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Fashion among Chinese Muslims

MARIS GILLETTE

In 1999, a Chinese Muslim (Hui) woman who lived in the old Muslim district (Huiminfang) in the city of Xi'an, Northwest China, showed me an outfit she had asked a local tailor to make for her. The long green robe and white headscarf closely resembled the Middle Eastern women's dress known as hijab. My friend, whose name was Lanlan, was very excited about the robe and veil. Lanlan said that she wore the robe and headscarf when she went to pray in the mosque, and when she attended Quranic study classes.

When I first met Lanlan in October, 1994, she dressed in western-style blouses, trousers, and sweaters, and kept her head uncovered. She had recently permed her hair, which preoccupied her because she believed that perms were un-Islamic. "Young women have to be fashionable," Lanlan said to me, justifying her choice. "I'm not even forty." Lanlan felt more secure about her hairstyle after she learned that a daughter of a local *ahong* (imam) had also permed her hair. In 1999 the clothes that Lanlan wore at home were not much different than what she had worn in 1994, but she was engaged in new religious activities and had adopted new Middle Eastern-style clothing to wear when she went to the mosque. How should we understand these developments?

New consumption among Chinese Muslims

When I arrived in Xi'an to conduct research among urban Chinese Muslims (Hui) in January 1994, residents of the Muslim district were experiencing economic success as private entrepreneurs. An abundance of new consumer goods were available, and local Muslims were enjoying them. They spent substantial sums of money renovating and constructing mosques, building private homes, and hosting expensive rituals. They purchased new foods, clothing, furniture, vehicles, electronics, dinnerware, and videotapes.

Eighteen months of fieldwork showed me that the consumer practices of local Hui fell into three main categories. First, locals produced, bought, and rented goods that resonated with traditional culture. They rebuilt some mosques in traditional Chinese architectural styles, and made, ate, and sold traditional Hui foods. They also wore certain types of traditional clothing. For example, many elderly women wore Chinese-style tunics and trousers with black knit caps as their daily dress. Second, Xi'an Muslims consumed or imitated goods from North America and Europe. Families built new houses to resemble western apartment buildings and bought new American-style sofa sets. Parents in their mid-forties and older were not likely to follow western fashions or eat western foods themselves, but they bought Nestle's chocolate bars, Coca-cola, and American-style T-shirts for their children. Locals considered these goods to be modern. Consuming them was a way of "catching up" with such "advanced" societies as the United States, Hong Kong, and Europe.

The third category was numerically less significant than the other two, but visually and symbolically striking. Chinese Muslims also consumed and imi-

Economic prosperity among Chinese Muslims in Xi'an, China, has led to new forms of consumption. Locals consume goods and fashions that point in three directions: towards traditional China, the modern West, and the modern Arab world. In the past decade some Chinese Muslim (Hui) women have expanded their wardrobes to include Arab-style headscarves and robes. These new clothes allow these women to experiment with creating new public identities as modern Muslims in a country where religion has been associated with backwardness.

tated goods from the Middle East. They built new mosques with green onion domes and white tiles. They purchased religious videos and audiotapes from Saudi Arabia. Pilgrims brought dates back from Mecca and distributed them to relatives and friends. A small number of those who had made the hajj wore long robes when they prayed at the mosque. A few female pilgrims and some young girls associated with Wahhabi groups (about 20 percent of residents were Wahhabi) wore headscarves with their blouses and trousers.

In 1994 and 1995, residents called the headscarf *gaitou*, literally "head covering," the same name given to a local hood worn by some Chinese Muslim women. When pressed by me to make a distinction, residents called the headscarves "Arab gaitou." The Arab gaitou occasioned much debate. Several men in their fifties and older told me that the new scarves were less preferable than the traditional hoods. A woman in a Chinese style hood, as one 70 year-old Salafi adherent put it, was "truly beautiful." Many locals also frowned upon the long robes, which they referred to as "desert dress" and "not suited to Chinese conditions." They found the hijab too "extremist" and associated it with Wahhabism.

Chinese Muslim women's clothing styles, including the adoption of Arab dress, are best understood in the context of Chinese modernization. Chinese intellectuals and reformers have debated women's appearance, status, and social roles for more than a century. Photographs from early twentieth-century China show that Chinese Muslims and non-Muslim Chinese shared ideas about proper dress. Men wore long robes. Women wore trousers with tunics and added a skirt if they were from the wealthy classes. All properly dressed men and women, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, covered their heads. Chinese Muslims often wore head coverings resembling those worn by non-Muslim Chinese, which were typically hats. In northwest China, young Chinese Muslim women wore the gaitou.

Fashion trends in modern China

In the early twentieth century Chinese women strove for gender equality and modernization by adopting men's dress and leaving their feet unbound. Radical female students wore men's long robes and left their heads uncovered. The next step in modernizing women's costume

was the *qipao* (or *cheongsam*) of 1920s Shanghai, which derived from the garb of elite Manchu women and the male scholar's gown. Modern young women during the twenties and thirties wore qipao with high heels and nylon stockings, and curled their hair in permanent waves. The third option was to wear knee-length skirts with a tunic-like side-fastening top. The latter was first adopted by Chinese women who studied abroad in the West. During the 1920s and 1930s most Chinese found women's short skirts scandalous.

