

Empowerment and Faith: Unraveling the HUI Women's Mosques in China

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ABSTRACT

The Hui Muslims constitute the largest Muslim minority group in China. The Hui women's mosques in China is a very unique phenomenon within the broader Muslim world. Emerging within a specific historical context, the Hui women's mosques stand as a testament of the remarkable resilience of the Hui Muslims in preserving their Islamic faith and Muslim identity in a predominantly non-Muslim society heavily influenced by Confucian culture. The previous studies on Hui women's mosques left two crucial questions unanswered: Why did Hui women's mosque emerge exclusively in the eastern and central regions of China, and not in northwestern region where the concentration of Hui Muslims' population is higher? Why was this phenomenon limited to the Hui Muslim community and not observed among other Muslim ethnic groups in China? This study employs historical, analytical and contexture analysis approaches to accomplish three research objectives. Firstly, it aims to re-examine the historical background of the Hui Muslims and the emergence of Hui women's mosques during the Ming and Qing dynasties within this particular ethnic group. Secondly, the study seeks to address the aforementioned questions and reidentify the possible causes for the emergence of the Hui women's mosques in specific regions in China. Thirdly, the study intends to provide an Islamic perspective to illuminate the unique phenomenon of Hui women's mosques in China.

Key words: Hui Muslim, Hui women's mosque, China

INTRODUCTION

One of the most striking aspects of Islam in China is the long-standing tradition of China's Hui women's mosques that dates back to 16th century. Equally intriguing, China stands as the sole nation with a historical legacy of women's mosques that stretches across centuries. While there has been significant growth in the study of Islam and Muslims in China since Dru Gladney's pioneering anthropological study – Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic, published three decades ago, most of the previous studies concerned themselves primarily with questions of history, politics, the Hui's ethnic identity and cultural practices. Hui women's mosques, as an important aspect of Islam and Hui Muslim in China, remained overlooked by scholars from both China and the West until Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun conducted the first comprehensive study on this subject in 2002. Surprisingly, their research failed to generate substantial interest among other scholars for further investigation. As of the available resources, valuable and extensive research on Hui women's mosques can only be found in the studies conducted by Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun.¹

Among their studies on this particular subject, Zhongguo Qinzhen Nusi Shi [The History of Women's Mosques in China] which was published in 2002, is the groundbreaking and the most comprehensive study in this

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¹ Maria Jaschok & Shui Jingjun. Zhongguo Qinzhen Nusi Shi [The History of Women's Mosques in China]. Beijing: Sanliang Shudian, 2002. Shui Jingjun & Maria Jaschok. The culture of 'Associational Leadership' in the Hui Muslim women's mosques of central China. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, No. 42. 2014. p 641-656. Maria Jaschok. The sound of faith: Chinese women's mosques, Islamic resurgence and religious agency. *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience*, Vol. 7, No. 3. 2021. p 93-110.

field to date. In the book, the authors provide a wealth of information on the subject by focusing on a combination of issues, ranging from religious activities to questions of identity and gender. They thereby expose and narrate the fascinating story of establishment, development and growing functions of women's mosques in China.

While apparently influenced by Western feminism, the authors examine the history and evolution of Hui women's mosques through a gender-focused lens, emphasizing the distinct female religious culture. Consequently, Hui women's mosques are portrayed as the product of Hui women's efforts to achieve gender equality and establish an independent female religious culture, particularly in the eastern and central regions of China where these unique institutions exclusively emerged. However, such an interpretation leaves two crucial questions unanswered: Why did Hui women's mosques emerge exclusively in the eastern and central regions of China, and not in northwestern region where the concentration of Hui Muslims' population is higher? Why was this phenomenon limited to the Hui Muslim community and not observed among other Muslim ethnic groups in China?

Hence, there is a need to re-examine the history of Hui women's mosques and re-identify the cause of their emergence in specific regions in China. Moreover, as Hui women's mosques are by nature religious institutions, therefore, it is essential to approach this re-examination and re-identification process from a religious perspective rather than a gender perspective.

The objectives of this study are threefold. Firstly, it aims to re-examine the historical background of the Hui Muslims and the emergence of Hui women's mosques during the Ming and Qing dynasties within this particular ethnic group. Secondly, the study seeks to address the aforementioned questions and reidentify the possible causes for the emergence of the Hui women's mosques in specific regions in China. Lastly, the study intends to provide an Islamic perspective to illuminate the unique phenomenon of Hui women's mosques in China.

