

# **Education, Gender and Islam in China: the place of religious education in challenging and sustaining ‘undisputed traditions’ among Chinese Muslim women**

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## **Abstract**

The essay investigates the place of religious and secular education in the lives of Chinese Muslim women. Education is treated as a site where state and society are reproduced and/or challenged, where tensions arise over control of minds and bodies, and over interpretations and uses of religion and culture. Specifically, the essay compares contrastive situations of female religious education within a matrix of inter-dependent issues such as the diversity of Muslim contexts in China, state treatment of minorities’ rights to religious practice and to education, organization and implementation of religious education, and relations between secular education and Islamic education.

**Keywords:** gender, religious education, role of religion, gendered education,

## 1. Introduction

Education has always been the battleground for traditional ideas and progressive reforms. Noting the vital struggle of Muslim feminists worldwide to provide higher education for girls, Aihwa Ong explains that education in religion is the only way that women will ever undermine the monopoly of men over the interpretation of Islamic law and Islamic practice. Ong (2006, p.41) quotes the Algerian feminist Boutheina Cheriet who observed that ‘at Beijing [1995 World Conference of Women], for the first time, the right to religious higher education became a demand. That would then give us credibility in interpreting the texts’. The Muslim population in China, estimated to total about 25 million believers, is comprised of ten minorities living both in self-administered areas of predominantly Muslim populations and also in widely dispersed settlement patterns, barely distinguishable from their Han Chinese neighbours (Dillon, 1995; Gladney, 1991, 2004; Israeli, 1980). They are separated from each other by language, cultural practices, economic circumstances and geo-political location, but these diverse communities share a salient characteristic: Islamic education as a marker of Muslim identity in a non-Muslim country.

This essay concerns itself with the consequences of women’s participation in, and exclusion from, mosque (and educational) life. Whilst for hundreds of years women’s mosques have been indigenous to Muslim practice in central China’s Hui communities, Uyghur women in Xinjiang are excluded from sites of collective prayer and education only accessible to men. Dongxiang Muslim women in Gansu, providing in a concluding illustration the most extreme case of religious/social invisibility, live their sheltered lives in stark contrast to Hui Muslim women. On the one hand, the mosque may be seen to constitute for women a site of spiritual as well as social transformation, where women and girls study the scriptures, experience the power of learning and move closer to the overriding goal of salvation; where they benefit from the guidance of a female *ahong* (female religious professional whose status is often tantamount to that of an imam) and from access to

mosques (*qingzhen nüsi*) and madrassas (*nüxue*) for women. On the other hand, the mosque constitutes a site of gender segregation where only men are granted access to deeper knowledge of Islam and their leaders interpret gender roles through the patriarchal lens, legitimizing what Agarwal (1994) calls ‘undisputed traditions’ by reference to the Koran and hadiths,.

We propose to examine an unusually diverse situation presented by Islamic education in China in order to ask questions over the national and local contexts in which women have entered religious education or are seen to be entirely absent from sites of education. What does this contrast tell us about the relationship between the central state and the Muslim community when it comes to the educational opportunities of women to be observed among Hui Muslim communities in central China, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, among Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang? How does access to religious education in Henan Province in central China translate into rights for women not enjoyed by their Muslim counterparts in Xinjiang? Does religious education challenge the monopoly by men over women’s choices, and by the same token, does their absence weaken the power and entitlement of women? Or, indeed, how important is the role of religious education in shaping women’s rights and choices compared to the compulsory government education to which all Chinese citizens are entitled?

## **2. Religious Education**

### *2.1. Right to religious education*

All Chinese, including members of minority populations, enjoy the right to education. The Law of Nine-Year Compulsory Education (1986) stipulates six years of primary and three years of middle or lower secondary schooling. However, whilst compulsory, the actual implementation of

the Law was to be carried out in different phases depending on the level of socio-economic development and local conditions (Mackerras, 2003, p.126).

