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# Islamic Education in China: Rebuilding Communities and Expanding Local and International Networks

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**Abstract:** Over the last twenty years a wide range of Islamic educational opportunities have been developed to meet the needs of China's 20 million plus Muslim population. In addition to mosque schools, government Islamic colleges, and independent Islamic colleges, a growing number of students have gone overseas to continue their studies at international Islamic universities in Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, and Malaysia. **Keywords:** *Islamic education, China.*

## Preface

At a time of rapid economic development and growing social unrest, and as income disparities escalate and government social welfare benefits disappear, increasing numbers of Chinese are seeking an ideology or faith that can help them through unsettling times. While some look to new belief systems which offer alternatives to the state-sponsored ideologies (which have been mostly discredited over the past two decades), others are returning to a faith that has survived for over 1,300 years in China, through periods of isolation, state persecution and state support: Islam. The ability of Islam to not only survive, but thrive, within a cultural civilization renowned for its ability to absorb and transform other peoples and cultures it has encountered, is one of the most intriguing chapters in both Islamic and Chinese histories, and yet one that still largely remains overlooked by both fields of study.

Over the past twenty years, throughout all of China (except for Xinjiang<sup>1</sup>), mosques have organized classes in Arabic and Islamic studies for all members of their community, from three-year olds in pre-school programs, to eighty-year old retirees determined to study the Qur'an and learn about their faith in their twilight years. In addition to government-run Islamic colleges, communities have also established independent schools.<sup>2</sup> According to government estimates there are now 35,000 mosques in China, 45,000 Muslim teachers, and 24,000 students studying in Islamic schools.<sup>3</sup> More recently, increasing numbers of Chinese Muslim students have chosen to go abroad to continue their Islamic studies. At present the most popular destinations are Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Iran, Pakistan, and Malaysia, but there are also students who have traveled to Turkey, Sudan, Libya, and Kuwait.<sup>4</sup> As more and more students complete their studies in China, and those studying overseas return, there are ever more qualified teachers available to establish schools in areas where Islam has not been taught for decades, if not generations.



Based on dozens of interviews carried out between 2005 and 2006, with Chinese Muslim students and leaders throughout China, as well as those studying in Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Pakistan, this article argues that the revival of Islamic education has not resulted in the widespread radicalization of Muslims in China. Instead, the revival of Islamic education has offered Muslims the opportunity to rebuild their faith and their religious institutions in the aftermath of the state-sponsored attacks on Islam during the Cultural Revolution (1966 - 1976). It has also allowed Muslims throughout China, even in the most remote villages, to gain access to information about issues facing not only Muslims in nearby villages, but also those in distant regions of China, as well as the world.

This article focuses on four main characteristics of the revival of Islamic education in China: the role of the state in supporting government Islamic education; the rebuilding of mosques and their role as centers of community religious activity; the active role of women in promoting Islamic education; and the potential impact of increasing numbers of Chinese Muslim students seeking to continue their Islamic education at international centers of Islamic learning overseas.

## Background

China's Muslim population is conservatively estimated at 20 million, and although there are Muslims living in every region of China, the highest concentrations are found in the northwest provinces of Xinjiang, Gansu, and Ningxia, with significant populations also found throughout Yunnan province in southwest China and Henan Province in central China. Of China's 55 officially recognized minority peoples, ten are predominately Muslim.<sup>5</sup> The Hui and Uighur are the largest groups, followed by the Kazak, Dongxiang, Kirghiz, Salar, Tajik, Uzbek, Bonan, and Tatar. Except for the Hui, these other groups are based in northwest China, and most have their own Turkic-related language, and unique culture.

The Hui are the largest and most geographically dispersed group of Muslims in China. They are also the most linguistically and culturally assimilated with the mainstream of their respective areas. So although the majority live near or amongst Han Chinese, speak Chinese as their mother tongue and have adopted many Han cultural practices, there are those who live among other minority peoples such as the Tibetans, Dai, and Bai, and speak those languages as their mother language and have adopted many of their cultural customs. Regardless of where they live now in China, most Hui originally descended from Western and Central Asia Muslims who began migrating to China in the early years of the Tang dynasty (618 - 907). In fact, there were Muslims in China from the earliest days of Islam, as Arabs and Persian traders had been traveling back and forth to China for centuries before the advent of Islam. One of the most famous hadith (sayings) of the Prophet Muhammad, "Seek knowledge, even unto China" (utlub al 'ilm was law fi al-Sin) is said to reflect both the importance of pursuing an education at all costs, and also the early Muslims' understanding of the importance of China, despite its distance.