THE HUI MUSLIMS: WHO ARE THEY?

The Hui is the largest Muslim minority ethnic group in China. The total population of the Hui is over 11 million, accounts for more than 46% of total Muslim population and less than 0.1% of the total population of China according to the latest statistic².

The prevailing historical view regarding the origin of the Hui Muslims in China suggests that the Hui people are the descendants of ancient Arab and Persian Muslim merchants who came to China through both ancient the overland and maritime routes of Silk Road during the Tang-Song dynasties (618-1279 AD) as well as the war captives from Central Asia and Middle East transported to China by Mongol army in 13th century³.

During the Tang-Song era, Chinese government implemented many special policies to attract foreign merchants and promote international trading. Great number of foreign envoys and merchants from Arabia, Persian, Central Asia and other countries came to China and later settled down in Tang's capital Chang An (today Xi'an China) and other port cities. After many years of residing in China, many of these settlers, primarily Muslims, married with Chinese women and stayed in China permanently. They regarded themselves as *zhutang*,

² National Bureau of Statistics of China. The Population Of Nationalities. <http://www.stats.gov.cn/> Accessed August 5, 2023.

³ Bai Shouyi. *Zhongguo huijiao xiaoshi* [The Brief History of Islam in China]. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press, 2000. Yu Zhengui. *Zhongguo lidai zhengquan yu yisilanjiao* [China's Successive Governments and Islam]. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press, 2012.

(literally means residing in Tang), or “residents of Tang”⁴. However, the Tang and Song governments never considered them as their citizens. In official Tang and Song documents, the early Muslims were referred to as “*hushang*” (foreign businessman) or “*fanke*” (foreign guest), their children were referred to as “*tushen fanke*,” (local-born foreign guest)⁵.

The Tang and Song governments designated a specific area in the city called *fanfang* (foreign quarters) for these foreign guests to reside and conduct business. Despite not being granted Chinese citizenship, early Muslims in Tang-Song era enjoyed considerable freedom within their designated area *fanfang* (foreign quarters). They were able to freely practice their own religion, observe their customs, speak their own languages, and build mosques in *fanfang*⁶. Additionally, they were granted judicial authority to resolve disputes among themselves based on Islamic Shariah law⁷.

In 13th century Mongol army conquered vast lands in Central Asia and Middle East, tens of thousands of Muslim war captives were transported to China by Mongol army. They were then resettled to various parts of China, thus created a huge influx of Muslims to supplement the merchants who were already present in China. The government of Yuan dynasty established by the Mongols employed a vast number of foreigners especially the Muslims to help them to rule over the Han Chinese. Great number of Muslims served in Mongol's army and government. Some of the Muslim troops were enlisted in the Mongol forces such as the multi-ethnic Tannaqi Army (*tanmachi jun*), the elite forward unit, which served Yuan emperor Khubilai Khan in his campaigns to conquer China and undertook garrison duties in occupied territories⁸. The Records of the Yuan (*Yuanshi*) give many biographies of distinguished Muslims who were employed in the services of the Mongols⁹.

During the Yuan dynasty, the Muslims in China were already considered a distinct ethnic group. The Yuan government created a separate household category for the Muslims called *HuihuiHu* (Huihui household) among other household categories such as *MengguHu* (Mongol household), *HanrenHu* (Chinese household) etc.¹⁰. From the Yuan dynasty onwards, Chinese historical records referred to Muslims in China as *huihui* or *hui*¹¹.

In Yuan dynasty the Hui Muslims enjoyed the highest social and political status in history. The first emperor of the Yuan dynasty Kublai Khan created a caste system in which all subjects of the Mongol empire were classified into four classes. The first class is Mongols. The second class is *Semuren* (literally means people with colored eyes), this includes Arabs, Persians, Central Asians and other foreigners. The third class is *Hanren*, includes Han Chinese and some minority tribes in north China. The fourth and the lowest class is *Nanren*, they were Han Chinese in south China. The Hui Muslims belonged to the second class, high above the ethnic Han Chinese¹².

⁴ Yu (2012). p 45.