Rights enshrined in the Chinese Constitution and in the Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional National Autonomy include independence of finance, independence of economic planning, independence of arts, science and culture, organization of local police, and use of local language. Modelled on the Soviet-Union, five autonomous regions, thirty prefectures, 117 counties, and three banners were established after Communist takeover. Autonomous administrative areas, as well as the various rights granted to them, are affirmed by the government as a positive example of local self-rule in ethnic areas, and an acknowledgement of minority self-determination unprecedented in Chinese history.

Whilst the Chinese state forbids religious content in public sector education, however, the mushrooming of private/religious schools, in certain ways the unintended consequences of state management policies particularly towards its minority populations, is testimony to the strength of ethno-religious interest groups and to the growing challenge posed to state monopoly over education. In particular in the case of a diverse Muslim population, new local educational strategies by Muslim leaders have led to reassertions of belief and identity as key parameters of local development. Traditionally, mosques have provided religious instruction for children and adults, often incorporating secular content. Today they are allowed to run schools, except in Xinjiang where official fears over separatist movements in the border province have made for strict control of Muslim communities (see below). Mosque-based schools in China offer teaching in the Islamic tradition of *jingtang jiaoyu*, a traditional education infused with the teaching of generations of Chinese religious scholars and *ahong*.

## *2.2. Women's rights to religious education*

The above-cited demand by the Algerian feminist Cheriet for ‘the right to higher religious education’ was interpreted by Aihwa Ong as the only legitimate entry-point for Muslim women to undermine the ‘indisputable tradition’ which patriarchal Islamists imposed on their female counterparts as authentic. The pathway to undermining the hold by political Islamists over disempowered women, Ong holds, that is, Islamists who claim the ‘authenticity’ of the sacred scriptures, can only come from within: women have to be able to contest oppressive gender prescriptions from a position of insider standing and superior scriptural knowledge.

Here we briefly review opportunities for Muslim women to receive religious education in central China, before considering the situation among Uyghur Muslims where such possibilities for women are strictly curtailed. But tradition needs disentangling from ‘traditionalism’ of stultifying patriarchal practices. The authors of the history of women’s mosques, Jaschok and Shui (2000), a history which is unique to Chinese Muslim societies, recreate the trajectory of what is termed by Shaheed (2004) ‘indigenous’ or ‘great ancestor’ practices as an evolution from assigned, segregated and walled-in space of rudimentary knowledge to a site dedicated to learning and authoritative religious leadership. As has been noted by writers such as Kabeer (2003), education does not offer an automatic panacea. It may actually reinforce, even entrench, female subjugation, legitimize and ‘normalize’ patriarch norms and power. Indeed, whilst a number of women’s mosques have evolved a high culture of learning, many others remain in a state of dependency under the religious as well as economic guardianship of men (Jaschok and Shui, 2000).

In Hui Muslim communities in central China *nixue/nüsi* (madrassas/women’s mosques) have functioned historically as providers of female education, mostly religious but arguably also contributing to secular knowledge, and as conduit of both tradition and reform. An important indicator of women’s individual and collective empowerment is therefore emerging as *preservation of tradition*. This is a tradition which is perceived by local Muslims to have proven its value to female congregations, and which is now under attack from the forces of change, rivalry for

resources and income-generation, or the corrosion of modernity, as some leaders would have it, or attacks from increasingly Wahhabi (fundamentalist)-influenced (less so Salafi, modernist, Islam) clerics. These schools of Islam provide increasingly, in the words of Aihwa Ong, ‘alternative ethical norms of humanity and ‘visions of transnational ethics’.

### 2.3. *Women’s mosques – ‘educate women, educate society’ (female ahong)*

For over 300 years, women’s mosques (*qingzhen nüsi*), under the leadership of a female *ahong*, have supported the education of Muslim girls and women, offering the most female-centred and female-controlled educational environment in China. Here girls have been taught basic scriptural knowledge and Persian language and, more recently, Arabic has been added to the curriculum. Women receive ritual instruction and guidance for proper Muslim practice at home. Spiritual and emotional support is provided by the *ahong* to women who seek counsel. The curriculum reflects the long history of education in women’s mosques, with teaching and texts steeped in the mutually reinforcing traditional ideals of Muslim women’s virtue, inspired both by Confucianism and Islam.

