

Chinese Muslim Women in the Virtual Community: Identity, Expression and Empowerment

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Abstract

The voiceless situation of Chinese Muslim women has not changed much from ancient China to modern China. However, the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is helping to create the possibility for collective expression of Chinese Muslim women. This paper investigates how Chinese Muslim women empower their Muslim identities through their off-line lives and the online community.

Keywords: Empowerment, Chinese Muslim women, Virtual Community

Introduction

Historically, Chinese Muslim women have rarely contributed to the written history of the Muslim community in China. The Chinese Muslim women's inability to produce knowledge and communicate is due to the deep-rooted feudal ideology: "A Woman without Talent is Virtuous", and in modern times, the voiceless situation has not changed much. The Muslim male still holds the dominant position of expression in the limited media of the Chinese Muslim community (Ma, 2016). However, the development of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) is creating the possibility for collective expression of Chinese Muslim women. The Internet has provided a voice for the silenced and marginalized groups (Shirazi, 2012) in the Islamic society and beyond. Compared to the proliferation of research on Islam and Muslims in the media, very little research work has covered Muslim women (Al-Hejin, 2014). This paper tries to shed light on the subject in the context of contemporary China. The Internet has increased activism opportunities for Muslim women, but the gender digital divide in the Muslim context is an important area that requires further research (Bunt, 2003). Consequently, this study tries to investigate how the Internet users among Chinese Muslim women present their off-line lives in the virtual community.

Literature Review

Muslim women have attracted considerable attention from Western media, and the Muslim women were framed in stereotypical molds, often as passive victims, uneducated and subordinated in the male-dominated society. However, Dastgeer and Gade (2016) found that both CNN and Al-Jazeera framed Muslim women as active participants during the Arab Spring, and women became a more important focal point than men in the media. The Muslim women in Western societies face many challenges. Women in North America who convert to Shi'i Islam come from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds; nonetheless they experience a sense of social marginalization after conversion (Inloes & Takim, 2014). The Muslim women in Australia face challenges balancing the Muslim culture, the Australian culture and the Islamic religion when they deal with issues related to sexual health, knowledge and needs (Meldrum, Liamputtong & Wollersheim, 2015). Turkish and Moroccan Muslim migrants in the Netherlands cope with increasing stigmatization (Eijberts & Roggeband, 2016). These challenges deepen the marginalization of Muslim women.

In a racial and religiously diverse society such as Singapore, the Hijab has become a hot-button issue, and it is not only related to the secular and religious binary, but also to the state and the Malay-Muslim community, and intertwined with the racial and religious problems (Zainal & Wong, 2017). In addition, Allen (2015) provided evidence that the British see the veil as a symbol of Islam and Muslims. The veil is not only seen as a symbol of powerlessness, vulnerability and oppression of Muslim women, it also makes veiled Muslim women become victims of Islamophobia. Muslim women in the United States were denied citizenships because they were regarded as threats to Western cultural values (Al-Hejin, 2014). However, the Hijab has become the visual identity of Muslim women.

Muslim women as a marginalized group have captured research interests from diverse perspectives. There is abundant research on Information and Communication Technology empowerment of marginalized groups, which show that the mass media play an important role in the empowerment process of marginalized minorities (Fetterman, Kaftarian & Wandersman, 1996). Haythornthwaite and Kendall (2010) underlined that a growing body of research is addressing the intersections and synergies between the online and off-line worlds, with people using the Internet to drive change in real communities. They explained that many studies have showed that the use of Information and Communication Technologies reinforce and regenerate geography-based

community identities. More and more people access the Internet, thereby increasingly empowering them to organize themselves beyond local, national, and international boundaries (Vat, 2006). Onyije and Francis (2012) highlighted that Information and Communication Technology can be used to exploit virtual experiences in order to increase their cultural, social and economic capital.

However, shifting to the current China context, the mass media are highly controlled by the government, and the print media of the Chinese Muslim community are shrinking, given the new media bloom (Gu, 2009). Under this background, the Internet becomes a vital interaction platform for Chinese Muslims, with the majority being Han, and other groups. NARA (2013) explored the Waqf activities in an urban Hui Muslim Internet community. He highlighted the advantages of the use of mobile technology in the religious activities of Chinese Muslims. However, the Chinese Muslim women live in a technology development background that still remains largely unexplored.

