

Nurturing Muslims in Confucian Cradle: A historical overview of Islamic Religious education in China

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Abstract

The identity negotiation among a religious ethnic minority is closely tied with its religious educational system and it equally applies to the case of the Sino-Muslim community. This paper investigates that how did Muslim religious educational system stature the distinctiveness of Muslim ethnic minority in the Chinese context while simultaneously helping them integrate into the Chinese society and what role did it play in placing Muslims at a continuum between Chinese and Islamic educational spheres. It contends that Chinese Islamic education predominantly adapted the essential characteristics of the Islamic madrasa system to the requirements of the Muslim population living in a Confucian social order. Hence it is a true reflection of the cultural simultaneity of Chinese Muslims. The research employs ethnographic methodologies including participant observation and extensive interviewing and relies upon the archival data for the historical contextualization of the observed facts. It concludes that the Islamic educational system in China played an inevitably crucial role in the survival of Islamic faith and knowledge in the Chinese land. On one hand, it connected the Chinese Muslim community with the mainstream Muslim world transcending regional and cultural boundaries and on the other hand, its certain features remained exclusive to Chinese Muslim civilization indicating the dynamic and vigorous interrelationship between Confucian and Islamic educational systems.

Keywords: *religious education, Chinese Islamic education, cultural simultaneity, madrasa in China, dual identity*

Introduction

Muslims in China moved from the obligatory seclusion in Tang-Song (651-1279AD) age to the dispersion in the whole of China as representatives of Yuan (1279-1368AD) and finally ended up acculturating in the mainstream Chinese society, at least apparently, in Ming-Qing (1368-1912AD) reign. So, they have a long history of existence in Chinese lands and since their localization in Chinese society during Ming, they have been struggling to keep an equilibrium between two powerful stimulating constituents of their dual identity i.e. Islam and Chinese culture. The vigorous dynamism of keeping pace with the authentic form of Islamic practices and simultaneously dealing with the socio-cultural challenges of the Chinese society has always been at work in the history of the Chinese Muslim community. So, they have been working on a continuum between *Huihua* (Islamization) and *Hua-Hua* (sinicization) is described in the terms coined by an eminent Chinese Muslim scholar *Fu Tong-Xien* at the beginning of the twentieth century. This continuous struggle of acculturation and retention gave birth to the development of a unique system of Islamic education in China that incorporated the Han language and Confucian texts into the Central Asian system of Madrasa and preserved the tradition of Islamic knowledge in China for centuries.

Literature review:

Post 9/11, the world is quite apprehensive towards the Islamic religious institutions known as madrasa and there is a lot of hype about the roots and role of Madrasa in Islamic history as well as in contemporary times. A common tendency is to assume the madrasa as more a center of political indoctrination, incubators of terrorists, and sources of violent ideologies than an educational institute.¹ Recently there is a groundbreaking work conducted on the madrasa of South Asia by many scholars² to counter such assumptions and highlighting the educational contribution of this system to society. But, the tradition of Islamic education in China has not been studied in detail, particularly with reference to its role in the construction of Sino-Muslim identity. The most extensive studies on the origin and linkages of the Chinese Muslim educational system have been conducted by Benite³ but his principal focus remains the genealogies of Han Kitab authors, a later outgrowth of Chinese madrasa, and not the educational system itself. Petersen⁴ also studied the role of Chinese madrasa in the construction of Sino-Muslim histories concentrating upon the pedagogy and curriculum of Chinese Islamic education. Transnational linkages of Chinese madrasa with the outer Muslim world in the twenty-first century have been studied by Jackie Armijo⁵. Moreover, the trends of religious education in general among Chinese Muslims have been investigated empirically by Alles⁶ and Maria Jaschok⁷.

The aforementioned literature leaves a lacuna for probing the role of Confucian and Islamic educational system in the development of Chinese Madrasa and the influences of both the sources of inspiration upon the social psyche of its Sino-Muslim alumni.

Research Questions:

This paper investigates how did the madrasa education stature Muslim identity in the Chinese context and what role did it play in placing Muslims at a continuum between the Chinese and Islamic educational spheres. We have conducted field research for three years in the area of Shaanxi where this movement of Islamic education started for the first time. Hence this paper spotlights the elements which paved the way for the emergence of this movement as well as the factors which contributed to its initial materialization. Its purpose is to unearth the role played by the province of Shaanxi and its teachers in the history of Islamic education in China.

Research Methodology:

The research employs ethnographic methodologies including participant observation and extensive interviewing and relies upon the archival data for the historical contextualization of the observed facts. The historical records are consulted to develop a comprehensive account of the development of Sino-Muslim educational pedagogies in Xi'an from the 16th century onwards. The current patterns of Muslim education in the region have been probed and documented after interacting and interviewing common people as well as alongs of the Muslim neighborhoods.

Islamic Education in China: Emergence and Formalization

The madrasa education in China was properly founded during the Ming dynasty and flourished as a hallmark of the unique identity of the Muslim minority in China. It is locally known as *Jingtang Jiaoyu* or Scripture hall Education system. We will cast a glance at the state of affairs and historical background which paved the way for the emergence of a coherent system of religious education among Chinese Muslims and then explore its similitude with the Confucian educational system and Muslim pedagogies. This educational system ostensibly carries some characteristics of Confucian teaching methodologies and some features of the Islamic madrasa system so our purpose here is to investigate the influence of both these sources of inspiration upon the development and pedagogy of *Jīng táng jiàoyù*. To grasp the interplay of the Confucian and Islamic resources in the development of the Chinese Islamic educational system, it is inevitable to be aware of the milieu of its initiation and life experiences of its founder Hu Dengzhou.