Older Muslim women in China point with pride to their unique sites of congregation, their own women leaders, their own Muslim women teachers, and their centuries’ long tradition of women’s mosques, serving the needs of Muslim girls and women during times when non-Muslim girls were commonly left uneducated. These were *halal* spaces where Muslim parents could send their daughters without fear for their reputation, reassured by the presence of female teachers and *ahong* that proper guidance would be provided. They ask why, in recent years, younger Muslim women accuse them of handing down an irrelevant heritage, why their curricula are considered out of touch with modern demands. They wonder how their age-old sites of education for women might adapt to rapidly modernising society and continue what they have always done to great effect: serve girls

and women, the most vulnerable members of a changing society. This is their challenge and their opportunity, as Chinese society experiences change that is gathering ever more momentum. It is an opportunity taken up by some of the women's mosques which in addition to offering religious instruction and vocational training also offer guidance about learning opportunities. For instance they help young women who live in locations remote from employment opportunities, who have few 'marketable' skills or, who are in need of 'respectable' work with education and employment options likely to be accepted by even strict Muslim families.

#### *2.4. Islam and diversification of female education*

Since the 1990s, competition to education offered by women's mosques has come from private religious schools which also offer education for girls and women either as all-female or as co-educational institutions. These receive support from Muslim leaders and believers who, influenced by international Arab-Muslim orthodoxy, are increasingly lukewarm in their espousal of women's mosques. In these private schools, fees are either waived or heavily subsidized by the community, regardless of whether the school is set up outside mosque compounds as Special Knowledge schools (*zhuanke xuexiao*), as Sino-Arabic schools (*zhong a xuexiao*) or as Muslim Culture schools (*musilin wenhua xuexiao*). Subjects range from modern Arabic, Islamic knowledge, Chinese history, to social science, English and IT skills (Jaschok, 2008).

Of influence is the renewed and vigorous contact with the outside world, in this case, the Muslim world of Middle Eastern countries. Whether through the funding of mosque schools or the supply of teachers and textbooks, the *umma* has a considerable effect on the content and organisation of education for Muslim women and girls in China. Not all Muslim communities are equally receptive to such influence, but in certain regions, the impact of Wahhabi orthodoxy is

clearly felt. Education is not a neutral concept, but laden with the values and agendas of those who shape texts and appoint educators.

Illuminating insights are provided by Masumi's (2007) comparison of state-sector education and religious private schools in Ningxia's Hui Muslim communities, suggesting contrasting life trajectories for Muslim girls. The most salient dichotomies oppose adherence to secular and religious values, aspirations for worldly careers and Muslim roles for women (mother, wife, nurse, carer), gender egalitarianism and gender complementarity, or ethnic and Muslim identities. The choice of schooling, Masumi maintains, appears to have a formative influence on the subsequent lives of Muslim girls, informing women's ability to act for themselves, women's struggle for betterment, women's conceptions of a good world and women's yearning for a good afterlife, *houshi*.

### **3. The case of Xinjiang**

#### *3.1. Complementary sites of patriarchy, State and Islam*

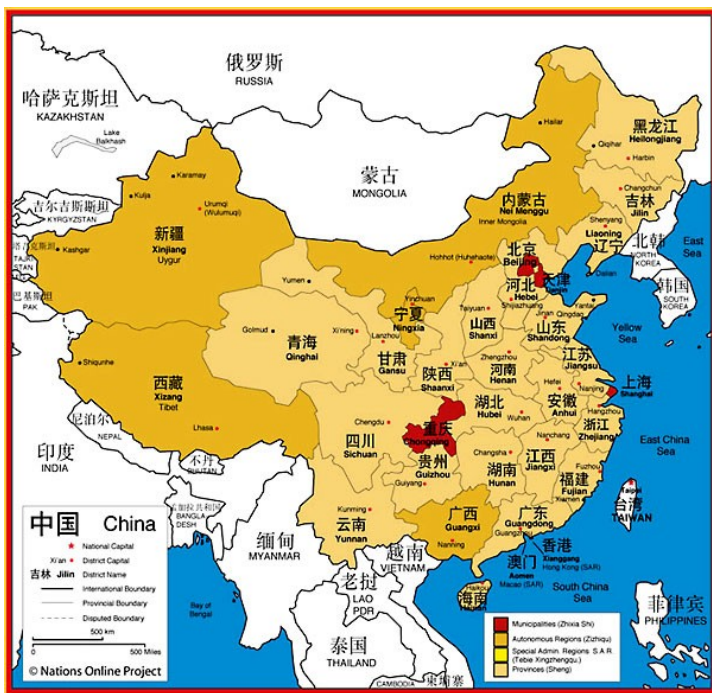
In the case of Xinjiang, state control of mosque activities, importantly educational activities, is all-pervasive. Training and appointment of clergy are regulated by the state-run institutions and strict state regulations forbid Muslims from attending religious schools or mosques until they are 18 years of age. Religious activities and expressions are prohibited in state schools. Complementing state control is the hold of patriarchal leadership over mosque life, rendering this entirely masculinised space inaccessible to women. This male space confines women's religious education to the home, the rudimentary nature of their instructions, such as everyday observance of Muslim diet and conduct, thus rendering them in important ways 'deficient' as Muslims and inferior to men. Indeed, as the anthropologist Xu Lili observes, despite considerable progress such as recently much



