

Contemporary Trends in Traditional Chinese Islamic Education

Author(s): Clyde Ahmad Winters

Source: *International Review of Education / Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft / Revue Internationale de l'Education*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (1984), pp. 475-479

Published by: Springer

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3444085>

Accessed: 27-09-2016 07:36 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



Springer is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *International Review of Education / Internationale Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft / Revue Internationale de l'Education*

Josef Wolf. *10 Jahre Schulgesetz*. Vaduz: Verlag der Liechtensteinischen Akademischen Gesellschaft, 1984.

GRAHAM D.C. MARTIN

CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN TRADITIONAL CHINESE ISLAMIC EDUCATION

In the People's Republic of China (PRC), increasing attention is being paid by the government to traditional Islamic-oriented educational institutions. This results from China's drive for modernization, which will require more highly trained and motivated workers.

The Chinese Communists are tolerant of Islam for many reasons, both economic and strategic. During an inspection tour of Xinjiang in September 1983, Premier Zhao Ziyang referred to this area as 'a crucially important treasure house', both for strategic and economic reasons.

Although in some respects the Communists view religion as spiritual pollution, they tolerate Islamic education in Muslim areas for three reasons: 1) the need for educated Muslims to help in the economic development of Muslim-majority areas such as Xinjiang and Ningxia; 2) to help develop their oil industry; and 3) the fact that Muslim parents were already providing their children with an Islamic education in their own homes.

Many Muslim areas border on the Soviet Union, or areas of Soviet influence (e.g., Afghanistan). This makes security in these areas very important to the government of the PRC. In addition, since the Muslim areas are rich in minerals, oil, and agricultural land, Chinese officials have no desire to alienate the Muslims and thereby provoke a Muslim fundamentalist rebellion similar to that which took place in Iran.

In May 1983, Xi Zhongxun, a senior Party official, urged Chinese Muslims to cultivate religious and cultural contacts with Muslims abroad. The *Red Flag*, the PRC's ideological journal, noted in 1982 that such contacts would 'play an important role in increasing our country's political influence'.

The Muslims of China are all *Sunni*, except for the Tajiks, who are Shiites. Around 60 to 75 per cent of the population of Xinjiang are Muslims of Turkic background. Some Muslims are called Hui and they live spread throughout the country. They are, however, concentrated in Guangxi, Gansu, Henan, Hebei, Mongolia, Ningxia, Qinghai, Shandong, Yunnan, and in large cities such as Beijing and Tianjin.

During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR), traditional Muslim centers of learning in Xinjiang and other Muslim areas were closed.¹ At this time, Jiang Qing said: 'To sweep away all the remnants of the system and habits of old ideas, cultures, customs [is the] fundamental challenge of our Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution'. Although many Red Guard activities in Xinjiang were discontinued after 1969, for reasons of national security, Muslim schools remained closed until 1975. Most Muslim schools reopened after the fall of the 'Gang of Four' in areas outside of Xinjiang. Today the re-emergence of Islamic-oriented schools in predominantly Muslim areas is a highly significant element in the educational situation in contemporary mainland China.

The Muslims belong to two major groups, the Hui, or Chinese-speaking Mus-

lims, and the Turkic speakers of Xinjiang Autonomous Region.² Estimates of the Muslim population range from as high as 115 million³ to as low as 13 million, according to the 1982 national census, but the best 'guesstimate' of their number is 55 million.⁴

There is a long tradition of education and scholarship among Muslims in China. Muslim parents play an important role in educating their children. Jiang-jing of Hebei University observed that: 'Muslim education has been carried on at home, for all Muslim parents feel obliged to pass their beliefs and traditions down to the next generation. Muslim habits and customs are taught to children from the cradle onwards; however, some Chinese social values are included, such as filial piety'.⁵

Traditional Muslim education before the Communist Revolution was centered around the *madrassah* (mosque-school) and the homes of individual Muslim teachers called *Ahongs*. The educational institutions were either supported by the Muslim community or financed by rich citizens or Han officials.

Muslims had the first public school system in China.⁶ Instruction in these schools took place in classical Arabic, which was also the language of services in the mosques. Chinese Muslim instructors are called *Ahongs*, meaning 'a literate Muslim or imam'. The students are called *manlas*.

The master of the traditional Muslim school in Hui areas was usually the senior mosque Imam. This *Ahong* was responsible for finding his own staff, and he was paid school fees by members of the *madrassah* or mosque school. It is reported that many of these *Ahongs* possessed fine libraries composed of works written in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Chinese.⁷

Muslim elders retained control over the recruitment of staff for these mosque schools in Xinjiang. The administrators of such schools were paid by the local Muslim *jamaat* (community).