⁵ Sen Tan Ta. Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009.p 73

⁶ Qiu Shusen *Zhongguo huizu shi* [The History of Hui Zu In China]. Yingchuan : Ningxia People's Press, 2012. p 30. Sen (2009), p 86.

⁷ Broomhall (1987), p 54

⁸ Dillon, Michael. China's Muslim Hui Community. London: Curzon Press, 1999. p 21

⁹ Bai Shouyi (ed.) *Huizu renwu zhi* [Biographical dictionary of the Hui people]. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press 1999 5th edition. Vol. 1.

¹⁰ Qiu (2012), p 101

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jin, Jitang. *Zhongguo huijiao shi yanjiu* [Studies Of the History of Islam in China]. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press., 2000. p 61

However, the Hui Muslims' situation in China changed completely after Mongol Yuan dynasty was overthrown by ethnic Han Chinese who established Ming dynasty afterwards. Having being humiliated for nearly a hundred years, the first Ming emperor Zhu Yuanzhang set to reassert Chinese supremacy and re-establish the Confucian concept of world order immediately after he ascended to the throne. Series of laws were implemented to sinicize all minority groups, especially Mongols and the Hui Muslims, and force them to integrate to Chinese society. In 1368, a decree was issued to ban foreign dresses, foreign languages and foreign surnames¹³. During the Yuan period, many Hui Muslims had already started to change their ethnic names to Chinese names as a result of ethnic integration. After the Ming government officially banned foreign names, large scale of the Hui population adopted Chinese surnames. In order to “curb the growth of [foreign] communities”, in 1372, the Ming government enforced a law which prohibited marriages within the Hui ethnic group. “Since the peoples of Mongol and *Semu* (mainly Hui Muslims) have settled down in China, they are allowed to marry Han Chinese. (but) marriages within the (respective) ethnic group are not permitted. Those who violate the law will be sentenced to be state slaves”¹⁴.

The sinicization policy of Ming government had significant impacts to the Hui Muslims in China. On one hand, the Hui's integration into mainstream Chinese society accelerated and deepened. The Hui became more and more acculturated and assimilated to Chinese culture. On the other hand, the Islamic faith within the Hui communities seriously declined.

In 1644, the Manchu, a nomadic minority group from the north-eastern region of China, seized control of the country, leading to the establishment of the Qing dynasty. During the initial years of the Qing dynasty, the Manchu rulers faced significant challenges in the form of repeated uprisings by the Han Chinese and the Hui Muslims, who opposed their rule. To effectively solidify their authority over the predominantly Han Chinese population and other ethnic groups within their realm, the early Qing leaders adopted a dual approach. On the one hand, they employed military force to suppress and quell various uprisings, thereby ensuring the maintenance of governmental order and the enforcement of laws. On the other hand, they sought to foster loyalty and compliance among the populace through benevolent measures. In regard to early Qing's policy towards the Hui Muslims, Donald Leslie states that “Autocratic rule was to be tempered by imperial benevolence; and religious freedom was allowed so long as it did not interfere with good order and obedience to the state”¹⁵. However, starting from the middle of Qianlong reign (1736-1796), there was a dramatic shift in the Qing government's policy towards the Hui Muslims and Islam. During the mid to late Qing period, the government pursued a policy of stringent control over the Hui Muslim population, employing a range of political and military strategies to ensure unwavering compliance from the Hui Muslim population. These approaches included the utilization of Hui individuals to govern their own community (known as “*yi hui zhi hui*”), and a simultaneous application of military suppression and political appeasement, often referred to as the “*jiao fu bing shi*” strategy¹⁶.

Regrettably, this period was also marked by instances of high extent of social and political prejudice against the Hui Muslims, leading to a wide range of persecution and discrimination. The discriminative and racist

¹³ Sen (2009), p 99

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Leslie, Donald Daniel. *Islam in Traditional China: A Short History to 1800*. Canberra: Canberra College of Advanced Education, 1986. p 122.

