the government to change their plans in order to better fit the community's wishes.

Other sources such as the articles by Candice Del Medico, Jörg Friedrichs, Dru C. Gladney give insight about the site itself and its history. An analysis of these helps to highlight discrepancies of marketing, or the lack thereof, relating to the site in question as well as to better contextualize the historical legacy of the Hui and their relationship with the government of China. Tourism websites are also the subject of study due to often conflicting information which describes the Great Mosque as a UNESCO Heritage Site, which in fact it is not (China Highlights 2021).

VIII. AUDIENCE

The campaign is largely targeted at younger travelers, aged between 18 to 30 years of age. The reason for this is that this age group is more engaged in social media, as well as having an interest in experiences abroad that are focused less on short-term vacations and more on longer-term cultural experiences (The Atlantic 2014). By engaging these groups, the idea is to increase awareness of the Hui ethnoreligious group while also promoting more sustainable tourist practices that may more equitably distribute the benefits of tourism to the community. Furthermore, considering the growth of the share of young travelers versus other travelers, it seems as though travel is a larger priority (The Atlantic 2014). This passion and curiosity for exploration of the world are of particular interest to the project due to the many cultural and economic possibilities that can be geared towards this group. Moreover, in having a photo contest with a focus on cultural photography, there is a call to action that emphasizes greater engagement with the community. This not only benefits the community which will have more

visibility but also will allow visitors to have a closer connection with the Hui people as an integral part of the site.

IX. MESSAGE

The fact is that "Food" is part of this long-lasting culture which is not separable from the identity of this area and also it is not the addressing issue. In fact, "Food" and all the marketing that has been done for it is a good opportunity to draw attention towards other aspects instead of starting to work from nothing. The goal is to make the area a culturally engaging site and the message for the audience is to come visit "A Living Site, A Living People". This approach would help to preserve the intangible and tangible heritages of the Hui neighborhood by strengthening and widening, rather than completely negating, existing tourism trends.

X. COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

In regards to the importance of effective communication, having a main website is crucial as an information hub. However due to the nature of the project, social media will also play a vital role. Considering the fact that most of the international channels are filtered and have limitations of use in China, choosing the platforms wisely is necessary. To reach a wider audience we suggest the usage of four social media platforms. Instagram as an international platform popular among younger users and Facebook as a widely used platform in most Arab countries will be the main social media used outside of China. TikTok as a Chinese and international platform where short clips with information can be shared is also important, as is RED the Chinese equivalent of Instagram.

It is also important to use relations with international organizations (like UNESCO, ICOMOS, ICOM, etc.) and the influencers who can affect positive attention to the area by designing Familiarization trip (Fam Trip) for them to come, see, experience and share with their audiences.

"A familiarization trip, or FAM for short, is a trip designed for traditional media, social media influencers, and bloggers to learn about a destination, a tourism operator, a hotel chain, or a tourism board, and sometimes, all of the above" (RTO9 2022).

XI. EXPECTED IMPACT

In this program, where big-scale and small-scale goals are pursued in parallel, the expected effects are: More engagement between local people and visitors, more understanding of the historical continuity of a living culture, gathering of stories to form an information bank,

developing job opportunities-economic equality, organizing tourist management plans. Finally achieving a better community organization through solidarity and collaborating with government, and business sponsorships is an important impact. While many of these impacts will take years to materialize, the primary impact is the creation of a basis to build off of with the focus first and foremost on community engagement and organization. However, given the long-standing resilience and organization of the local community, as well as their growing importance to the government's foreign policy, small steps like a photo project are actionable and have the potential for positive change.

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