

ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY IN CHINA

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ABSTRACT

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This study examines the transformation of Islamic education among China's Hui Muslims during the early twentieth century, a period marked by profound political and cultural change. For centuries, the mosque-based Jingtang Jiaoyu (Scripture Hall Education) served as the cornerstone of Hui religious learning, preserving Islamic identity within a predominantly Han Chinese society. However, by the Republican era, this traditional system's limitations—particularly its avoidance of Chinese literacy, narrow vocational focus, and isolation from global Islamic scholarship—had become increasingly apparent. The fall of the Qing dynasty and the establishment of the Republic of China created new opportunities for educational reform. Constitutional guarantees of ethnic equality, the influence of the New Culture Movement, and the Hui community's growing political consciousness created conditions for reimagining Islamic education. Hui scholars and reformers responded by establishing modern Islamic schools that integrated Chinese language instruction and social sciences into religious curricula while maintaining Islamic identity. These reforms produced a new generation of leaders capable of navigating religious, social, and political spheres simultaneously. Through historical analysis and a case study of Chengda Normal School, this research demonstrates how these reforms successfully balanced tradition with modernization.

Studi ini mengkaji transformasi pendidikan Islam di kalangan Muslim Hui di Tiongkok pada awal abad ke-20, sebuah periode yang ditandai dengan perubahan politik dan budaya yang mendalam. Selama berabad-abad, Jingtang Jiaoyu (Pendidikan Balai Kitab Suci) yang berbasis masjid menjadi landasan pembelajaran agama Hui, melestarikan identitas Islam dalam masyarakat Tiongkok yang didominasi Han. Namun, pada era Republik, keterbatasan sistem tradisional ini—khususnya penghindaran literasi bahasa Tionghoa, fokus kejuruan yang sempit, dan isolasi dari keilmuan Islam global—menjadi semakin jelas. Jatuhnya Dinasti Qing dan berdirinya Republik Tiongkok menciptakan peluang baru bagi reformasi pendidikan. Jaminan konstitusional atas kesetaraan etnis, pengaruh Gerakan Kebudayaan Baru, dan meningkatnya kesadaran politik komunitas Hui menciptakan kondisi untuk menata ulang pendidikan Islam. Para cendekiawan dan reformis Hui menanggapi dengan mendirikan sekolah-sekolah Islam modern yang mengintegrasikan pengajaran bahasa Mandarin dan ilmu-ilmu sosial ke dalam kurikulum agama dengan tetap mempertahankan identitas Islam. Reformasi ini menghasilkan generasi pemimpin baru yang mampu menavigasi bidang agama, sosial, dan politik secara bersamaan. Melalui analisis sejarah dan studi kasus Sekolah Normal Chengda, penelitian ini menunjukkan bagaimana reformasi ini berhasil menyeimbangkan tradisi dengan modernisasi.

INTRODUCTION

The Hui Muslims, China's largest Muslim minority, trace their lineage to Arab and Persian merchants of the Tang–Song era and to Central Asian captives brought during the Mongol conquests. Over centuries, they evolved into a distinct ethnic community officially recognized under the Yuan and Ming dynasties. Living within a predominantly Han Chinese environment shaped by Confucian, Buddhist, and Daoist traditions, the Hui faced persistent pressures of assimilation and discrimination. To safeguard their faith and identity, Hui scholars developed mosque-based *Jingtang Jiaoyu* (Scripture Hall Education) during the late Ming dynasty, which for centuries remained the cornerstone of Islamic learning in China.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, however, the limitations of *Jingtang Jiaoyu* had become increasingly apparent. Its reliance on Arabic and Persian instruction left many graduates illiterate in Chinese, restricting their ability to engage with wider society or communicate Islamic teachings to non-Muslims. Its narrow vocational focus confined students to mosque leadership, leaving many unemployed in a rapidly modernizing economy.

At the same time, the political and social position of the Hui Muslims was undergoing profound transformation. The fall of the Qing dynasty and the rise of the Republic of China introduced constitutional guarantees of ethnic equality and religious liberty, while the New Culture Movement promoted reform and modernization. Within this new environment, Hui Muslims became more politically conscious and active, participating in nationalist projects and asserting their role in the broader Chinese polity. Traditional religious education, which cultivated purely clerical talents, could no longer meet the urgent needs of a community now facing complex religious, social, and political challenges. What the Hui required were leaders capable of navigating all three spheres simultaneously.

