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I. Introduction

*E*ven before I participated in the Faculty Development International Seminar (FDIS) in the summer of 2006, I had been intrigued by the position of Chinese Muslims in the world, past and present. The first reason is the fact that Chinese Muslims may be seen as a community of double importance: China is a rising economic power and the Muslim world is in the political spotlight, given its strategic importance for countless historical and economic reasons. Secondly, one must note that there are twenty million Chinese Muslims today, a large number of people (although a small fraction of the 1.3 billion Chinese people and the 1.3 billion Muslim people worldwide). Most Chinese Muslims live in rural areas and maintain a traditional lifestyle, but some live in China's growing urban settings. Urban Chinese Muslims present an interesting case for students of religion as they struggle with their complex identity while taking great pride in it. In this article I reflect on my visit to China to study the Chinese-Muslim communities in Taipei, Nanjing, and Shanghai, the three cities visited by seminar participants. I focus on urban Chinese-Muslim identity and the prospects of Chinese Muslims as a distinct community within China and the Muslim world.

A word about the history of Islam in China is in order. Islam reached China in the 7th century CE, mostly through merchants who married into the local Chinese populations. The offspring of these marriages were the nucleus of a Chinese-Muslim community within the (Han)

Chinese majority. These Chinese Muslims are known as the Hui peo-
ple. The Hui have always been capable of assimilating easily into the
majority because they and the Han are not readily distinguishable
from each other (only in some parts of northwest China can the Hui be
distinguished from the majority Han people by facial and other physi-
cal features).

Islam reached its zenith in China during the Yuan dynasty (1271–
1368 CE). During the early days of the Ming dynasty, a Chinese-Mus-
lim navigator by the name of Zheng He (1371–1435 CE) brought fame
to the Chinese-Muslim community because his seven exploratory voy-
ages by sea reached as far as the eastern coast of Africa. Later, the so-
called Uighur people (also spelled Uyghur) and other people of Turkic
and Mongolian stock added to the Chinese-Muslim population, as
westward migration of Turkic tribes and eastward expansion of Chi-
nese territories turned people of Inner and Central Asia into members
of the Chinese world.

China today recognizes ten separate Muslim nationalities (among 56
Chinese nationalities), but more than 50% of Chinese Muslims belong
to the Hui people. The Hui are known to be good businessmen, and
many are also well known as national masters of the martial arts. As a
people, the Hui are also recognized as a national minority, a status that
grants them protection. A sign that they are acknowledged in China is
that the red banner of the People's Republic of China bears a large yel-
low star, representing the Han majority, and four smaller yellow stars,
one of which represents the Hui people while the other three represent
the Manchu, Mongol, and Tibetan peoples.

However, Chinese Muslims belong to a nation whose aspirations to
be a major economic and political player in the world is characterized
by nationalistic overtones, and nationalistic pride in China is almost
inseparable from the glorification of the Han people, China's historical
majority. Most anthropologists observing China agree that the majority
of China's Han people are occasionally puzzled by, and often suspi-
cious of, their Hui fellow countrymen. The same can be said about the
relationship between the Han and the rest of China's Muslim commu-
nity, consisting, as I said, of peoples of mostly Turko-Mongolian eth-
nicities, including the Uighur community (which accounts for almost
40% of Chinese Muslims) and other communities whose numbers are
usually estimated in the hundreds of thousands. Furthermore, Chinese
Muslims' affinity with the Muslim world is not without its limitations,

since the worldwide Muslim community's cultural and religious centers are quite distant from China's centers of culture.

At any rate, Chinese Muslims' position in the world deserves the attention of students of religion as well as students of the Chinese sphere, whether they are historians, political scientists, or sociologists and anthropologists. In the remainder of the article, I will propose that one need not overlook the similarities between urban Chinese Muslims and other urban Muslims, including Western Muslims who live in Europe and the United States. I will also suggest that the future of the Chinese-Muslim community is tied to the future of China itself, and whether they succeed in preserving their identity and continue to view themselves as both Chinese and Muslims depends first and foremost on their Chinese context.