improved educational opportunities for girls in state schools and a steady increase in literacy of both women and men (Reyila and Jiman, 2003), despite the comparatively high visibility of Uyghur women in the secular spheres of trade and commerce and the emergence of indigenous (secular) women's self-help organizations, *qiayi*, yet there remains a persistent gender inequality. Xu identifies women's lack of religious participation, so notable in the Hui communities in central China, as an important cause of gender obstruction. Women's voicelessness in a society faced with calls for greater Islamization can only be challenged, she suggests, if women find a way to create their own space and institutions within the religious sphere. Only thus can education benefit women and challenge the patriarchal hold of conservative Islamic leaders over the lives of women (Xu and Jaschok, 2009).

### *3.2. Impact of tensions between State and Islamic institutions on female education*

Under the banner of 'national harmony' and multi-culturalism, the Chinese government implemented a series of preferential policies as in relation to, for example, family planning (allowing for exemption to the 'one-child family' policy), economic development and education (Iredale, Bilik, Guo and Hoy, 2001). Yet despite these preferential policies, progress in the field of family planning and, relevant here, female education is still lacking in many respects. In a recent report on 'Gender Achievements and Progress in Education', presented in Beijing, the UNICEF representative Rima Salah outlined three enduring problems as continuing to obstruct female education: tradition, poverty and lack of political will (Salah, 2005).



Map 1: China provinces and administrative units (source: [www.nationsonline.org](http://www.nationsonline.org))

### 3.3. Force of tradition: keeping girls 'safe' and 'pure'

As mentioned above, the tradition of female-led women's mosques, so influential in Hui Muslim communities in central China, never spread to Xinjiang (Jaschok and Shui, 2000). The

absence of such educational provisions contributed to the difficulties of local Muslim girls' education in particular conservative rural society. Without mosque-based religious education for girls, only the State secular sector would offer the chance for Muslim girls in Xinjiang of formal education.

The development from informal/religious education to formal state (but locally-funded) education in the 1980s, popular elsewhere, was restricted in Xinjiang, if not completely forbidden. This may be explained by a shift in the focus of education to the secular as well as by strict state control over all aspects of education. In the light of the disturbances in the late 1990s, due to official concern over a potential revival of religious fundamentalism which had given rise to suspicion of separatism and even to accusations of terrorism, the Chinese government further tightened control on religious activities, in contrast to other ethnic minority autonomous regions (Ferdinand, 1994; Gladney, 1999; Mackerras, 2003; Roberts, 2004; Yi, 2005). The state's religious oppression provoked resistance among the minorities, fearing the threat to their culture and to their ethnic identity. The massive Han Chinese influx into Xinjiang has furthermore compounded local resentment (Rudelson and Jankowiak , 2004).