Educational reform thus became both a necessity and a possibility. Hui scholars and reformers sought to preserve the spiritual depth of traditional learning while addressing its structural weaknesses. They envisioned schools that could integrate Chinese language and social sciences into Islamic curricula, establish teacher training academies to produce qualified educators, and reconnect China's Muslims with the wider Islamic world through study abroad programs. These reforms were not merely pedagogical adjustments; they represented a conscious effort to reposition Hui Muslims within both Chinese society and the global ummah.

This study situates Hui Muslim educational transformation within that historical moment. Through historical analysis and the case study of Chengda Normal School, it argues that early twentieth-century reforms successfully balanced tradition and modernization: preserving Islamic identity while enabling Hui Muslims to participate more fully in Chinese society and global Islamic

scholarship. In doing so, the Hui experience offers a compelling example of how minority religious communities negotiate cultural change without surrendering their distinctiveness.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach with historical research methods to reconstruct and analyze the transformation of Islamic education among Hui Muslims in China in the early 20th century. The research stage begins with heuristics, namely the collection of historical sources that include Republican-era educational policy documents, curriculum notes, and the writings and thoughts of Hui reformist figures. After the data sources are collected, source criticism (verification) is carried out externally to test the physical authenticity of the documents and internally to ensure the credibility of the information content. The validated data is then interpreted through contextual analysis to understand the causal relationship between changes in the political landscape after the fall of the Qing Dynasty and the shift from the Jingtang Jiaoyu (Scripture Hall Education) system to a modern school model.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Political and Cultural Context for Islamic Educational Reform

The early twentieth century witnessed profound transformations in China. With the fall of the Qing dynasty after nearly three centuries of Manchu rule, the newly established Republic of China adopted its inaugural democratic constitution, which enshrined principles of ethnic equality, religious liberty, and freedom of assembly.¹ Despite ongoing instability caused by warlord conflicts, foreign imperial intervention, and the mounting threat of Japanese expansion, the Republic nonetheless created a new political environment in which minority communities could assert themselves with greater confidence.

For the Hui Muslims, this period marked a decisive shift in social and political status. Once regarded as marginal “foreign guests,” the Hui were now formally recognized as one of the five principal ethnic groups in the Republic’s nation-building project, alongside the Han, Manchu, Mongol, and Tibetan peoples.² This recognition reduced institutional prejudice and opened avenues for participation in national life. Hui intellectuals and community leaders became increasingly politically conscious and active, contributing to nationalist causes and engaging in debates about China’s modernization.

¹ Zhengui Yu, *Zhongguo Lidai Zhengquan Yu Yisilanjiao [China’s Successive Governments and Islam]* (Ningxia People’s Press, 2012).

² Yu, *Zhongguo Lidai Zhengquan Yu Yisilanjiao [China’s Successive Governments and Islam]*.

The Hui are a distinctive ethnic group whose identity is inseparable from Islam. Unlike other minorities in China whose ethnic consciousness is rooted in language, territory, or kinship, Hui identity has historically been defined almost entirely by religious affiliation. As a result, Islamic education has played a central role not only in preserving religious faith but also in sustaining Hui communal identity and cohesion. For centuries, the mosque-based Jingtang Jiaoyu system safeguarded this identity by cultivating religious scholars and transmitting Islamic knowledge. Yet the new political and cultural realities of the Republican era demanded more than purely clerical training.

The rise of the New Culture Movement (*xin wenhua yundong*) further intensified these pressures. Advocating reform across culture, politics, education, and literature, the movement encouraged critical reflection on tradition and promoted new models of learning. Hui scholars recognized that the exclusive religious orientation of Jingtang Jiaoyu left graduates ill-equipped to address the broader challenges facing their community. As Hui Muslims became more politically active and socially engaged, they urgently required leaders capable of navigating religious, social, and political responsibilities simultaneously.