II. Challenges Confronting Urban Chinese Muslims

Despite their unique position in the world, Chinese Muslims face challenges similar to those facing other Muslim communities worldwide. Not unlike other Muslim (and other religious) communities in the modern world, Chinese Muslims struggle with two major issues: 1) how to define the borders of their community and 2) how to define and read the history and traditions they consider their own.

A. Individual and Community

When it comes to identifying the borders of "personal" and "communal" identity, Chinese Muslims face the same challenge facing most modern Muslims. How does an individual in the Chinese-Muslim community balance his/her own needs and aspirations with those of the community as a collective entity? To make matters worse, the concept of the "Muslim community" itself is rather vague. The Chinese Muslims I met kept referring to the importance in their lives of the worldwide Muslim community, but they ended up being more concrete when they talked about the small community of Chinese Muslims they actually meet on a regular basis. For urban Chinese Muslims, their immediate Chinese-Muslim community provides a yardstick that gauges their commitment to their Muslim community. If these individuals accept being part of their small community, they begin the hard work of balancing the needs of this community with their own needs and aspirations. If they break away from their community, they

have a different set of challenges if they continue to relate to their Muslim identity. Some Chinese Muslims complain about their "brothers and sisters," who do not show up in the mosques or in community meetings. Others defend those who are often absent: "Success in life requires a lot of work, and work takes a lot of time," they say.

In the metropolitan Chinese world, religious freedom comes as part of a package that also includes the freedom of the individual to leave his/her community. With urbanization and opportunity, many Chinese Muslims are left with a choice between a commitment to their personal success and a commitment to their community. Speaking about Chinese Muslims in Taipei, an *imam* (religious leader) says: "Taiwan is an island with 23 million inhabitants. The number of Muslims in Taiwan is anywhere between 40,000 and 60,000. Muslims enjoy a lot of freedom here, actually too much freedom! The political authorities do not suppress religious communities, and that benefits the members of the Muslim community, but economic and social freedom turns people away from the community." A Shanghai *imam* thinks this applies to his city, too: "It is difficult to be a Muslim in Shanghai; everybody wants to do business and most people tend to focus on material success." This may undermine traditional Muslim life over time, the *imam* believes, and as our conversation was ending, he emphasized that, "it is the role of religious leaders to continue to teach about Islam and Islamic values, and especially to educate the new generation of Chinese Muslims."

Shanghai is a metropolis with a large population of young newcomers who arrive to pursue their education and plan to work in Shanghai after finishing their studies. My informants reminded me that Shanghai as it stands today is a very "new" city: "There are very few people here in Shanghai whose grandparents are from Shanghai." In Shanghai I also met Chinese-Muslim students who were visiting their friends in the city. One of these students is studying in Malaysia and plans to come back to Shanghai to work after he finishes his degree. He hopes to "have a job and be an activist and work to strengthen the Chinese Muslim community in Shanghai and other large Chinese cities."

Many Shanghai graduate students had a broader range of interests compared with their fellow Chinese Muslims of older generations. These students were eager to discuss topics ranging from Edward Said's *Orientalism* to Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* to the work of Iris Chang, the Chinese-American activist and writer who wanted to draw the world's attention to the Japanese killing of 300,000 Chinese people

in what is known as the 1937 Nanjing Massacre and who committed suicide at the end of 2004.

Compared to Taipei and Shanghai, Nanjing is a city with a strong sense of the past. In Nanjing one can find remnants of traditional Chinese-Muslim communities that emphasize "communal" over "personal" identity. But as Nanjing moves in the direction of urbanization, fears of "imbalance" among Chinese Muslims are expressed. In Nanjing Chinese Muslims spoke about urbanization as a threat to Chinese-Muslim communities. One *imam* spoke about the history of Muslims in Nanjing and some of the recent changes affecting the Muslim community there: "The shared history of Chinese Muslims is what brings them together, and the community will hold together in the future as long as they remember that history. The Chinese-Muslim community here is quite stable, but urbanization and migration to the cities might change the demographics quite rapidly." I spoke through an interpreter to some of the older generation of Chinese Muslims in Nanjing, since most of them spoke neither Arabic nor English. They echoed what their *imam* said about the changes that may affect Nanjing Muslims: "More and more people move to the city, and the government moves the city to us (!), and all this makes our traditional life more difficult." These older lay interviewees have centered their lives on their community and worked in pre-industrial professions, mostly in agriculture and simple trading.