With the changing circumstances and increasing adaptation of Chinese

lay Muslims with Chinese material culture i.e. successive intermarriages with local Han women and switching language from native to Chinese, the elements of their distinct Islamic identity began to collapse. Since Muslims attained eminent social and economic status in Yuan's reign and penetrated the Chinese official complex, they urged to attain noteworthy positions in the Ming official hierarchy as well. This made Muslim elites' children pursue the studies of Confucian classics⁸, a prerequisite of Ming imperial exams. Thus the hybrid progeny of Muslims, who already spoke the Chinese language, when got engaged with the Confucian studies became gradually detached from the Arabic script and orthography thus unable to get acquainted with traditional Islamic textual resources.

Apart from this, the standardization policies of Ming further accelerated the integration of Muslims into the Chinese Han culture. The loss of connection with sacred Islamic languages and the Muslim regions, on one hand, and increasing interaction with the Han culture on the other resulted in the dwindling of Islamic knowledge. By the mid of the Ming dynasty, the situation was quite worse and people feared the extinction of Islamic practices and faith as there was no organized system for the preservation and transmission of Islamic knowledge. A comprehensive, organized, and coherent system was needed to revitalize Islamic education in China's Muslim community.

In this state of affairs, Hu Dengzhou responded to the grave needs of Chinese Muslims and laid the foundations of an innovative educational system known as *Jīng táng jiàoyù* or Scripture Hall education system. He is commonly known as *Hu Taishi* (the great teacher) among Xi'an Hui and is highly revered by all the Hui factions equally. Hu hailed from a Gedimu⁹ Hui family residing in the city of *Weicheng* located to the west of Shaanxi province and his life span corresponded to the period of Jia Jiang (1522-1566 A.D) and Wan Li (1573-1620 A.D) of the Ming Dynasty. The birth of Hu in Shaanxi bestowed the area with a great eminence in the Chinese Muslim community and it became the center of learning attracting students from all over China. The famous Chinese Muslim scholar *Bai Shouyi* declares Shaanxi to be the birthplace of China's Islamic culture.¹⁰

The different versions of Hu's biography agree upon the following points. Hu was a well-versed scholar in Confucian classics as The Genealogy records that Hu initially focused on Confucian classics and the history of Chinese dynasties but does not mention the reason that why did he abandon the studies of Confucian canon instead of pursuing his carrier in the imperial examinations.¹¹ Probably because he was a devout Muslim and he wanted to complement his learning with the original and authentic knowledge of Islamic texts which he was unable to do in China as the teaching methodologies of the

local mosque could not satisfy his thirst for knowledge. His inability to grasp the languages of sacred texts taught by the Chinese Muslim teachers frustrated him and led him to the centers of Islamic learning in the Muslim world to satisfy his yearning. Before his final destination Makkah, he stayed in Central Asia, seeking religious education and collecting Islamic sources from a reputed Muslim scholar who later advised him to travel to the heartland of Islam to complete his studies. Hu's hailing from both Confucian knowledge and Islamic scriptures was reflected in his pedagogical methods and standardization of the mosque education system. Upon his return from Makkah, he brought with him the authentic Islamic knowledge accompanied by many textual resources in Arabic and Persian whereas, before him, the Chinese Muslim society was characterized with 'deficiencies within scriptures and a scarcity of scholars'¹².

Since in late Ming the Muslims were cut-off from the Muslim world due to strict foreign policies; there was no intellectual aid for local Chinese Muslim scholars from the outer Muslim world to facilitate the understanding of the sacred classical texts. The major texts were in Arabic or Persian which Chinese Muslims no more understood and thus were incapable to produce a body of Islamic knowledge on their own. This scarcity of sources, scholars, and knowledge left the Chinese Muslims threatened by the sway of assimilation and endangered the very survival of Islamic faith and practices. In this milieu, Hu returned with a refreshed corpus of Islamic sources and mastery of Arabic and Persian languages thus revitalizing Islamic knowledge in China and reviving Islamic faith in a community standing on the verge of loss of its identity.

Upon his return, Hu realized the gravity of the crisis and wished to establish an educational system crafted in Chinese ambiance and enrolling local disciples, who possess a double legacy of Islamic knowledge and Confucian literary tradition. The aim was to generate indigenous Muslim scholars who could independently engage in scholarly activities and produce fruitful work for the local Muslim community. He adapted the system and curriculum, that he observed and experienced in the Muslim world, to the Chinese context and introduced the Chinese language as a medium of instruction for the first time. His aim was not to make people capable of reading sacred texts only but to disseminate knowledge among the masses in the language they spoke and understood. He realized the fact that Chinese Muslims needed religious scholars capable to understand both Confucian and Islamic cultures and master both the sacred languages of Islam as well as local Chinese vernacular. His educational system marked a formal beginning of the development of Islam in the Chinese social context with its specific lexicon, system, and pedagogy. His intelligent and timely measures revolutionized the Chinese Muslim educational apparatus and this is why he was esteemed a

great deal by his contemporaries and successors. His tombstone, erected in 1710, bears a long inscription¹³ describing Hu as a savior of Chinese Muslims by founding the *Jīng táng jiàoyù* after a long period of discontinuity and his existence and mission has been rendered as a result of divine orders.