It was not until the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1274 - 1368), however, that large numbers of Muslims settled in China. The Mongols recruited and forcibly relocated hundreds of thousands of Muslims from



Western and Central Asia to help them administer their rapidly expanding empire. In addition to craftsmen, artists, architects, engineers, medical doctors and astronomers, the Mongols also brought administrators and officials who were posted to government positions throughout China. These men married local women, and were able to pass on their faith and religious practice for generation upon generation, over the centuries. The Mongol Yuan dynasty was then followed by the Ming dynasty (1368 - 1644), when once again Han Chinese ruled China. Although all the foreigners who had settled in China during the Yuan dynasty were allowed to remain, lingering resentment over the influence of “barbarians” resulted in a series of laws requiring all residents to adopt certain traditional Chinese cultural practices, including wearing Chinese clothes, speaking Chinese, and adopting Chinese names.<sup>6</sup> By the Qing dynasty (1644 - 1911), Muslims were so assimilated, that like local Chinese throughout the country, many rose up in revolt against local government malfeasance.<sup>7</sup>

The collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911 saw a renewed interest on the part of Muslim communities in different regions of China to build both secular and religious schools.<sup>8</sup> These efforts lasted until the chaos brought on by the Civil War, and the Sino-Japanese war. During this period of unrest, the Communist Party appealed to the Chinese Muslims in the northwest for assistance. In return they were promised guarantees of religious freedom and a certain degree of autonomy. However, these promises did not last long, as several Muslim leaders and intellectuals were caught up in the Anti-rightist campaign, one of the first major political campaigns of post-liberation China.

During the Cultural Revolution the situation for the Muslims grew significantly worse, and all forms of religious practice were outlawed, including communal prayer, religious instruction, and religious festivals. Even traditional expressions such as the standard Muslim greeting *as-salam alaikum* (peace be upon you), or *alhamdulillah* (thanks be to God) were banned. As was the case with other religious leaders during this period, Muslim leaders were persecuted, jailed, and even killed. Although the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, it was not until the early 1980s that most Muslim communities in China were allowed to regain control of their mosques. Except for the mosque in Beijing, which continued to be used by the diplomats from Muslim countries for weekly prayer, all other mosques in China were taken over by local officials and most put to other uses. A common practice was to select a use most likely to offend Islamic sensibilities and defile sacred space, for example to use the courtyard to raise and slaughter pigs.

In the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, as mosques were repaired and rebuilt, they slowly regained their role as centers of Muslim communities. In addition, as a response to the chaos and targeted attacks they had just survived, Muslim communities throughout the country immediately set about organizing informal classes on Islam.

### **State-sponsored Islamic Education**

The state was also well aware of the impact of their systematic efforts to undermine religion, and in the case of Islam, sought to redress some of the damage by establishing Islamic colleges throughout the



country to offer formal training for imams (known as *ahong* in Chinese, from the Persian *akhund*). In all, some ten colleges were established in different cities in China to serve the needs of distinct regions.<sup>9</sup> In the early years these colleges were fully funded by the state and provided students with modest stipends. In addition to offering four-year programs that included instruction in Arabic, Qur'an, Hadith, Islamic law, Chinese language, and Chinese history, these colleges also offer three-month intensive "refresher" courses for imams. By acting quickly to establish comprehensive Islamic studies colleges, the government was able to both begin to rebuild that which they had helped destroy, but they also were able to have a strong influence in how Islam, or at least the study of Islam, was reconstituted in China. Although most Muslims appreciated these efforts, and continue to do so even to this day, there are others who worry that these schools are not sufficiently independent. The government strictly controls which teachers are hired to teach, which students are selected, and the content of the courses taught. Despite these reservations, many of the most respected older scholars of Islam have accepted teaching positions in these schools, and many of the most outstanding young students have chosen to study there. Four years after they were established, it was the graduates of these schools who were the first Chinese Muslims in over fifty years to go overseas to continue their Islamic studies.

In recent years, many of the students who have completed their studies abroad and returned to China have taken up positions as teachers (of course after being vetted by state authorities) in these colleges. Furthermore, although these schools, like all public schools in China, are now fee-paying, the tuition is relatively low, and for many poorer Muslim families, especially in rural areas, these schools offer an important alternative to more expensive standard schools. Many of these schools now also offer classes in English and computer studies.

