

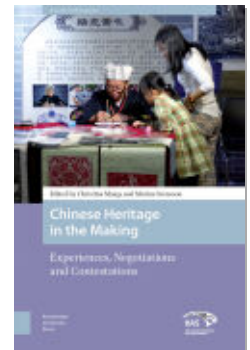


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Telling Stories in a Borderland: The Evolving Life of Ma Bufang's Official Residence

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Section I

Re-imagining the Past: Contested Memories and
Contemporary Issues

2 Telling Stories in a Borderland

The Evolving Life of Ma Bufang's Official Residence

Susette Cooke

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Abstract

Many heritage sites have emerged from oblivion during the reform period, among them the former residence of the Sino-Muslim warlord Ma Bufang in Xining. Once a PLA barracks and class struggle education centre, it is now a protected heritage site, museum and tourist attraction, whose multifaceted history implicates it in complex issues of ethnicity, religion, nation-making, and political contestations as relevant to the present as to the past. State orthodoxies of history and heritage coexist with sub-narratives, silences, contradictory signs and untold stories, as site managers navigate challenging dilemmas of interpretation and meaning of the site: What is the story at the Ma Residence, and whose story can be told there?

Keywords: ethnicity, religion, Hui, tourism, memory

Regime change came suddenly to Qinghai Province, in the final stages of the civil war between the Nationalists and Communists. Ma Bufang, Governor of Qinghai under the Nationalists,¹ implacable foe of the Communists, and semi-autonomous ruler in his frontier domain, held out till the bitter end. On 27 August 1949, the day after his main forces surrendered to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in Lanzhou, General Ma left his

* Research for this chapter was supported by funding from the Australian Research Council for Discovery Project 1092962, 'China's Tibetan Buddhist Margins'. Findings are based on fieldwork in Qinghai and visits to the Ma Residence in 1995-1996, 2002 and 2010-2013.

¹ The terms 'Nationalists' and 'Guomindang' are used interchangeably in this chapter to refer to the Chinese government under the Nationalist Party (Guomindang), 1928-1949.

Official Residence in Xining in a US-supplied plane, bound for Chongqing. By 5 September the PLA First Field Army had reached the walls of Xining, and marched into the city the next morning. Overcoming local resistance around Xining, by the end of the month the PLA commander had set up the Qinghai Province People's Military Administrative Committee to replace the former Governor's administration. Ma Bufang, with close members of his household, military and government staff, and over a hundred cases of gold and silver, was by then in Hong Kong, never to return to Qinghai (Qinghaishengzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 1987: 513-514, 520; Chen 1996: 22-24; Cui et al. 1999: 641-642; La and Ma 2009: 202).

This pivotal moment, as the Sino-Muslim² warlord left Qinghai and the PLA moved in, marks an interface between two worlds, and between two pasts and potential futures. When Ma Bufang's regime met its end at the hands of the Red Army, its subjects not only faced a future different from that which Ma Bufang had been constructing, but a totality of change they could scarcely have envisaged from their vantage point on China's northwestern margins. In the new world of Communist China, material and mental transformation required, not least, that they would see and narrate past, present, and future in new ways, too.

The state enterprise of history construction and reconstruction in post-imperial China was crucial to Republican and Communist legitimization of their regimes and the contours of the nation they sought to govern. The task required imagination and political dexterity. Borders, territory, demography and culture all presented dilemmas for the Chinese nation-state builders, who assumed the right to determine and narrate the national past and, after the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) took power, increasingly reinforced the state's unilateral authority over this task. In China's ethno-culturally non-Han border regions, notably Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, and Tibet, a discourse of their inalienable historical belonging within the Chinese nation supported the more tangible integration activities of civil and military state agencies. In Qinghai, where a non-Han power dominated a multi-ethnic population on the eve of the Communist victory, perspectives on the new nation-building process diverged among the region's peoples as much as with the national centre. Fitting Qinghai into the national grand narrative

2 The term 'Sino-Muslim' can include all followers of Islam in Qinghai, other than Tibetan and Mongol Muslims, before their official classification into several different nationalities (*minzu*) by the PRC during the 1950s. The Ma clan belonged to the largest Muslim nationality, the Hui (*Huizu*). For a fuller examination of ethnonyms for Muslims in the Northwest, see Lipman 1997: xx-xxv.

contended with multiple collective memories, views of the past, and the reality of resistance to the new political order.

Recent scholarship on the public narration of China's past in museums and at memorial sites emphasizes the core nation-building role these institutions perform in the People's Republic of China (PRC), a function inextricably linked with political legitimation of the Party's leadership of the state and the nation (Denton 2014; Varutti 2014). Through these institutions, state orthodoxy on the evolution of the Chinese nation reaches a vast audience, via the efforts of Chinese officials involved in culture work who must respond to the Party's changing ideological concerns. But successive politicized reconstructions of China's history, embedded in policies, campaigns, academic work, education, and museums, have not eradicated alternative memories and historical tellings (Watson 1994). Disjunctures of public-private, official-vernacular memory remain, in the shadows of society or individual and collective minds, or sometimes in concrete form, like Ma Bufang's Official Residence (Ma Bufang Gong'guan).

Sites like the Ma Residence – substantial architectural structures of historical significance – have gradually been emerging from oblivion, or public invisibility, since the Party turned from revolution to reform, and serve as one kind of barometer for measuring changing attitudes to past society and history in China today. In recent years, they have found a new lease of life in the embrace of the burgeoning domestic tourism industry, underwritten by government support because as state-owned sites they require government approval to be opened and used in this way. Tourism has become a major economic focus for many local governments in China, including in Qinghai where it was declared a 'pillar industry' in provincial planning in 2003 (Qinghai Provincial Government 2003). The 'heritage turn' in Chinese society today intensifies the cultural and economic value of such sites, yet successful as they are proving to be in drawing tourist interest, they embody challenging complexities for those now managing them, and who are responsible for their representation to the visiting public.

Narrative at the Ma Residence: Dilemmas for heritage site management in a contested borderland

Ma Bufang, one of a family of Sino-Muslim warlords who emerged in the late Qing and consolidated their power in the Northwest through the Republican era, built his Official Residence in Xining in 1942. Fortuitously surviving the revolutionary-era destruction of old buildings, the Residence evidences

a substantial past that must be explained to a contemporary audience in the discursive setting of twenty-first-century China. It sits, however, in the 'political minefield' of the landscape of modern Chinese history (Denton 2014: 9), embroiled in the vexed contestations of ethnicity, religion, identity, and power that have beset region and nation in the making of contemporary China. The past embodied by the Ma Residence is deeply implicated in the still unfinished process of national integration in China's Northwest, where current state-building projects and ethno-religious sensitivities do not coexist without friction (Leibold 2007; Bovingdon 2010). In the state's search for a 'useable past' (Denton 2014: 14) at this heritage site, the national grand narrative contends with the physical evidence of an alternative non-Han power base in China's northwestern borderlands on the eve of the birth of New China. If museums in China use the past to illustrate the present (Mitter 2000: 280), to what extent is the Ma Residence 'useable', and for whose purposes?

