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Islamic Education for Women in China: Vocational or Ethical Schooling?

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The Hui, an ethnic minority group—*shaosu minzu* or national minority in the socialist context—in China, has a population of more than 10 million people (last recorded in 2010) and as such, is the second largest ethnic minority group in China. The Hui have managed to maintain their ethnic and cultural identity, including their Islamic faith, throughout the approximately one thousand years that they have inhabited China's territory alongside other ethnic minorities and the majority Han, which has a population of 1.2 billion people. The Hui speak Chinese as a colloquial language. The Hui are concerned that if they lose their customs and their Islamic faith, they may be assimilated into the culture of the Han majority. They, therefore, fear for the loss of their cultural identity and thus strive to maintain their unique identity through various activities such as the promotion of religious education at community mosques, eating halal food, issuing appeals against ethnic hate speech and discrimination, and also demanding for equal employment opportunities and treatment among the Han majority. The primary mechanism that the Hui employ to maintain their cultural identity is Islamic education. In the past, young Hui males were educated at community mosques, where they studied Islamic scholarship in both the Arabic and Persian languages. On the other hand, young Hui females were not allowed to study except in some districts, such as in Henan, Hebei, and the Northeast. In the Northwest with a large Hui population, young Hui girls did have the opportunity to study Islamic scholarship at women's mosques.

Since the time of China's Reform and Open Policy of 1978, numerous private religious schools for women and female children—called *nixue* or *nixiao*—have been established in the Hui communities in the Northwest such as Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, Yunnan, as well as Henan and Inner Mongolia. These communities were



Figure Islamic School in Yinchuan, Ningxia



Figure Islamic School in Zhaotong, Yunnan

underdeveloped in terms of economy and education. Moreover, Hui families were skeptical of these schools, as they were run by the Chinese Communist Party, which had initiated the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) and had attempted to destroy anything related to Hui religion and ethnicity. At that time, more than 90% of the mosques in northwest China were destroyed, religious books were burned, clerics were prosecuted, and the Hui were sometimes forced to eat pork or raise hog. However, even during that turmoil, pious Hui Muslims endeavored to discretely maintain their beliefs in anticipation of a time when they would be able to practice their faith without persecution.

After 1978, the Hui community desired to reconstruct their culture through the establishment of religious schools designed to foster the development of pious Muslims. Parents were eager to send their children to such schools in order to recover a collective ethno-religious pride after the humiliation they had endured during the Cultural Revolution. Female students also wanted to be literate and have the opportunity to pursue academic studies despite their parents' strong objection to sending them to "communists" schools.

Muslims in the Hui community supported these religious schools financially through donations and most children were not charged tuition. Almost all of the teachers in the schools were females literate in Arabic/Chinese and knowledgeable in Islamic scholarship. At the same time, these schools were able to supplement secular public schools, which lacked in finances, enrollment, facilities, and access for Muslim females—and thus popularity among parents—who were economically poor but pious in their religion. In these private religious schools, young women learned Islamic ethics and literacy in both Arabic, the key language of their ethno-religious identity, and Chinese.

The Muslim community hoped to foster the development of a generation of "wise wives and good mothers" who had accurate knowledge of Islamic scholarship and would not contradict the traditional family code. Moreover, they taught Chinese literacy, which was necessary to live in China. Muslims believed that doing good in this life would lead to eternal life in heaven. They believed that because mothers spent more time with their children, if the mothers had better knowledge of what was fundamentally right and wrong, then mothers could teach their children to behave properly. Therefore, they believed the ability of Muslims to achieve eternal life in heaven depended on the education of young girls, the mothers of the future generation.

However, the female students at these schools were not credited with the time spent studying at these schools, nor was their fluency in Arabic given any credence when it came to measuring their academic qualifications. This treatment prevented them from continuing study at higher academic institutions such as colleges and universities. In fact, most of these young female Muslim students, up until the middle 2000s, wished to pursue a career as an educator or religious scholar. This meant that once they were educated at these private institutions, they essentially had no career opportunities outside of the Hui communities in China. In other words, they had no opportunities to be professionals such as lawyers, medical doctors, economists, scientists, or university professors.

On the other hand, during the 1990s and 2000s, local governments began to stress the importance of the education of Hui women at secular schools in response to the campaigns and subsidies of UNESCO and other NGOs. Gradually, the local governments increased the number of female Hui teachers, enriched school facilities, and gave a schooling allowance to the Muslim families with special economic conditions. As a result, of this governmental policy, almost all female Hui children began to enter public primary and junior high schools and their literacy rate rose drastically. Most wished to enter college after finishing high school, but many were not able to do due to economic conditions. They understood that their employment prospects in the cities were not be

bright due to the shortage of job opportunities stemming from the lack of human relations in coastal cities and the increasing number of unemployed youths with college diplomas. Moreover, the pressure of being competitive in the job market with Han elites put pressure on them to assimilate to the Han's values. They knew higher education would give them more diversified career choices, but they also feared that this might also make them more likely to assimilate to the values and the behaviors of the Han majority and, as a result, diminish the Hui ethno-religious culture.

Nixue became an option for those female students who failed to enter institutions of higher-education due to economic or religious reasons. From the 2000s up to the present, the *nixue* became like a kind of vocational school, which fostered Arabic interpreters at the commercial and wholesale cities such as Yiwu and Guangzhou, and which attracted many Arabic speaking Muslim merchants. The Hui women, who previously had lost confidence due to the history of ethnic and gender discrimination, became empowered as a result of these increased educational opportunities. Muslims merchants from Arab countries have a tendency to choose Muslim companies and interpreters as counterparts. They confess that the more they become pious, the more they become rich and, this richness in turn brings them opportunities to do good for the poor. However, there are also critics of the *nixue*, who argue these religious schools became vocational schools in order to foster interpreters and businesswomen, and as such, they are losing their mission to foster the development of religious and ethical human beings. In this context, the *Nixue* are struggling to figure out their new mission in China's rapidly growing economy.

This presentation discusses the secular/religious education of Hui Muslim from both a historical and contemporary perspective. This paper will also reexamine the Islamic school boom of the 1980s in northwestern and southwestern China and its relation to the Islamic Awakening phenomena, which was interrelated with the updating of authentic Islamic doctrine in China. Additionally, this presentation will discuss problems of Hui women's empowerment through secular/religious education. The collaboration of Hui returnees, international migrant Muslims, and domestic migrant Muslims has had deep impacts on the formation of the pious yet active commercial city of Yiwu, which is a rapidly growing wholesaling center in Zhejiang.

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“Comment”

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The three papers presented in Session 1 focus on unique and relatively neglected cases of Islamic communities in China. There are several common themes in the papers: Islam, minority, ethnic identity, gender, education, and “voices”; and the papers demonstrate how these issues are closely linked.

Comments on Professor Wang's paper: This paper, a comparative analysis of sermon poems composed by Uyghur and Hui mosque preachers, shows these poems provide rich information concerning how China's Muslim minorities absorbed Islam, and, in turn, how their traditions influenced Islam. Uyghur poems



commentator: Prof. OKA Natsuko

examined in the paper are composed of a sermon text with 100 metrical verses (“One Hundred Songs”) edited by a preacher serving at the Central Mosque of Yarbash Village, Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The Hui poems analyzed contain four calligraphies comprising a series of religious poems written by a Hui preacher of the Sufi order “Linmingtang,” in the Hui Autonomous Region, strongly influenced by the Islamic-Confucian scholarly tradition of the 17th to 18th centuries. While the Uyghur sermon poems include criticisms of moral depravity and socio-political problems such as corruption, the Hui calligraphies are for meditation by Linmingtang members and