Thus, the reform of Islamic education was not simply a pedagogical adjustment but a strategic response to the Hui community's evolving circumstances. It sought to preserve the religious foundations of Hui identity while equipping new generations with the intellectual tools necessary to participate in national life and engage with global Islamic scholarship. In this way, the Republican era provided both the motivation and the opportunity for Hui Muslims to reimagine their educational institutions, laying the groundwork for a revival that balanced tradition with modernization.

Traditional Islamic Education: The Jingtang Jiaoyu System

For centuries, the mosque-based Jingtang Jiaoyu (Scripture Hall Education) served as the backbone of Hui Muslim learning. Established in the late Ming dynasty by Sheikh Hu Dengzhou of Shaanxi, it provided a structured path for transmitting Islamic knowledge and cultivating religious leaders. Its endurance over nearly five centuries reflects its central role in preserving Hui religious identity and sustaining communal cohesion at a time when cultural assimilation posed a constant threat to faith.

Most scripture halls were attached to mosques and employed full-time professional instructors. Over time, the system produced a long line of renowned teachers and established three major centers of instruction in Shaanxi, Shandong, and Yunnan.³ The curriculum was systematic and rigorous, built around the “thirteen scriptures” (*shi san ben jin*), which included Arabic

³ Din Shiren, ed., *Zhongguo Yisilan Jintang Jiaoyu [Islamic Scripture Hall Education in China]* (Gansu People's Press, 2013).

grammar and literature, tafsir (Qur’anic interpretation), hadith (reports of the Prophet Muhammad’s sayings and deeds), balagh (rhetoric), ‘Ilm al-Kalām (theology), fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), logic, and Islamic philosophy.⁴

The system operated at two levels. At the elementary stage (xiaoxue), children studied Qur’anic recitation, prayers, and basic religious practices using primers such as the haiting and zaxue. At the advanced stage (daxue), students—known as hailifan—pursued the demanding curriculum of the thirteen scriptures. Completion often required a decade of study, culminating in recognition as along (imam) through the ceremonial chuan yi (robe-donning).⁵

Instruction was delivered in Jingtang yu, a hybrid oral language blending Chinese syntax with Arabic and Persian vocabulary. Later, a phonetic script known as xiaojin, based on Arabic and Persian alphabets, was created to assist students who lacked literacy in Chinese.⁶ Because of its sole focus on religious subjects—especially mastery of grammar, vocabulary, and classical texts—and its long duration of study, Jingtang Jiaoyu produced graduates with a deep understanding of Islamic scripture. However, the emphasis was almost entirely on reading and comprehension; writing was not required, and creative or analytical engagement with texts was limited.

Despite its strengths in safeguarding faith and producing generations of religious leaders, Jingtang Jiaoyu revealed significant limitations by the early twentieth century. Its avoidance of Chinese literacy left graduates unable to communicate effectively with wider society or translate Islamic teachings for non-Muslims. Its exclusive religious orientation restricted career prospects to mosque leadership, leaving many unemployed in a modernizing economy. The lengthy duration of study further delayed graduates’ ability to contribute to community development. Moreover, due to the isolationist policies of the Ming and Qing dynasties, Hui Muslims in China faced severe restrictions on overseas travel, which in turn limited the ability of *Jingtang Jiaoyu* to maintain meaningful engagement with global Islamic scholarship.⁷

Thus, while Jingtang Jiaoyu had long safeguarded Hui identity, it could not meet the demands of a politically active and socially engaged community in the Republican era. Reform was therefore not a rejection of tradition but an adaptation—preserving the spiritual depth of Jingtang Jiaoyu while expanding its scope to prepare Hui Muslims for new religious, social, and political responsibilities.

⁴ Din Shiren, *Zhongguo Yisilan Jintang Jiaoyu [Islamic Scripture Hall Education in China]*.

⁵ Din Shiren, *Zhongguo Yisilan Jintang Jiaoyu [Islamic Scripture Hall Education in China]*.

⁶ Din Shiren, *Zhongguo Yisilan Jintang Jiaoyu [Islamic Scripture Hall Education in China]*.

⁷ Din Shiren, *Zhongguo Yisilan Jintang Jiaoyu [Islamic Scripture Hall Education in China]*.