A tradition based upon unfamiliar language is vulnerable and stagnant as was the case of Islam by Hu's time. He envisioned the situation and its drastic outcomes and perceived that only if the texts were translated and made available to native people in their language there would an engaging and lively intellectual activity be possible. Thus blowing a new spirit into the Chinese Muslim system of learning, he embarked on the translation project. The translation was not merely an issue of linguistic commands rather thematic understanding and epistemological comprehension was an essential pre-requisite to illustrate the text before Chinese Muslim audience. Hu aimed not only to translate the literal meanings of sacred Islamic texts into Chinese but also endeavored to disseminate the concepts and ideas of Islamic knowledge among the masses to indoctrinate their minds and lives. So, the local scholars trained by Hu's educational system expounded Islamic ideas in Chinese and laid the foundation of an intellectual legacy entirely belonging to the Chinese Muslim body of knowledge and purely unique in its form and content. Thus the translation along with the dissemination of Islamic learning was the fundamental contribution of *Hu Taishi* to the Chinese Muslim educational system and due to this, he is still held in awe by Chinese Muslims as the founder of *Jīng táng jiàoyù*. He erected the building of Islamic knowledge embedded in the Chinese soil thus nationalizing it for the first time, to use a modern term. By his time, Muslims were localized but Islamic knowledge they possessed was still bookish and not dynamic or vibrant enough to tackle with real life problems of its bearers. By eradicating the main barrier of language and using a non-sacred language to elaborate the sacred teachings, Hu created a group of scholars with true understanding of Islam who could actively engage in looking for the daily life problems of their fellow religionists in the diverse fields of faith, philosophy, rituals, mysticism and others.

Although Hu devised and formalized the patterns and pedagogy of the educational system yet his teaching circle was confined to his house and his disciples were from his own family. It was Lanzhou Ma, his second-generation student, who began the classes in the mosque for the first time and drew students from all over China to Xianning near Xi'an. It was a major shift in Chinese Muslim education as the learning became institutional and organized substituting then existing individual and domestic patterns of transmitting religious knowledge. Unsurprisingly the system was not fully developed since the first moment of its inception rather with time it matured and became more coherent and organized. The hierarchies and levels were

created and the students were categorized into three levels i.e. primary, secondary, and tertiary.

Hu's system provided free education, study materials, classroom accessories, and mastery in both Chinese and Islamic religious languages so it attracted a good lot of Muslim students. These Muslim students after obtaining religious education and graduating returned to their homelands and established similar mosque schools there. Their schools imitated their alma mater in Xi'an and thus resulted in the replication of identical mosque schools with a standardized curriculum and teaching methodologies. Since all other schools originated from Shaanxi, they were connected through their common teachers thus creating a network of Muslim scholars throughout the country¹⁴. This coherent and formalized system performed dual function of educating Muslims both in religious and secular fields; the medium of instruction was Chinese so it enhanced the secular literacy of Muslims and since the texts taught in the network institutions were coherent they determined common criteria of Muslim education. Thus Muslims became able to establish a parallel educational system which, like *Hanlin* and *Donglin* Academies, educated the Muslim youth in Chinese and also helped Chinese Islam to flourish independently imparting and preserving Islamic knowledge in Chinese lexicon and Hui setup.

Jīng Táng Jiàoyù: Hailing from Chinese and Islamic Educational Systems

It would be enlightening to see that what were the educational standards and methodologies of surrounding non-Muslim Han society at that time and to what extent it influenced the Muslim educational system in its methodology and standardization. On the other hand, it would be equally significant to see that how did religious education flourish in the contemporary societies of the Muslim world in the 16th century and what role it has to play in the development of *Jīng táng jiàoyù*. The life history of Hu Dengzhou traces two sources of influence; his Confucian learning at an early age and his travel to Muslim lands and seeking religious knowledge there. Therefore one can rightly anticipate that the system devised by him would be reflecting the characteristics of both the sources of inspiration aided by the fact that all the beneficiaries of the system shared the dual identity of Chineseness and Muslimness with Hu. This simultaneity of both scholars and disciples imparted some unique characteristics to the educational system thus making it a symbol of the fusion of Chinese and Islamic learning. To explore the nature and extent of this fusion would be the purpose of the following analysis. It will also see that what role did it play in the history of Chinese Muslims and why is it in a swing?

The Han society of the 16th century Ming China was exceptionally involved in the learning activities. The changing lenient policies of Ming

regarding the eligibility to appear in the official examination resulted in considerable growth in the private academies all over the country. Jejiang's reign in the 16th century, exactly in the time Hu established the mosque education system, was the most fertile time for private educational institutions as 30 percent of the Ming reign academies were founded during this era.¹⁵ As quoted by Fong¹⁶, *Tang Shunzhi* (1507-60) records his observation that even the small merchants of his time were exceptionally fond of leaving a written legacy behind; this statement becomes significant in the Chinese context where seeking education was a matter of rank and merchants stood lowest in this social ranking order. In this milieu, the sons of the prosperous Muslim elite were naturally attracted to secular Confucian education particularly when there was no alternative system of Muslim religious education. So, not only the Muslims' internal inertia in the sphere of religious learning but also the external pressure of high standards of Confucian learning necessitated the foundation of a formalized Muslim educational system to satisfy the educational needs of Muslims and to secure a high status in a society which esteemed learning.