The Chinese Communist Party promoted gender and ethnic neutrality in dress after coming to power in 1949. Standardized costume was part of the party's efforts to modify the patriarchal social order, minimize ethnic and class

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differences, and expand production by incorporating more women into the work force. For the first thirty years of Communist party rule, men and women usually wore trousers and long-sleeved jackets or shirts. Skirts were rejected as bourgeois, decadent, and demeaning. After 1958, when the party implemented policies to “modernize” religion, head coverings other than workers’ caps were castigated as “feudal.” In Xi’an the majority of local Muslims quit covering their heads at this time. At most, men and women wore head coverings for worship, removing them in public to avoid censure.

After Mao died in 1976, the Chinese government abandoned collectivization and radical socialist politics and promoted internationalization as the best way to modernize. Chinese women, emulating American and European women’s costume and reacting against the enforced gender neutrality and standardization of the Maoist era, quickly adopted skirts. Many young Chinese, including Chinese Muslims, equated wearing skirts with being modern. Nevertheless, most Xi’an Hui Muslims felt that local women should wear trousers, which were thought to be more in accordance with codes of Islamic modesty, and also conformed with traditional and Mao-era practices.

The post-Mao “reform and opening” included an official tolerance of Islam and minority traditions. Some Xi’an Muslims, especially men, the middle-aged, and the elderly, started covering their heads in public. Most Chinese Muslim women did not cover their heads most of the time. This was especially true of working Hui women, particularly those who did not work in a Muslim run business. A number of Hui told me that a head covering would “inconvenience” them at work. Some said that head coverings would make their non-Muslim co-workers uncomfortable. One young working woman claimed she “did not have time” to cover her head. Some young women considered covered heads a sign of how Chinese Muslims were more “feudal” than non-Muslim Chinese.

In 1994 and 1995, Xi’an Hui women and men agreed that a white cap was the most convenient and easiest way for a Muslim to cover her (or his) head. Locals said that women borrowed the practice of wearing a white cap from men’s worship hats (*libai maozi*), small round caps that were usually white. Women who planned to visit a mosque or attend a religious ritual carried a white hat in their purses, to put on when the need arose or to lend another woman. When young women wore white hats, as for example at a funeral, they preferred to let some of their hair show underneath the cap.

The class of women most likely to cover their head all of the time was post-menopausal women. Elderly women covered their heads at home and in public, and they covered all their hair. Usually elderly women wore black knit caps or black or brown scarves wrapped tightly around the hair. Those who went often to the mosque wore the *gaitou*. Post-menopausal women’s practice of covering their heads conformed to a general view shared among Chinese Muslims that religion was the provenance of the old. This view was also reflected in those who made the *haji*: the vast majority of Hui pilgrims were over fifty.

The Arabization of dress

When Lanlan had her hijab made in 1999, Xi’an Muslims no longer called this kind of veil “*gaitou*.” Their new name was *shajin* or “Saudi kerchief.” Over the next five years, the number of women wearing Arab style headscarves increased slowly but steadily. When I revisited the Xi’an Muslim district in September of 2004, the young women who covered their heads almost all wore “Saudi kerchiefs.” Veils were almost as common as white caps among women who chose to cover their heads.

One reason that helps explain why more Xi’an Muslims were wearing the Saudi headscarf was the increase in the number of locals who made the pilgrimage. Between 1994 and 2000 the number of pilgrims from the Muslim district doubled, and the numbers have continued to rise each year. Imitating the costume, architecture, and eating practices of Arab Muslims has become an important way for local Hui to show their authenticity as Muslims. The Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, carries a special significance as the originating point of Islam, and many locals conflate contemporary Arab practices with the Islam practised by the Prophet. Xi’an Muslims also admire the prosperity and technological advancement of Saudi Arabia. Locals who made the pilgrimage came home with tales of six lane highways, skyscrapers, and air-conditioned tents.

By wearing a Saudi-style veil, a Xi’an Hui can express a Muslim identity without carrying connotations of being “feudal” or “backward” that



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Two Chinese Muslim women, Xi’an, China

a traditional hood might imply. Women who chose Arab-style veils also present themselves as more “authentic” Muslims than Chinese Muslim women who wear white hats or leave their heads uncovered. Lanlan’s consumer choices illustrate how local Hui experiment with being modern and Muslim. Lanlan followed new trends whenever she could. She permed her hair as soon as permanent waves were available in Xi’an. She bought new western foods as soon as they appeared on the market, such as the Del Monte creamed corn that she served in 1999. When historic reproductions of late-imperial Chinese style furniture became popular, Lanlan bought a set for her living room. Lanlan’s decision to wear the hijab when she prayed must be viewed in relation to these other consumer choices. An Arab-style long robe and veil was another venue for Lanlan to experiment with her (modern) identity.

Over the decade that I have known her, Lanlan has struggled to show that she is a proper Muslim woman by becoming more interested in religion as she ages, and to remain young and participate in Chinese cultural displays of modernization. In 1999, Lanlan chose the “Saudi kerchief” as a way to be simultaneously religious, youthful, and trendy. However, by 2001 Lanlan had stopped studying the Quran and spent less time at the mosque. Busy working in her husband’s butchery, she again spent most of her time wearing western-style dress and left her head uncovered. Her decision to wear the hijab was no more and no less enduring than her other consumer choices.

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