### Private Islamic Colleges

Perhaps as a consequence of the lingering reservations about the government-run Islamic colleges, beginning in the late 1980s different communities began to establish independent Islamic colleges. One of the earliest, and most respected of these schools was set up in a village outside Dali, in western Yunnan province. This school was the brainchild of several retired Hui schoolteachers. Opened in 1991, its very first class included students from every region of China; from Xinjiang in the northwest to Hainan Island, off China's southeast coast. Indeed, that this small school in a relatively remote part of China was able to attract students from such a wide-range of places so quickly speaks to the complex networks of communication linking Muslim communities throughout China. Many of these schools also have their own websites.

Although there was a government-run Islamic college in the provincial capital Kunming, these teachers had been able to convince authorities of an additional need for Islamic studies schools. The courses offered included Arabic, Chinese, and the traditional Islamic Studies courses; with English and computer classes added later. The first group of students included many outstanding students, who upon graduation continued their studies overseas, or became teachers at the school. Most, however, were sent



to teach in villages needing teachers. In order to place the teachers, the head of the school would travel to different villages to find out which were in need of teachers and what local conditions were like. He would then match students who were about to graduate with specific communities. Before graduation they would be sent off for a one-month trial teaching assignment to see if they would be suitable for a two-year assignment.

The efforts the head of the school made to locate appropriate teaching assignments for his students appeared to have been quite successful. While some returned to their home villages and towns, many were assigned positions quite far away. In one particular village, two days travel from the school, I met two young women who were teaching at a large mosque-based school. One had just finished her studies at the Dali independent Islamic college, and the other was just completing her first two-year teaching assignment. Although they were living far from home, they were extremely enthusiastic about their teaching and looking forward to new challenges. The teacher trainee was just finishing up her one-month practicum, had settled in quite well and was looking forward to starting her two-year teaching assignment there in the fall. The teacher who had just finished her two-year assignment also spoke enthusiastically about her experience in the village, but felt strongly that it was time for her to return to her home village, which she knew desperately needed a teacher. I later traveled to her home village and found that it was indeed one of the poorest I had ever seen. Its mosque was in a state of disrepair, with Cultural Revolution slogans still visible on the walls, and little evidence of any active community religious activities. Two years teaching in a community with a strong commitment to reviving religious knowledge and practice was no doubt exactly the kind of training she needed before returning home.

There are dozens of these independent Islamic colleges throughout China, mostly established in the 1990s, and according to several informants, the government has not recently allowed any new ones to be established. Some are co-educational, some for men only, and some for women only. They play a crucial role in the development of local Muslim societies as they are independent, supported by local communities, and developed with the needs of the community in mind. Some have argued that more so than the government-run Islamic colleges, and even the famous foreign Islamic colleges, these schools offer the best training for teachers and imams. For in addition to receiving advanced training in Islamic studies, students also learn about the Muslim communities in which they live, their unique histories, customs, and values.

Another important role played by these schools is attracting students from distant regions of China. Both a school in Inner Mongolia and in Henan may equally attract a diverse student body from Xinjiang, Shanghai, Guizhou, and Tibet. These students bring to their school their own life experiences as well as the experiences of their communities back home, so that during their studies, not only do they learn a tremendous amount about the communities in which they live, they bring that knowledge back to their home village upon completing their studies. In addition, I have met many teachers from different regions of China who met and married while in school. These relationships serve to further develop ties between Muslim communities scattered across China.



## Mosque-based Education

Mosque based education, known as *jingtang jiaoyu* (education in the hall of the classics) is the most common form of Islamic education, and is found throughout all regions of China (except for Xinjiang), in both large cities and small villages. Classes are offered for children of all ages, adults, and the elderly. However, for school-age children, classes are only offered during times when regular school is not in session, for example in the early morning, late afternoon, or during summer vacation. The government maintains strict control over the curriculum in state schools and seeks to maintain uniform content. Thus, although schools in areas with predominantly minority populations might have some classes in their native language during the first few years of school, they are not allowed to offer classes that cover their own history and culture.

These mosque-based schools are extraordinary in their range of size, condition, and quality of instruction. Some are brand-new multi-storied classroom buildings equipped with computer labs, while others might consist of one small blackboard attached to the outside wall of a slowly crumbling mosque. The size and quality of the classrooms is mostly a reflection of the economic status of the village or community, as well as their commitment to Islam. The quality of instruction also depends on the communities' ability to attract good teachers. I have met teachers who have studied overseas, speak three languages fluently, and have extensive knowledge of Islam. However, in some extremely poor and remote villages, I have met others who seemed barely literate in Chinese, and appeared to have only a rudimentary understanding of Islam. Nevertheless, as increasing numbers of young people complete their Islamic studies, one can find qualified teachers in the most remote and poor regions. In some cases a teacher would have returned to their home village upon graduation, whereas in others there are graduates who volunteered to be sent wherever they were most needed.