The educational systems and institutions in the Muslim world were equally emphatic motivation of the foundation of *Jīng táng jiàoyù* as it was only after return from Central Asia and Makkah that Hu could establish his mosque education system. So, to comprehend the influence of the contemporary Muslim world upon this movement, it is inevitable to have a brief overview of the situation of 'madrasa' i.e. traditional Muslim religious educational institute. The madrasa established in Baghdad by *Nizam al-Mulk* in the late eleventh century is often today mentioned as the first archetypal 'madrasa' though there are instances for the existence of its rudimentary forms in *Khorasan* before that.¹⁷ By the time Hu traveled to Central Asia in the 16th century, 'madrasa' was an inevitable feature of Muslim urban neighborhoods, serving as the principal institution of higher learning in Near East, Central, and southwest Asia.¹⁸ This 'madrasa' system founded in the 11th and 12th centuries, had ripened in the 15th and 16th centuries and was at its apex with repeated revisions and modifications for example in Central Asia, Persian texts were also added with Arabic ones in Madrasa's syllabus during this period.¹⁹ These religious institutions not only imparted religious knowledge but non-religious sciences were also taught and pursued there.²⁰ They were characterized by flexibility, adjustment to the requisites of area and time, and high standards of pedagogy.

The educational theories developed and propagated by the Muslim educationists like *Ghazali*, *Jahiz* and *Farabi* were quite flexible and helped the learners to apply and imitate the educational patterns of Muslim institutions in culturally diverse contexts from where the disciples belonged.²¹ So, Hu

obtained his religious education from such institutions and realized the fact that for the rehabilitation and continuity of Islamic knowledge in China, it is inevitable to reproduce a 'madrasa' archetype in Hui communities. His training in the broad and goal-oriented atmosphere of Muslim institutions enabled him to lay the foundations of *Jīng táng jiàoyù* by confidently introducing the cultural and linguistic adaptations from his Chinese cultural context.

To discern the traces of Chinese and Islamic educational systems in *Jīng táng jiàoyù*, it would be appropriate to deal with its constituents independently i.e. its role, execution method, the medium of instruction, the levels of education, and the curriculum.

The role

Undisputedly the first and foremost role played by the *Jīng táng jiàoyù* was the foundation of a purely Islamic educational system serving to produce the religious scholars and acquainting people with basic knowledge of their faith in a heterogeneous society. The issue becomes contentious when Benite claims that this educational system was a Chinese Muslim attempt to make their learning of Islamic texts a complementary part of their Confucian learning, thus incorporating their sacred body of knowledge into the larger Chinese system of learning and being a legitimate and homogenized part of the whole²². He proposes that by developing this system of learning, Muslims presented Islam as 'Dao of Muhammad' in which Muhammad P.B.U.H was presented as a preserver of knowledge and its transmitter with the chain continuing to Hu Dengzhou. This is the way Confucians too portray Confucius and their teachers as the transmitters of knowledge. He reinstated that Chinese Muslims imitated the Confucian categories of *rú* 儒 and *Xué* 学 while establishing their scripture hall education system.

Since, previously the mosque organizing committees were comprised of *Jiao fang* which performed religious functions but with the commencement of *Jīng táng jiàoyù*, the Muslim education began to generate scholars who could understand, produce and expand the religious knowledge among the local people. So, religious stratum of the society got converted into a scholarly class; precisely for Benite, it was a shift of Muslim religious leaders from imam to *Jīng shi* (classical teacher/scholar). His statements correspond to the facts as the categories changed within the religious hierarchical structure of Chinese Muslims with the introduction of *Jīng táng jiàoyù*. But what needs to be explored is whether this change was nominal only or functional as well. In other words, were the categories of '*rú*', '*xué*' and '*jīng shi*' borrowed from Confucian lexicon just to make the status and role of their corresponding entities/persons intelligible to the minds trained in Chinese learning or the whole structure and pedagogy of *Jīng táng jiàoyù* was also made identical to

the Confucian educational system.

For Petersen²³, *Jīng táng jiàoyù* performed the task of combining the dual identity of Chinese Muslims and expressed it an embodied form for the first time thus putting an end to the previously existing disengagement between the Chinese and Muslim cultural spheres. Mi Shoujiang²⁴ speaks of it as the ‘profound combination and extensive exchange of Sino-Arab cultures’. The main *raison d’être* to characterize it as an embodiment of dual cultural identity is the induction of the Chinese language into the sphere of Islamic religious instruction. The local Muslim historians view this system as the hallmark of Hui people and a vital reason to keep the Muslim faith alive in China and for them, the primary role it played was the preservation of Islamic knowledge and faith, preventing the assimilation of Muslims into Chinese society. It assisted Chinese Muslims ‘to reject assimilation and maintain the fundamental faith in Islam’.²⁵ It served Muslims to build a new self-constructed image of themselves with their unique religious identity-preserved and helped the Muslim intellectuals to defy the pressure of assimilation from Han society. Mi Shoujiang²⁶ goes on to state that this system was so crucial for the vitality and survival of Islam that it was the only phenomenon that safeguarded the faith of Hui people through the Chinese history from Ming to the present day.

So, we suggest that the role played by *Jīng táng jiàoyù* was predominantly religious and Muslims intended to save their unique identity from being effaced and rejecting the integrative pressure from the Han state and society in the religious realm. They did not mean to launch an imitation of Confucian learning or create a parallel class of ‘*Huirú*’ when the system began its activities. Rather they wanted to produce Muslim scholars well versed in religious sciences thus their intentions were introversive and community-oriented. Thus the influence of Chinese society and culture was confined to the medium and language of instruction only and not in the ‘ideological’ and ‘philosophical’ fields. Benite’s insights could be comfortably applicable to the Eastern development of this educational network more precisely which differed from the original Shaanxi school of *Jīng táng jiàoyù* in its modes of development as well as functions.