Given that Chinese Muslim women rarely kept records of themselves as part of the history of Chinese Muslims, chronicles of the images and lives of Chinese Muslim women are blurry. The history of the Chinese Muslims dates back to the Tang Dynasty, along which Islam spread to China. Many Muslims from Arabia and Persia came to China as soldiers, merchants and political emissaries (Gladney, 1987). These Muslims settled in China and contributed appreciably towards local and national development (Hu, 1993; Wei, Wise, Baric, Black & Bittles, 2003). The Muslim women were mothers and wives to such men, and bore and raised their children. That almost sums up the lives of Chinese Muslim women of those times.

There are ten Muslim ethnic minority groups in China. These Muslim ethnic groups were officially recognised by the Chinese government in 1954 through the Ethnic Categorization Project (minzu shibie 民族识别), which is based on Stalin's four-part definition of nationality (Caffrey, 2004; Leibold, 2010). Most Chinese Muslims live in the western part of China; the Xinjiang Uygur autonomous region, the Ningxia Hui autonomous region, the Qinghai province and the Gansu province. Chinese Muslims developed the Islamic education system for maintaining their Muslim identity, however, during the anti-religion political movement in the 1950s (the ten-year Cultural Revolution Movement, 1966-1976), Chinese Muslims suffered an official proscription of their religion. Their mosques were defiled, closed or destroyed, and their Imams were persecuted, imprisoned and even killed (FitzGeald, 1967; Wan & Li, 2005; Armijo, 2008; Israeli, 2012; Li, 2017). Essentially, Islamic education was suspended in Muslim communities until 1978 when the Chinese government implemented the Reform policy. The Chinese Muslims' marginalization continued under the atheistic ideology and communist media system of China.

The Chinese Muslims are struggling through their marginalization, and maintaining their Muslim identity has become the most important issue to them. Hall believed that identity construction onto a common source of identification possesses the closed stability and alliance characteristic which is shared with others (Grossberg, 2011). Historically, Chinese Muslim women were spiritually and financially constrained by patriarchal norms. Jaschok and Shui (2002) investigated the role of the Women Mosque in the life of Chinese Muslim women in Henan province. The Women Mosque was a localized manifestation of the Islamic religion in China. Unfortunately, the Women Mosque was unknown to outsiders due to the reduced status of Chinese Muslim women. Over a time span of 300 years, these women mosques "have supported the education of Muslim girls and women, offering the most female-centred and female-controlled educational environment in China, and provided spiritual and emotional support by female Ahong (Imam)" (Jaschok, Chan, 2009). These women mosques and the services provided by them were very important for the Chinese Muslim women in maintaining their Muslim identities.

The situation of the Chinese Muslim women in contemporary China is still less explored, especially in the context of technology development. The Internet-based new media platforms are widely used by the Chinese people. China had 1 billion Internet users in 2017 (statista, nd), and the number increases year after year. Technology development changed the life of the Chinese people, and the Muslim women among them as well. Bunt (2003) held that despite the fact that the Internet has increased activism opportunities for Muslim women, the gender digital divide in Muslim contexts is a significant area that needs further research.

Brief Contextual Overview

The entry point of this study is the BBS named "Ramadan Diary", which was launched since 2007 for Muslim users' daily posts about their lives in Ramadan. "Ramadan Diary" is one of the BBS of the website, 2muslim.com. 2muslim.com was set up in 2003 by Mr. Ma Yuming in Lanzhou, a provincial city of Gansu. After ten years of development, 2muslim.com has become the largest Chinese-speaking Muslim online community, with "around 370,000 registered users" as reported to this author by Mr. Ma Yuming, the webmaster of 2muslim.com (personal communication, 2015). Based on the statistics gathered from Alexa.cn in 2014, 2muslim.com has risen to the top 1% of the main websites of the Chinese Muslim Hui ethnic group. There are many BBS in 2muslim.com, and most of the users are Chinese Muslim Hui (personal communication, 2015). The users of 2muslim.com are very active; they post, comment, discuss, and debate in the individual BBS they

prefer.