Hui Muslims disagree as to how they should deal with the challenges facing their collective identity as a distinct nation within the Chinese world. A Shanghai Muslim student says that the Hui people have historically preserved their identity by creating physical communities around the mosques, and they should now consider creating "cyber communities" to replace the physical communities of the past yet serve the same function. Another student disagrees. She believes that so-called cyber communities have become fertile ground for sectarian quarrels among Chinese Muslims, dividing them into Sunnis, Shi'is, Sufis, and rationalists. On occasion, they serve to create superficial acquaintances among students. In some cases they even serve as a matchmaking instrument to help young men and women in the Muslim community get to know each other and marry.

B. History and Religious Tradition

There are two basic questions a community has to answer with regard to its sense of history and the tradition it considers its own. First is the question of what counts as relevant history, and second is how this history is interpreted.

Many Chinese Muslims today have a strong sense of the importance of the history of Islam in China as an integral part of their identity. In Nanjing, where I visited the 15th-century Jingjue Mosque, I was reminded of the importance of Zheng He as an arch-father of Chinese Muslims. I was also told about Chinese Muslim scholars who are seen as polyglots, polymaths, and masters of the wisdom of China and of Islam. As an Egyptian guest, I was allowed into a special room with information about Chinese-Muslim scholars and notables, which also contained some of their relics, books, and paintings.

Chinese-Muslim religious leaders bring another layer of history to the lives of Chinese Muslims. These *imams* have studied Arabic, sometimes in Muslim institutions inside China, and sometimes in Arabic-speaking countries. Through speeches by these *imams*, the history of Islam in the Middle East forces itself into the consciousness of Chinese Muslims.

Pre-Islamic Chinese history also occupies a place in Chinese-Muslims' consciousness. An interesting discussion with some Chinese-Muslim students invited the question of whether the teachings of Kung Tzu (or Confucius, 551–470 B.C.) were compatible with the teachings of Islam. Some of these students assert that Confucianism and Islam are quite compatible. The notion of *tao* (the Way) of which Confucius spoke is equivalent to the notion of "truth" in the Islamic teachings, these students contend. Also, Confucius spoke of *te* (virtue) as an endowed or given character or set of qualities, which parallels the divinely endowed good character of which Sufi (mystic) Muslims spoke.

If these elements of what counts as relevant history distinguish Chinese Muslims, so do their interpretations of the Islamic history that is common to them and to non-Chinese Muslims. Take the fact that some Chinese-Muslim communities allow women to lead the daily prayer, while most Middle Eastern Muslim communities will not allow that. Those who do not think it acceptable for Muslim women to lead the prayer (a majority in the Muslim world) will accuse Chinese Muslims of either ignorance or laxity and lack of religious commitment. In the

language of a Middle Eastern-Muslim visiting China: "Maybe they should go to a Muslim country to study Islam." For that observer, it is clear that Chinese Muslims do not understand their Islamic tradition as well as they should. Some non-Chinese Muslims I met suggested that Chinese Muslims are "eclectic" about following Islam. These observers noted that some female Chinese Muslims will not shake hands with males but do not wear a headscarf. In the Muslim country from which these observers come, it makes more sense for a woman to wear a headscarf while taking the license of shaking hands with men. To them, if a woman will abandon wearing a headscarf, she may as well shake hands with men. "Eclectic" following of traditional values may be inevitable, and the choices that different communities make will also be inevitably different. Yet to say that one will "pick and choose" from their tradition is a question of "interpreting" this tradition.

III. Looking Ahead

If history is any indication of what the future holds for Chinese Muslims, then one can expect a mixed picture of concord and conflict between Chinese Muslims and the rest of the Chinese nation. Chinese Muslims are aware of the differences that separate them from the rest of the Chinese people, but the Hui people in particular have an opportunity to be part of China's national project of growth and development and its attempt to achieve economic and political prominence in the world. As all privileges come at a price, being included in the Chinese project of the twenty-first century will require a measure of compromise on the part of Chinese Muslims.