The students also represent a wide range of ages and backgrounds. Morning classes are usually held for the retired and elderly. In the late afternoon and evening, classes are offered for those who work full-time. In cities, on the weekends there might be classes for university students who take time away from their regular studies to learn Arabic and study Islam. Many mosque schools also offer pre-school programs for 3 - 6 year olds. These pre-schools are especially important in larger cities where once the children are enrolled in elementary school, they may find themselves one of only a handful of Muslims in their school.

The impact of these schools on community life was made clear to me one afternoon as I visited a small village in Yunnan province. It appeared as quiet and ordinary as most Chinese villages on a late summer afternoon. Gradually as the sun began to set, dozens of children appeared in the mosque courtyard, and soon there were hundreds of children there, many having walked in from neighboring villages. The children were lively and high-spirited, and while most of the boys played outside until it was time for classes to begin, many of the students had gone up to their classrooms early to review for their classes and socialize with their friends. For Muslim communities who have lived through difficult and sometimes devastating times, it must mean a great deal to them to see their latest generation



embrace the study of their faith so enthusiastically. The classroom building in this particular village was especially impressive as well. Five stories high and towering over the village buildings, it had been built by funds raised by several neighboring villages, and served the entire community.

Of course I also heard stories from teachers of sullen teenage boys who had been sent off to study in Islamic schools by their parents in the hope that they would be kept busy for a few years, and steered away from the temptations created by lack of jobs and too much time on their hands. Many parents also seemed hopeful that Islamic studies training would provide a sufficient moral grounding for their sons to help guide them through the rest of their life.

### **Studying overseas**

Beginning in the early 1990s, Chinese Muslim students were allowed to continue their studies overseas. The first group of students went to Egypt, Syria, and Pakistan. Shortly thereafter the Saudi government instituted a scholarship program that required students to first pass an Arabic exam before being eligible. A few years later, Iran also began a scholarship program, and there are now students also studying in Malaysia and Turkey. Overall the students who I interviewed who were most positive about their studies overseas were those who studied in Syria. They praised the quality of education they received, the generosity and friendliness of the Syrian people, and the relatively low cost of living. Since I first began interviewing students there in 1999, several have decided to settle down there, at least for a few years, and a few have even married Syrians.

The students studying in Saudi Arabia enjoyed the most comprehensive scholarships. In addition to all education costs being covered and yearly plane tickets home for summer vacation provided they pass all their end of the year exams, they also received a generous monthly stipend to cover living expenses. Although several students who had not studied in Saudi Arabia told me they would never consider doing so, and several of those who studied there complained about adapting to life in the kingdom, most students who had been there spoke highly of the education they had received. Despite Saudi's reputation for promoting the most conservative and intolerant form of Islam (also known as Wahabi or Salafi Islam), most of the students and graduates with whom I spoke do not seem to have adopted such a world view. According to one graduate of Madina University, of all international Islamic universities it was the "best place to study religion," for in addition to covering the four schools of law (see below), they also "read a wide variety of sources with the understanding that reading different interpretations of Islam would not interfere with their own faith." In addition to learning about some of the major differences between Sunni and Shi'a Islam, he also enjoyed learning about some of the great Muslim intellectual reformers of the early 20th century.

However, there are graduates from the universities in Saudi Arabia who bring back with them a certain degree of intolerance regarding some of the local practices of Islam within China. As Islam evolved in China over the centuries, although the essential beliefs remained the same as in the rest of the Islamic world, slight variations did arise. For example, until recently most mosques in China were built





in a style very similar to traditional Buddhist temples. Some students who have returned have led movements within communities to replace these “foreign style” mosques with more “authentic” Middle Eastern style mosques. As a result, dozens if not hundreds of mosques dating back centuries have been torn down and replaced with mosques deemed more “authentic”. There are also slight differences in prayer times. Normally prayer times vary from day to day by one or two minutes depending on the rising and setting of the sun. However, in many areas of China the prayer times are set year-round and do not change day to day. Although these differences are minor, they have recently created rifts within communities. There are now several villages in Yunnan (and most likely other areas of China with significant numbers of Saudi graduates), mosques offer two different times for each of the five daily prayers. Although most people believe that these differences will work themselves out, there is some concern within the Muslim community that these differences will grow overtime. In one case, a returned student was extremely critical of local practices and went so far as to establish a new mosque.