When the early disciples established their institutions in more urbanized and sinicized communities of Eastern and Southern China, this movement changed its operational methods and perhaps intentions as well. It was in Nanjing that *Han Kitab* authors thought to popularize the Islamic teachings tinting them with categories overlapping Islamic and Confucian philosophical spheres thus switching the mode of the educational network from introvert to extrovert i.e. from within the Muslim community to broader Chinese society.²⁷ Otherwise, the initial activities and organization of the *Jīng*

táng jiàoyù resemble only apparently to the activities and interests of *Rú* who were engaged in the scholarly enterprise. But a deeper insight relegates this semblance to be superficial as the curriculum, purpose, and goals of both systems were not identical. It will be argued in the following pages that Hu applied the pedagogy, the hierarchy of levels and organization of the 'madrasa' system in *Jīng táng jiàoyù*, and his system flourished independent of the Confucian system of learning.

The Execution Method

It was a movement essentially hailing from the traditional Muslim educational system known as *madrasa* and was adapted to fit into the Chinese society.²⁸ The Preservation of knowledge with its authenticity verified through the continuous transmitting hierarchy from teacher to disciple was the most noticeable feature of his system. For imparting and reinforcing the knowledge, the twofold methodology was applied i.e. memorization as well as the dissemination of information through dynamic intercourse between the teacher and the student. The studies were divided into three levels i.e. primary, secondary, and tertiary or higher secondary. There were no formal examinations and no official degree awarding system in *Jīng táng jiàoyù* exactly like the madrasa system.²⁹

The idea of Muslim scholars being the preservers of religious knowledge is very Islamic and there is enough probability that Hu adopted it from the Muslim institutions where he acquired his religious education. The educational system in the pre-modern Islamic world is specifically characterized by the preservation and maintenance of hierarchy.³⁰ This goal of preserving knowledge was the need of the hour as well and equally emphatic in the Chinese Confucian system of learning; as for them Confucius himself played the role of a preserver of the 'way of ancient'. So, *Jīng táng jiàoyù* reflected all these three strands in its functioning. It maintained the hierarchical characteristics of imparting Islamic knowledge as there are written records of transmission of knowledge from Hu Dengzhou to his disciples and then onwards.

It is well-known that Muslims narrate and value the chain of the transmitters of knowledge and they have compiled the genealogies of narrators with their life histories. Benite declares the compilation of genealogies and maintenance of hierarchies as an explicit influence of Confucian learning whereas to us, it is a characteristic directly linking *Jīng táng jiàoyù* with the broader network of 'madrasa' in the Muslim world.³¹ It was about the preservation of the hierarchy of transmitters to secure the authenticity of knowledge being transmitted so naturally, the preservation of knowledge itself would be comparatively a more substantial phenomenon.

Memorization of the texts had been the primary means of imparting knowledge in *Jīng táng jiàoyù*; it was necessary because the sacred texts to be read during the prayers and other rituals needed to be learned by heart. But memorization was not the end but a tool only and it marked the preparatory and complementary point of studies, not the ultimate, corresponding exactly to the similar practice in the Medieval Islamic educational system. The counterpart of memorization was the diffusion of knowledge through personal discussions, dynamic interaction, and the adoption of various innovative methods suited to the capabilities and needs of the disciples.

In the Medieval Islamic madrasa system as well, the teacher disciple relationship was ultimately important and the teachers used to choose the methods and tactics keeping the disciples' circumstances and aptitudes in view. Such an informal character of *Jīng táng jiàoyù*, inherited from 'madrasa'³² was a big reason for its success and popularity as it worked according to the needs and interests of the people who attended. Hu himself was repelled from the religious education in China and left for Central Asia because he disapproved of the stagnant method of teaching sacred texts which were not intelligible for the students and thus created no interest. This is why he formalized an educational system that could nourish the learning abilities of the disciples and engage them in lively discussions thus indoctrinating Islamic faith and knowledge in their minds and lives.³³

Following the organization patterns of madrasa education, *Jīng táng jiàoyù* comprised of three levels of studies corresponding to primary, secondary, and college-level studies in today's terms. This division is found throughout the Muslim world wherever the madrasa system is and was found. In Indonesia and Malay countries, there are *madaris* (plural of madrasa) that follow this organization. These institutions are known as *Peasantren* there and comprise of a mosque, teachers, learning center, and boarding house for students.³⁴ Similarly in the sub-continent, all the *madaris* have the same divisions with each mosque working as *Maktab* whereas the large mosques have affiliated religious schools to impart higher studies. The primary level studies were imparted in almost every mosque and known as *Maktab* in the Islamic lexicon whereas the centers of higher learning were established in big mosques.

Originated at Shaanxi, these centers replicated throughout the Chinese land resulting in a network of Muslim scholars connected through the shared identity of Islamic learning. Primary school level was the initial period of Mosque Education where Muslims could acquire basic Islamic knowledge. Most often, the students of the primary level were not able to recognize the Arabic or Persian orthography. This is why most of the teaching was oral and for the reading purposes, a script peculiar to *Jīng táng jiàoyù* was developed

which transliterated Arabic text into Chinese characters. Of all the three levels of Mosque Education, the primary level was the most popular. In the North-Western Chinese provinces such as Shaanxi, Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai, the primary Mosque Education was taken as compulsory. It was obligatory upon every Hui parent to send their school-age children to primary school to receive a basic Islamic education. The popularization of the primary level of Mosque Education was of great importance to the spread and development of Islam in China. The very similar practice of *Maktab* schools and practice of Arabic Tamil is found in South India and Sri Lanka as well where we see the *Mulla* teaching Quranic recitation, Arabic-Tamil reading, some Tamil, and a little Arabic. It was called *Maktab Pallikkodam* in Tamil.³⁵