In the Islamic-oriented schools, the students read books about Arabic, the Quran (Koran), grammar, exegesis, and many other subjects such as geography and science. In Xinjiang the Muslims wrote their own language in the Arabic script.⁸

Before 1949, practically all the Muslims in Xinjiang could read and write Arabic. A.K. Wu observed in 1940 that 'their language is Arabic in origin and goes from the right to the left, the symbols being said to resemble tadpoles. Although I had no means of making any very accurate observations, I was often surprised to notice how many of them can read and write'.⁹

During the GPCR, the Red Guards closed down many *madrassahs*, and private Muslim schools throughout China were closed, except for a few in Xinjiang. As a result, most Muslim students outside Xinjiang were taught Islamic studies in the homes of learned *Ahongs*. Since 1979, Muslim communities have restored the *madrassah* system and the teaching of basic Arabic, Quran, *hadith tafseer*, and *fiqh*.

After the fall from power of the 'Gang of Four', the Communists increased aid to Muslim schools, and supported the 'creation of written languages' to express the native languages of the Muslim minorities. Under Deng Xiaoping, there has been a rapid increase in the number of Muslim youths attending government-supported Islamic-oriented schools. The Deng regime has shown respect for Muslim minority culture, including the rehabilitation of mosques and financial support for Muslim teachers in religious institutions.

In 1977 there were secondary schools and colleges in Xinjiang where religion was taught and which were staffed by government-supported *Ahongs* and Imams.¹⁰ At this time, there were over 80,000 students attending 2000 mosque schools in Xinjiang.¹¹ In 1981, the Communist Party legalized the use of Arabic.¹² It is interesting

to note that when Professor al-Baz, formerly of the US National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC, visited Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang, in 1981, he reported that when he visited a mosque the imam spoke perfect classical Arabic.¹³ Today, the native Muslim languages and writing systems are also used in their own primary and secondary schools and in colleges.

The key to traditional Islamic education in contemporary China is the *ulama* (knowledge in Islamic sciences in general). According to a Chinese Communist People's Party Central Document written in 1982, there were 20,000 Imams in China; but this estimate appears to be low, because in Xinjiang alone there are 12,000–14,000 mosques and 15,000 Muslim clergy and other functionaries.¹⁴ There is usually a mosque for each unit of approximately 500 Muslims.

Due to the closure of Muslim schools during the GPCR, there is a great demand for younger *Ahongs* now that religious leaders are free to propagate their faith in places of worship and to train young Muslims for the *ulama*. In addition, Muslims can accept donations for religious projects from foreign sources.

There are individual Muslim and government efforts aimed at helping to alleviate the shortage of Imams in China. The Institute of Islamic Theology in Beijing was re-opened in 1982 after having been closed during the GPCR. Around 130 students per year study there.

There is a critical shortage of *Ahongs* in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Here Muslims were again allowed freedom of religious practice in 1979. In October 1982, the Ningxia Islamic Association started training courses for Imams. At this Islamic Theological Academy, Imams attend courses for six months. During this period, the students attend lectures on the Quran, Islamic doctrine and commandments, and the history of Islam. They also study the status of Islam in Arab countries and China's religious policies. The training course is paid for by the state. In 1983, 34 Imams graduated from the course and received certification in Islamic studies.¹⁵ Ma Liesun, Hui vice-chairman of the Political Consultative Conference of the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, observed that: 'In recent years, many young people have started to study classical religious works in Arabic'.¹⁶

According to Mamat Sait, director of the Religious Division of the Xinjiang Nationalities Commission, there are 15,000 Imams in Xinjiang. According to Mamat, 600,000 yuan has been allocated to building or renovating mosques in the autonomous region.

Mamat says that an Islamic College will soon be established in Urumqi, the capital of the autonomous region. He reported that 15 *manlas* had been sent to study at Beijing Quranic College and 3 students to institutions in Egypt.¹⁷ In Xinjiang, an Imam is usually paid an allowance of around 120 yuan a month.

Religious education is forbidden for those under 18, but Muslim parents feel obliged to pass their beliefs and traditions on to their children by providing them with Muslim education at home. The *China Youth Newspaper*, in 1982, complained that parents in Xinjiang were 'forcing' religion on their children.¹⁸

Much of China's future economic development will depend on educated workers. In Xinjiang, many young workers lack basic skills. When some 40,000 workers at Karamay oil field in Xinjiang were given a secondary level exam to assess their qualifications, only 2 per cent passed the test.¹⁹ Chinese officials hope that support of Muslim schools can provide Muslim workers with the basic skills needed to participate in the future industrial development of Xinjiang.

Another important reason behind China's interest in supporting Islamic schools is its desire to strengthen its oil industry. At present China is exporting workers to

the Middle East on contracts. Chinese officials hope that by sending Muslim workers to the Middle East who have an above-average knowledge of Arabic and Middle Eastern affairs, these workers will be able to communicate with the Arabs. This, it is hoped, will facilitate a smoother transfer of oil industry skills from Arab oil states back to China. It would appear that the Chinese Communist Party views the export of workers to the Middle East as a method for Chinese workers to obtain on-the-job training and work experience in the oil industry. Once the contracts for these workers expire, they will probably be assigned jobs in China's own expanding oil industry.