However, a student who had graduated from another Islamic university overseas used the famous Chinese saying about “a frog in a well” (*jingdi zhi wa*) to describe students he had met who had studied at Madina University in Saudi Arabia. The expression refers to people who are narrow-minded.

The students who studied in Iran were among the most satisfied, even though their studies and training proved to be more rigorous than that offered anywhere else. Not only do they have to study Persian, in addition to Arabic, they also have to study the Shi’a school of law, in addition to the four classic Sunni schools of law: Hanafi<sup>10</sup>, Hanbali, Maliki, and Shafi’i. Despite these additional burdens, all the graduates with whom I spoke were extremely positive about the comprehensive Islamic studies education they received and their experiences living in Iran.

Another popular destination for Chinese Muslim students is Pakistan. Although the U.S. has put a huge amount of pressure on the Pakistani government to close Islamic schools (madrassa), or at least forbid foreigners to study in them, many Chinese Muslim students have somehow managed to continue their studies there. In addition to speaking very highly of the quality of Islamic education provided there (Islamic universities are able to provide bachelor’s, master’s and even Ph.D.s in Islamic fields of study), the Chinese students also said it was one of the easiest countries to adapt to, the cost of living was very reasonable, and in the summer it was possible to travel back and forth overland which was extremely cost-efficient, allowing them to avoid expensive international flights. Although there are a handful of extremist religious schools in Pakistan, the majority provides mainstream Islamic studies programs, in addition to intensive short-term courses for imams.<sup>11</sup> None of the students I interviewed who had studied there expressed any extremist views.

Most students stay abroad for between five and eight years. Some go on for post-graduate degrees, while others choose to settle, at least temporarily, in the cities where they studied because they had such positive experiences while living there. These graduates supported themselves, and sometimes their families which had joined them from China, by working a variety of jobs. Everyone with whom I spoke planned to return to China eventually, but for some it was clearly in the distant future. I met one such



couple who opened a small restaurant in the outskirts of Cairo near the new Al Azhar University campus. It had proved especially popular among the Al Azhar students from Southeast Asia who lived nearby, as well as the Chinese students. In Damascus several students managed an internet café near the university campus which attracted a wide range of international students. The range of languages heard as students conversed with friends back home through internet telephone programs was quite extraordinary. I also met students who taught martial arts and ones who provided traditional Chinese medical treatments. However, most ended up working as interpreters in local company's that had business dealings with China. As communities of Chinese students become more established, students have not only encouraged their friends, siblings, and former classmates to join them in their overseas studies, but several have even convinced their parents.

There are also students who decide to study overseas for more practical reasons. As the Chinese government has abandoned its long-standing policy of fully funding college education, and passed the bulk of the expense onto students and their parents, some families have chosen to use the money they would have spent educating their child at home, to send them abroad. Islamic universities overseas are often a popular option as the expense is reasonable and it would be relatively easy to make contacts with other Chinese Muslims studying there, thus facilitating the process.

In conversations with Chinese Muslims who were studying, or had graduated from Islamic universities overseas, it became clear that these young people had learned a tremendous amount about the rest of the world and challenges faced by Muslims elsewhere. Those who return to China bring back an awareness of the world, and a strong foundation in Islamic studies. Although many hope to immediately take up positions as imams in their home towns and villages, it is often the case that the religious leaders of the community, although impressed with their foreign training, want to make sure the future imams have also acquired an understanding of their own communities and their needs. *“Educate a man, educate an individual; educate a woman, educate a nation.”*

Over the course of dozens of interviews with Chinese Muslim students and teachers, I was struck again and again by the extraordinarily active role played by women in all levels of the revival of Islamic education in China. Like the men, they attended public and private Islamic colleges in China, and also went overseas to study. But unlike the men, it seems that more women, immediately took up a teaching position upon completion of their studies. In addition, the women also made the effort to establish schools for girls, especially in the poorer Muslim regions of China. I often wondered if the women were not somehow more dedicated to the task of providing an education to all. In an interview with a woman teacher who had set up a small girls school in a village, I asked her why she was so determined to carry out this endeavor, even though it meant living a difficult life away from her home village. Her response was immediate, “educate a man, educate an individual; educate a woman educate a nation.” Sitting in a small village in a remote part of China, she listed the various ways in which a young girl's education could have a major impact on the health and social well-being of her future children and grandchildren



and the community at large. She seemed to know intuitively what it had taken the World Bank and several international NGOs years of research and millions of dollars to realize.<sup>12</sup>

