



Lily:
One Hui Woman's Journey to New Life

Brook has a life-long calling to serve Christ where he is less known, and to bolster Asian Christians in missions. Brook has lived among the Chinese Hui people for ten years, spending most of that time as a missionary in northwest China.

Abstract:

Lily is a Hui Chinese Muslim who has come to love Jesus. She speaks of being Hui and Muslim somewhat interchangeably, and primarily as a social identity. Hui Muslim is her ethnicity, her family's tradition, the way she fits into the community, and the way her people distinguish themselves from her nations' ethnic majority – the Han people. Although she knows little about formal Islam, the rules and rituals of Muslim community life shape her. Daily shopping and food preparation must be *halal*, and annual festivals must be observed. Perhaps most importantly, rites of passage surrounding marriage, childbirth, and death must be completed to satisfy her family's expectations. Here we follow her through the customs and rites of passage surrounding the birth of her second child and hear her speak about her understanding of their forms and meanings. As she has journeyed toward greater faith in Christ in spiritual matters, her social identities as both a Muslim and a Chinese have been challenged but never abandoned. Lily shows how her ethnic minority uses religious rituals as cultural identifiers and simultaneously embraces certain traditional Chinese rituals. Throughout her journey, Lily finds ways to preserve Hui cultural forms while pursuing her new life in Christ. Her biggest challenge comes as she considers not what she might leave behind, but whether new life requires new rituals. This reflection on

Lily's story ends with a challenge – the challenge presented by the Christian rite of passage into the body of Christ – baptism.

It is an honor to share about my dear friend Lily. She is a precious daughter of God, loved by our savior, and I pray in faith that she will be with us in paradise. Lily's voice is one that has been heard by very few people in the world. Today, I hope that by reflecting some of her words I will shed a little light on the value and challenges of rituals for Lily's people group, the Hui Muslims of China.

Hui people and rituals

People who have lived among the Hui do not typically speak of them as ritualistic people, but a closer look shows that their rituals provide their most distinctive cultural markers, along with bridges and barriers to the gospel. Important Hui rituals include rites of passage (such as weddings and funerals), annual festivals, and regular rituals (such as *halal* food preparation, prescribed hand washing, and prayer).

In many ways, Hui Chinese Muslims tend to blend in with their atheistic compatriots. They are physically and linguistically similar to the majority Han Chinese. Hui dress is modest but otherwise identical to Han dress. Head coverings are only popular among the elderly, food service workers, and in peasant villages. Unlike the nine other recognized Muslim minority people groups in China, the Hui have no distinct cultural traits to distinguish them except Islam. Other groups claim their own language, clothing, dance, food, facial features, and even territory, but not the Hui.⁴⁷ Even specialty "Hui food" bears an uncanny resemblance to the Han food of whichever region it is found, just substituting pork for another meat.

⁴⁷ The other nine recognized minority people groups or minzu who traditionally believe Islam, in descending order of population are: Uyghur, Kazakh, Dongxiang, Kirghiz, Salar, Tajik, Uzbek, Bao'an, and Tatar. (Spellings of transliterated names here follow Stewart.)

I have asked many Hui what being Hui means to them, and the most common answer is, “We are not Han, and we don’t eat pork because we are Muslim.” Asking further questions has occasionally plunged me into fascinating conversations about how to pray, protection against evil spirits, the afterlife, earning merit or the difference between various Islamic sects and orders in China. But more often I find myself speaking with a Muslim, like my friend Lily, who knows little about Islam, rarely attends a mosque or prays, and struggles to say a simple greeting in Arabic. The distinguishing characteristics Hui report about themselves are the *halal* diet, celebration of Korban and Eid (two annual ritual feasts), avoidance of Spring Festival (a Han celebration of their Lunar New Year) ritual prayer (which most of my conversation partners neglect) and endogamy, that is, a commitment to marrying within the community. As we will see, all of these involve essential rituals, even endogamy. So in some sense, although I have never heard a Hui person say they value rituals very highly, it seems like their rituals are crucial to what makes them Hui.

