

SINICIZATION OF ISLAM THROUGH THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION

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On March 22nd, 2023, the holy month of Ramadan started. Millions of Muslims across the globe observe a foundational pillar of practicing Islam – fasting during the month. According to officials¹, China is home to almost 35.000 mosques of which 25.000 are in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR). The Niuji Mosque (牛街礼拜寺), one of the most famous mosques in China, gathered Muslims to celebrate the start of Ramadan (see fig. 1). As observers noticed the number of attendees was relatively small, mostly the older generation and some children. The ban on Islamic classes in mosques for youth may be a reason. It's hard to find any children's literature or other information on Islam in mosques as well as online on Taobao or other Chinese platforms².

The introduction of Islam into China is evident from the 7th century onwards. Dru C. Gladny, Raphael Israeli, Jonathan Lipman, and Michael Dillon among many other international and Chinese scholars focus on the history of Chinese Islam and Chinese Muslim identity. However, the work of Western scholars on Islam in China is entirely separate from the work of Chinese scholars, especially during the Xi Jinping era due to the sensitivity of this topic and obstacles of the field studies arrangement. The Sinicization of Islam³ has been remarkably apparent in the history of China and it has been the subject of debates in various academic circles. During the Xi Jinping era, this discourse was mostly ignored due to political circumstances.

This article aims to introduce scholars' opinions on the historical background of Islam in China across the largest Chinese Muslim ethnic groups – Hui and Uyghur. In terms of understanding the Chinese Muslim identity in contemporary China, it's important to go through its historical evolution. Sinicization of Islam is a crucial part of it. The brief overview of the main papers of scholars would help future researchers to navigate the Islam introduction to China and generate more public discussions on the topic of the Sinicization of Islam.

Key words: Islam, Muslims, Hui, Uyghur, Sinicization.

¹ According to Yang Faming, president of the China Islamic Association. *Global Times*, February 08, 2021. Available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1215309.shtml>.

² The search result on Karan or any Islamic literature on Taobao and other Chinese platforms shows "no result".

³ The term "Sinicization of Islam" refers to the Chinese policy "Islam with Chinese characteristics", the process of adapting or assimilating Islamic practices, beliefs, and culture to fit within the context of Chinese society and culture. Briefly, it aims to strengthen the Han culture in China.

КИТАЇЗАЦІЯ ІСЛАМУ КРИЗЬ ПРИЗМУ ІСТОРИЧНОЇ ЕВОЛЮЦІЇ

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22 березня 2023 року розпочався священний місяць Рамадан, коли мільйони мусульман по всьому світі дотримуються посту, основоположного принципу сповідання ісламу. Відповідно до заяв чиновників у Китаї налічується майже 35 000 мечетей, з яких 25 000 знаходяться у Сіньцзяні. У цей день у мечеті Ньюдже (牛街礼拜寺), одній з найвідоміших мечетей Китаю, зібралися мусульмани на святкування початку місяця Рамадан (див. рис. 1). Як помітили спостерігачі, людей прийшло відносно небагато, в основному старше покоління та невелика кількість дітей. Це можна пояснити тим, що заняття з ісламу для молоді та дітей перебувають під забороною. До того ж у мечетях не поширюється дитяча література чи інша інформація про іслам, так само, як неможливо її замовити на китайських пошукових ресурсах.

Поява ісламу в Китаї датується ще з VII століття. Дрю К. Гледні, Рафаель Ізраїль, Джонатан Ліпман і Майкл Діллон – серед інших міжнародних та китайських учених, які досліджували історію китайського ісламу та ідентичність китайських мусульман. Однак роботи західних учених на тему ісламу в Китаї різняться з результатами досліджень китайських учених. Це особливо стало помітно в епоху Сі Цзіньпіна, що пояснюється делікатністю теми та перешкодами в організації польових досліджень. Китаїзація ісламу простежується протягом усієї історії Китаю і була предметом активних дискусій у різних академічних колах. В епоху Сі Цзіньпіна ці дискусії здебільшого ігноруються через політичні причини.