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, and fasting in Ramadan is obligatory for adult Muslims. While fasting from dawn till sunset, Muslims refrain from consuming food, drinking liquids, and engaging in sexual relations. Fasting for Muslims during Ramadan includes the increased offering of prayers, recitation of the Quran and increase in doing good deeds and charity. Since 2007, 2muslim.com has launched the Ramadan Diary as one of its projects in Ramadan. About 100 users of 2muslim.com posted their diaries in Ramadan Diary in the inaugural year, and subscriber numbers increased annually subsequently. Chinese Muslim women users have written abundant content in Ramadan Diary, describing their daily lives in Ramadan, and commenting about other participants' diaries. Consequently, the Ramadan Diary has created a Chinese Muslim women virtual community, in which they can share their knowledge, exchange their ideas and describe their personal lives in Ramadan.

Ramadan Diary provides abundant content related to the Muslim identity of Chinese Muslim women. The contents of the Ramadan Diary are highly personal, as the participants explore their own lives and the lives of their local Muslim communities. The posts in the Ramadan Diary column intensively explore the free speech limits of Chinese Muslims in Ramadan, as against the religious orientations of contemporary China.

Method

This study applied the qualitative approach. The researcher started the investigations by reading the posts and comments on Ramadan Diary, then the researcher participated in Ramadan Diary as a user for three consecutive years. This participation allowed the researcher to experience firsthand the excitement and anxiety that came with presenting herself in front of an unseen audience. During those years, the researcher read abundant posts from Ramadan Diary about many Muslim women's lives. That act aroused the researcher's academic interest towards investigating how Muslim women present themselves in the Ramadan Diary virtual community.

The sample of this study was chosen through two steps: firstly, a random sample; the 2014 Ramadan Diary project was chosen (one of the ten-year projects from 2007 to 2016) on the 2muslim.com online community; secondly, using a purposive sample, 33 women participants were chosen from 102 participants of the 2014 Ramadan Diary project. All the diaries were downloaded in May 2016. The content of the Diary as the basic text data was analysed with the Nvivo 8 software.

Thematic analysis was applied for the data analysis. Inductive analysis is a data-driven process, in this sense, the process of coding the data without trying to fit it into the researcher's analytic preconceptions or a pre-existing coding frame (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The data analysis includes coding, collecting codes under potential sub-themes or themes, and comparing the emerged coding's clusters together with and in relation to the entire data set, based on the four phases of initialization, construction, rectification and finalization (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen & Snelgrove, 2016). The researcher then developed the themes which relate to the research question, in order to ensure deep understanding of the research topic.

Sample

The 33 female participants were identified by their registration information, and cross checked by the content of their posts. These participants post their diaries day by day, but not all of them insist on posting every day, so the numbers of diaries were quite different. Some post around 30, some less than 5. See Table 1 below.

Table 1: List of the Participants and Numbers of the Diaries

Participant No.	Amount of the diary	Participant No.	Amount of the diary	Participant No.	Amount of the diary
1	35	12	26	23	23
2	10	13	12	24	2
3	20	14	12	25	12
4	18	15	18	26	9
5	25	16	6	27	3
6	5	17	10	28	17
7	29	18	28	29	29
8	3	19	8	30	1
9	9	20	3	31	22
10	27	21	3	32	4
11	1	22	26	33	9

These 33 female participants come from at least 30 cities or counties of China, and one of them lives abroad, in Malaysia, but some of the participants' locations could not be sourced due to the fact that 2muslim.com has been shut down since December 2016. The participant's locations can almost match with the Muslim population distribution in China. Hence, the researcher believes that these samples represent the Muslim women in the Chinese Muslim community.

Findings

The Ramadan Diary provides a platform for Chinese Muslim women users to present their daily lives in Ramadan. They freely express their happiness and sorrow, and chronicle their lives with family, colleagues and community. These diaries present the portraits of many active Muslim women in Chinese Muslim communities. Table 2 presents final themes and subthemes which were developed based on the data analysis, the overarching concept of which is the Muslim identity. Due to the fact that Ramadan is a highly religion-oriented period, the content of the Ramadan Diaries are highly related to the Muslim identity, and the three main themes developed supported Muslim identity as the overarching concept.