In summary, traditional Muslim education is thriving in contemporary China. This is surprising, given the fact that the Chinese Communists view religion with suspicion and hope to eliminate it entirely in the PRC. Even though the Communists have their reservations about supporting Islam, it is viewed as an indigenous religion, in contrast to Christianity which is seen as a religion imported by Western missionaries. This, along with China's interest in increasing its role in the Middle East,²⁰ and strategic and economic concerns in predominantly Muslim areas of China have all played an important role in the re-emergence of traditional education in Muslim China.

Notes

1. Winters, Clyde Ahmad. *Mao or Muhammad: Islam in the People's Republic of China*. Hong Kong: Asian Research Service, 1979, pp. 43–44.
2. Winters, Clyde Ahmad. 'Spectrum on China'. *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs (JMMA)*. 3 (1983), No. 2, pp. 70–71.
3. Christi, S.A. 'Muslim population in mainland China'. *JMMA*. 2 (1980), No. 1, pp. 75–85.
4. This figure is based on the number of Muslims it takes to support a mosque. The average mosque, conservatively speaking, cannot be built and maintained by less than 500 Muslims in a locality. The China Islamic Association claimed that 40,000 mosques were operating in China before the GPCR. If we multiply the total number of mosques (40,000) by the total number of Muslims it takes to support and maintain a mosque (500), for the period between 1955 and 1964 we arrive at a total of 20 million Muslims in China.

This total may be conservative because before the GPCR 42 mosques in Beijing served 80,000 Muslims, or an average of 2000 per mosque. By 1984, there were 40 mosques open in Beijing and 200,000 Muslims, this would average 5000 per mosque.

This indicates an increase in the Beijing Muslim population of 2.5 per cent since 1964. The increase may be smaller than in other parts of the country since the annual average increase in the minority population in China is 2.94 per cent. If we multiply the 'guesstimate' of the Muslim population before 1964 (20,000,000) by the average increase in the Muslim population (2.5 per cent), we have a total population of 50 million Muslims in China.

If we increase the average membership of a mosque before 1964 (500) by a factor of 2.5, we arrive at a total of 1500 persons per mosque. If we multiply the 40,000 mosques which were open before the GPCR by 1500 (40,000 × 1500), we arrive at a total of 60 million Muslims in China. I averaged off these numbers to arrive at the figure of 55 million Chinese Muslims.

5. Jiang-jing. 'When and how Muslims came to China'. *American Muslim Journal*. 4 November 1983, p. 6.
6. Broomhall, M. *Islam in China*. London, 1910, p. 238.
7. Yin Ming. *United and Equal*. Peking, 1977, p. 31.
8. Hutson, I. 'The Szchuan Moslems'. *Muslim World*. 10 (1920), pp. 254–255.
9. Winters, C.A. 'Chinese language policy and the Muslim minorities of Xinjiang'. *Asian Profile*. 10 (1982), No. 5, pp. 413–419.
10. Wu, A.K. *Turkistan Tumult*. London, 1940, p. 220.
11. Chen, Jack. *The Sinkiang Story*. London, 1977, p. 329.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 331.
13. Winters. 'Chinese language policy . . .', p. 417.
14. Abu Fadil, M. 'An eastern outpost of Islam'. *The Middle East*. October 1981, p. 49.
15. Wren, Christopher S. 'Islam after persecutions, rebounds in China'. *New York Times*. 15 June 1983, p. 1.
16. 'Minority delegates discuss new law on National Regional Autonomy'. *China Reconstructs*. August 1984, pp. 12–16.
17. 'Xinjiang religious leader on religious freedom'. *Xinhua News Agency*. No. 737, 18 August 1983, p. 12.
18. Wren, p. 12.
19. *China Reconstructs*. October 1983, p. 32.
20. Winters, C.A. 'Islam in China: the contemporary scene'. *The Muslim World League Journal*. April 1984, pp. 41–42.

CLYDE AHMAD WINTERS

READ, EDUCATE AND DEVELOP, THE 'READ' PROJECT IN SOUTH AFRICA

1. The Founding of the Project

Early in 1979 a group of sympathetic ladies, Women for Peace, began visiting Soweto and Alexandra to see what assistance could be supplied to achieve a complete return to normal conditions. Other groups followed this precedent but coordination of efforts was lacking, so it was decided to form a liaison committee. Women for Peace was, at this time, collecting and distributing secondhand books in Soweto. Mrs. Cynthia Hugo, a qualified teacher then working as the librarian at St. John's College, a private school for boys, was invited to visit Soweto and comment on this work. From her short tour, Mrs. Hugo became convinced that much misguided effort was being expended on collecting these secondhand books. Furthermore, supplying Soweto schoolchildren with secondhand books was, she decided, treating them as secondhand pupils.

She returned to her school library, but discussed the situation with the principal and staff who offered their support in a campaign to secure funds to supply eight Soweto secondary schools with reference libraries and, later, readers. Originally a list of four hundred basic books was drawn up after consultations with many interested parties. By November, 1979, the necessary funds had been accumulated and it was decided to organise an exhibition displaying the four hundred basic books in order to stimulate interest and raise additional finance. The Department of Educa-