Another important role played by female graduates of both government and independent Islamic colleges, is as imams. Closely tied to the phenomenon of women's mosques in China (most commonly found in the Central Plain provinces of Henan, Shandong, Anhui, Hebei, Shaanxi<sup>13</sup>) this tradition is unknown in most of the Islamic world. One prominent scholar of Islamic Law, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Professor of Law at UCLA School of Law has argued that the tradition of female imams in China is a remnant of a practice that existed in the earliest days of Islam but was gradually undermined by traditional Arab patriarchal values together with those of other cultures encountered as Islam spread.<sup>14</sup> According to research by French scholar Elisabeth Alles, the practice of women's mosques has recently spread to other regions of China as students who have studied in places where they are common return to their home communities.<sup>15</sup> In addition, female imams have also traveled to other regions of China to both further their studies and help establish new schools. According to Chinese press reports, there are now even women imams in Ningxia, which together with Gansu have the reputation of having the most conservative Muslims in China, especially when it comes to issues related to gender.<sup>16</sup>

Although the phenomenon of women's mosques and female imams may be unique to China, in fact it reflects a movement presently taking place throughout the Muslim world. No longer satisfied with traditional interpretations (and some argue misinterpretations) of the Qur'an provided by men, be they Islamic leaders, fathers, husbands and brothers, women are organizing Qur'anic studies classes in which they closely study the text of the Qur'an themselves under the guidance of female religious scholars.<sup>17</sup>

Chinese Muslims' commitment to educating girls has also allowed for an important alliance between religious leaders and government officials determined to stem the tide of rural households forgoing education for their daughters. Over the past ten years, government fiscal reforms have resulted in the burden of support for public education being passed from the central government to local governments. As a result, due to lack of funds, local governments have often introduced school fees that have multiplied over the years. These fees have now reached crippling proportions, and as a result, an increasing number of rural farmers are choosing to forgo educating their children, especially their daughters. In response, the All-China Women's Federation (ACWF) has begun a rural campaign to encourage the education of daughters. In Muslim regions, imams have worked together with this government group to remind peasants in rural areas of their religious obligation within Islam to educate all their children. ACWF officials have told me that these cooperative efforts have been very successful.

## Lasting Impacts

In addition to promoting religious knowledge, Islamic schools have also played important roles in strengthening networks between Muslim communities both within China and abroad, and also in promoting different degrees of religious identity. As one travels to different regions in China, one will encounter, even in the most remote and impoverished areas, Muslim villagers who are not only



informed about the situation of Muslims living in the region as well as other parts of China, but also the latest issues concerning Muslim communities throughout the world. These networks were originally based on the trade routes plied by Muslims throughout the country, as they have for centuries dominated the transport trade. Muslims traveling to study under different religious scholars has also been a constant source of flows of information. In addition, Muslim communities have established journals and newsletters, and most recently, websites. The range of this network of information has expanded dramatically recently with increasing numbers of students going overseas to further their Islamic studies.

One final indication of the growing awareness of multiple degrees and facets of religious identity is the recent trend among religious educated Muslims in China to distinguish between ethnic and religious identity. In the past if one wanted to ask if someone were Muslim, one would ask, “are you ‘Hui?’” Technically Hui refers to ethnicity only, but has been conflated with religious identity. Now, Chinese Muslims very self-consciously will distinguish between someone being “Hui” and someone being Muslim. For example, the response could now be, “yes, they’re Hui, and they are also Muslim,” or “they are Hui, but they are not Muslim.”

Although over the past few years the Chinese government has made it increasingly difficult for Chinese Muslim students to continue their studies overseas (primarily by refusing to issue a passport to anyone who stated the intention of wishing to study Islam while abroad), many continue to find ways. However, recently I interviewed several Islamic studies teachers who had studied overseas, and they argued that there is no longer such a great need to study overseas. They were confident that there were now Islamic colleges in China that were able to offer comparable levels of education and training. Others in the community, especially the elderly, continue to argue that imams who are locally trained have the benefit of having developed a more in-depth understanding of Muslim communities and their unique histories and cultures. But perhaps most importantly, this recent trend of promoting Islamic studies within China reflects a growing confidence within the Chinese Muslim community of the integrity and authenticity of Islam as it is practiced in China. In the past Chinese Muslims had to contend with conservative Arab Muslims (especially some from Saudi Arabia) who accused them of somehow being inauthentic Muslims for having been so influenced by Chinese culture. Chinese mosques, renowned for their beauty and their incorporation of traditional Chinese temple architectural styles were held up as examples of a corrupt form of Islam. This argument is of course ludicrous, as mosques throughout the world have always reflected indigenous culture and architectural traditions. Nevertheless, some Chinese Muslims were vulnerable to these accusations, going so far as to tear down traditional mosques and replace them with ones that can best be described as pseudo neo-Arab, and extraordinarily unaesthetic. Thankfully, more recently this practice appears to have stopped. In cases where traditional mosques had to be repaired or replaced, great efforts have been made to retain as much of the original architecture and decoration as possible.<sup>18</sup>