У цій статті автор ставить за мету ознайомити з експертними думками деяких учених щодо історичної еволюції китайського ісламу на прикладі найбільших китайських мусульманських етнічних груп – хуейської та уйгурської. Ідентичність китайських мусульман у сучасному Китаї важливо розглядати кризь призму історичної еволюції. Китаїзація ісламу є важливою частиною цього процесу. Коротке представлення робіт деяких учених допоможе майбутнім дослідникам зорієнтуватися у походженні та розвитку ісламу в Китаї та сприятиме більшій кількості публічних дискусій на тему Китаїзації ісламу.

Ключові слова: іслам, мусульмани, хуей, уйгури, Китаїзація.



Figure 1. Niuji Mosque. The celebration of the start of the Ramadan. Beijing, 2023

Introduction

Islam entered China with Arab and Persian traders on the sea routes from India and Southeast Asia and also on the Silk Road in the seventh century CE. The first Islamic mission to China arrived in 627 CE⁴ from the port of Guangzhou in the south to the Tang Dynasty court in Chang'an (Xi'an). As evidence, the oldest Chinese Islamic mosques⁵ and cemeteries were found in China's southeastern port cities (Gladney, 1996). During the Tang-Song dynasty (618–1279 C.E.) *umma*⁶ in China located within the *fanfang* 番坊⁷ mostly at south-eastern coastal ports. The establishment of the Guangzhou *fanfang* marked the beginning of Islam's presence in China [Meng, 2010]. These early Muslim settlers, also known as *Huihui* (回回)⁸, played a significant role in facilitating trade between China and the Islamic world. The fundamental work on different ethnicities' construction during the Tang period was made by the American sinologist Marc S. Abramson. His book "Ethnic Identity in Tang China" discovered the Tang roots in Inner Asia, including Turks, Persians, and Arabs.

Zvi Ben-Dor Benite in his monograph "From 'literati' to 'ulama': the origin of Chinese Muslim nationalist historiography" described the story of the origins of the Hui ethnicity based on *Huihui yuanlai* (回回原來) [Ben-Dor Benite, 2004]. The emperor Tai Zong (626–49) of the Tang dynasty asked "Muhammad to send a delegation of Muslims to come and save his empire. As a result, three thousand Muslims arrives in China", remained in China, and were allowed to marry Chinese women. As per this legend, the future Hui became their direct descendants. Zvi Ben-Dor Benite in his monograph also mentioned the Chinese scholar Liu Sanjie (ca.1635–1720), who started to write this story, which was circulated verbally before. This was the first attempt to explain Chinese Muslim identity – both Muslims and Chinese. Liu and other Chinese Muslim scholars during the early Qing period gathered a valuable "database" of information on Chinese Islam – *the Han Kitab*. *Huihui yuanlai* creator explained the importance of the Muslim literati elite using the comparison between Muhammad and Confucius, suggesting that as Muhammad is to Islam, what Confucius is to Confucianism. Ben-Dor Benite has concluded that Muslim literati were an integral part of the Chinese Confucian literati elite during that historical period. *This period of Chinese Muslim history could be called the period of immigration and the introduction of Islam to China.*

I.

Under the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1206–1368) Islam became a permanent feature in China and regular contact with the Middle East has been created. As the Mongols' westward expeditions to Middle and Western Asia brought to China a big number of Muslims, they created settlements around mosques. According to Israeli research data, the total population of Muslims in China in the 14th century

⁴Some researchers refer to 628 CE.

⁵The Huaisheng Mosque (广州怀圣寺) is the oldest mosque in China, that was rebuilt many times over its history.

⁶Umma is an ancient Arabic religious term, the equivalent of community.

⁷Fan (番) denotes an undifferentiated multitude of non-Han others and Fang (坊) means unit(s) of residential area.