In many respects, state education manifests the confrontations and contradictions of the vested interests of the state and of Muslim institutions. Codes of dress and modes of education are eloquent examples of these tensions. A 'suitable' space for girls' schooling and parents' notions of education are two important determinants of the legitimacy of Muslim girls' education. They are very much influenced by the interpretations of tenets of religious laws. On the one hand, purity and modesty are highly-praised qualities required for Muslim women and thus certain ways of veiling are adopted among women believers, such as *hijab* or scarves, depending on the schools of Islam to which they and their family adhere. On the other hand, expressions of faith in state-run schools are strictly prohibited by an assertively atheistic Government. It has been reported that girls were expelled from schools for wearing overly long skirts and for covering their hair (Fuller and Lipman,

2004). Moreover, co-education as practised in the state school system is regarded by some of the more conservative Muslim parents as inappropriate, even in violation of Islamic laws of purity, *haram*, raising concerns over absence of a 'safe space' for daughters (Gladney, 1999).

'Safety' of school-age daughters is an acute and deeply felt source of anxiety for Muslim parents, in rural mountainous areas in particular, where the remoteness of school locations contributes to parental fear. However poor facilities of schools might also be a factor, for example some schools might not be able to provide segregation of lavatories which is against Muslim observances of cleanliness (Jaschok, 2008). Therefore, an important obstructive factor to be considered is the school of Islam, *jiaopai*, to which a Muslim woman and her family belong. State (secular) schools are perceived as male domains and Muslim parents are unwilling to expose daughters to danger, imagined and real. This distrust is reinforced by the lack of suitable female teachers and inappropriate, dilapidated facilities. Repeatedly, interviews conducted by researchers such as Xu Lili (2009) point to the inability of many rural schools to allow girls to observe Muslim codes of purity, propriety and cleanliness, and to their failure to provide water and separate lavatories, as a significant deterrent. The result has been widespread resistance on the part of conservative parents to permit Muslim daughters to enter secular co-educational schools.

The meaning of notions such as 'safe space', 'purity' and 'modesty' in the Muslim contexts is by no means static. Yet these concepts are often translated by local religious leaders, who are particularly influential in the rural communities, into rigid prescriptions for husbands to transmit to their wives at home. That women may themselves become complicit in their physical as well as intellectual confinement is not surprising. Authoritative pronouncements by religious leaders in mosques and by husbands at home create for too many women in remote and closed Muslim communities a culture of habitual compliance. Aspiring to a paradigm of exemplary female Muslim conduct entails all too often abnegation of constitutional rights, such as entitlement to state education.

### *3.4. Female education as contestation over belonging*

Daughters' legitimate claim to state education is furthermore limited by parental perceptions of education, both in regard to the content and to the relevance of the state school curriculum to their daughters' Muslim duties in society. The Qur'an, Islamic doctrines and Muslim practices reflecting the strong identification with a spiritual 'home' (the birthplace of Islam) that ultimately overrides the home of their birth, are the pillars of education in Muslim contexts. From the Muslim parents' point of view, the passing on of their culture and religion is the main task of education. And their notion of education and perceived value of schooling play a determining role in making decisions. The state school curriculum is a standardized national curriculum (Iredale, Bilik, Guo and Hoy, 2001, p.81), translated into minority languages and lacking the history of ethnic minorities, a history which Muslims consider vital to their culture and identity. In addition, where there is reference to ethnic minority history in the classroom it is often problematic since framed by officially sanctioned master narratives of a superior Han civilization, giving rise to resentment among the minority communities (Hansen, 2001). Apart from the frustration over distortions and bias, the relevance of education is also a concern among parents. In many Muslim contexts 'in particular...girls, either do not go to the state schools, or leave them after a comparatively short time in favour of the mosque because their parents are not convinced of the value of learning Chinese or mathematics, but prefer them to learn the Qur'an, Arabic and Persian (Mackerras, 1999, p.40).'

The choice of schools is thus not only the outcome of parental religious conservatism but also derived from their anxiety to preserve their ethnic/cultural identity. Girls' access to education requires sanction from the community which however reproduces, endorses and reinforces the traditional gender roles of women. Studies show that Muslim parents may opt to choose minority-

language schools in order to preserve their cultural and ethnical distinctiveness. For example, Benson observes that in Xinjiang, even in urban areas, there is a 'division of labour' among Uyghur sons and daughters. While the former attend Chinese-language schools for essential language training, the latter are usually placed in Uyghur-language schools (Benson, 2004). In fact, the rationale is based on strict adherence to traditional gender roles. Sons who can obtain necessary religious knowledge from the mosques, are expected to make use of improved social mobility, given the Chinese language learned at school, in the interest of the family. On the other hand, daughters are expected to be mothers and carers who will be responsible for transmitting the important Uyghur language and culture to the next generation (Gladney, 2004).