The provincial-level Xinlu Cultural Relics Administrative Office (*Xinlu wenwu guanlisuo*), which manages the Ma Residence, holds the curatorial advantage of an extant site, virtually intact,³ but whose architectural uniqueness and locational context inherently give shape to multiple, and powerfully symbolic, narratives. The story there potentially stretches to extremes of interpretation. At its broadest and most extravagant, it tells how Sino-Muslims, under the warlord Ma clan and especially Ma Bufang in Qinghai, carved out a territory for themselves within the formal boundaries of the Republic of China, and nearly changed Inner Asia. But can this story be told in a state where the discourse of national unity, ethnic unity, and sovereign territory is paramount domestically and internationally, taught in schools, work units, and religious institutions as patriotic education, where intellectual endeavour is permeated with these orthodoxies, and peaceful expression of alternative national perspectives is punishable under the Criminal Law Code? Moreover, these events happened at a time when the Chinese government of the day was in a state of high anxiety about national sovereignty and territorial integrity, including in the Northwest, concerns which continue to inform PRC government policy there 60 years later. At the other extreme, can the narrative presented at the site seamlessly meld the Ma Bufang Residence into the state's orthodoxy of historical continuity and inclusive national formation for all nationalities?

3 The Ma Residence is frequently noted – in literature and at the site – as the most complete Republican structure in Qinghai.

Current official terms classify the Ma Residence as a ‘cultural relics protection unit’ (*wenwu baohu danwei*), a ‘tourism scenic precinct’ (*liuyou jingqu*), and a ‘museum’ (*bowuguan*). State officials charged with its major restoration in 2004 extended its identity to a ‘national treasure old residence’ (*guobao laozhai*), creatively captioning their site on its main entrance sign as ‘the story of a lifetime’ (*yibeizide gushi*), or ‘the story of a generation’. This label sidesteps declarative statist ‘political storytelling’ (Denton 2014: 16), focusing instead on an important political personage and his historically-significant residence, a strategic management choice for navigating the rough waters of acceptable historiography of a Chinese border region. Through this form of ‘museumification’ the state culturally and politically appropriates and transforms a private space into a public locus (Varutti 2014: 73). The approach has successfully attracted Han tourists who roam its courtyards in increasing numbers, and visiting high officials reportedly make it an obligatory stop in their Xining itinerary.⁴ But how is the ‘story of a lifetime’ to be told at this site?

This chapter explores that question in the context of three key contingencies: The geo-historical ground of its telling, its temporal settings before and after Liberation, and its ethnic dimensions. In other words, how to tell stories in a borderland region of the PRC – in this case Qinghai – with its particular ethno-cultural mix, persistent socio-cultural disaggregation, and sporadic volatility? What is the story at the Ma Residence, and whose story can be told there? In the following sections I explore critical factors of place, time, and ethnic dimension that inform this story in this borderland and produce the dilemmas that make it hard to tell at the Ma Residence site.

The Ma Residence in context: Region and history

If the Ma Residence is ‘the story of a lifetime’, it is more widely the story of a region, of the end of empire, and the making of a modern Chinese nation-state, and ultimately of geopolitical transformation in Inner Asia. The Northwest⁵ was a cultural frontier where influences from China, Central Asia, Mongolia, and Tibet converged over many centuries (Ekvall 1939; Lipman 1997). Under the Qing and the Republic, state activity there worked towards the gradual incorporation of this periphery into the

4 Personal communication from site management staff, November 2011.

5 The region may be identified as the ‘Northwest’ from a Chinese geographical perspective, but is typically named and situated in other ways by other regional inhabitants.

Chinese political mainstream, a process in which the Ma clan played a key role in the area covered by today's Qinghai, Gansu, and Ningxia Provinces (Hunsberger 1978; Leibold 2007; Lin 2007). During the Republic each of these provinces became associated with a powerful branch of the Ma clan, in Ma Bufang's case, Qinghai, which in his lifetime transitioned from a region on the outer edge of Gansu to a full province in its own right. Over centuries, diverse peoples had moved along the Gansu Corridor into China's northwestern borderlands, including Muslims from Central Asia and the Middle East, who formed a substantial segment of the regional population by the Ming and Qing periods. Travellers passing through Gansu and Ningxia in the early twentieth century describe their sense of being in a distinctively Muslim Northwest, so marked was the presence of Sino-Muslim communities and the local authority of Ma family warlords (Gu 1949; Pickens 1936; Teichman 1921). Most of Qinghai, however, lay beyond the edge even of the Muslim Northwest. Although the 'Qinghai Mas' ruled from the city of Xining, and its adjacent districts along the Huang River (Huangshui) were farmed primarily by a mixed population of Han Chinese and Sino-Muslims, the rest of Qinghai was the domain of Tibetan and Mongol pastoralists, whose cultural and political affinities lay outside a Chinese or a Muslim framework.

The Ma clan came to prominence at a time of violence in the Northwest. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the region was devastated by successive uprisings characterized by brutal conflict among Sino-Muslim and Han Chinese communities and the Qing state.⁶ Several members of the Ma family of Hezhou (Linxia)⁷ in southern Gansu received high military posts in the local Qing administration for their services in suppressing unrest, among them Ma Bufang's grandfather. By the late nineteenth century they had started, in effect, 'a small dynasty of their own' (Lin 2007: 119). Ma Bufang's father Ma Qi took control of Xining at the fall of the Qing dynasty, and after 1915, supported by his official status within the new Republican government, he began to lay the groundwork for a virtually independent fiefdom within the boundaries of the new Chinese state (Hunsberger 1978; Cooke 2008). When the Nationalist government in Nanjing made Qinghai a separate province in 1928, they appointed Ma Qi as Governor, followed by his brother Ma Lin, then his son Ma Bufang in 1938.

6 See Lipman 1997: Chapter 4, and for further references to the uprisings.

7 Today's Linxia City, which remains a prominent Hui ethno-cultural centre as the seat of the Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture.