⁸The standard word for Muslims in Chinese language documents of the late Yuan period was mostly used for the Hui people.

was around 4.000.000. Islam played a significant role in their political and economic life. The Mongol rulers employed Muslims in administration and military positions. As per Iranian historian Rashid-al-Din Hamadani⁹, Muslims governed 8 of 12 districts during the reign of Kublai Khan, in the remaining districts, Muslims were vice-governors [Morgan, 1994]. Ispah Rebellion or Persian Sepoy Rebellion, the series of civil wars against the Yuan, was led by the Muslim army. However, it was crushed by the Yuan loyalists. Michael Dillon, Dru C. Gladney, Buell Paul D., and Kenneth W. Morgan have covered this earliest period of Islam in China. *During this period Muslims gained power even over native Han Chinese.*

The status of Muslim communities was reduced as well as restrictions were imposed on all foreign religions under the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). Gladney described the Sino-Muslim communities under the Ming Dynasty as Chinese-speaking and their knowledge of Islam was gained largely through Chinese-language texts such as the *Han Kitab* because very few Chinese Muslims knew Arabic or Persian languages. Only in the 18th century China reestablish its connection with Arabia and Chinese Muslims gained the opportunity to rejoin the larger Islamic world [Barfield, 2000]. The Ming Dynasty also witnessed the construction of some prominent mosques, such as the Niujié Mosque (牛街礼拜寺) in Beijing. Admiral Zheng He, originally Ma He (馬和), was born in a Muslim family of Kunyang, Kunming, Yunnan, led well-known maritime expeditions throughout Asia and Africa during the Ming dynasty, and played a historical role in expanding Chinese influence abroad.

Nanjing has become a centre of Islamic learning. At the same time, Islam first faced challenges as the government restricted the practice of foreign religions. According to E. Caprioni, the natural Sinicization of Islam started at that time by adopting the Chinese language and dress [Caprioni, 2011]. During the Ming dynasty, Hui started to take Chinese names. Islam continued to be practiced in certain areas of China, particularly in the northwest region. *During the Ming rule, there were the first signs of Sinicization. Also, this period was noticed by the formation of the Hui ethnicity*¹⁰.

II.

Dru C. Gladney, Raphael Israeli, Jonathan Lipman, Paul A. Cohen, and many others worked mostly on Hui ethnicity¹¹ historical background and evolution of its identity when it comes to Muslims in China. All of them constituted that from the beginning Islam was a foreign religion in China. Its language was Arabic, and its beliefs and traditions were different from Confucian society. Islam was not a part of the Three Teachings which include Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Hui people didn't occupy their ancestral territory and didn't distinguish themselves through their language [Gladney, 1996]. That explains why they don't concentrate

⁹ Also known as Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍlullāh Hamadānī, considered the most important single source for the history of the Ilkhanate period and the Mongol Empire.

¹⁰ Włodzimierz Cieciora in his article “Ethnicity or Religion? Republican-Era Chinese Debates on Islam and Muslims” emphasized that debate on Muslim religion and ethnicity continues nowadays.

¹¹ Hui ethnic group is ethnically and linguistically similar to Han Chinese with the exception that most of them practice Islam, engendering distinctive cultural characteristics. Most scholars use the term “Chinese Muslims” or “Muslim Chinese” when mentioning the Hui people.

in a certain province but have intermingled with the Han Chinese throughout China. The economic status of the Hui population during the Ming dynasty solidified. If before the Ming the Hui people mostly spoke Persian and Arabic languages, but influenced by Han culture, they increasingly spoke the Han language [Wan, 2010]. According to Soucek, the Uyghur population became Islamised from the tenth century onward, and only in the 16th century Islam became their dominant religion [Soucek, 2004].