Islamic Educational Reforms in the Republican Era

By the time of the Republic of China, the advent of steamships facilitated a significant advancement in the exchange between Hui intellectuals and Muslims abroad. Several prominent Hui Muslim Islamic scholars and intellectuals returned with new concepts of Islamic education after visiting Turkey, Egypt, and other Muslim countries. While traditional Jintang Jiaoyu (Scripture Hall Education) continued to train religious students in mosques, a new type of Islamic schools, initiated and promoted by renowned Ahongs and Muslim intellectual reformists, emerged and quickly spread throughout China.

The pivotal figure in the history of modern Islamic education in China is Wang Haorang Ahong. Wang Ahong served as an Imam at the renowned Ox Street Mosque in Beijing. In 1906, on his journey to Hajj, he visited Egypt, Italy, Greece, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. During this significant voyage, he revisited Turkey and had an audience with the Sultan, from whom he obtained numerous Islamic texts and brought back two Turkic Hafiz to China.⁸

Upon his return, Wang Haoran Ahong established several Muslim primary schools in Beijing. Subsequently, he travelled to Shanghai, Henan, and Nanjing, where he tirelessly advocated for the establishment of new Islamic schools. Wang Haoran's pioneering work catalysed a nationwide movement among the Hui Muslim communities, inspiring Islamic scholars and community leaders across China to establish similar institutions. His success demonstrated the viability of educational reform and provided a practical model that others could adapt to their local contexts.⁹

With the founding of these new Islamic schools, the landscape of Islamic education in China underwent a transformation from traditional mosque-based education to modern institutions offering primary, secondary, and teacher training programs, with instruction conducted in both Chinese and Arabic language.

During the Republic of China period, Islamic education was introduced through two types of schools. The first was the Hui School (Huiming Xuexiao). These schools primarily admitted Hui Muslim students, although Han Chinese students were also permitted to enroll. The Hui School followed the same curriculum as ordinary public schools, with the addition of one or two religious subjects.¹⁰ Early Hui primary schools, such as Wuchang Hui School was founded in 1912, Lanzhou Qinghua School was founded in 1913, Yunting School was founded in 1918, and Shadian Yufeng School was founded in 1921, marked the initial phase of Islamic education. Soon afterward, Islamic

⁸ Boqing Ying, "Wanghaoran Ahong Zhuanlue [The Biography of Wang Haorang Ahong]," *Chinese Muslim* 2 (1982): 8–11.

⁹ Ying, "Wanghaoran Ahong Zhuanlue [The Biography of Wang Haorang Ahong]."

¹⁰ Chuanbing Zhou, *Xinhua Xiangchuan de Huizu Jiaoyu [The Transmission of the Hui's Education]* (Ningxia People's Press, 2008).

secondary schools emerged, including Halal Middle School, founded in 1928, Muxing Middle School, founded in 1928, and Ming De Middle School, founded in 1930. In 1935, a significant milestone was achieved with the establishment of the first Islamic school for Muslim women, Xinyue Girls Middle School, in Beijing.¹¹

The second, and more important type, was the genuine Islamic school. These types of schools were primarily teacher training schools, where they trained new imams and religious teachers who were capable of understanding both Islamic scriptures and Chinese books. In addition to teaching Arabic and Islamic courses, they also provided courses in Chinese language, classical Chinese literature, history, geography, and arithmetic.¹²

Among the various educational reforms introduced during this period, the establishment of Islamic teacher training schools represented perhaps the most significant and lasting contribution to China's Islamic educational landscape. These institutions not only addressed the immediate need for qualified educators but also embodied the reformist vision of producing graduates capable of bridging religious and secular knowledge.

Islamic Teachers Training Schools: Innovation and Modernization

One of the most significant achievements of the Islamic educational reform during the Republican era was the establishment of Islamic teacher training schools. Several prominent institutions were founded during this period, including the Shanghai Islamic Normal School in Shanghai, Chengda Normal School in Shandong, Wanxian Islamic Normal School in Sichuan, the Chinese-Arabic Teachers Academy, and Yunting Normal School in Ningxia. These schools played a pivotal role in revitalizing and expanding Islamic education across China. They produced a new generation of prominent *Ahong* (Islamic clerics) and scholars who later became influential figures in the development and leadership of Islam in modern China.

The new Islamic education system, as exemplified by these teacher schools, marked a significant departure from the traditional *Jintang Jiaoyu* (Scripture Hall Education). It introduced key reforms in curriculum, pedagogy, and institutional structure, reflecting a broader effort to modernize Islamic learning and align it with contemporary educational standards.