¹⁶ Yu (2012). p.135

attitude of the Qing government towards the Hui Muslims was clearly reflected in the Qing's law. The Hui was distinguished as a special category of persons in the law of the Qing. The Qing Dynasty's criminal law exhibited different treatment of the Hui Muslims in comparison to the Han Chinese population. Within this legal framework, Hui Muslims faced significantly harsher punishments than their Han Chinese counterparts for identical offenses¹⁷. During this period, the Hui community experienced severe military oppression, including brutal crackdowns and massacres that inflicted immense suffering on their lives. The cumulative impact of these policies and actions culminated in a time of unprecedented hardship for the Hui Muslims. The combination of discriminatory treatment, political marginalization, and harsh military measures cast a shadow over the quality of life for the Hui population during this period.

The ethnic tension between Hui Muslims and Han Chinese during the Qing dynasty was notably more pronounced compared to the Ming dynasty. This contrast was particularly evident at the regional level, where Han Chinese governors and military leaders often held deeply prejudiced and discriminatory views toward the Hui Muslims and Islam.

In 1724, Chen Shiguan, the governor of Shandong, stated in his memorial to Yongzheng Emperor that:

The evil religion is forbidden by the law. Hui Jiao (Islam) does not worship Heaven and Earth, neither our Gods, but worship its own God, has its own calendar and many followers, bringing harm to the people. Please give order to force the Hui to give up their religion and destroy their mosques¹⁸.

The discrimination and prejudice to the Hui Muslims and Islam did not take place in the Qing's court only, it was also widely spread among the Han Chinese intellectuals. Gu Yanwu (1613-1682), a prominent Confucian scholar, wrote in his book that "the Hui are stubborn and reluctant to change their old customs. They band together like a bandit and harm their neighbours. No matter how long they have lived under the auspice of this empire, their barbaric behaviour has never changed"¹⁹. Some Han Chinese scholars proposed more radical and racist solution to the Qing court. During Emperor Qianlong's reign (1735-1799), a Han scholar named Wei Shu called for sending all Hui Muslims into exile. Wei criticized the court officials for turning a blind eye to Hui's population growth, and lamented that China would again fall under barbarian rule if no actions were taken²⁰.

The discriminative and suppressive policy of the Qing government towards the Hui Muslims and Islam, the ethnic tension between the Hui and the majority Han Chinese as well as deteriorating economic situations led to waves of the Hui Muslims' uprising against the Qing government. Throughout the Qing dynasty, there were more than ten Hui Muslim uprisings. According to Yusuf Chang, as many as ten million Hui Muslims were killed in the process²¹. This was the greatest racial genocide in Chinese history.

¹⁷ Hu Yunshen. *Lun qingdai falu zhong de huihui wenti* [Studies about the Hui in Qing's Law]. *Huizu Yanjiu*, No. 4. 1998. p 30-37. Wang Dongpin. *Daqing luli huizu falu tiaowen yan jiu* [The Study of Law Articles Related With Hui In Criminal Law Of The Qing]. *Huizu Yanjiu*, Vol. 2. 2000. p 5-14.

¹⁸ Fu Tongxian. *Zhongguo huijiao shi*[History of Islam in China]. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press, 2000. p.76

¹⁹ Jin (2000), p 77

²⁰ Qi Yanchen. *Zhongguo gu dai yan lun shi*. [A History of Speeches in Ancient China]. Beijing: Aviation Industry Press, 2005. p 206.

²¹ Yusuf, Chang The Hui (Muslim) Minority in China: An Historical Overview. *Journal of the Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Vol, 8, No. 1. 1987. pp. 62-78.

THE RISE OF HUI WOMEN'S SCHOOLS: ISLAMIC REVIVAL MOVEMENT DURING THE LATE MING AND EARLY QING DYNASTY

The Ming's language policy was the most important assimilation measure with extremely wide-ranging impact on the Hui. During the Yuan dynasty, the Hui Muslims were multilingual, they spoke Arabic, Persian, Turkic and Chinese language. The Arabic, Persian and Turkic were used in their families and among themselves, while Chinese language were spoken in public and with the Han Chinese. However, Arabic was the *lingua franca* of the Hui ethnic group²². Banning the foreign language caused the Hui to lose their native tongues of Arabic or Persian, rendering them unable to understand the Qur'an and other religious books. By the mid-Ming dynasty the Chinese language became the only language of communication in the Hui ethnic group. Most of the Hui switched completely from Arabic to Chinese language in all walks of life, and only a handful of literati like Imams and Islamic scholars could understand the Arabic and Persian languages²³.