Table 2: Subthemes, Final Themes and Overarching Concept of the Ramadan Diary

Subthemes	Final themes	Overarching Concept
Quotes from the verses of the Quran	Islamic knowledge sharing	Muslim identity
Quotes from the Hadith		
Islamic history or other knowledge		
Islamic religious educational issues		
Du'a making	Religious practice	
Quran recitation		
Fasting		
Daily prayers		
Wearing the Hijab		
Remembering Allah		
Charity work		
Family relations	Social relationship	
Relationships with other Muslim women		
Relationship with the local Muslim community		
Relationship with non-local Muslim communities		
Relationships with non-Muslims		
Media-assisted communication		

Theme One: Islamic Knowledge Sharing to Support their Understanding of Islam

When the Muslim women users of Ramadan Diary write about their daily lives, they usually quote verses of the Quran and several Hadith to support their opinions or express their feelings in relation to some issues. For example, when talking about filial relationships with parents, Participant No.12 quoted several verses of the Qu'ran¹ as follows:

Ayat 17:23: Your Lord has decreed: Do not worship any but Him; Be good to your parents; and should both or any one of them attain old age with you, do not say to them even "fie" neither chide them, but speak to them with respect.

Ayat 17:24: And be humble and tender to them and say: "Lord, show mercy to them as they nurtured me when I was small.

Ayat 31:14: We enjoined upon man to be dutiful to his parents. His mother bore him in weakness upon weakness, and his weaning lasted two years. (We, therefore, enjoined upon him): "Give thanks to Me and to your parents. To Me is your ultimate return."

Hadith: I asked Allah's Apostle, "O Allah's Apostle! What is the best deed?" He replied, "To offer the prayers at their early stated fixed times." I asked, "What is next in goodness?" He replied, "To be good and dutiful to your parents." I further asked, what is next in goodness?" He replied, "To participate in Jihad in Allah's Cause." I did not ask Allah's Apostle anymore and if I had asked him more, he would have told me more. (SAHIH BUKHARI Volume 4, Book 52, Number 41 Narrated by Abdullah bin Masud)²

---by Participant No.12

The Ramadan diary writers also shared their knowledge about Islam and Muslims, the life of the Prophet (SAW), and the life style of Muslims. As for the religious and educational issues, the diary disclosed that there are many centres which provide informal religious education classes for women and children. Some are provided by local mosques, while some were established by groups of Muslim women themselves. The curricula are highly concentrated on Quran recitation. For example, from the diaries of Participant No.1, the researcher found that the participant was a primary school student and her mum was a teacher at the informal religious education class. On 7th July, 2014, she wrote:

At 7 am this morning, I came to the class with my mum. It was worthy to be called women class; there are many aunts and grannies. When my mum called the roll, I got to know there are more than one hundred students in these three classes and plus our holiday class, my mum has four classes.

Thanks to Allah, the Star-Moon women study class in Minhe County, Qinghai province is growing bigger and bigger. Now, we have two teaching centers. In MLW (Anonymous by researcher) teaching center, at the very beginning, the students did not even know the Arabic alphabets, but now they can recite the Quran fluently. Recently, we had a new alphabet class. In BDJ (Anonymous by researcher) teaching center, according to the religious knowledge level of students, they are divided into three classes: Quran recitation and explanation class, praying and living knowledge class and alphabet class. (Participant No.3)

--- By Participant No.1

Theme Two: Religious Practice is the Way to Maintain their Muslim Identity

The Muslim women highlight their religious practices mainly from seven perspectives: making Du'a, praying, fasting, Quran recitation, remembering Allah, wearing the Hijab and Islamic philanthropy. Fasting, praying and Quran recitation in Ramadan occur at higher frequencies when they write about their personal lives. They show their gratitude by remembering Allah in different situations, and make Du'a for themselves, for their family members and even for the Palestinian people. Israel bombed Palestine that Ramadan, and it became the hot issue discussed by Chinese Muslim women.

May Allah bless all of us with health, safety, happiness and a world without disaster and war.

--- Participant No. 11

May Allah give you assistance, protect you, let you out of difficulty and war, and grant you a peaceful life in this world.

--- Participant No. 13

The world expresses support for Palestine, including Jewish people who have conscience. We only have empty hands, we can only appeal, we ask ourselves again and again: what on earth can we do?