Another researcher Huang Zhenpan formulated that the Hui ethnicity became Muslims following the arrival of the first envoys the Prophet sent to China in the year 627 CE. The mixed marriages (Hui father/Han mother) helped them to avoid complete Han-ness. But at the same time, Huang stated that the Hui are Han, and the history of Chinese Muslims is the history of the conversion of some Han Chinese to Islam¹².

The compatibility of Islam with Confucianism, and the incompatibility of Islam with it, was always at the centre of academic discussions, mostly Western. The Sinicization of Islam or incorporation of it into the majority of Han has become the greatest challenge for Chinese rulers since its early history and has coloured the inter-ethnic relations of anti-Muslim sentiments.

Chen Yuan, the well-known ethnographer, has concluded, that the Hui people were mostly people of central Asia origins, which passed through a long and gradual process of assimilation and Sinicization. He explained the survival of the Hui identity through the absence of Muslim proselytizing in China and not confrontation with Confucianism. Despite the almost completed process of Sinicization, Hui remained after all Muslims [Chen, 1985]. According to Israeli, Muslims cannot be incorporated into the majority of Han, which means to be fully Sinicized, because Islam and Chinese civilization have different principles [Israeli, 2002]. As an example of such contradiction, the Muslims coming from Central and Western Asia during the Mongol invasion during the period of the Yuan dynasty provoked the enmity with indigenous. Muslim rebellion in Northwest and Southwest regions of China continued for almost the whole Qing dynasty period until the nineteenth century and the disharmony between Muslims and non-Muslims in Northwest and Southwest China remains until nowadays.

According to Israeli, because of Islamic teaching, the concept of *khilafah* (political unity), incompatibility of Islam with Confucianism, Chinese Muslims show more solidarity with other Muslims in the world than with Han. That's why Muslims in China through their responses to the Sinicization tensions succeeded to become another centre of world Islam. Gladney has shown the harmonic integration of Chinese Muslims into Han culture through a relationship between nationalism and ethnic religion.

As per Ishfaq, the Sinicization of any religion was required in China to hold the influence in the country, not only Islam but also Buddhism and Christianity. Each has had to alter itself over centuries to allow for their comprehension by people with a distinctly Chinese and often Confucian worldview [Ishfaq, 2018].

¹² Huang Zhenpan was a leader of the Liudong Qingzhen jiaoyu hui, (Islamic Educational Association of [Chinese Foreign Students] in Tokyo). He published an article "Lun Huimin" (On the Hui people) in *Huizu renwu zhi* (jindai), pp. 236–7.

Despite both being Muslims, the Hui ethnicity distanced itself from Uyghurs during the period of “Chinese awakening”¹³ for not to be excluded from the Han nation and not to be confused with the Uyghurs¹⁴. As per Huang Zhenpan, Islam was not transmitted to Hui from Uyghurs¹⁵.

III.

The Qing dynasty (1644–1912) was the most successful dynasty in conquest in Chinese history in terms of the territorial foundations of the modern Chinese nation-state [Rawski, 1996]. Evelyn S. Rawski has written extensively on the Qing period historiography. She showed two different opinions of Qing scholars. The key to the Qing Empire’s success lay in the adoption of Manchu rulers of a policy of Sinicization¹⁶. But other scholarship suggested that in terms of empire-building, the Qing’s success lay in its ability to use the cultural links with non-Han peoples of Inner Asia, including Turkestan, the “New Territory” (Xinjiang). Uyghur Muslims, mostly located in the Xinjiang region (meaning “New Frontier”), were conquered by the Manchu Qing dynasty after the Dungan revolt (1862–1877). Xinjiang became a Chinese province only in 1884¹⁷. Rawski highlighted that “interpretations of Qing history lie at the foundations of contemporary Chinese nationalism”. The tensions between ethnic nationalism and the State goal of a multiethnic nation-state started to be challenging between 1895–1912 when a Chinese nation and a Han ethnic group started to play the dominant role, and it continues nowadays. Chinese Muslim elites of the period 1904–1908 intensified their cultural and religious activity to preserve their unique position as Muslims identifying themselves with the Chinese nation. But the Chinese Muslim elites at the same time wanted to separate the Hui ethnicity from the Uyghurs, which did not speak Chinese and did not live within the traditional Chinese boundaries. *This period was marked by completing the territorial foundation of the modern boundaries, including Xinjiang.*

IV.