## Concluding Remark



It is important to mention one more factor that will continue to influence Chinese Muslims' decision to study overseas: rapidly expanding economic ties between China and the countries of the Middle East, especially the oil-producing countries of the Gulf. In January of 2006, Saudi Arabian King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz traveled to China to sign agreements related to oil, energy and trade. China is rapidly approaching U.S. levels of energy use and is seeking to establish long-term energy agreements with countries in the Middle East. Chinese trade with Saudi Arabia for the first 11 months of 2005 totaled more than \$14 billion, and is expected to continue to rise quickly. The recent hike in oil prices has accelerated the already extraordinary boom in construction in the region, and China has successfully won a series of contracts to build some of the largest projects in the region.<sup>19</sup>

Another major trading partner of China in the Gulf, is the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Trade between the two countries was estimated at \$10 billion in 2005. The UAE is also the site of the largest trade hub for Chinese goods outside of China. The complex, known as Dragon Mart is 1.2 km long and displays manufactured goods from hundred of Chinese companies. China also has extensive contacts with Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar and has recently assisted in the establishment of an Islamic bank in Bahrain that will invest in real estate in China following Islamic Shariah measures.

As these economic ties expand and diversify, knowledge of Arabic will be of increasing value either as an important incentive for students considering studying Arabic, or an option for those who have completed their Islamic studies, and also happen to be fluent in Arabic.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Despite its official designation as the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region (or XUAR) Xinjiang is the most tightly controlled and religiously suppressed region in China. The state has conflated the practice of Islam with separatist activity and instituted a range of measures prohibiting most forms of Islamic education and public religious practice. In the aftermath of 9-11 China was quick to jump on the "War on Terror" bandwagon, further justifying their repressive measures in Xinjiang. Thousands of Uighurs in Xinjiang have been thrown in jail and sentenced without public trial. There are many reasons given to justify China's harsh policies there, however, it should be noted that in addition to being the most natural resource rich region of China (with major sources of oil and natural gas), it is also a strategic border region which neighbors Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakstan, Mongolia and Russia. Furthermore it is the site of China's nuclear weapon development and testing site. Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have extensive reports on China's policies in Xinjiang. Last year Human Rights Watch issued a report that dealt specifically with the issue of religious freedom in Xinjiang. Titled "Devastating Blows: Religious Repression of Uighurs in Xinjiang," Volume 17, Number 2 (2005) it documents the extent to which the government has denied Uighurs the ability to openly practice their religion and systematically sought to undermine parents ability to pass on their faith to their children. In addition, for a brief summary of the situation that includes possible government policy solutions, see Dru Gladney, "Xinjiang: China's Future West Bank?" *Current History* (September 2002) pp. 267 - 270. Because the state so tightly controls all forms of religious activity in Xinjiang, including Islamic education, this article focuses on the situation in the rest of China.

<sup>2</sup> China has nine years compulsory education. Only a small number go on to finish the American equivalent of grades 10 - 12. The Islamic studies schools are for students who have completed the required nine years of public education, and are referred to as colleges in this article, even though the term is not exactly equivalent. According to government estimates, in



2000 there were approximately 23,000 students enrolled in these schools. "Young Chinese Muslims Enthusiastic about Learning Arabic," *People's Daily* (English edition) 30 March 2001.

<sup>3</sup> "Islam's Lasting Connection with China," *People's Daily* (English edition) 20 May 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Although there are no official records kept, it is estimated that there is a total of between 1,500 and 2,000 Chinese Muslims presently studying in Egypt, Syria, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Malaysia. Al Azhar in Cairo, has the largest number, with approximately 300 students. Most of the students are sponsored by their family and community, but many also receive a small stipend at whichever Islamic university they attend.

<sup>5</sup> According to the 2000 China national census, the Hui population of China is approximately 9.2 million and the Uighur population is 8.6 million. The other Muslim populations are: Kazak 1.3 million; Dongxiang 400,000; Kirghiz 171,000; Salar 90,000; Tajik 41,000; Uzbek 14,000; Baonan 13,000; and Tatar 5,000.