--- Participant No. 22

The Chinese Muslim women showed their love for the Hijab in the Ramadan Diaries. They believe that wearing the Hijab is a very beautiful thing. These Muslim women actively participate in many charity activities in their local communities, and there are such charity activities at higher levels, including the Ramadan Gift Bag Project. The 2muslim.com website has launched the Ramadan Gift Bag project each Ramadan since 2012. The 2muslim.com website called for donations, and collected money for the Ramadan gift bags; 200 RMB for each gift bag. Items therein included: a bag of rice or flour, a barrel of cooking oil, a pack of tea, a pack of dates, and 50 RMB. Initially, 2muslim.com made plans on how many bags were to be distributed in each local community. The volunteers in each community were asked to find and distribute the bags among the beneficiaries. 2muslim.com planned to collect money for 600 Ramadan gift bags, but eventually they ended up with enough money for 704 bags in 2012, and increased every year thereafter. In 2015, 2muslim.com got donations worth 1,734,387.70 RMB, and distributed 6,942 Ramadan gift bags in total.

2muslim.com launched the Ramadan Gift Bag project for several years, and it worked well.

--- Participant No.2

Today is the day our Wuzhong Community (a city in Ningxia Hui autonomous region---by the researcher) delivers the Ramadan Gift Bags. On Saturday, we, several moderators (of the online Wuzhong Community) already bought all the goods. For nine hours, we visited several villages and delivered the Ramadan Gift Bags to some elderly persons who had no families.

--- Participant No.13

On Sunday, our Hezhou online community had the Ramadan Gift Bag delivery activity.

--- Participant No.4

Lanzou online community decided to deliver the Ramadan Gift Bags on 6th July. I took on the task of printing stickers for the gift packs.

--- Participant No.9

In 2017, after the 2muslim.com website was shut down by the Chinese government, the Ramadan Gift Bag Project continued and the volunteers organized and communicated through WeChat; and the Chinese name of 2muslim.com “中穆网” was still used as the logo of the Ramadan Gift Bag Project. The Chinese Muslim women actively participate in the Ramadan Gift Bag Project and many other charity activities among Chinese Muslim communities.

Theme Three: Social Relations Highlight the Interaction of Chinese Muslim Women with Others

Social relations are also of crucial concern to Chinese Muslim women. They wrote about family relations, relations with other Muslim women, relations with the local community, relations with non-local communities, and relations with non-Muslims.

For these women participants, family relations are their highest concern. The women prepare the food for fasting, write about a lot of big or small issues about their family members, study in school, take care of their

sick kids, and experience happiness and sorrow in their family life. The researcher also found that the women always got help, support, consolation and suggestions from other women from their local community and non-local communities as well. The mosques were the main places where local Muslim community members interact with each other. The women went to the mosques for prayers and prepared food for everyday fasting, and the most active males or females in the local communities were introduced in the diaries. The women writers wrote about the experience of their travel to other Muslim communities, or some famous Imam from another place who visited them and gave speeches to their local communities. The Israeli army bombed the Palestinian people, and the “two clear movements”³³ in Yunnan province were hot issues discussed by the writers. When the writers wrote about their relations with non-Muslims, it was always harmony-oriented.

In addition, the researcher put media as a sub-theme in this part in order to explore deeply the relationship between media usage and these Muslim female Internet users. The researcher found that the women use media like the Internet, short messaging, WeChat and QQ to access information, post and communicate with other users, and provide information to all users. The Chinese language media, especially the 2muslim.com website, was the main platform for them to get news about the Chinese Muslim community and Muslim communities abroad. These women take part in the Ramadan Diary Project, consciously sharing their lives, even writing poems and fiction to express their feelings and understandings about the Muslim life. They communicate through the Internet-based media, exchange ideas and wishes, and discuss the issues which are of common concern to them. The media play very important roles in their lives, as some of them may be physically isolated from other Muslims.

These Chinese Muslim women positively presented their Muslim identity from three aspects - knowledge, practice and social relations - no matter their age, their location and their occupation. Figure 1 below presents the coded map of their Muslim identity.