The isolationist policy of the Ming Dynasty was another major factor which contributed to serious decline of Islamic education among the Hui Muslim communities. The Sea Ban (*hai jin*) policy enforced by the Ming government in 1371 and continued into the early Qing dynasty put a complete stop to China's maritime trade. Foreign trade was strictly done through traditional tribute system²⁴. The closed-door policy also discouraged individuals in China from venturing overseas. As a result, the direct and robust connections between the Hui Muslims in China and the broader Muslim population beyond the country's borders were severed. One noteworthy consequence of this policy was a considerable reduction in the influx of Islamic scholars, teachers and Islamic books from Islamic countries to Ming China. By the mid-Ming, "there was a big shortage of Islamic books, and learned men were few, the transmission and interpretation [of the texts] were not clear, propagating the (Islamic) Truth become impossible"²⁵.

In addition to this, the forced intermarriage between the Hui Muslims and the non-Muslim Han Chinese, coupled with entrenched social and political prejudice and discrimination against the Hui Muslim and Islam, collectively played a pivotal role in the marked decline of Islamic education and faith within the Hui Muslim communities in China.

In response to the challenges, during late Ming period, some great Hui Islamic scholars launched Islamic revival movement in order to retain Islamic faith within the Hui Muslim communities and preserve the Hui's Muslim identity. This movement lasted from the late Ming to the early Qing dynasty.

The centre of the Islamic revival movement was Islamic educational reform. A new Islamic educational system, known as Jingtang Jiaoyu (Scripture Hall Education), was introduced by the prominent Hui Islamic scholar Sheikh Hu Dengzhou from Shanxi, China. Its goal was to promote the popularization of Islamic education within Hui Muslim communities and, simultaneously, to cultivate excellent religious professionals urgently needed. In light of the situation that Hui Muslims had largely lost their Arabic mother tongue, with the younger generation being proficient only in Chinese language, Jingtang Jiaoyu (Scripture Hall Education) adopted Mandarin Chinese as the medium of instruction. Numerous religious schools were initially opened in private

²² Qiu (2012), p 262.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Yu (2012), p113

²⁵ Qiu (2012), p.355.

homes and were later moved to mosques. Financial assistance was provided to attract and support Hui Muslim students studying in these religious schools²⁶. Soon, the Islamic Jingtang Jiaoyu system spread to other provinces. More Islamic religious schools were founded by Sheikh Hu Dengzhou's students and followers all over China

It's not long before the important role of Hui Muslim women in preserving and transmitting Islamic faith was realized by the Hui Islamic scholars. A revolutionary initiative was taken by Sheikh Hu's students to open women's classes and schools to educate Hui Muslim women. By the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, Hui women's schools had become popular in the eastern and central regions of China, surpassing family education as the primary approach to female Islamic education in the country. However, Hui Muslim women's schools did not emerge in China's northwestern regions, where traditional family education remained as the main method of Islamic education among the Hui communities there²⁷.

EMPOWERING THE HUI MUSLIM WOMEN: FROM WOMEN'S SCHOOL TO WOMEN'S MOSQUE

Confucian teachings emphasize hierarchical relationships between men and women. Women's roles are primarily confined to the domestic sphere, and their education is deemed unnecessary beyond learning skills related to managing the household. Confucianists believe that educating women and allowing them to learn to read would lead to increased promiscuity and be detrimental to cultivating feminine virtues. This belief has persisted and gradually evolved into the notion that "women without talent are virtuous" (*nuzi wu cai bian shi de*). While men are encouraged to possess both virtue and talent, the idea of women pursuing education and achieving accomplishments is opposed²⁸.

Therefore, in Confucianism-dominated China, establishing women's school and educating women in mosques or classrooms was not only a creative measure by the Hui Islamic scholars, but also a bold and revolutionary step in empowering the Hui Muslim women by providing them direct and easy access to religious education.

The early Hui women's religious schools may have appeared in eastern and central regions of China during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. They were established by renowned male Islamic scholars of that time²⁹.