The establishment of the Republic of China in 1912 led to the improvement in relations between the different ethnic groups in China and also marked an increase in Sino-foreign interaction, indeed academic activities within the local Muslim community and the Muslim countries of the Middle East. Sun Yat-sen proclaimed that the country belonged equally to Han, Manchu, Mongolian, Hui, and Tibetan¹⁸. This period was noticed by rising the Uyghur nationalism and rebellion that became a grave challenge to the post-Qing rulers. Twice, in 1933–34 and 1944–49, the Uyghurs proclaimed their independence from the East Turkestan Republic. The Chinese Muslim Association was established in 1938 in Wuhan with Kuomintang support

¹³ Western Concepts of China in the Early 20th Century. China was seen as an ‘awakening’ by the West after a time of weakness.

¹⁴ John Fitzgerald, *Awakening China: Politics, Culture, and Class, in the Nationalist Revolution*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, pp. 23–66.

¹⁵ Huang Zhenpan, ‘Lun Huimin,’ in *Huizu renwu zhi (jindai)*.

¹⁶ Rawski’s conclusion is based on the work of Ho Ping-ti “The Significance of the Ch’ing Period in Chinese History”, *Journal of Asian Studies*, 26.2: 189–95.

¹⁷ Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomic Region (XUAR).

¹⁸ 五族一家与世界大同 - 在北京五族共和合进会与西北协进会欢迎大会的演说 Available at: <http://www.sunyat-sen.org/index.php?m=content&c=index&a=show&catid=46&id=6848>

(國民黨). Chiang Kai-shek's government proclaimed cultural blocs within one ethnic group – the *Zhonghua minzu* despite Sun Yat-sen's concept of five ethnic groups, including Muslims in the category of 'citizens with particular life habits' [Cieciura, 2016]. Muslims served extensively in the National Revolutionary Army and reached high positions during Chiang Kai-shek's time. As an example, General Bai Chongxi became the Defence Minister of the Republic of China. Muslims showed patriotism, contributed military, and put diplomatic enforcement to the National resilience during the Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945). The Hui people improved their importance and international image by sending “The Chinese Islamic Goodwill Missions” to the Middle East and Southeast Asia, building a bridge of Sino-Mideast communications [Wan, 2010].

In 1949 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) promoted atheism that impacted Islam as well as all other religious practices. During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), religious institutions, including mosques, were severely damaged or destroyed. However, CCP showed a more loyal attitude toward Muslims as they lived in the north-western area along the border with Soviet Union republics. Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and Mongolians had more religious and ethnic identification with people across the border pushed CCP not to alienate them, and wished to avoid a resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism [Goldman, 1986]. Hui people were recognized as a nationality during the 1950s by the People's Republic of China (PRC).

The restrictions on religion gradually eased in the late 1970s after Deng Xiaoping returned to full power. To maintain stability along its long border, CCP reopened mosques even before churches. Muslims were allowed to make pilgrimages to Mecca. Although the government continues to regulate and monitor religious activities for strategic and political reasons. Goldman argues that the post-Mao effort to be more tolerant of religious practices could be explained not only by political purposes to control public over private worship, but also by attracting travelers on religious channels.

In the first half of the 20th century, Chinese Muslims got under severe control and experienced repression as well as other religions.

V.