### *3.5. Socialization and female education*

It is argued by a number of students of Islam in China that sons and daughters growing up in Muslim families are treated more equally than is the case in Han Chinese families. For instance, Reyila (2003) maintains that the Qur'an represents an exemplary egalitarian notion of gender and compares the treatment accorded to minority girls favourably to the discriminations suffered by daughters in Han Chinese families (Croll, 1994; Parish et al, 1993; Zhang et al, 2003). However, she also concedes that Muslim families actively support and implement a distinctly gendered way of upbringing for sons and daughters as proper Muslim conduct. The outcome is frequently the legitimization of a daughter's socialisation into the subordinate position in both household and economy. Reyila shows how daughters are more likely to be deprived of chances of schooling, and they are more ready to accept the traditional gender roles. Where a rural household is struck by poverty, the number of children will be a crucial factor in influencing a parent's decision over whether the investment in education should be extended to the daughter. Last but not least, it is not uncommon that female members of a large household will be tied up by housework, and daughters

are required to stay at home helping with domestic chores to care for siblings instead of completing their education (Mackerras, 2003).

Furthermore, in line with common practices re/presented by the state as ‘characteristic’ of minority culture, the legal minimum age at which Uyghur girls can marry is frequently lower than the age limit set for Han Chinese. Early marriage practices are again increasingly common, particularly in the south of Xinjiang (Xu and Jaschok, 2009). These in turn affect girls’ access to education and parents’ willingness to consider the ‘value’ of their daughter’s education beyond the most rudimentary knowledge - even given recent measures by the state to provide free education. Gendered perceptions of the pertinence of education to women’s lives are overriding factors in deciding the fate of daughters (Reyila and Jiman, 2003).

#### **4. From Geopolitics to Gender politics**

Since the 1980s there has been a noticeable revival of Islamic influences in Xinjiang. In spite of state control of religion, Islamic influence has strengthened among minorities because of a wide range of reasons. First of all, the steady influx of Han Chinese into Xinjiang in the past few decades, actively encouraged by the Chinese state, has been perceived by many Uyghurs as a threat to their culture and religion. As the most numerous ethnic minority group in the region, resistance to state policies has assumed a number of forms. Scholars like Fuller have noted growing emphasis on those ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and religious characteristics that distinguish their way of life from that of Han Chinese (Fuller and Lipman, 2004, p. 339). Moreover, the ever increasing cross-border trade since the 1980s, especially from Pakistan, has been an important factor in contributing to the growing role of Islam in Xinjiang. These traders not only provide information about Islam, whether in Central Asia or in the Middle East, to the local Muslim population, but they also bring with them very direct messages promoted as ‘Islamic’ practices that pertain specifically to the

Arab-Muslim paradigm of female conduct – such as are conveyed in the images of women wearing *hijab* and of gender-segregated life-styles. Roberts maintains that due to outside Islamic influence and due to such foreign financial support for local educational institutions, private/religious schools have come to flourish throughout the region (Roberts, 2004, p.226). Here the Qur'an, Arabic and Persian languages are at the heart of school education, whereas these subjects are absent from the state education curriculum, creating dissatisfaction and even resistance among Muslim communities (Roberts, 2004).

The heightened religious impact in everyday life is growing in strength. In southern Xinjiang, especially in the towns of Khotan or Kashgar which have had historically close links with Pakistan, veiled women are seen more frequently and more children attend religious schools than in the northern part of Xinjiang (Roberts, 2004). Moreover, the enhanced stature of the Islamic Academy funded by the Islamic Development Bank in the 1980s illustrates the growing links with the Arab-Muslim world, while the increasing number of students attending Uyghur-language schools instead of Chinese-language schools also expresses Muslim parents' educational preference. Yet research suggests inter-generational tensions with growing concern on the part of the older generation over diminishing knowledge of Islam by the young, over contempt of the young for all that relates to 'the traditional way' and their seduction by the materialism of mainstream Han society and its consumer morality (Fuller and Lipman, 2004).