Ma Bufang thus inherited his position through his family's power, and like Ma Qi set about building a territorial power base for himself and in anticipation for his son, Ma Jiyuan. In this aim he was energetic and successful on many fronts, relying fundamentally on his political and military strength but economically sustained by trade monopolies and resource extraction. He initiated region-building modernization projects such as road construction and literacy programmes – social and infrastructural activities largely replicated later, with ideological modifications, by the CCP. His aggressive expansion into Tibetan and Mongol lands beyond Xining would have ramifications in Qinghai's ethnic relations long after his regime's end. Remote from the Chinese heartland, unchallenged by Nationalist armed forces within his territory, and filling key military and civilian posts with ethnic and family loyalists, Ma Bufang maintained his authoritarian personal rule while other warlords were neutralized or defeated (Hunsberger 1978: Chapter 9). By the 1930s he had consolidated his power in Qinghai as no other political leader in the region had been able to do, perhaps since the seventeenth century Mongol prince Gushri Khan. Contemporaries began calling him the King of the Northwest (Xibeiwang).

Yet Eurasian geopolitics, the war with Japan, and the presence of Communists in parts of the region forced the Nationalist government to elevate the importance of the Northwest in its nation-building strategy and regime survival (Leibold 2007; Lin 2007). As the Nationalists strengthened their political and military position in the region, Ma was drawn into a closer, if uneasy, relationship with Chiang K'ai-shek.⁸ Providing the Nationalists with valuable troops to fight the Japanese, Ma then supported Chiang in the civil war with the Communists, to whom he was bitterly hostile (Hunsberger 1978: 112-117; Chen 1986: 129-143; Yang 1986: 161-162). But in 1949 the Nationalists lost the battle for China to the Communists. The Red Army defeated Ma's main troops in Lanzhou and took Xining in September that year, garrisoning the Gong'guan. Qinghai became a provincial administration within the newly-founded PRC. Chiang K'ai-shek and many of his government, including Ma Bufang, fled to Taiwan. Thus Ma's regime fell quickly, although it was fiercely defended by mostly Hui armed loyalists for some years into the 1950s. Ma spent the rest of his life outside China, first in Egypt as ambassador for the Republic of China, then in Saudi Arabia, where he died in 1975.

8 Ma Bufang was appointed head of the Guomindang in Qinghai in 1938 (Hunsberger 1978: 103).

Ethnicity and politics in the borderland

Ma Bufang lived in an era of war, regional and local violence, nation-building and regime contestation, as post-imperial China struggled to consolidate itself as a modern sovereign nation. For the Nationalists, as for the CCP, this process meant full incorporation of vast multi-ethnic border regions like Qinghai into the Chinese world. For the past thousand years, as a political and ethnic transition zone between China and Tibet, Qinghai has consisted essentially of two cultural and economic environments: The pastoral world of Tibetans and Mongols across most of the region, and the Sinic agricultural sphere centred on Xining, a demarcation reflected in the principal ethno-political contestations in regional history. But in the late Qing and Republican periods, Qinghai's position on the edge of the Muslim Northwest became salient for regional power relations. The deadly Han-Hui conflicts of the late nineteenth century ironically propelled the Muslim Ma clan to prominence and built a stronger Muslim element in Qinghai's population through forced resettlement of Hui from Shaanxi and Gansu, part of the Qing solution to ethnic problems in the Northwest. The Ma's status, and actual power, brought a new ethnic factor into the power nexus which subverted the historical Sino-Tibetan contestation: A Hui clan supported by ethno-religious loyalists now dominated the regional political process, in the name of the national Chinese state. This new ethnic order (Bulag 2002: 44), evident in the physical structure of the Ma Residence, spearheaded that state's incorporation of the borderland and its peoples more swiftly and, once the CCP took over, more durably than had ever happened before.

The Hui preeminence in Republican Qinghai remains unsettling for the grand narrative of nation-building and Qinghai society today, where ethno-politics is never far from experiences in everyday life. Qinghai's ethnic communities hold collective memories of inter-ethnic conflict pre-dating Ma Bufang's regime: during his rule, fault lines deepened and brought tangible consequences in the post-1949 order. Despite their regional power and certainly because of it, the Qinghai Hui, who composed 15 per cent of the provincial population, received scant dispensation for their nationality in the Communists' ethnic autonomy system (Cooke 2008: 410-411). Armed resistance by Ma loyalists into the 1950s caused heavy losses in Hui communities (Chen 1996: 37-45; Cooke 2008: 408) and a continuing perception among the Han of their violent, oppositional nature. Their political and social capital was thus severely reduced in the province where both had been ascendant. For Tibetans and Mongols,

memories of violence and loss under the Ma regime merge with contemporary Hui-Tibetan economic conflicts (Horlemann 2015; Fischer 2015), and with recognition of Ma Bufang's role in bringing their territories under a Chinese political administration. The ironies of the state-formation process in their region are not lost on Tibetans and Mongols. In particular, they recall Ma Bufang's extraction of a huge payment in silver for releasing the newly-recognized 14th Dalai Lama, a native of northeastern Qinghai, for his enthronement journey to Lhasa in 1937 (Lin 2006: 113-114). For the CCP, fierce and ideologically indefensible resistance to their nation-building efforts in Qinghai came from ethnically non-Han peoples, who frequently perceived the transformative campaigns launched after 1949 as destructive actions by a Han state.

All these ethnic contestations, contradictions, and disunities are supposed to have ended with Liberation and the establishment of the PRC, and after 60 years Qinghai's multiple nationalities purportedly enjoy ethnic harmony in a consolidated Chinese nation. Yet Xining's streets are filled with posters urging 'nationalities unity' (*minzu tuanjie*), and state agencies concerned with 'nationalities work' (*minzu gongzuo*) have expanded. Disjunctures in the historical narrative and the place of ethnic relations within it permeate Ma Bufang's legacy and the Party's inheritance in Qinghai, not least at the Ma Residence where alternative understandings of place, past, and present intersect, complicating the work of its managers.