Lily’s identity is firmly bound up in being Hui, but what that means can be difficult for outsiders to comprehend. *Hui* is an official ethnic classification, but Lily also uses it as a synonym for *Muslim*. Lily and I have talked at length about what she means by Hui and Muslim, and I believe that for her, the identity is more social than religious.

Being from a small town, Lily has a keen sense of being expected to behave as a Muslim and wants to avoid standing out. She is fiercely loyal to her family’s traditions,

the most obvious being *halal* food preparation, endogamy, and observing annual festivals. She fears the social penalty – exclusion, gossip, ridicule – far more than any possible spiritual consequence of breaking these traditions.

A strictly *halal* diet requires the ritualized slaughter of meats. Fear that dishonest vendors may pass off regular beef or lamb as *halal* prevents some Hui from leaving their hometowns. Lily is not so strict, but would certainly never knowingly eat pork or be seen in a shop that sells pork. For social reasons, the ritual of keeping *halal*, or at least her family's version of *halal*, is vital to Lily.

On the other hand, she and most other villagers studied alongside Han classmates at a Chinese government school. This Communist Party institution, she believes, was designed to eradicate religious “superstition” and instill secularism in line with the Chinese Communist Party's goal for a harmonious, homogenous society. Hui students who were not successfully converted to atheism learned to privatize their faith or become nominal devotees. So it is that Hui in Lily's society fit in by limiting their public religious expressions to “essentials” such as choice about food and marriage.

Hui insistence on only marrying other Hui may serve to preserve family lines and their Muslim faith. It may also be related to long-held prejudice between ethnocultural groups. Another major factor seems to be the kind of wedding Hui people, and especially their elders, expect, even though Hui weddings can closely resemble Han weddings in their form. Wedding rituals shared between Han and Hui include the presentation of a dowry, a banquet, and ceremonies to honor parents. Differences in small details like the eating of a particular fried bread called *youxiang*, hold great significance for Hui families. Most importantly, a Hui wedding must include the reading

of *nikah*, which cannot take place unless both the bride and groom say the *shahada* as evidence that they are Muslims.

Marriage for a Hui like Lily (as for a great many Chinese people) is shaped primarily by filial piety, obeying your parents, rather than satisfying one's own desires. The ceremony of marriage gives honor to the parents regardless of the long-term outcome. Divorce is common, and quite often, even suggested by the parents. By then, however, the dowry has been paid, the *nikah* has been read, and hopefully, a son has been born.

Lily would never have considered marrying a non-Hui, but this was not because of Islam, nor any prejudice against other groups. In her own words, her relationship with her husband is 'average' and her husband is anything but pious. She has often told me her best friend's husband makes her 'extremely angry' and that Hui men are 'not good.' Conversely, she praises Christian men for not smoking or gambling, and for being 'good to their wives' and 'willing to cook.' Why then, did Lily marry her Hui husband rather than a non-Hui schoolmate or friend? She explained that it was because of parental and social expectation of endogamy.

Lily's faith journey

It took years of knowing Lily before she opened up to me about spiritual matters. The two other Christians who knew her had the same experience. One of these Christian women was the Han Chinese owner of a business where Lily did some short-term work. The other was a missionary like me. Lily had always complied when any of us wanted to study the bible together but in a subservient manner. Eventually, she took the initiative and joined my small women's fellowship group which included Han, Hui, and women from three other groups. By this time, she was in her mid-30s with a nine-year-old son

and her daughter was born soon afterward. Together we all grew in knowledge of scripture, prayerfulness, and love. Slowly, the word of God and the lives of Christians began to influence her, and by the grace of God, she gradually started to open up about her beliefs, her desire to follow Jesus, and what was holding her back.

All of the barriers to faith that Lily told us about arose in some way from her social situation. The few theological objections she had to Christian faith were quickly answered to her satisfaction. She had only good experiences of Christians, and no stories of Christian hypocrisy leaving a bad taste in her mouth. Instead, her objections were about what her family and friends would say and do to her. She did not express fear of physical violence or financial deprivation; it was more of a concern about causing offense, social exclusion and being met with disapproval.