There were two types of religious education for Muslim women during this period. The first type focused on providing basic knowledge of religious beliefs and practices. The curriculum varied, but typically included learning Tawheed, Shahadah, 18 short chapters of the Quran, and how to perform prayers. The second type of education aimed to cultivate female Islamic scholars and was divided into two stages: elementary and advanced education. At the elementary level, the students study basic Islamic and Arabic subjects including Sarf, Nahwa, Aqeedah, some chapters of Quran and basic Ibadah and duaa in daily life. At the advanced level, the students must learn at least five Persian Islamic books known as *nu ren jin* (Women's Books). These books were compiled

²⁶ Din Jun. *Zhongguo jingtang jiaoyu yu qide lishi gongxian* [China's mosque education and its historical contributions]. In Din Shiren (ed.) *Zhongguo yisilan jingtang jiaoyu yu* [Islamic Scripture Hall Education in China] (pp.74-80). Lanzhou: Gansu People's Press. 2013.

²⁷ Maria & Shui. (2002). p 86

²⁸ Wang Ming. *Zhongguo nuzi jiaoyu shiming de lishi yanbian* [The Historical Evolution of Women's Education in China]. *Journal of Southwest Agricultural University*, Vol 10, No. 9. 2012. p 162-165.

²⁹ Maria & Shui. (2002). p 97

by renowned Hui Islamic scholars, encompassing a wide array of subjects. These included Islamic Aqeedah, Ibadah and comprehensive guidelines and precautions for women during menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth. Moreover, they delved into topics concerning women's roles in family and marital contexts, the moral expectations set for Muslim women, narratives from Islamic history, stories of the Prophet's dawah, and the stories of female Sahabah³⁰.

By attending women's schools, Hui Muslim women were no longer restricted to the confines of their homes and burdened by household chores like their non-Muslim Chinese counterparts. They gained influence and respect within their families and Hui communities by virtue of their grasp of Islamic knowledge.

During the late Ming and early Qing period the Hui women's schools were founded and run by men, and initially, teachers in those school were also men who were Hui Islamic scholars or imams in the mosques. However, this kind of teaching and learning style was problematic as it went against Confucius' teaching of men and women's separation (*nan nu shou shou bu qing*). Islam also forbids the free mixing of men and women without the presence of women's immediate relatives. At around the mid-Qing dynasty, male teachers in women's schools were gradually replaced by female teachers³¹. While as women's schools were taken over by female teachers, these schools became a place exclusively for women. By the mid to late Qing dynasty, some Hui women's schools in the central region of China had transformed into women's mosques³². The excellent female teachers of women's schools became *nü ahong* (female Islamic scholars) in women's mosques. They managed their own affairs within the women's mosques.

Hui women's mosques were not just places for women's prayer, they played a vital role in facilitating Hui women's access to religious education, spiritual growth, and community participation. The mosques were the Hui Muslim women's own space where they could learn important religious knowledge, make friends, share feelings with their sisters in faith, receive spiritual support from their teachers or mentors who were from their own gender. What's more important, the Hui women's school and women's mosque provided another life path for the Hui Muslim women. More and more Hui Muslim women joined the women's school and later become teachers and *nü ahong* (female Ahong). Many Hui Muslim widows devoted the rest of their lives to become religious professionals after losing their husbands³³.

However, Hui women's mosques were not totally independent from men's mosques. Generally, women's mosques were either founded by or attached to men's mosques. Although some women were in charge of mosque affairs, they depended on husbands or other male relatives for decision or action on weighty issues. Unlike men's mosques which were centres of Hui Muslim communities' religious, social and cultural activities, women's mosques were limited to religious services.

THE HUI WOMEN'S MOSQUES: FOR FAITH OR FOR RIGHTS?

The Hui women's mosques played an important role in preserving and transmitting Islamic faith among the Hui Muslim communities during the Ming and Qing dynasties. However, the question remains: why did Hui women's

³⁰ Ibid. p 108

³¹ Ibid. p 109.

³² Ibid. p 113

³³ Ibid. p 120

mosques emerge in the particular regions in China? Maria and Shui attempt to elucidate this phenomenon through the lenses of gender equality and the growth of separate female culture. They depict the rise of Hui women's mosques as a manifestation of Hui women's aspiration for independence within religious and cultural spheres. Such an explanation, however, leave two crucial questions hang in the air. Why did Hui women's mosque emerge exclusively in eastern and central regions of China, and not in northwestern region where the concentration of Hui Muslims' population is higher? Why was this phenomenon limited to the Hui Muslim community and not observed among other Muslim ethnic groups in China?