The Ma Bufang Official Residence

Even ten years ago, as restoration work began on the Ma Residence, Xining had the feel of a frontier town. Twenty years ago, before the determined high-speed structural change of the Great Western Development policy (*Xibu dakaiifa*) had set in,⁹ a palpable sense of worlds beyond it clung around the unruly long-distance bus stations filled with people who were not Han Chinese, and blew across the city as dust-laden winds from Inner Asia's high desert and steppe. Domestic tourists had scarcely ventured here, repelled by the harsh environment, the 'backward' local conditions, and a perceived muted threat from the local non-Han people. But Xining is in the process of upgrading to a thriving Han-friendly urban centre, captioned

9 For Great Western Development, or the 'Open up the West' campaign, see Goodman 2004a: 317-334.

the 'Summer Capital' (*Xiadu*) to attract visitors and new residents to a location where ethno-cultural diversity manifests as tamed, packaged, and safely accessible. Its life as a 'frontier town' is receding as the tide of Chinese development engulfs it in urbanization, consumer commerce, and dominantly Han demographics.¹⁰

For centuries, however, Xining really was a frontier town, gauged from the perspective of any of the peoples on whose political or cultural periphery it lay. Situated on a tributary of the Yellow River on the northeastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau, Xining has historically been the last outpost on this margin of Chinese civilization and control as well as a ruling city of non-Chinese states. Situating Xining on the Sino-Tibetan transition zone foregrounds the major forces contending in the greater region for 1400 years, but oversimplifies the multiplicity of peoples and cultures who interacted in its immediate environs for even longer, and into the present. After Liberation its diversity was flattened to serve the revolutionary goals of socialist construction and perhaps above all, its belonging within a Chinese nationalist state. For the majority of Chinese it conjured a dark vision of forced labour camps and harsh conditions on a remote, inhospitable, and unfamiliar periphery. International visitors did not generally stay there long either. Xining's history, however, is 'as rich as any American frontier town' (Gaubatz 1996: 55). If little of its evocative past remains evident and much was destroyed, some is now being recovered, including Ma Bufang's Residence.

Of Ma Bufang's several *gong'guan* at locations across Qinghai, only his finest and last-built survives.¹¹ His primary residence had been in White Jade Alley (*Baiyüxiang*), near Xining's main city wall inside the Muslim quarter. Xining's historical Muslim quarter had existed since the Ming period as a separate walled suburb appended to the Chinese city's eastern wall. Today, minus its wall, it remains a highly distinctive precinct of Muslim residential and commercial life centred on the Dong'guan Great Mosque (*Dong'guan qingzhen dasi*) (Cooke 2008: 402). Ma built his ambitious new Residence outside the East City wall at Zhoujiaquan,¹² edging but not within the Muslim quarter, appropriating a large stretch of land which contained the Xiao Spring (*Xiaoquan*) used by passing caravans

10 The Han comprised 74 per cent of the Xining Municipality population in the 2010 China Population Census.

11 Sources vary on the exact number from at least four (Jiang 1981: 99) to eight (Chen 1986: 281).

12 The place name 'Zhoujiaquan' is preserved in the name of the small police post (*paichusuo*) at the main gate of the Residence site.

and famous for its pure water.¹³ A solid surrounding wall enclosed orchards and fine trees in an area more extensive than now remains. Construction started in June 1942 and was completed a year later. No structure like it existed anywhere else in the province, with its solemn grey-brick walls inlaid in parts with subtle filigree designs derived from Islamic art. A series of seven compounds surrounded by dedicated-use buildings formed the basic layout of the complex, reminiscent of traditional Chinese courtyard houses (*siheyuan*) but modified by the needs of a large Muslim household and the feudalistic trappings of its powerful head: reception halls, household supervision offices and staff accommodation, military guard quarters, stables, kitchens, gardens,¹⁴ a grain mill and oil press to supply the family compound.¹⁵ The Residence enclosed the Xiao Spring for its exclusive use. Household offices and family apartments for Ma Bufang, his son and their wives lay at the inner core, connected to another building accommodating female family members, maids and guests,¹⁶ all behind the section which served Ma Bufang's public but personal role as the most powerful man in Qinghai. Here, on the northern side of the complex facing the Huang River and the North Mountain, the outer courtyard and its structures reflected the nexus of Ma Bufang's powers, in scale, style, and separation. He received national-level guests like officials from the Nanjing government in the Residence's most famous building, the Jade Hall (*Yushiting*), faced with tiles made from jade quarried in Qinghai's Xinghai and Huzhu counties. Non-Han leaders from Qinghai – Mongols and Tibetans – were received in a room specially designed to accommodate their cultural practices, but at the other end of the expansive courtyard opposite the Jade Hall.

13 According to a stele at the site, the spring was excavated and restored after the *gong'guan* became a tourism precinct. It still supplies exceptionally pure water. The Xiaoquan Elementary School in the neighbourhood and nearby commercial enterprises incorporate its name.

14 The South Garden, overlooked by Ma Jiyuan's Chinese wife's rooms and originally filled with orchards, exotic plants and trees, is much reduced in size from the original and has not yet been fully restored. Locals remember it as a place where children played into the 1970s. Temporary residences built there were removed during restoration.

15 Three interconnecting western courtyards were for household and military attendants. The northwestern compound housing male servants and carters, though restored, currently serves commercial rather than heritage purposes. In 2006 it was a Muslim teahouse, then became an international youth hostel in 2012. A piece of revolutionary heritage built in the 1950s in the gardens on the eastern side of the *gong'guan* has also been preserved: The Wu'aitang, now used as a supermarket.

16 This impressive two-storeyed wooden building follows the more traditional Sino-Muslim architectural style of the Northwest. The ground floor now houses the Qinghai Folk Customs Museum. Ethnic handicrafts shops and the restored quarters of Ma family female relatives and guests occupy the upper-storey rooms.

Figure 2.1 Graphic of layout of the Ma Bufang Official Residence at site entrance



Photograph by Susette Cooke

The Residence is hard to classify stylistically, unless as vernacular Sino-Muslim architecture for the élite in the Northwest. Its design and use of valuable regional materials make it unique, combining traditional Hui, Han and Sino-Western elements into a harmonious whole, decorated with the jade tiles on inner and outer walls and ceilings that give the Residence its most exceptional characteristic. Both Han Chinese and Islamic principles were used in aligning the various courtyard buildings (Song 2008: 16; Yang 2010: 110). Ma apparently worked on the draft design and layout, then placed the project under military supervision and brought in fine craftsmen from the Muslim Northwest's artistic centres, Lanzhou and Linxia. Hundreds of soldiers and workers from surrounding counties were requisitioned to work on the construction, whose final cost is said to have been 200,000 silver yuan, not including the local corvée labour (Jiang 1981: 99).