Some of the biggest barriers came from how she perceived faith in Christ might change her participation in family rituals. The most notable examples of Lily's interaction with rituals after she professed faith in Christ surrounded rites of passage, rather than the regular, daily rituals. While for certain Hui friends of mine, the annual rituals hold deep significance, for many others including Lily and her family, Eid and Korban are primarily occasions to meet and eat good food, practically devoid of spiritual meaning. Likewise, wedding rituals are a non-issue for Lily because she is resigned to her place in an 'average' marriage. Food rituals have not been an obstacle for Lily either, due to the contextualized lifestyles of Christians who have shared their faith with her. Missionaries from other countries, as well as local church leaders, are

careful to avoid causing offense by what they eat.⁴⁸ When we eat at Lily's home, she sources the meat herself to ensure it has been slaughtered according to the prescribed rituals. When she eats out or in our homes, she is more relaxed, but would never knowingly eat food contaminated with pork.

The three rites of passage Lily and I have discussed as they relate to faith in Jesus are birth rites, baptism, and funeral rites. When Lily became pregnant with her second child, nothing about her lifestyle changed apart from increasing the amount of milk she drank. She continued to work, including lifting and other physical tasks. While her pregnant shape was not yet pronounced, she continued to ride her bicycle for transport even though local wisdom says cycling is unsafe while pregnant. Nothing changed until the month of Ramadan arrived. Then she donned a small headscarf for the month. Her mother-in-law had recommended it as a way of protecting the unborn baby. Lily, who like many Hui women, usually kept her hair uncovered, told me it was just a superstition she did not believe. She said the scarf could not do anything spiritually – either good or bad – but it was easy enough to comply, and it kept her mother-in-law from complaining. This was the first clear instance I observed of Lily accepting an Islamic *form* while dismissing its *meaning*. Over the next few months I learned much more about forms and meanings in Lily's faith journey.

Shortly after her daughter's birth, I was invited to visit at the hospital, and later at her home. Lily allowed our fellowship group to visit her so she would not need

⁴⁸ Sadly, contextualized practices have not always been used in this part of China. In recent years, however, awareness of contextualization has improved, some missionaries have adopted Halal diets and the practice of forcing pork onto new converts to prove their Christianity has been largely abandoned.

to leave the house during her month of confinement. Confinement may be thought of as a ritual, but is not distinctively Hui or Islamic. Chinese Christians, Buddhists and atheists also follow regulations for one month after giving birth according to Traditional Chinese Medicine. Hui mothers follow the same customs as Han, which vary by region and usually include abstaining from certain foods, leaving the house, and bathing. The restrictions are often enforced by the baby's grandmother(s). I had previously questioned Lily about whether she believed confinement to be effective or necessary during my own pregnancy. She assumed the health benefits of confinement were probably real, but mentioned no relationship between confinement and spirituality. Her main emphasis was that if confinement was not observed, the baby's grandmother(s), other relatives and friends would criticize the mother, even going so far as to blame the mother if anything went wrong with the mother or baby's health. Confinement was a set of rules that would incur social penalty if broken.

A few weeks after giving birth, Lily was able to come out to meet us. One memorable conversation happened as we were discussing which day we would meet. Lily said to the group, "I can't come on that day because that is the day the *imam* is coming to our house to read scripture over the new baby. Don't worry, it's not a religious thing, it doesn't do anything, it's just a custom we have, and I had better be there. That's ok, isn't it?" In this statement, Lily showed that she believed in a difference between an effective ritual and a mere custom. She was separating the form of a ritual from its meaning. That is, like the headscarf, the scripture reading was meant to effect spiritual protection. Lily dismissed this *meaning* but saw no problem with going through the motions, maintaining the *form* of the ritual. She knew that as a follower of Christ, her faith must be in Christ alone. Any spiritual meaning or power she may have previously attributed to the ritual was gone. At the same time, she

wished to honor her family and her traditions by continuing to observe rituals that she deemed to be harmless.

Does a new life require new rituals?

It would be simplistic to say that Lily's new faith in Christ freed her entirely from the power of Islam. Faith in Christ did not replace Islam, because Lily's Islam was primarily a community, not a religion or a spiritual faith. So, while it was relatively easy for her to strip away religious significance from an Islamic ritual, it was much more difficult to introduce appropriate biblical rituals while living in her community.