The Hui are envied by many Chinese people because they are exempt from China's one-child policy. Yet the Hui do not feel so privileged. Many Shanghai Hui people are afraid of assimilation and have a strong sense of alienation. They also occasionally complain about discrimination at school and in the work place, e.g., when they refrain from drinking wine, because that is seen as a refusal to socialize. I invited two of the students I met in Shanghai to dinner with Macalester faculty, and these students were surprised that it was socially acceptable for some faculty members to choose not to drink alcohol. One of the students said, "So, you actually have the freedom to either drink or not drink? In China's business culture, you pretty much have the freedom to drink only!"

The question of the degree to which compromise may be required from Chinese Muslims invokes analogies with European and American Muslims. Euro-Muslims and American Muslims have struggled with their desire to assert their complex identity and reject accusations of disloyalty or dual loyalty. Western Muslims reject any essentialist judgment of their status in the world as inherently problematic. Chinese Muslims face a similar dilemma, despite the differences in the details. Chinese Muslims are not part of the colonial past that shapes Middle Eastern and Western relations. The history with which Chinese Muslims need to come to terms is mostly their own history as a nation (Huizhou or the Hui nation) within the Chinese nation. It is precisely in this history that one finds the roots of the hopes and fears of today's Chinese Muslims.

It is clear that Chinese Muslims are "Chinese" as much as they are "Muslims." They have been affected by China's communist past. Even young Chinese Muslims told me stories about how they used to belong to the Communist Party and had to make a choice recently whether to be "communist" or "Muslim." Furthermore, Chinese Muslims today are a good example of the state of transition that China is undergoing. They hope to see the future resolve some of their dilemmas and help them continue to be part of China as well as part of the multinational Muslim community.

This hope, however, may not be shared by all Muslims, especially those temporarily living in China. A Middle Eastern-Muslim woman, who speaks Chinese fluently and is married to a Chinese Muslim, told me that she likes the seriousness of Chinese business culture but thinks that Islam is probably a dying religion in China in the long run. She hopes to live in China for a few years and then take her husband to her country, where they can raise children. "Raising Muslim children here would be a difficult task," she says. But hope overcomes fear in the language of some Chinese-Muslim graduate students in Shanghai. In the words of an articulate 25-year-old: "There is no point in lamenting the withering of traditional life. Most of us were born in villages in the northwest or the south of China, but village life is not the trend of the future. One has to answer the questions that are addressed to him and not the questions that were addressed to his parents!" Other young students nodded in agreement.

IV. Conclusion

The hopes and fears expressed by Chinese Muslims living in metropolitan areas tend to echo those expressed by many European and American Muslims. Metropolitan Chinese Muslims and Western Muslims share a sense of relief for their freedom from religious oppression, mixed with antipathy for assimilation. A Chinese-Muslim *imam* summarized his community's dilemma as that of "too much freedom." The desirable aspect of freedom, in his view, is the politico-religious guarantee that no political oppression would be directed against members of his religious community. The threatening part of freedom is that which allows an individual to break away from his/her community with minimal losses. If the *imam* is correct in believing that Chinese Muslims have "too much freedom," then one of the unintended consequences of China's ascension in the world economy might be the decline of the Chinese-Muslim community in the not-too-distant future. But if the new generation of Chinese Muslims can forge a new path for themselves as they try to balance their modernity with their religious identity, the Chinese-Muslim community may provide a model to be emulated by modern Muslims worldwide. ◉

Further Reading

Zvi Ben-Dor's *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2005) deals with the thought and historical context of 17th- and 18th-century scholars, who forged an Islamic-Confucian school, as well as the emergence of the Chinese-Islamic literature known as the *Han Kitab*.

Maris Boyd Gillette's *Between Mecca and Beijing: Modernization and Consumption among Urban Chinese Muslims* (Stanford University Press, 2001) exposes the complexity of Hui identity and tensions between the Hui and their society.