To understand the reasons for emergence of Hui women's mosques in China, first of all, it is important to keep in mind the specific historical context in which the Hui Muslims lived when Hui women's mosques emerged, and look at the Hui Muslims as an entire ethnic group rather than focusing solely on Hui communities in particular region.

The sinicization policies enforced by the Ming government, which encompassed the prohibition of foreign languages, customs, surnames, and forced intermarriage between Hui Muslims and Han Chinese, yielded substantial impacts to the Islamic faith and ethnic identity of the Hui Muslims in China. These policies significantly expedited the Hui Muslims' acculturation and assimilation into the predominant Han Chinese culture, and directly resulted in serious declination of Islamic faith among the Hui Muslim communities. However, as pointed out by Lipman, despite all Hui Muslims under the Ming China went through the sinicization process enforced by the Ming government, the extent of Hui's acculturation and assimilation to the Han Chinese varied significantly from region to region. In eastern and central regions of China which was the traditional Han Chinese core area, there was significant assimilation. While in peripheral regions, particularly in northwest, which was the Hui Muslim core area, the Hui Muslim population was relatively large, and influence from central government was relatively smaller, sinicization process led to certain level of acculturation, rigid distinctions were maintained and the Hui's consciousness of their difference and separateness was preserved³⁴. Meanwhile, the impacts of the isolation policy which was implemented by the Ming government and continued into the Qing dynasty also varied in degrees across the different regions of China. In the border regions of the northwest, Islamic scholars from Central Asia and Middle East crossed the borders and entered China from time to time. Especially during early and mid Qing dynasty, Sufism flourished in the northwestern region of China due to the endeavours of Sufi preachers from Central Asia and Middle East who entered China via the routes of present-day Xinjiang province³⁵. In contrast, the central and eastern regions of China received much less influences from other Islamic countries due to the strict Sea Ban (*hai jin*) policy enforced by the Ming and Qing governments which cut the direct relationship with Middle East countries. Additionally, their significant geographical distance from the borders with Central Asian countries further contributed to this limited interaction.

Consequently, the practice of traditional Islamic education for Hui Muslim women through familial channels was maintained in the northwestern region of China due to lower extent of acculturation to the non-Muslim Chinese culture and comparatively higher degree of preservation of Islamic traditions, as well as relatively closer ties with the Islamic world. However, this form of female Islamic education could not be

³⁴ Lipman, Jonathan N. *Familiar Strangers*. Washington: University of Washington Press, 1997. p 89

³⁵ Ma Tong. *Zhongguo yisilan jiaopai yu menhuan zhidu shilue* [The Brief History of Islamic Sections and Menhuan in China]. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press, 2000. p 24

sustained in the eastern and central regions due to higher extent of acculturation and the diminished presence of Islamic traditions, as well as the lesser influences from other Muslim countries in these areas. This could explain why Islamic Jingtang Jiaoyu (Scripture Hall Education) system originated in central region of Shaanxi province and spread to all regions of China, including northwestern region, but Hui women's schools and later women's mosques, emerged only in eastern and central regions of China.

Different levels of acculturation into Han Chinese culture may also account for the absence of women's schools and mosques among other Muslim ethnic groups in China. There are 10 Muslim ethnic groups in China, namely, the Hui, Uyghur, Kazakh, Dongxiang, Kyrgyz, Salar, Tajik, Baonan, Uzbek, and Tatar. With the exception of the Hui ethnic group, whose population is disbursed throughout China, all other Muslim ethnic groups predominantly reside in the northwestern region of the country. These Muslim ethnic groups experienced much less exposure to Chinese cultural influences compared to the Hui Muslims. They preserved a significant portion of their original cultural elements, among which the most important is their distinct languages. This gave them a significant advantage, as they could directly and easily communicate with Muslims from Central Asia who belonged to the same language group.

Moreover, the Ming and Qing governments treated the Hui and other Muslim ethnic groups very differently. Especially during the Qing dynasty, the Hui Muslims were categorized as a separate group and received harsher treatment by the law of Qing. Other Muslim groups were treated friendly and with respect. For instance, while Hui mosques faced orders for closure or demolition, the Qing emperor oversaw the construction of a mosque for Uyghur Muslims within the confines of the Royal City (*Zijin Cheng*), an area prohibited for Hui Muslims' habitation³⁶.