On the advice of several provincial scholars, Ma named his new home 'Fragrant Cottage' (*Xinlu*), and invited the Chairman of the National government, Lin Sen, to provide the calligraphy for the name plaque above the main gate. Chiang K'ai-shek also provided an inscription, 'Fragrant Virtue through the Generations' (*Shide qingfen*), dispatched via a special messenger

from Nanjing (Song 2008: 16; Jiang 1981: 99). Such personal courtesies between the de facto ruler of Qinghai and the Nationalist government's leaders signified the political currents of 1943, as the Northwest loomed larger in the Guomindang's national strategy and Ma consolidated his regional leadership within the borders of the Republic. Ma's pragmatic political allegiances and his regional identity combined easily in his new Residence. His fundamental religious and cultural affinities shaped the life inside the compound, while admitting influences that now infiltrated the borderland's politics and socio-economic environment. Some of these were artistic and practical, but others reflected insecurities of the times. Secret underground passages provided storage for valuables and escape routes for the family. High stout walls, resident guards and provision for self-sufficiency gave the Residence fortress-like capacities.

Ma Bufang built his Official Residence just as the Nationalists launched their most confident strategic undertakings in the Northwest. Remotest of the Muslim warlords, he was implicated in the international and domestic forces that shook the region, but not overwhelmed by them until the very end. Signs of the times permeate the architecture and artefacts displayed at the restored site: portraits of Nationalist leaders, a Russian-style fireplace, American technology and army vehicles, Chinese calligraphy presented to Ma by important Nationalist officials, Sino-Muslim religious inscriptions, his son's wife as a modern Chinese bride in a white Western-style wedding gown.¹⁷ Among the objects contemporaneous with Ma himself, there are no signs of the Communist force critical to the struggles and outcomes of the era. These appear only from the time of his regime's defeat, mostly as photographic images of the victorious Communist army and cadres, and cheering ethnic minorities in the Liberation of Qinghai exhibition. Ma Bufang's notorious hostility to the CCP receives graphic portrayal elsewhere, at the West Route Army Memorial Hall,¹⁸ below Xining's South Mountain. In counterpoint to the Residence exhibition's telling of regime change as Liberation, the post-Ma government in Qinghai was occupied for over a decade, eliminating armed resistance to the new order, from Hui and other Muslims loyal to the Ma regime and Tibetans and Mongols opposed to the sweeping changes imposed in their territories.

17 Ma Jiyuan's wife, Zhang Shunfen, was a Han Chinese woman from Nanjing, whom he met while studying in Chongqing. As Ma Jiyuan had already made a traditional arranged marriage within the clan, he married her as his second wife (Yang 1986: 235-236). Yang gives her name as Shunfang, but Shunfen is used at the Ma Residence site.

18 *Zhongguo gongnong hongjun xilujun jinianguan* (Chinese Worker Peasant Red Army's West Route Army Memorial Hall).

Incarnation and evolution

The Ma Residence enjoyed life as domicile and citadel for the Ma family for only six years, until their escape before the Red Army's occupation of Xining in September 1949. Remarkably, it survived the bouts of destruction after 1949 that obliterated much of China's built heritage, whether politically-motivated like the Cultural Revolution or the result of zealous development policies of the reform era. Much else in Xining was torn down in the 1950s – notably the city walls – and even 1990s construction currently bears the ominous demolition sign *chai* throughout the East City District (*Chengdongqu*). Essentially the state saved it for its own use. At Liberation, the victorious First Field Army garrisoned the Residence and retained it as a Qinghai Military Region office after 1954. Faded photographs displayed at the site show political commissars at the Xiao Spring in 1950, and Field-Marshal Zhu De reviewing the troops there during his 1958 inspection tour of Qinghai. Soon afterwards the army transferred the site to the Lanzhou-Qinghai Railway Office, then during the Cultural Revolution, labelled as 'teaching material by negative example' (*fanmian jiaocai*), it was opened as a 'class education exhibition centre' (*jieji jiaoyu zhanguan*) for holding class struggle sessions. In 1979, reflecting the reform era's more tolerant turn towards socio-cultural activities, it was converted into the Qinghai Provincial Museum, and in 1986 declared a provincial-level cultural relics protection unit. In this guise it was difficult, if not impossible, to locate the site by reference to the *Ma Gong'guan*: no such name appeared on city maps, and district locals denied knowledge of it.¹⁹ In 1996 the provincial Party Committee declared the Museum a 'patriotic education base' (*aiguo jiaoyu jidi*).²⁰ By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, its life as a museum was usurped by construction of a glamorous new Provincial Museum,²¹ in the flourishing new heart of Xining taking shape under Great Western Development. Although many of the buildings were now locked and inaccessible, neighbourhood Hui made use of the empty but degraded compound for community activities – a kindergarten, growing vegetables, rubbish recycling, and the inevitable temporary housing and flimsy

19 This was my experience during trips to Xining in 1995-1996 and 2001-2002. See Cooke 2008.

20 Many sites in the PRC received this designation during the 1996 Patriotic Education campaign. I saw no sign of this classification at the Ma Residence during visits 2010-2013. Ma's regime is covered at the West Route Army Memorial Hall in Xining, a patriotic education base.

21 Opened in 2001: see Qinghai Provincial Government Work Report 2002.

shopfronts along the street frontage.²² The site's fate seemed uncertain, or at least in limbo (Cooke 2008).

Forces animating socio-economic life in China's heartland – commerce and state-sponsored cultural tourism – came to the Ma Residence's rescue, additionally spurred by the state campaign to transform China's ethnic borderlands (Ma 2000). In multi-ethnic Xining, a city where few historical sites had survived, local officials realized they had a treasure for harnessing heritage with development, and in 2004 the Qinghai provincial government decided to restore the Ma Residence as an open tourist site. Unlike the case of the Zhizhu Temple in Beijing (Tam, this volume) with its many extant historical buildings, the local state saw preservation as within its interests. Despite the solid survival of the bones of the complex, this required a massive restoration project involving the highest provincial leadership, the Xining city government, and state and private business funding. The Qinghai Provincial Culture Bureau (*Qinghaisheng Wenhuating*), as chief supervisory office, expressly appointed a director from the region with a background in local history and museum curation, and subsequently engaged the '*guobao laozhai*' category to 'carry' the 'story of a lifetime'.²³ The central government took an interest: representatives from the State Administration of Cultural Heritage (*Guojia Wenwuju*) visited Xining to inspect the work. As in the original building of the Residence, the work was not without disruption for locals. Part of the 1.86 million yuan invested in the restoration was used to relocate people living in and around the site.²⁴ By May 2006 restoration was complete: opened to the public, the site was awarded a 3A National Tourist Attraction rating by June, upgraded to 4A by November 2007.²⁵ Prominent signage in Xining's eastern sector guides tourists to the site whose identity and location were until recently hidden. Most recent tourist maps show its location at 13 Weimin Alley (*Weiminxiang*), and the Xining municipal government website lists it as a key tourist attraction.²⁶

The current incarnation of the Ma Residence is likely to remain integrated into tourism development for the foreseeable future. In that context, its life has to some extent turned back to reflect its original purpose and time, in ways that synchronize with the contemporary policy environment.