The secondary level of studies carried an intermediary status and was never conducted independently; it was either additional or supplementary learning for the primary level disciples in case they wanted to enhance their knowledge but could not pursue the higher secondary level or it was an elementary/preparatory learning for the students of college level. The college-level studies were meant to train ahongs and comprised of ten years-long studies of Arabic and Persian languages, Quranic annotations, and exegesis, Islamic law, *Tasawwuf*, Traditions of the Holy Prophet P.B.U.H and Islamic doctrine, etc. the students were called *Manla* or *Halifah* at this stage and once completed their studies were declared to be ahong or imam. The various titles for the teachers of these learning centers included *Jingshi* (master of scriptures), *Mingjing* (one who masters scriptures), *Akhund* (Imam), or *Usta* (sir). The scholars produced by *Jing táng jiàoyù* constituted the Hui lot which served to expand and propagate Islamic knowledge in the far-flung areas where only the local scholars could reach and communicate. They rescued the Islamic faith from the danger of waning and revitalized it again embodying a unique instance of madrasa graduates in China.

In the later Qing dynasty (late-19th century), Muslim scholars from Yunnan province further developed a complete system with primary, middle, and advanced education. Yet, the traditional *Jing táng* education in northwestern China still maintains the dual system of Koranic and madrasa.³⁶

The Contents and Medium of Studies

As we have already stated that the curriculum of *Jing táng jiàoyù* was semi-formalized and varied from an institution to another depending upon the availability of texts, the expertise of the teacher, the tendencies and capabilities of the disciples, etc thus it was quite inclusive and flexible. At the primary level, the contents and concerns of studies are almost coherent and standardized. The main task of primary school was to teach Arabic letters, *Qing Zhen yan* (al-*Kalimah al Tayibah* or Testimony), *Du'as* used in daily five times prayers, and also teach how to perform and receive ablution, prayer and

fast, and allow students to learn and recite *Haiting* (Khatam or selected verses from the Holy Qur'an). The *Haiting* comprised of some passages from the last part of the Quran to make the students acquainted with Quranic Arabic and thus served as a primer. For the sacred texts to be recited at the life passage rituals or festivals and basic knowledge of Islamic articles of faith and worshipping rituals, a book called *Zaxue* (diverse studies) was in use.³⁷

The contents of higher studies in *Jīng táng jiàoyù* were similar to those followed in the contemporary Muslim *madaris*. The Arabic and Persian languages were taught with great diligence as Hui disciples were not native speakers whereas all the Muslim sacred texts were in these two languages. The *Jīng táng jiàoyù* script worked for the primary level but for the higher level, the disciples had to command the back and forth translation of sacred texts in Chinese and Arabic which necessitated thorough studies of Arabic syntax, grammar, and rhetoric (*sarf, nahv, and balaghah*). The Arabic language with all these technical aspects was equally meticulously taught in *madaris* of the Muslim world as well because even a native speaker could not understand the proper meaning of sacred scriptures without profound linguistic expertise. So, the disciples pursuing higher studies were prepared linguistically before embarking on the proper subjects of specialization. The specialization subjects included the study of Quran with elaborate commentaries, full command upon the back and forth translation of Quranic exegesis in Arabic and Chinese, Islamic theology, *Hadith* and its sciences, Islamic mysticism and philosophy, Islamic law and jurisprudence as well as Persian literature and grammar.³⁸

A local Shaanxi scholar has mentioned that the Shaanxi school placed great emphasis on studies that are “specialized and concentrated,” focusing on the teaching and research of Islamic philosophy and thirteen texts were declared as ‘must read’ in Shaanxi school of *Jīng táng jiàoyù*.³⁹ But Zhao as quoted by Benite⁴⁰, mentions that the curriculum in the seventeenth century was not fully standardized even then he names some fourteen books, eight in Arabic and six in Persian, taught at some of the Chinese Muslim schools. The books mentioned by him considerably match with those being taught at some other Muslim schools at the same time as provided by some other scholars. It denotes that although no curriculum was fixed yet the subjects and texts taught at different schools of *Jīng táng jiàoyù* resembled closely. The curriculum got rich, diverse, and more standardized when the graduates from these schools started translating texts and thus enhancing the availability of texts for Chinese Muslim disciples.

When this system started working, there were quite a few texts available for the students and wherever the disparity in *Jīng táng jiàoyù* and madrasa curriculum occurred, it was mainly due to the scarcity and non-

availability of the sacred literature in Hui communities but abundant in the Muslim world. The disconnected boundaries of Hui from the Muslim world and its isolation from the rest of Muslim communities explain this lack of religious textual sources. Hu's flexibility in selecting the texts and keeping the provision to add and remove various textual sources in the curriculum by the teachers reflects the disposition of madras. In the Islamic world, the texts were not taken as the commanding authority rather the tools to convey knowledge thus the teacher could maneuver the teaching plan independently as per suitability. The texts were dealt with great dynamism and were not inertial or static at all as Chamberlain said that they "were rather enacted fortuitously in time,"⁴¹ and so could be maneuvered, and reformulated according to the time and participants.