Although Lily developed a regular habit (or ritual) of reading the bible for herself whenever she visited Christians, even sitting alone for hours in the word, she struggled with regular bible reading at home, for fear of criticism. She did not want to be seen with either a standard bible or the Hui contextualized bible. A *manga* graphic novel rendering of the bible was of some help here, because she was more comfortable being seen with it at home.

To my surprise, our discussions about baptism (a rite of passage into life in Christ) and funerals happened together. It was around this time that, one by one, women in our little group decided they were ready to be baptized in the name of Jesus. One day in private, I challenged Lily about why she did not want to receive baptism like the other women in our fellowship group. Here is what she said.

"I love Jesus, and I love Christians. I love reading God's word and singing to him. I always want to come to our fellowship group. Meeting with you all for worship is the best time of my week. But I can't be baptized."

"Why is that?" I asked.

“My family would be heartbroken if I were to be cremated.”

What? Had I just heard what I thought I heard? I paused to make sure I had understood correctly. I had. I quickly thanked God and asked for wisdom. Then I spoke.

“Where did you get the idea that Christians must be cremated?”

She replied, “That’s what the Han do.”

It was as I thought. Like so many other Hui, Lily was showing that despite the years of friendship with expat Christians, several meetings with Hui believers, and a little exposure to Muslims from other ethnic groups, in her mind she still divided the world into only two groups: Hui and Han. Hui were ‘us,’ and Han were ‘them.’ I reminded her that some of us are neither Hui nor Han, then directed her to think about burial rituals in the bible.

I asked her what was done with Jesus’ body after he died. She knew he was embalmed and buried. I assured her this was not a once-off burial by showing her the stories of Lazarus (John 11:38-44) and Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-10). Then I went on to inform her that in many traditionally Christian cultures, burial is the norm. I told her of the European tradition of placing graveyards beside churches to remember our forebears and the epitaphs that remind us of the bodily resurrection for which we confidently hope. As I spoke, a wave of realization and relief spread across Lily’s face.

She still did not get baptized, though. Although she was reassured to know baptized believers can be buried, there were further barriers involved in the ritual of baptism itself. Lily thought long and hard about what exactly was so impossible about baptism, but she has not been able to express it in her own words.

Other Hui believers have given me some insights into their feelings about baptism as a rite of passage. They have not expressed any reservations about the form of baptism nor its symbolism. Use of water to symbolize cleansing from sin, presenting oneself clean before God, the imagery of dying and rising found in baptism by immersion, and the embodiment of union with Christ in baptism are all quite agreeable. As a rite of initiation into the body of Christ, baptism is desirable.

The problem with baptism seems to come from its association with apostasy from Islam. Like many believers from Muslim backgrounds elsewhere in the world, Hui who trust in Christ hesitate to publicly declare their allegiance to a religion their families oppose. They view the rite not only as an entry to a relationship with Christ but as an exit from their previous life. They see it as leaving their Islamic faith, but more importantly for people like Lily, leaving what their family holds dear, which is effectively the same as leaving their family. Since Lily seemed lost for words, I asked her if the main problem with baptism was that her family would think she was rejecting them. She replied, “I just know they wouldn’t like it.”

Many Hui have been baptized into Christ secretly, and in so doing have mitigated the shame and social penalty of being seen as ‘leaving Islam.’ I talked Lily through the process of our friends’ baptisms, pointing out the locations, who was and was not present, who knew about it and who did not. She was unmoved. Her speech wandered around various emotional expressions, and I was left with the impression that in her view, even a secret baptism would be a betrayal. The barrier was not only social but personal. To this day, Lily has not been baptized into Christ, but she is still eager to learn from God’s word and to meet with Christians. Does it matter? Rituals can move hearts to desire Christ, can strengthen community bonds, and can sometimes be hurdles too great overcome on the road to faith. Rituals do not save.

Only faith in Christ saves. I cannot judge for sure, but my hope is that Lily is my sister in Christ with whom I can worship him together for eternity.