22 According to an on-site photo exhibition on the restoration, since 1943 over 20 work units had used the *gong'guan* premises for offices and residences.

23 Site management staff personal communication, November 2011.

24 Xie 2006: 49, confirmed by site management staff, November 2011.

25 4A level is awarded to sites with 30,000 or above overseas tourists per year; 500,000 tourists in total per year.

26 <http://www.xining.gov.cn/html/74/331577.html>.

The complex has been divided into four principal sections: The space of the Ma family's domestic life and public ceremonial; the exhibition on Qinghai's Liberation; the Qinghai Folk Customs Museum (*Qinghai minsu bowuguan*), and spaces offering commercial opportunities.²⁷ Usages sometimes overlap, but essentially they allow the management to address a requisite political, cultural and commercial agenda at a state-run heritage site. Discreet curatorial choices have made room for further imaginings, however: much at the Residence is visible but unexplained. As it manifests today, the *Gong'guan* is a place of orthodox political storytelling but also of silences, contradictory signs and symbols, untitled images, compromises made at key points. Perhaps above all it evidences an alternative order and way of life that existed in the borderland until these were overturned in 1949. The ambiguities of that history severed the site from identification with its original self for many decades, yet recoverable later in terms of a protected heritage site where 'the story of a lifetime' may be told.

Heritage protection and its meaning are nevertheless contingent on time, place and policy. Interpretive voices are constrained by the *Gong'guan's* position as a sensitive site in a sensitive region within an authoritarian state, where entanglements of ethnicity and political power continue to complicate ascriptions of heritage there. Ma's Residence, until 2004 de-linked publicly from its existence as the Hui warlord Ma Bufang's seat of power, now sits in a potentially contested space for heritage classification, although audible local disputes over the *Gong'guan's* meaning as heritage, which would involve more tortuous issues than alternative usage of heritage buildings (Tam, this volume) or urban heritage planning (Graezer Bideau and Yan, this volume), remain off limits at present. The following section considers narrative and sub-narrative at the Residence today.

Stories and heritage at the Ma Residence

This chapter began by construing the defeat of Ma Bufang's regime in 1949 as a rupture between two pasts and therefore two potential futures. In the nearly seven decades since then, overwhelming change has come to the

27 Commercial ventures observed over 2010-2013 have included a mixed souvenir and local products shop at the entrance to the Residence, an upscale art and rocks outlet in the southern hall in the main family courtyard, arts and crafts shops for each of Qinghai's minority nationalities in upper-storey rooms in the Folk Culture Museum, a Tibetan thangka exhibition, and the teahouse-now-youth hostel in the northwestern compound (see note 15).

territory he ruled, as Qinghai Province becomes more fully absorbed into the Chinese socio-economic body. That process includes the obligatory discourse of national and ethnic unity, formulated in Qinghai's case with mandatory reference to its historical and present existence as a multi-ethnic, multicultural region of China. Not surprisingly the multivalent ethno-cultural definition does not allow for diverse interpretations of its political past, let alone a differently imagined future. The violent stoppage of 1949 inevitably left behind precarious sensitivities in local society: ambiguities and dissonances embedded in the physical fact of the Ma Residence cannot be addressed candidly on the streets of Xining. Dilemmas of the Ma Bufang story that arise from the alternative nature of his regime make everything about him and his time and place hard for the party-state to tell *except* in its own terms. For all its efforts and enabling capacities to send its message, it's still hard for the state to recognize, let alone address, interpretations beyond *its* orthodoxy on Ma and his time.

Yet the Ma Residence, reconfigured as a heritage site telling 'the story of a lifetime', does transmit a variety of messages paralleling the state narrative, above all, the strength of Sino-Muslim identity, culture and political status in that time and place. The ethnic culture dimension of the Ma story constitutes the most outstanding aspect of space and display at the site, but its ethno-political complications portend questions about the past that may be unsettling and unsettled in the present. What was the nature of the Ma regime and what is its relation to current state and society? How these questions are answered at, and by, the *Gong'guan* site reflects openings and limits for the 'useable past' in contemporary China's heritage environment in a multi-ethnic borderland.

Given the highly political contestation implicit in the existence then removal of Ma's regime, political commentary at the site, exclusively statist as it is, could be considered restrained, either by curatorial preference or the understanding that everybody knows the main story. The state's voice enfolds the site into the grand narrative of Liberation and national belonging in the 'Liberation of Qinghai' exhibition housed in an inner courtyard hall, the only sustained explanation of its historical political context. For Chinese visitors the historical moment and meaning are part of a familiar tale, with photographs of pre-1949 Xining and early Liberation scenes providing local specifics. Spare textual accompaniment covers only the first few years of CCP activity in Qinghai, limited perhaps by available imagery from the time as much as the sensitivities of regional consolidation (Chen 1991: vol. 1, 46-50; Chen 1996: 149-166; Cooke 2008: 408), and the annexation of the Residence itself by Party military

Figure 2.2 Young Chinese tourists at the Jade Hall



Photograph by Susette Cooke

authorities. The Republic of China, the state formation in which Ma Bufang and other Muslim warlords of the Northwest conducted their political lives, is represented in display items without commentary: portraits of key political figures like Sun Yat-sen and Chiang K'ai-shek immediately recognizable to Chinese visitors, the Nationalist flag, official delegations from Nanjing, and lesser official and military players in the Ma Bufang saga. Portraits of Ma and his family members simply appear alongside those of prominent national personages, as co-participants in the era of Nationalist government.

Lodging the Ma regime inside the Nationalist government provides a safe Chinese state-centric narrative framework, uncontroversial for state officials or the majority of visitors. Most of these are observably domestic Han tourists and Sino-literate Taiwan and Hong Kong compatriots,²⁸ for whom the site and its displays are a visual discourse on the Chinese state at the frontiers, suggestive of national power, nostalgic past times, and

²⁸ This composition of tourists was evident on all my visits to the site, and confirmed by site management staff in November 2011.