This vitality and freedom of interacting with texts and utilizing them according to the currents of environ learned by Hu during his stay in the Muslim world enabled him to bring a revolutionary shift in the sphere of Hui religious education which henceforth became an indispensable as well as distinguishing ingredient of *Jīng táng jiàoyù*. For the first time in Chinese Muslim history, he introduced Chinese as a medium of instruction for imparting religious knowledge. It was an inevitable requirement of his time as very few people knew Arabic and Persian and if Chinese were not introduced; the Islamic faith would have faded away in the Hui communities of his time. Adding the Chinese language into the curriculum of Islamic studies served multiple purposes; it helped Hui getting literate in secular education as well because for the sake of command over Chinese language, *Jīng táng jiàoyù* syllabus included the teaching of some Chinese literature as well e.g. Classics and official histories. Benite, therefore, speculates that the Hui elite might have sent their children to the mosque schools to obtain the basic knowledge of Chinese characters as well apart from the basic necessary religious education.⁴²

So, mosque schools could have served as an elementary Muslim school for Muslim children. Moreover, obtaining religious education and pursuing Islamic learning in the Chinese language made Islam an indigenous religion. We see Buddhism since its inception, has worked on the translation of its texts and categories, through *Ko Yi* and other techniques, in locally intelligible language whereas Islam continued to be a religion of foreign people and language until in Ming, its literature embraced Chinese language making it an enterprise of Hui, a Muslim people peculiar to Chinese land. It was the adoption of the Chinese language as a medium of instruction that resulted in a specific Hui religious vernacular and script. The teachers during the lectures inserted the Arabic and Persian terms into the Chinese speech and with time; these terms were influenced by Chinese dialect and lost their original form thus creating a cache of Arabic and Persian loanwords embedded in the

Chinese syntax creating *Jīng táng jiàoyù* vernacular. Not only did the changes occur in speech but also in the script where Chinese orthography was used to depict Arabic text and this script also became the identity mark of *Jīng táng jiàoyù*.

Contemporary Religious Education among Hui and Jīng Táng Jiàoyù

Presently, Chinese Muslims' education system is mainly composed of three parts: state-sponsored Islamic colleges, *Jīng táng education*, and Chinese-Arabic schools (*zhong'a xuexiao* 中阿学校). Since Xi'an does not have any state-sponsored or Chinese-Arabic school, our concern here is only with *Jīng táng jiàoyù*. The Islamic education in Xi'an could never rise again after Qing Rebellions; by the middle of Qing Shaanxi was the center of Islamic learning for the whole China but the brutal killings and almost extinction of Hui from Shaanxi resulted in the dwindling of education here. Xi'an Hui is still facing the aftereffects of Qing atrocious wars in the form of cultural backwardness and deprivation from religious education. As the center of Islamic learning shifted to Gansu and Ningxia, Islamic education in Shaanxi sank into sharp obscurity. Therefore Xi'an does not have any institutes of modern education in Arabic or Islamic studies. All the religious education revolves around traditional and reformed forms of mosque education.

Jīng táng jiàoyù remained the standard and exclusively practiced method of religious learning among Hui since its foundation for more than three centuries. Not only because Hu was a Gedimu Hui so all the Gedimu followed his footsteps wholeheartedly but also because it was the only option available. In 1890's, Ma Wanfu for the first time raised the slogan of reforming the religious education among Hui and a new faction is known as *Sunnati* or *Yihewani*⁴³伊赫瓦尼 emerged. Since Ma pursued his education in Arabia in the 1880s, he was deeply moved by the movement of *Muhammad ibn 'Abd Al-Wahhab* there. Like Hu, he also brought the idea of reform in the field of education from the heartland of Islam but the circumstances in the Muslim world were drastically different in his time. The institutions of the Muslim world, Hu visited, were the places to impart vitality, dynamism, freedom of interaction, and adaptation but in Ma's times, there was a unilateral emphasis upon 'returning to the roots of Islam' with no room for modifications made in the religious realm because of historical and regional exigencies. This is why when Ma returned to his homeland, he called for an unconditional reform and declared the methods of *Jīng táng jiàoyù* as illegitimate and unauthentic. He remained illiterate of Chinese language and criticized the script and vernacular developed under *Jīng táng jiàoyù* severely.

The mastery of the Arabic language and pronouncing the loanwords in proper native dialect was vital in the educational system introduced by him. The contents and curriculum were not significantly altered but the

emphasis was laid on teaching the Arabic texts and literature directly instead of relying upon Chinese translations produced during *Jīng táng jiàoyù*. The medium of instruction was nearly impossible to be changed to Arabic so, despite the substitution of Chinese texts with Arabic, the language of instruction remained Chinese.⁴⁴ This new faction demanded to eradicate all those features of traditional Chinese Islamic education which emerged under the pressure of Han culture and social setup. The reliance upon Chinese texts and usage of sinicized Arabic loanwords was taken as a symbol of Hui integration into the Chinese culture and thus condemned. On the other hand, Gedimu believed that *Jīng táng jiàoyù* has been a savior system for Hui faith and identity and fostered Hui culture halting the pressure of assimilation and integration from the dominant Han culture. This conflict is still perceptible in the mosque schools run by Gedimu and *Sunnaiti*.