Nowadays, the government officially recognizes Islam as one of the five major religions in China, alongside Buddhism, Taoism, Catholicism, and Protestantism. In most of China Muslims have considerable religious freedom, however in Xinjiang activities are restricted, and reported human rights abuses against the Uyghur Muslim community, which have drawn international attention and criticism. There is a dispute between the United Nation (UN) and the Chinese government. China fears the rise of radical Islamic thinking and separatism movements, and the role of exiles in neighbouring states and Turkey, with which Xinjiang's majority Uyghur population shares linguistic and religious ties. The permanent mission of the PRC to the UN Office in Geneva and other international organizations in Switzerland issued a 131-page document¹⁹ referred to latter's note verbal dated on June 26, 2022, where firmly opposed the release of “assessment of the human rights situation in XUAR”

¹⁹ Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/ANNEX_A.pdf.

by the OHCHR²⁰. In terms of religious belief, according to officials, Xinjiang fully implements the policy of freedom of religious belief and protects the normal religious needs of believers by the law. OHCHR Assessment of human rights concerns in XUAR issued a document²¹ on August 31, 2022. Chapter VI “Other human rights concerns” reported on the large-scale deprivation of liberty of religious activity in this region.

The Chinese government consistently denies allegations of any discrimination against the Uyghurs and other predominantly Muslim minorities in XUAR, instead advocating a special form of “Islam with Chinese characteristics”²² to prevent extremism and separatism. In the Xi Jinping era, The China Islamic Association (CIA) plays a political, security, and ideological role, promoting patriotism, and serving as an instrument of Muslim assimilation into Chinese society [Golod, 2022]. The officials highlight the representative of all ethnic minorities in regional government and the National People’s Congress as proof of equal rights for all religious and ethnic groups according to the Constitution²³. The head of the CIA, Yang Faming introduced the five-year work plan (2018–22), which launched “for the Sinicization of Islam in China for promoting patriotism, building a system of Islam classics with Chinese characteristics, improving rules and regulations in the field of Islam, strengthening the construction of Islamic culture, engaging in public welfare and charity activities, and training high-quality Islamic personnel”²⁴. The policies of “adapting Islam to local conditions” have faced criticism from human rights organizations and religious freedom advocates, who argue that CCP infringes upon the rights of religious minorities.

It’s important to note that the situation regarding the Sinicization of Islam in China is complex and controversial. There are diverse perspectives on the issue. The Chinese government’s policies and their impact on religious freedom and cultural preservation continue to be subjects of debate and concern. The integration and assimilation of Uyghurs into the State was the most challenging task for the Chinese rulers through the long way of the historical evolution. Even nowadays Chinese nation-building is not over yet, even CCP regularly announces its success domestically and internationally [Golod 2023]. *Sinicization of Islam became one of the mainstream State policies in the modern history of China.*

Conclusions

During Xi Jinping era, Chinese leadership in Central Asia and closer relations with Arabic countries would create more opportunities for Chinese Muslims to develop religious ties, however, under the strict CCP control. The government called the Sinicization of Islam or ‘adapting Islam to local conditions’ the best course for development in Chinese modern society, the only way to co-existence socially and economically in a big multi-national country. From the State’s perspective, the Sinicization of Islam leads to the complete integration of Muslims

²⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

²¹ Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/countries/2022-08-31/22-08-31-final-assesment.pdf>.

²² This form adheres to core beliefs but, from the official point of view, is better adapted to Chinese society and can play a positive role in China’s economic and social development.

²³ Article 36, Constitution of the People’s Republic of China.

²⁴ Global Times. Available at: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202102/1215309.shtml>.

and Chinese society, in other words, the Han majority according to the earlier proclaimed concept of *Zhonghua minzu*.

Throughout the historical evolution, from the introduction till the modern period, the role of Islam and Chinese Muslims was significant, and many scholarly pieces of research have proven it. The current religion's Sinicization campaign explains that CCP considers Muslims as the only minority group that should be localized and has to accept the superiority of the Han. For future academic work on XUAR, despite the economic and touristic development of the region, on-the-ground research became much more difficult nowadays, which will result in less accurate scholarship.

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