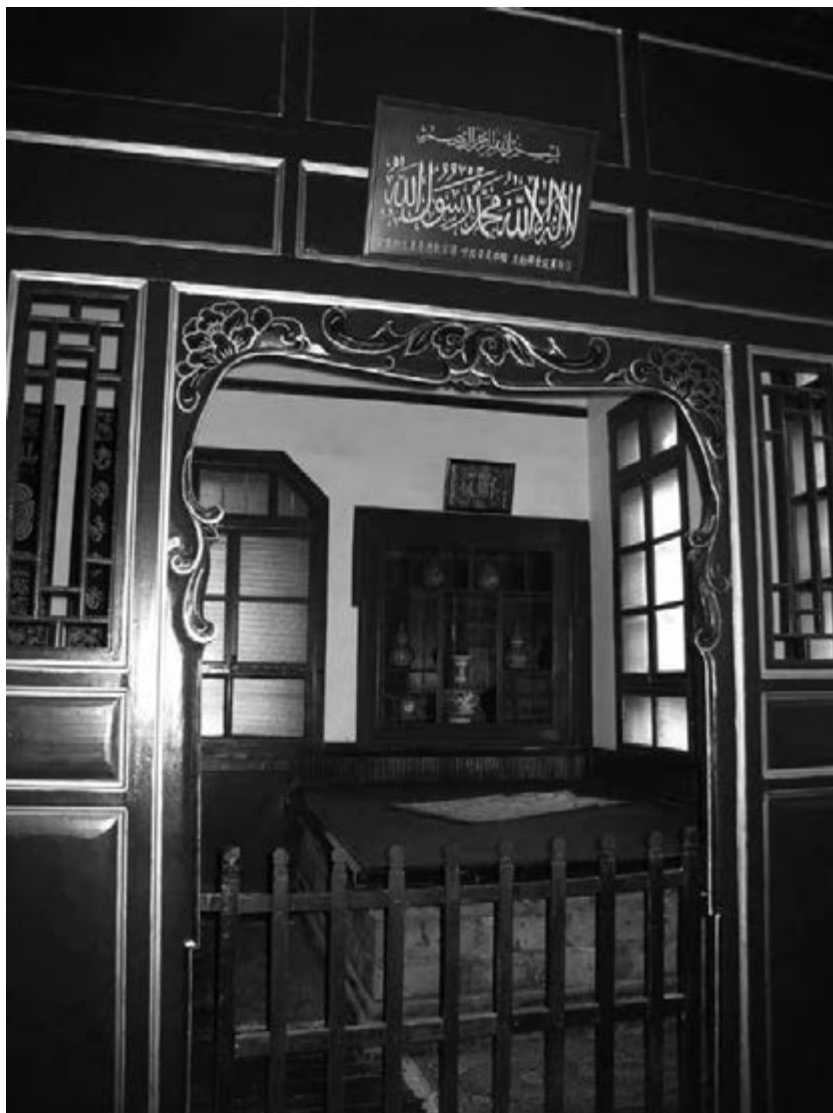
the frisson of other-cultural worlds. Despite the management's relatively soft-voiced politics at the site, the given context is still a Chinese national one. Reassessment of the Republican period in terms of nostalgia for its social and cultural accoutrements has, besides, been on the rise in the PRC for several years and may be safely expressed at historical sites. Aside from its political meaning, the Ma Residence offers a rare glimpse into élite life on a remote margin of the Republic, keenly enjoyed by domestic tourists as witnessed on all my own visits. In my experience the object of their greatest fascination is a small photograph of Soong Mei-ling, Madame Chiang K'ai-shek, who accompanied her husband as part of a Nationalist government delegation to the Northwest in 1942 (Qinghaishengzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 1987: 448-450; Yang 1986: 169-170). People may wish to recover their own cultural past, real or romanticized, as much as the history of an exotic region.

For the Hui, the Ma Residence narrates an alternative story at once more complicated and more critical: Their ethnicity's moment of ascendancy in this borderland, under their own strongman, the most powerful man in Qinghai. The site itself of course testifies to the centrality of Ma Bufang in this scenario, officially recognized in the captioning of his lifetime's story. Inside, especially in the living quarters for his son and for himself and his wife, he is apparent as a Sino-Muslim man of substance, leading a comfortable and cultured domestic life emphatically representative of Islamic principles.

Authenticity of this representation is not in question, as most artefacts now on display were recovered from among original items at the site, saved and kept in locked storage since the Cultural Revolution. Hui community groups were consulted about the correct display of religious exhibits, although no Hui were on the management staff in late 2011.²⁹ Culturally the site principally belongs, and has been allowed to belong, to the Hui. On the other hand, its political meaning cannot transgress the state's narrative of multi-ethnic and Chinese national unity. Like other minority nationalities in the PRC who must keep silent about ideologically unacceptable interpretations of their past, Qinghai Hui cannot voice a collective consciousness of the Ma era other than negatively, due to Ma's fierce anti-Communism, the real existence then armed defence of his regime, and memories of destructive social, economic and religious policies that followed Liberation (Chen 1991: vol. 1, 46-50; Chen 1996: 149-166; Goodman 2004b: 387; Cooke 2008: 408).

29 Information from informal conversations with site management staff, November 2011.

Figure 2.3 Ma Bufang's bedroom in the west wing of the inner courtyard



Photograph by Susette Cooke

Contradictions of the rupture of 1949 nevertheless haunt the Residence. Its very solidity and design suggest Ma anticipated the long-term continuation of his regional position. The rich vernacular traditions expressed in its architecture and interiors suggest connection to a strong social basis. At the least, it is evidence of a place and a way of life locally impressive in its time.

By way of explanation at the site, his regime's abrupt demise is elided with the state's master narrative of the Chinese nation via its fate at Liberation, but the visual wealth of the exhibits evokes other perspectives on what was happening on this borderland. At the restored *Gong'guan* the Hui have got some of their history back by the now public visibility of Ma Bufang's imposing stronghold. On the street, however, communicated references to Ma remain muted and evasive among local Hui residents, who sometimes allude to his social welfare projects and religious principles,³⁰ but generally choose to protect a relatively favourable present by circumventing a contentious past. Some speak of him as 'a sincere religious man' or simply 'a Guomintang official': A common response is 'we don't talk about that time'.³¹ Memories around the Ma Residence are therefore both stirred and repressed. While not in their hands, the restoration affords the Hui a kind of recovery from negative critique and the destructive aftermath of the end of the Ma regime. In a time of local survival and revival for their ethnic group, their collective memories centred on the site may be more about success than trauma, with its respectful showcasing of their culture and Ma's importance, and state recognition of his residence as protected heritage. The most potent Hui story manifests daily outside the walls of the *Gong'guan*, in the flourishing cultural, religious, economic and social life of the Hui community.