The most notable transformation concerned Chinese language instruction. Traditional mosque-based *Jintang Jiaoyu* deliberately avoided teaching Chinese due to concerns about cultural assimilation, focusing exclusively on Arabic, Persian, and Islamic scriptures. Instruction was conducted primarily in *Jintang Yu*, resulting in many graduates becoming illiterate in written

¹¹ Tongxian Fu, *Zhongguo Huijiao Shi [The History of Islam in China]* (Ningxia People's Press, 2000).

¹² Yu, *Zhongguo Lidai Zhengquan Yu Yisilanjiao [China's Successive Governments and Islam]*.

Chinese and unable to write or translate Islamic texts into Chinese. This linguistic barrier created a communication gap: Hui Muslims educated in traditional Chinese schools struggled to comprehend speeches delivered by illiterate *Ahongs* using *Jintang Yu*, while religious leaders could not effectively communicate with the broader Chinese-speaking population.

Islamic education reformers recognized that this reluctance to study Chinese language and literature had contributed to the self-imposed marginalization and stagnation of Hui Muslim communities. By limiting Hui Muslims' linguistic abilities, traditional education restricted their access to economic and social opportunities within Chinese society. More critically, the neglect of Chinese language education prevented Hui Muslims from effectively propagating Islamic teachings to non-Muslim Chinese populations.

The new Islamic teacher schools differed fundamentally from traditional *Jintang Jiaoyu* in several crucial aspects. In terms of curriculum content, the reformed schools prioritized Chinese language instruction while incorporating social sciences such as history, geography, and mathematics alongside religious studies.¹³ This represented a dramatic shift from the exclusively religious focus of traditional education. Furthermore, the educational objectives underwent significant transformation. While *Jintang Jiaoyu* aimed solely to train religious professionals for roles as mosque imams, the new Islamic teacher schools pursued a dual mission: developing religious scholars for Islamic institutions while simultaneously nurturing individuals with skills applicable to broader society. Consequently, graduates of these reformed schools could contribute to various professional fields beyond the traditional confines of mosque leadership.

Despite these modernizing reforms, the schools preserved their distinctive Islamic identity through the dedicated efforts of their founders, who were predominantly *Ahongs* and Islamic scholars. Under this religious leadership, these institutions maintained essential Islamic characteristics while embracing educational innovation. They continued to provide rigorous training in Arabic language and fundamental Islamic doctrine, ensuring that religious education remained the cornerstone of their mission even as they expanded into secular subjects.¹⁴

Case study: Chengda Normal School as a Model Institution

Among the newly established Islamic schools during the Republican era, Chengda Normal School emerged as the most prominent and influential institution. Founded in 1925 in Jinan, Shandong, this private Islamic educational institution was established through the collaborative efforts of renowned Islamic scholar Ma Songting Ahong, prominent Hui Muslim scholar and

¹³ Yufeng Mao, "Muslim Educational Reform in 20th-Century China: The Case of the Chengda Teachers Academy," *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* 33 (2011), <http://journals.openedition.org/>.

¹⁴ Zhihe Qian, "20 Shiji Qianbanye Huiizu Jiaoyu Fazhang de Guiji [The History of the Hui Muslims' Educational Development in the 20th Century]," *Ningxia Social Science* 2 (1995): 23–28.

politician Tang Kesan, and other notable figures. Chengda operated for sixteen years before being nationalized by the Nationalist government in 1941.¹⁵

As a pioneer of Islamic educational reform during this period, Chengda implemented three fundamental changes to traditional scripture hall education: introducing Chinese language instruction, expanding the curriculum to include secular subjects, and redefining the expected roles of its graduates.