As the history of the Hui women's mosques indicates, the very purpose of founding women's mosques by the Hui Muslims was to revive the Islamic faith among the Hui Muslim communities in China. Therefore, this unique phenomenon of Hui women's mosques should be examined from an Islamic perspective – specifically, through the lens of Islamic dawah, as opposed to the viewpoint of gender equality, which is evidently influenced by modern feminism.

The researcher would argue that both the emergence of Hui women's schools and women's mosques were part of endeavours by the Hui Muslims to conduct Islamic dawah during the Ming-Qing era. The transformation of Hui women's schools into women's mosque is more likely an accommodation policy adopted by the Hui Muslims to protect their Islamic faith and preserve their Muslim identity by adapting to an extremely hostile political and social environment they encountered during the mid to late Qing dynasty, rather than the manifestation of Hui women's desire for gender equality and independence from the perceived Islamic patriarchal system as portrayed by Maria and Shui.

Throughout the Ming-Qing era, the Hui Muslims applied accommodation policies to safeguard core religious values of Muslim life through outward conformity to dominant Confucian cultural and social norms of Han Chinese society. They changed their Muslim names to Chinese names, their dresses to Chinese dresses, their native language to Chinese language. The architectural style of Hui mosques were also changed from Islamic

³⁶ Fu (2000). p 111.

Arab style to traditional Chinese temple style. But the core Islamic principles and values were kept intact among most of the Hui communities.

The transformation of Hui women's schools into women's mosque occurred during the mid-to-late Qing Dynasty, which was the darkest period when the Hui Muslims experienced the most severe oppression and persecution in their more than 1000 years of presence in China. During this period, the Han Chinese governors and military chiefs at the regional level overwhelmingly held very prejudiced and discriminative view about the Hui Muslims and Islam. Several high rank regional government officials submitted petitions to the Qing Emperor advocating for the prohibition of Islam and the closure or destruction of Hui's mosques. Serious accusations arose against the Hui Muslims. This included worshipping a different God, congregating during night-time hours and dawn, and allowing the mingling of men and women in shared spaces, etc³⁷.

Before this period of heightened tension, Hui Muslim men and women traditionally prayed together in the same mosque. However, as conditions deteriorated and the pressure to conform to Confucian cultural norms intensified, the Hui Muslims resorted to transforming women's schools into women's mosques in order to facilitate the segregation of Muslim men and women for prayers within a single mosque, thereby aligning with the Confucian principles of maintaining separation between genders (*nan nu shou shou bu qing*).

CONCLUSION

In delving into the historical trajectory of Hui women's mosques, a compelling narrative of empowerment and faith emerges. Through an exploration of the historical circumstances that led to the establishment of these institutions, it becomes evident that Hui Islamic scholars and conscientious members of the Hui communities recognized the pressing need to counteract the deteriorating political and social environment and the declination of Islamic faith among Hui Muslim communities. In seeking to address the unanswered questions left by previous studies on Hui women's mosques, the final analysis demonstrates that the emergence of the Hui women's mosques in central and eastern regions of China, excluding the northwestern region, can be attributed to the different extent of Hui Muslim communities' acculturation to the Han Chinese society. Additionally, it can be linked to the different impacts of isolation policies enacted by the Ming and Qing governments to the Hui Muslims communities in these regions. Furthermore, the transformation of women's schools into women's mosques in this particular region could be a result of Hui Muslims' accommodation policy which they adopted during the Ming and Qing dynasties to achieve external conformity with the prevailing Confucian cultural and social norms, specifically, maintaining separation between men and women (*nan nu shou shou bu qing*).

In conclusion, the emergence of the Hui women's mosques in China is not a manifestation of the Hui Muslim women's struggle for women's rights, rather, it stands as a testament to the unwavering endeavours by the Hui Muslims on the path of Islamic dawah to retain their Islamic faith and preserve their Muslim identities.

³⁷ Jin Tianzhu. *Qingzheng Shiyi* [Clear The Doubts About Islam]. In Zhou Xiefan (ed.) *Qingzheng Dadian* (Vol. 18, pp.1-36). Huangshan Press, 2005. p 17

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