In *Hua Jue Xiang* mosque Xi'an, the curriculum for primary education remains as it was traditionally in *Jīng táng jiàoyù*. The primer and script introduced by Hu are in practice even today and serve to educate children of Gedimu in *Huimin Jie* (Muslim quarter of Xi'an). In the *Sunnaiti* mosque *Jian Guo Xiang*⁴⁵, the madrasa is known as *xuexiao*, comprised of a boarding house and lecture rooms for the students attached with the mosque, and education with residence cost nothing to the Manla. So the primary infrastructure of *Sunnaiti* Islamic education is an imitation of traditional *Jīng táng jiàoyù*. When asked about *Jīng táng jiàoyù*, the *ahong* responded that all the religious education pursued by Hui in China is through this system but he criticized the discrepancies created by the *Jīng táng jiàoyù* script and tone. He claimed to practice a reformed *Jīng táng jiàoyù* contrasting the traditional one in some aspects and following it in some others. Therefore, he added, they teach Arabic *Sarf* (syntax), *nahw* (grammar), *tafsir*, *hadith*, Islamic Law, and theology with all the reading activity conducted in Arabic. He showed the books which were thoroughly in Arabic with no Chinese translation written and the books were exclusively published from the Arab countries. Their titles included *tafsir Jalalain*, *tafsir Baidawi*, *Riad ussalihin*, *Mishkat ul Masabeeh*, etc and they constitute a significant part of the Islamic educational curriculum throughout the modern Muslim world. When probed about the Arabic proficiency of the students, he said that they could read and write Arabic but need illustrations in Chinese to understand it. The students, studied for one year, two years, or four years and after graduating from 4-years of studies, they are recruited as *ahongs* in various mosques.

Unlike the modern religious institutions, which are different from *Jīng táng jiàoyù* in course content, curriculum design and implementation of teaching methods as well as the purpose of studies, reformed *Jīng táng jiàoyù* is much closer to its traditional counterpart. Contrary to the modern schools, both traditional and reformed *Jīng táng jiàoyù* institutions work to produce

ahongs or religious scholars and not 'application-oriented'⁴⁶ people. Traditional education is usually criticized by the proponents of modern education for lacking the standardization and formalized networking as well as curricula. Its textbooks are rendered to be outdated and not up to the needs of the rapidly developing global world.

Many of the Hui graduates⁴⁷ from state-operated colleges and universities believe that the archaic system of education is a hindrance to the ethnic development and personal cultivation of the Hui community. The new concept of education, as propagated by the state, entails the functionality of education in earning one's livelihood and improving one's economic status by utilizing what one learned. In this milieu, traditional *Jīng táng jiàoyù* fails to compete as its graduates are well-versed in religious knowledge but are not eligible to secure high positions in the secular fields. So, there is a grave need and a compelling call for reform in this centuries-old system of education; it needs to accommodate some secular subjects as well as enhance the linguistic skills of its graduates to regain its worth in today's Chinese Muslim society.

Conclusion

Religious education plays a pivotal role in the identity construction of an ethnic minority and if maneuvered intelligently, it can positively serve to preserve the native essential socio-religious traits reconciling the new culture with the inherited one. Religious education does not always lead to extremism or detachment and exclusivism rather it aptly facilitates the process of acculturation and adjustment in a new society in many cases of which Jingtang Jiaoyu is an illustrious example. It is a quintessential representation of the simultaneity of Chinese Muslims. Their unique system of education concerning the objectives, curriculum, and pedagogy renders them distinct from the rest of the Han society but at the same time, the usage of the Chinese language as a medium of instruction bespeaks their sinuous connection with Chinese culture and land. The methodology, pedagogy, and curricula of this system reflect its hailing from the madrasa educational system prevalent in the entire Muslim world in 16th century A.D. So, this educational system performed a role broader than the edification of Hui youth merely and established an *Ummah* wide connection; its scholars transcended the regional boundaries and were connected and outer Muslim intelligentsia through a common educational system. It represented a unique instance in the educational history of the pre-modern world where a semi-formalized pedagogy was universalized throughout the Muslim Ummah creating a unique bond between its adherents.



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¹³ Author A personally visited the tomb of Hu Daishi on December 15th 2013 and observed the tomb stone.

¹⁴ For details of this network and genealogies of its teachers and disciples please see Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China*.

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²⁹ Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China*. Berkey, "Madrasas Medieval and Modern: Politics, Education, and the Problem of Muslim Identity."

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³¹ In Indo-Pak madaris and elsewhere the disciples still memorize and maintain the tradition of preserving the chain of narrators of sayings of the Prophet all the way from the Holy Prophet P.B.U.H to the disciple himself.

³² "The system of transmitting knowledge...remained throughout the medieval period fundamentally personal and informal, and consequently, in many ways, flexible and inclusive." Berkey, "Madrasas Medieval and Modern: Politics, Education, and the Problem of Muslim Identity."p.6

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³⁸ All this information has been collected through the field surveys, examination of the archives in the old mosque libraries of Xi'an and personal communication with present along and disciples at various madaris in Xi'an.

³⁹ Jianbiao., "Changes in Islam's Status in Modern Shaanxi Province."

⁴⁰ Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China*. p.76

⁴¹ Michael Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus, 1190-1350* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). p.143

⁴² Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China*.,p.65

⁴³ Yihewani is the new sect arose in China in nineteenth century under the influence of Wahhabism from Saudi Arabia. For details of the sects please see Michael Dillon, *China's Muslim Hui Community: Migration, Settlement and Sects* (Routledge, 2013)..

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⁴⁵ The author A visited this mosque frequently throughout 2012 and 2013 and participated in the classes as well. Apart from that, extensive interviews with male and female alongs were also conducted several times.

⁴⁶ Wenlong uses this term endorsing the CCP language, please see Wenlong, "Religious Institutes and the Construction of a Harmonious Society in a New Era.",p.21. The graduates from these schools are not expected to be religious experts rather beneficial individuals economically and culturally working for the material prosperity of areas with Muslim majority as well as serving the country building good relations with Gulf countries.

⁴⁷ Author A met many Hui graduates who belonged to Xi'an or studied in the local universities from September 2012 to December 2014 and discussed the issue. The interviewees included Ma Qiang, Li Na, Ma Jiao, and Ma Yizhe.