Unlike traditional scripture hall education, which did not provide Chinese language instruction, Chengda made Chinese a compulsory subject and trained students to use Chinese to understand and interpret classical Islamic texts. The school significantly expanded beyond the Scripture Hall's traditional exclusive focus on theology by incorporating natural and social science subjects into its curriculum. Arabic, Chinese, and Islamic theology were taught throughout all six years of study, while Persian was eliminated from the curriculum. During the first three years, students studied history, geography, mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology. In the final three years, they focused on educational methods, school administration, economics, and related subjects. The curriculum also included martial arts training.¹⁶

Departing from scripture hall education's aim of training students exclusively as imams and religious professionals, Chengda sought to develop multi-talented graduates. As Ma Songting Along explained, Chengda's students should become capable of serving as "three heads at once": heads of mosques, heads of schools, and heads of Islamic organizations.¹⁷

Traditional scripture hall education suffered from the limitation of "only speaking, no writing" (shu er bu zuo). Chengda actively encouraged students to write articles and translate Arabic texts. Many successful Chengda graduates authored works addressing central issues, including Muslim identity, religious questions such as the permissibility of interest, and Islamic governmental models. To promote the translation of religious texts into Chinese, Ma Songting organized Chengda students and teachers beginning in 1929 to translate the Quran. Although the translation was completed in 1944, the manuscript was tragically destroyed by Japanese bombardment before publication.¹⁸

¹⁵ Qian, "20 Shiji Qianbanye Huizu Jiaoyu Fazhang de Guiji [The History of the Hui Muslims' Educational Development in the 20th Century]."

¹⁶ Songting Ma, "Zhongguo Huijiao Yu Chengda Shifan [China's Islam and Chengda Teacher's Academy]," dalam *Zhongguo Yisilanjiao Shi Cankao Ziliao Xuanbian (1911–1949) [Selected Reference Materials on the History of Islam in China, 1911–1949]*, vol. 2, ed. oleh Xinghua Li dan Jinyuan Feng (Ningxia People's Press, 1985).

¹⁷ Ma, "Zhongguo Huijiao Yu Chengda Shifan [China's Islam and Chengda Teacher's Academy]."

¹⁸ Qiang Ma, "Zouchu Bianyuan Kunjin Cong Chengda Shifan Toudi Minguo Shiqi Huizu Jingyin de Wenhua Xintai [Stepping Out of the Marginalized Situation: The Cultural State of Mind of Hui Elites During the Republic of China Period Shown by Chengda Normal School]," *Northwest Ethno-National Studies* 4 (2008): 196–208.

While many school regulations resembled those of non-Muslim institutions, Chengda students were treated similarly to *Halifan* (religious students) in traditional religious schools. They were required to observe daily prayers and observe fasting during Ramadan, maintaining the spiritual discipline central to Islamic education.¹⁹

After the Sino-Japanese War began, Chengda Normal School relocated from Beijing to Guilin, Guangxi. Despite the challenging wartime circumstances, Chengda continued its dual mission of national salvation and religious revival. Upon arrival in Guilin, students organized various activities to support the war effort. In 1942, when the Chinese Islamic National Salvation Association requested that Chengda provide personnel for a "War Propaganda Team" operating in the Gansu-Ningxia-Qinghai regions, the school responded by sending three faculty members, including two who had studied in Egypt.²⁰

Simultaneously, Chengda students engaged in extensive *da'wah* (Islamic missionary) activities. In a notable achievement in Guilin, Chengda teachers and students successfully reconverted an entire 500-person village to Islam. The residents of this village were related to Bai Chongxi, the Defense Minister of the Republic, but had lost their religious faith over time. Ma Songting and several students traveled to the village and remained there for several days to conduct *da'wah* among the villagers. Following their successful mission, Chengda helped establish both an elementary school affiliated with the academy and a mosque for the village.²¹

Most graduates of Chengda Normal School assumed positions as imams in mosques throughout China. The school's commitment to excellence extended beyond domestic boundaries: during the 1930s, Chengda sent several groups of students to study at Al-Azhar University in Cairo.²² Many of these graduates subsequently became prominent Islamic scholars in China, further extending the institution's influence on Chinese Islamic intellectual life.

The success of institutions like Chengda Normal School in producing competent religious educators was complemented by another crucial dimension of educational reform: the systematic effort to reconnect China's Muslim community with the broader Islamic world through international educational exchanges.

¹⁹ Ma, "Zouchu Bianyuan Kunjin Cong Chengda Shifan Toushi Minguo Shiqi Huizu Jingyin de Wenhua Xintai [Stepping Out of the Marginalized Situation: The Cultural State of Mind of Hui Elites During the Republic of China Period Shown by Chengda Normal School]."

