

East Asia

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In the years immediately following the end of the decade known as the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), the Muslims of China<sup>1</sup> lost no time in rebuilding their devastated communities. After ten years of intensive and often violent persecution by government forces in which all forms of religious expression were outlawed and hundreds of religious leaders were imprisoned, Muslim communities throughout China began slowly to restore their religious institutions and revive their religious activities. The re-establishment of educational institutions plays a vital role in this still ongoing process.

The first priority of Muslims in China was to rebuild their damaged mosques, thereby allowing communities to create a space in which they could once again pray together, but also so that the mosques could reassert their role as centres of Islamic learning. Over the next two decades, mosques throughout most of the country organized classes for not only children and young adults, but also for older people who had not had the opportunity to study their religion.

When asked how to explain this recent resurgence in Islamic education, religious leaders, teachers, students and members of the community cite two main reasons: a desire to rebuild that which was taken from them, and the hope that a strong religious faith will help protect their communities from the myriad of social problems presently besetting China in this period of rapid economic development.

#### Early Islamic education in southwest China

First settled by Muslims from Central and Western Asia in the Yuan period (1271-1368)<sup>2</sup>, Yunnan has for centuries attracted Muslim students from throughout the region and the country. As early as the Ming period (1368-1644), Muslim scholars from Yunnan were invited to teach in other parts of China, and scholars from outside were invited to teach in Yunnan, thus creating networks linking the Muslims of Yunnan with Muslims in the rest of



Students in the girls' evening school class in a village in central Yunnan.

China and Southeast Asia. Throughout this period, Islamic education took place in mosques and was known as *jingtang jiaoyu* (education in the Hall of the Classics). Beginning in the late Qing period (1644-1911), Muslims were once again allowed to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and study in the major centres of learning in the Islamic world. During this period several Muslim scholars from Yunnan studied abroad and when they returned they started a movement to revitalize Islamic studies there by translating the most important Islamic texts into Chinese, rendering them more accessible.

While in other parts of China Islamic education has always concentrated on the study of Arabic, Persian and Islam, in Yunnan the tradition has always been one of *Zhong-Ah bing shou* (Chinese and Arabic side-by-side educa-

# Resurgence of Islamic Education in China



A graduation ceremony for *ahong* (from the Persian *akhund*) who have completed their studies in a village in central Yunnan.

tion). In the past this consisted of intensive instruction in classical Chinese, whereas today it includes the study of modern Chinese with Chinese history and culture, together with Arabic language and Islamic studies. All the Muslim teachers and scholars with whom I have spoken have emphasized the importance of mastering the Chinese language and studying traditional Chinese culture and history. One explanation given to me by a leading imam was that 'while we are proud of the fact that our ancestors were Arabs and Persians, we must acknowledge that today we are Chinese, and in order for us to strive forward we must use both of our legs.'

#### 'Educate a woman, educate a nation'

Another area in which Islamic education in Yunnan is unique concerns the role of women. Of the twelve major independent Islamic schools, four are for women only, and most of the other schools, while predominantly male, do allow women to attend. The female graduates of these schools have taken a very active role in spreading Islam. Most become teachers themselves upon graduation, either working in Islamic schools that are already established or helping to establish new schools in poorer regions. Several recent graduates have also established Islamic pre-schools and after-school programmes for Muslim children.

The women with whom I spoke expressed clearly and confidently the importance of Islam in their lives, their commitment to Islamic education, and their determination to educate others. I met several young women who had volunteered upon graduation from Islamic colleges to teach in remote impoverished villages, isolated from friends and family. I also met several exceptionally strong-willed women who had established independent Islamic girls' schools. One spoke of the fundamental role women played in society and the importance of the role of education; for as she put it, 'by educating a woman, you educate a nation.' Sitting in a small village in a remote part of China, she listed to me the various ways in which a young girl's education could have a major impact on the health and social well-being of her future children and grandchildren. Another woman in a large industrial city in northwest China spoke to me about how she established a women's Islamic school, which had quickly grown, and now

had over 500 full and part-time students ranging in age from 5 to 85. In addition to offering a wide range of day and evening classes, the school also was very active in community development work in the more impoverished Muslim villages in the region.

#### Expanding networks

While travelling to different relatively remote regions of China, I was struck again and again by the extent to which Muslim villagers were informed not only about the situation of their co-religionists living in other parts of China, but also about the latest issues concerning the Muslim communities throughout the world. This phenomenon is in part the result of the large number of Chinese Muslims travelling to different regions of China to study, but also the increasing number of students who go overseas to study. Although there are no official records kept, it is estimated that there is a total of between 500 and 1,000 Chinese Muslims presently studying in Egypt, Syria, Pakistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Libya, the Sudan, Turkey, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Al-Azhar has the largest number, with approximately 300 students. Most of the students are sponsored by their family and community, and receive a small stipend at whichever Islamic university they attend. The students at Al-Azhar spoke of the difficulty in adapting to life in such a crowded and overwhelming city, but were also very cognizant of the importance of Al-Azhar and its role in Islamic history. Some, however, expressed disillusionment with the realities of living in a modern Muslim society. For the Muslims of China, who have always been a small minority amongst the Han Chinese majority and who have survived for centuries isolated from the rest of the Islamic world, often experiencing intense periods of persecution, the idealistic expectations they have of Islamic countries can become the basis of considerable disappointment.

The students studying in Damascus seemed the most content. They spoke enthusiastically about their studies, the Syrian people, and their lives in Damascus. With over 100 Chinese students studying there and a constant flow of new students and visitors from China, they were able to keep abreast of conditions back home. I was also able to meet with a student who had graduated from an Islamic university in Iran. Little is known of the students studying in Iran, for

almost all of those who have completed their studies there have chosen to stay. Indeed, this student spoke very highly of the quality of the education and living conditions of the Chinese students in Iran.

As this research project continues to expand, I will interview Chinese Muslim students studying in other centres of Islamic learning throughout the Muslim world, as well as return to China several times over the next few years to document their impact on their communities upon their return. How their experiences overseas influence their identities as both Muslims from China and members of an international Islamic community, is one of the issues that will be addressed. Recent studies of globalization have all focused on Western cultural influences, ignoring among many other important movements, the globalization of Islamic values. However, by concentrating on the role of international centres of Islamic learning, one can reveal both the independent as well as interrelated flows of different Islamic educational traditions throughout the world. ♦

My present interest in the resurgence of Islamic education is the result of several years living in Kunming, the provincial capital of Yunnan Province in southwest China, where I first carried out my doctoral research and then wrote up my dissertation. Upon completing my dissertation, which concentrated on the early history of Islam in China, I decided to begin fieldwork on contemporary issues facing the Muslim minority population of China today. After several months travelling to different regions and meeting with Muslim villagers and religious leaders, I came to the conclusion that a study of the recent resurgence of Islamic education would provide a significant contribution to our understanding of Muslim society in China. Through the course of this research, which concentrated on southwest China, but included interviews with Muslims living in the northwest, I learned of the increasing number of students studying overseas at Islamic universities. I subsequently travelled to the Middle East to interview students there as well.

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#### Notes

1. The combined population of these Muslim groups is presently conservatively estimated to be over 20 million.
2. The degree of government control on religious activities varies from region to region. Government control in Xinjiang is the strongest, and there even small schools within mosques are not allowed.

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