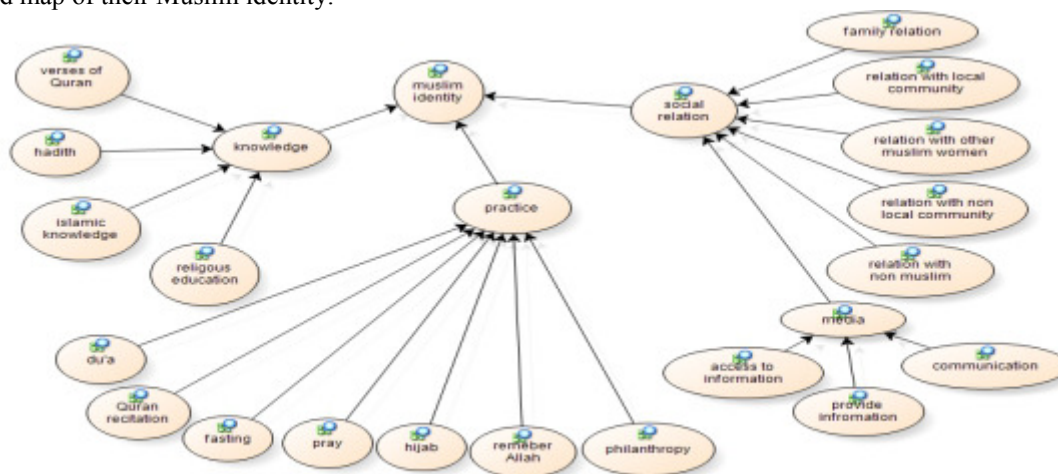


Figure 1: The main theme and sub-theme of the content of the Ramadan Diaries

Conclusion

Given that the Ramadan Diary Project is highly related to Ramadan, the ninth month in the Islamic calendar, the contents of the diary are thus more religion-oriented. Considering that there is a lack of media platforms for Chinese Muslim women to share the Muslim life in modern China, the Ramadan Diary on 2muslim.com became the most important platform for these women, who live in largely scattered communities, to share and communicate with each other.

The Chinese Muslim women use Internet self-empowerment to unite as one congregation via Ramadan Diary. In this congregation, they share similar historical memories and the same religion, knowledge and life style.

Discussion

The researcher concluded that these Chinese Muslim women positively presented their off-line Muslim identity in Ramadan Diary BBS from three aspects - religious knowledge, religious practice and social relations - and sub-themes of each aspect, however the researcher also found diversity of each sub-theme and summarized it as problems that these Chinese Muslim women encounter in their lives. The researcher discusses these problems as follows:

Firstly, the Chinese Muslim women were faced with prejudice and discrimination, not only from Chinese mainstream society but also from inside the Muslim community. This problem appeared especially when they discussed issues related to the Hijab. They experienced difficulty hunting for jobs while wearing the Hijab, and

they were treated as foreigners when they met most non-Muslim Han people. In addition, in some Muslim communities, the young women who were unmarried and wearing the Hijab were laughed at by other Muslim women, because there is a popular but wrong notion in local communities that wearing the Hijab is only compulsory for married women. The researcher found that the Chinese Muslim community is diverse in its response to the Hijab issue. In some places, women wearing the Hijab are encouraged and supported by local communities, and in other places, some women face prejudice and discrimination due to some wrong notions about the Hijab in their Muslim communities.

I have read an article about a convert Muslim girl. Her mum does not like her wearing the Hijab.

---- Participant No.28

My company does not allow me to wear the Hijab since we have a uniform.

---- Participant No.19

When my mum and I walk the streets wearing the Hijab, we are always treated like people from the Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region, because in their judgment, the people in Sichuan province should not dress like this.

---- Participant No.23

There is an unbelievable opinion in the Muslim communities in the Northwest of China, that the women who wear the Hijab are married. So, when an unmarried girl wears the Hijab, she is under considerable pressure. Sudai (a girl's name) told me that her relatives and friends often tell her that no one will marry her if she insists on wearing the Hijab.

---- Participant No.3

Unfortunately, one of them took off the Hijab due to her job.

---- Participant No.8

Secondly, Chinese Muslim women face many difficulties in the area of their right to religious education. Some women got support for their religious education from their families, but could not get support from the local communities. However, some women fight for their right to religious education from their unsupportive family members. Some women freely attend the religious education programmes provided by the local mosque, while some women fight for their right to religious education from their unsupportive local communities. In the western part of China, the women cannot own the women mosques, just like the Muslim women in Henan province, who are not even allowed to go to the mosque. Instead, the women self-organized Quran teaching classes in their private homes, and this was also criticized by the male-dominant Muslim community.