Heritage and memory around the site potentially belong to Qinghai's other minority nationalities, too – Tibetans, Mongols, Tu and Salar – who as subjects of the Ma regime were also affected by its rise and fall.³² Although they have been accorded cultural representation at the Qinghai Folk Customs Museum housed in the former women's quarters, their own sub-narratives have no active voice at the present-day site. The persistently unintegrated frontier peoples – Tibetans and Mongols – have their place as 'ethnic minority guests' submitting to the Centre in Ma's specially-modified reception room opposite the Jade Hall, safely inscribed into Chinese history, without reference to violent encounters with the Ma clan's mostly Sino-Muslim armed forces

30 Such expressions echo works by reform-era Hui scholars, who expand on these aspects but give only the barest details of the end of regime at Liberation. See, for example, La et al. 2009: 91-104.

31 Reluctance to talk about past Hui experiences has characterized my conversations with Hui citizens since I first visited Qinghai in the early 1990s. This is the case for events occurring before and after the founding of the PRC in which they feel negatively implicated, such as the 19th-century Muslim uprisings and the Ma regime, or damaged by state policies, such as the democratic religious reforms of 1958 and the Cultural Revolution.

32 All these nationalities were granted areas of titular regional autonomy in Qinghai under the PRC: only the area around Xining, approximately 2 per cent of the provincial area, does not have ethnic autonomy status.

(Hunsberger 1978: 79-86; Horlemann 2015). Ethnic Han people, who have lived continuously in the Xining districts for seven centuries and developed a distinctive localized culture, are not represented at the Museum,³³ which in all other respects mirrors state narrative and ethnic policy in the province, complete with text expounding Qinghai's harmonious ethnic relations through history. Long-term Han residents I have spoken to in Xining reflexively call Ma Bufang a *tu huangdi* (local despot), who provides local renown but who, for them, was properly overthrown by the new Chinese state.³⁴

As for the central subject of the 'story of a lifetime', the site's management has had to negotiate the rehabilitation of Ma Bufang as a powerful individual figure from a locally significant non-Han ethnicity, who was embedded in the Republican administration and so the Chinese state, but at the same time was a foe of the CCP and, in Marxist terms, a class enemy of people of all nationalities. These elements, including his links via the Nationalists with their American allies, are not absent but are to some extent moderated by sparse (or no) explanation, and the observable domesticity and religiosity of the *Gong'guan* as a family home. There are even hints of cross-straits reconciliation with the Ma family in a photo of Ma Jiyuan, his wife and other Nationalist officials in Taiwan,³⁵ visited by the popularizer of Qinghai folk music and old acquaintance of the Ma family, Wang Luobin. By letting the exhibits speak for themselves, nationalist discourse is represented and Hui sensitivities are not irked. As mentioned earlier, stories of Ma Bufang's more violent relations with the Communists and some of Qinghai's peoples are told at the monumental West Route Army Memorial Hall, a Red Tourism enclave in Xining's south.

Useable history: Concluding remarks

Unravelling the 'story of a lifetime' is not occurring only at the Ma Residence in its role as a heritage and tourism site. As significant historical figures

33 The Han are listed among Qinghai's nationalities (*minzu*) in the general introductory text at the Museum, but presumably cannot be represented among cultures of minority nationalities (*shaoshu minzu*) because they are members of China's 90 per cent Han majority. The PRC's ethnic classification system has yet to escape from the majority-minority binary.

34 Informal conversations during visits to Xining, 1995-2013. Some have read works by Han authors on the Ma clan, who spare no details alleging Ma Bufang's despotic record (see, for example, Chen 1986: 280-288).

35 See also reference to contacts among Ma family members in Taiwan and the Mainland, under the PRC government's early reform-era reconciliation policy (Yang 1986: 256-257).

are extracted from oblivion or one-dimensional evaluation in orthodox state historiography, Ma Bufang has been appearing in popular revisionist history, mostly as historical fiction (Gu 2012; Ma 2012). A certain melancholic romanticism attaches to his son Ma Jiyuan, whose attributed modernist and Sino-cultural attitudes evoked other potential futures (Yang 1986: 233-236; Mi 1995: 700; Ma and Fan 2008: 190-195). Some of these more imaginative visions contrast with orthodox evaluations of Ma as primarily a local despot or semi-feudal warlord,³⁶ or instigator of lurid violence towards Communist prisoners.³⁷ Serious local history is now being produced in Qinghai by academics and independent writers, so we may expect to see more on Ma Bufang and his regime's place in regional and national history. Contemporary Hui scholars in Qinghai emphasize his social welfare programmes and contributions to the Anti-Japanese War and national unification, but avoid political critique.³⁸ Radical re-assessment of his regime and its place in modern China still seems a long way off.

Tourism is political, especially in the PRC, as officials running the Ma Residence as an open tourist site well understand. State and sub-state storytelling at the *Gong'guan* navigate tensions between official claims and vernacular memories by a prismatic appropriation of its past, so that reflective visitors may walk away with a sense of nested stories, even within a Han-centric nationalist framework. This view, too, falls within the management's understanding of their site's political, cultural and commercial agendas. The overwhelming majority of its visitors are Han; Hui seldom go there, other Qinghai ethnic minorities scarcely at all.³⁹ Hui community response to the Ma Residence in a sense happens off-site, in the resurgence and dedication to their own culture, values and social life in Xining's East City District neighbourhoods. Its prominence as a 4A-level national tourist site makes the Hui presence in the Northwest visible and powerful in a former era which, while not yet allowing for an alternative Hui-centric telling, still offers a form of recovery of their past. Local social actors as well as the state can, for their own purposes, find a 'useable past' at the *Ma Gong'guan*.

36 La et al. cites ten major works on Ma Bufang and the Ma clan published between 1986 and 2006, including Chen 1986 and Yang 1986 cited in this chapter (La et al. 2009: 259). They contain valuable historical research without contravening the state's ideological conventions regarding the Ma regime.

37 See [http://tags.news.sina.com.cn/Ma Bufang](http://tags.news.sina.com.cn/Ma%20Bufang) for examples.

38 See officially sponsored publications La et al. 2009; La and Ma 2009; La and Ma 2014.

39 The ethnic composition of visitors was clearly observable on all my visits to the site, and also confirmed in conversations with management staff.

Officials responsible for the restored Ma Residence have told stories in their borderland by using their resources skilfully, responsive to state mandates and to the social landscape that literally surrounds them. At this macro-level their choices resonate at heritage sites in other ethnic minority areas of China, but conditions vary significantly among them, and within them. In Qinghai, ethno-political contestation weighs heavily in the exercise of state policy, including in the life of the Ma Residence as seriously as local conditions demand.

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About the author

Dr. Susette Cooke, Department of Chinese Studies, School of Languages and Cultures, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Sydney NSW, Australia