<sup>6</sup> Towards the end of the Ming dynasty, many Muslim families had become completely conversant in all aspects of elite Chinese culture. Many passed the grueling imperial examinations, while others joined the economic elite. By the beginning of the Qing dynasty a group of Muslim scholars who had been trained in both the Chinese Classics and Islamic studies, developed a body of knowledge that came to be known as the Han Kitab written in Chinese. These works used Neo-Confucian ideas and concepts to discuss fundamental Islamic principles. It was not an effort to define themselves for the Han Chinese, but rather a reflection of the degree to which they had adopted certain Confucian ways of thinking. As Tu Wei-ming explains, "They were so steeped in the ambiance of the Neo-Confucian world that they took it for granted that 'this culture of ours' provided the solid ground for them to flourish as Muslims." p. xi in Sachiko Murata's *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000). The Han Kitab is also the subject of a recent study by Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005). It was also during this time that the first Islamic studies schools were established.

<sup>7</sup> Two recent works on Muslim rebellions in China which make the effort to include as many perspectives as possible are David Atwill's *The Chinese Sultanate: Islam, Ethnicity and the Panthay Rebellion in Southwest China, 1856-1873* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), and Kim Ho-dong's, *Holy War in China: The Muslim Rebellion and State in Chinese Central Asia, 1864-1877* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004). In Yunnan, in response to the state's perceived mistreatment and corruption, Muslims led a multi-ethnic revolt against the local government officials, establishing a semi-independent state that lasted for almost twenty years. In his work, David Atwill documents the events leading up to the rebellion and the degree to which Muslims made repeated appeals to the state for justice before rising up. In Kim's work, he uses a wide range of sources to document the rebellion led by Ya'qub Beg in Xinjiang.

<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive overview of Islamic education efforts in China in this period, see Leila Cherif-Chebbi's, "Brothers and Comrades: Muslim Fundamentalists and Communists Allied for the Transmission of Islamic Knowledge in China," chapter in Stephane Dudoignon (ed.) *Devout Societies vs. Impious States? Transmitting Islamic Learning in Russia, Central Asia and China, through the Twentieth Century* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Schools were established in Beijing, Kunming, Xi'an, Shenyang, Xining, Lanzhou, Yinchuan, Urumqi, and Zhengzhou. The school in Kunming, for example, serves the Muslim population of Yunnan, Sichuan, and Guizhou provinces. The school in Beijing had originally be established in 1955, and was administered by the Islamic Association of China, which is part of the government's central Religious Affairs Bureau set up to oversee all religious activity in China.

<sup>10</sup> The vast majority of Muslims in China are Sunni Muslims and follow the Hanafi school of law.

<sup>11</sup> For an excellent overview and analysis of commonly held misunderstandings regarding the role of Islamic studies schools, see William Dalrymple's, "Inside the Madrasas," *New York Review of Books*, 52.19 (December 1, 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Summers, for example, has repeatedly reiterated the importance of educating girls to international development. He mentioned it most recently in January 2006, at the *World Economic Summit* in Davos, Switzerland where in an interview he stated, "The education of girls is the single most important investment that can be made in the developing world. Beyond the tangible economic benefits, it promotes smaller, healthier, and happier families." See Web site, <http://www.weforum.org/site/homepublic.nsf/Content/Interview+with+Lawrence+Summers,+President,+Harvard+University,+USA>.



<sup>13</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the role of women's mosques in China, see Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun, *The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam: A Mosque of their Own* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Professor Abou El Fadl also goes on to express the hope that, "perhaps from the margins of Islam the great tradition of women jurists might be rekindled." Lousia Lim, "Chinese Muslims Forge Isolated Path, BBC News, 15 September 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Elisabeth Alles, "Chinese Muslim Women: From Autonomy to Dependence," chapter in Stephane Dudoignon (ed.) *Devout Societies*.

<sup>16</sup> "First Generation of Female Imams Emerges in Western China," *Xinhua News Service*, 24 August 2003.

<sup>17</sup> This movement is extremely important and influential as it has allowed Muslim women around the world to distinguish between the God granted rights and obligations for both men and women as proscribed in the Qur'an, and those that are actually based on traditional local cultural practices that are not Islamic but are often claimed as such by men.

<sup>18</sup> John Irish, "The Manchurian Candidates," *MEED: Middle East Economic Digest*, vol. 48, issue 51 (17 December 2004).

<sup>19</sup> These contracts involve thousands of Chinese workers relocating to the Gulf region. Here in the United Arab Emirates thousands of Chinese have also been recruited to work in clerical and clerk positions.

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