²⁰ Mao, "Muslim Educational Reform in 20th-Century China: The Case of the Chengda Teachers Academy."

²¹ Mao, "Muslim Educational Reform in 20th-Century China: The Case of the Chengda Teachers Academy."

²² Fu, *Zhongguo Huijiao Shi [The History of Islam in China]*.

International Connections: Dispatching Muslim Students Abroad

One of the significant achievements of Islamic education during the Republican era was the reestablishment of connections and relationships with Muslim communities, particularly Islamic universities in other countries.

The pursuit of Islamic knowledge in Middle Eastern countries had been an important tradition for Hui Muslim scholars for centuries. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, despite facing maritime restrictions imposed by the government, many distinguished Islamic scholars—including Hu Dengzhou, the founder of Scripture Hall Education in China, and several Chinese Sufi leaders—studied in present-day Saudi Arabia and Yemen during their pilgrimage journeys to Hajj. The advent of modern steamboat travel made such journeys considerably more accessible.

As early as 1906, Wang Haoran Ahong visited Europe and several Middle Eastern countries, meeting with the Sultan of Turkey. In the early 1920s, Wang Jingzhai Ahong traveled to Cairo and established initial contacts with Azhari ulama, resulting in the first publicized presence of Chinese Muslims in Egyptian mass media.²³ In 1932, Ma Songting Ahong, president of Chengda Teachers' Academy, visited the King of Egypt and the president of Al-Azhar University, returning with over four hundred books donated by the king and Al-Azhar University, as well as two professors from Al-Azhar. Using these donations, Chengda established a library named in honour of King Fuad.²⁴

Beginning in 1930, more than forty Hui Muslim students were sent in six successive groups from Chengda Normal School, Shanghai Islamic Normal School, and Mingde Islamic School to study at Al-Azhar University in Egypt.²⁵ Many of these Azhari graduates subsequently became prominent Islamic scholars, educators, and editors for Islamic publications upon their return to China, including Ma Jian, Pang Shiqian, and Na Zhong.

CONCLUSION

Islamic education among China's Hui Muslims in the early twentieth century underwent a profound transformation shaped by both internal limitations and external opportunities. The traditional Jingtang Jiaoyu system had long safeguarded Hui identity, transmitting religious knowledge and cultivating clerical leadership. Yet its avoidance of Chinese literacy, narrow vocational orientation, and lengthy duration of study left graduates ill-equipped to meet the demands of a community that was becoming increasingly politically conscious and socially engaged in the Republican era.

²³ Jinyuan Feng, "Wang Jinzhai Ahong," dalam *Zhongguo Huihui Minushi [The History of China's Hui]*, ed. oleh Shouyi Bai (Zhonghua Book Store, 2007).

²⁴ Mao, "Muslim Educational Reform in 20th-Century China: The Case of the Chengda Teachers Academy."

²⁵ Yu, *Zhongguo Lidai Zhengquan Yu Yisilanjiao [China's Successive Governments and Islam]*.

The new political climate—marked by constitutional guarantees of ethnic equality, the rise of the New Culture Movement, and the Hui community’s growing participation in national life—created the conditions for reform. Hui scholars and reformers responded by reimagining Islamic education in ways that balanced tradition with modernization. They integrated Chinese language and social sciences into curricula, established teacher training academies to produce qualified educators, and reconnected China’s Muslims with the wider Islamic world through study abroad programs.

The case of Chengda Normal School illustrates the depth of this transformation. By combining rigorous religious instruction with secular subjects and cultivating graduates capable of serving simultaneously as mosque leaders, educators, and community organizers, Chengda embodied the reformist vision of multi-functional Hui leadership. Its efforts to translate the Qur’an into Chinese and its dispatch of students to Al-Azhar University further demonstrate how reform bridged local identity with global Islamic scholarship.

Taken together, these reforms enabled Hui Muslims to preserve their religious distinctiveness while engaging more fully with Chinese society and the international ummah. They represent a successful model of minority educational adaptation: one that did not abandon tradition but reinterpreted it to meet new social, political, and cultural realities. The Hui experience in the Republican era thus offers valuable insight into how religious communities can negotiate modernization without surrendering their core identity, contributing simultaneously to national integration and global Islamic revival.

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