What a pity for the women in Minhe county. Many women in the countryside do not know how to make ablution, they even cannot declare the Shahada. However, when we successfully organized the women religious knowledge class, they criticized us as captivating uneducated housewives.

---- Participant No.17

Thirdly, the Chinese Muslim women face many problems concerning their family relations. Some women get full support from their family members for their religious practices such as praying, fasting and so on. Other women encounter many troubles in the course of their religious practices, due to their non-practicing Muslim husband or non-Muslim family member. Such women write about their sorrows when they are faced with drunken husbands almost every day during the fast. A convert Han Muslim girl wrote about her complicated emotions when her parents prepare food for her fast but are against her conversion to Islam.

The alarm clock (for fasting) struck at 3:20. My husband just stepped inside the house. He just came back, drunken, at 3:30 am. I woke up for fasting, but my husband just came back, drunken, sitting beside the table, smoking.

---- Participant No. 14

I go to the kitchen. I suddenly see the vegetable and fruits on the table, with tears in my eyes. It was prepared by my family member (non-Muslim) last night. The balance and difference of this "one family, two systems, respect each other" inspired many sparkles and moved me to tears, even while laughing. On the one hand, they are against my choice. On the other hand, they silently support me over my religious practice. Faced with such contradictory love and worry, I can only be more careful and patient, pray for them, and wish that Allah grant them mercy and guidance.

---- Participant No. 33

Fourthly, the Chinese Muslim women face domestic violence from their unreasonable, non-practicing Muslim husbands and pious, practicing Muslim husbands too. A woman wrote about her several miserable experiences with her drunken husband during Ramadan. She said; "He slapped me on my face" and "He beat me harder and harder" due to some family trouble (Participant No. 14). Another writer wrote about an aunt whose leg was broken by her husband, only because she actively supported the female Quran teaching class, but unfortunately this female Quran teaching class was not supported by the local male-dominated Muslim community (Participant No.3).

I felt aggrieved when my husband talked like that, so I contradicted him. Then he threw the cigarette

end to me, came at me and slapped me on my face.

---- Participant No. 14

Someone found her husband making some irresponsible remarks. Her husband was shamed into anger, beat her, and broke her leg.

---- Participant No.3

The diversity phenomenon on the same issue of Chinese Muslim women highlights the diaspora identity theory. The Chinese Muslim Hui are distributed all over China, and due to the large territory of China, the different places have different local dialects, customs and culture. This makes the unity of the Chinese Muslim Hui very difficult. However, the development of the Internet gave the Chinese Muslim Hui a chance to unite, even though they exhibit ample diversity.

These Chinese Muslim women positively presented their off-line Muslim identity in Ramadan Diary BBS from three aspects: religious knowledge, religious practice and social relation, irrespective of their ages, their occupations, and their locations. They highlighted their Muslim identity in this online community. In other words, this Ramadan Diary BBS allowed them to highlight their Muslim identity freely. The Ramadan Diary online community explored ways through which participants appreciated their own identities and had their voices heard, in a bid to begin to create an improved sense of community. They promoted a sense of community within the membership of the participating groups, and further discussions of personal interests, issues of mutual interest and concern for local community issues.

Culture and communication are symbiotic, and given the shrinkage of traditional print media and the fast growth of the Internet-based new media, the new media has become more and more important in the maintenance of culture and cultural communication. The virtual community also empowers Chinese Muslim women and boosts their Muslim identity and free expression of their Muslim life. However, this self-empowerment is fragile, as the 2muslim.com website has been shut down due to unexplained political reasons.

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Notes

Note 1. All the Quran verses retrieved from <http://www.islamicstudies.info/tafheem.php?sura=17&verse=23>.

Note 2. This Hadith english translation retrieved from <https://www.sahih-bukhari.com/Pages/results.php> the writer did not mention the detail of the Hadith, such as narrator and volume, and the research got it by searching.

Note 3: On September 23, 2014, Yunnan Provincial Party Committee Office of the Communist Party of China issued a document to fire all foreign and non-local teachers and students in the Arabic language school and Islamic scripture school. It caused strong reactions amongst the Muslim community in Yunnan province and all over the China as well.

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