Scholars like Gladney (1999) argue that Muslims in rural areas are increasingly inclined to be influenced by the traditionalist/fundamentalist ideology and are thus more conservative and that the revival of a fundamentalist Islamic influence to be noted in rural Muslim communities in recent years is actually related to the growing pan-Islamic movement which has spread to the region from Central Asia. The impact on gender relations and on the physical and social mobility of girls and women sees women increasingly excluded from the labour market and girls barred from education (Iredale and Guo, 2003; Dillon, 2004). In considering female education, we become aware of the



intimate interplay of geo-politics, religious and commercial traffic with local customs and family dynamics in which gender is shaped and configured.

## **5. State policies and local educational reforms**

Lack of political will is apparent in the weak implementation of laws of education, leaving girls particularly disadvantaged. Compulsory free education policies may not be enacted at local levels, rather they are contravened or bypassed by other local authority statutes. Studies indicate that direct and indirect costs are the major obstacles for girls' schooling (Boyle, Brock, Mace and Sibbons, 2002; UNESCO report, 2004). These direct costs range from tuition fees, uniforms, shoes, school books and supplies while indirect costs include the opportunity costs where families cannot afford the loss of income or labour contribution. The economic and educational reforms, to a great extent, are detrimental to women, especially to ethnic minority women in rural areas. These reforms significantly increase the direct and indirect costs for schooling and therefore, influencing parents' decisions, calculations of the opportunity costs of sending a daughter to school, and most important of all, their notion of the value of schooling (Hooper, 1991; Kwong, 2003).

A series of educational reforms have been implemented in recent years in the hope to address problems created by the heavy financial burden on counties and townships. Obligated by the state to cover educational expenses with ever more limited resources, local authorities had required students in rural areas to pay for textbooks, to pay school levy fees and other miscellaneous fees, rendering parents unable to give their children the most elementary education. However, since 2001, textbooks have been provided free of charge to poor rural secondary and elementary students in targeted counties where implementation of nine-year compulsory education had yet to be popularized. Over the five years of the current Eleventh Five-Year Plan, announced in 2005, central government plans have progressively abolished, in incremental fashion, all user charges for rural

education (Brock, Hu and Wong, 2008). In 2006, the 'Two exemptions and one subsidy policy' (TEOS) was formally implemented in the under-developed western region (Sun, Zhao and Wong, 2008). Although a number of scholars (for example, Sun, Zhao and Wong, 2008) recognize the enormous potential for progress that implementation of TEOS promises for families held back by poverty, others (Brock, Hu and Wong, 2008) treat the ultimate outcome of these educational reforms with greater caution. Given the many challenges encountered during the implementation of free education for all, they hold, it is too early to evaluate the benefits of this new initiative in particular for the most disadvantaged sectors of population. Among these challenges, cultural/religious strictures on female education so firmly rooted in patriarchal kinship system, in patrilocal marriage and in patriarchal control over female mobility, must be counted among the most resistant to state reform.

In this grey area of interpretation, gender-disaggregated literacy/illiteracy data are illuminating. The 1990 population census provides us with literacy rates which illustrate certain ethnic and gender disparities among the population of Xinjiang. While the total literacy rates of Han Chinese (87.14%) compare favourably to that of the Uyghur population (75.32%), Uyghur men are seen to be better off than their female counter-parts; whilst the former was attaining literacy rates at 77.99%, the latter reached 72.5% (Bhalla and Brenner, 2006, pp.66-67). Constituting the largest ethnic minority group in Xinjiang, a comparison of the illiteracy rates of Uyghur men and women in rural and urban areas can be regarded as a valid indicator of the predicament of girls' education in the conservative cultural milieu of rural society. Available figures indicate that state policies to eradicate illiteracy are more effective in urban areas (see Table 1). In spite of the impressive progress achieved in eliminating illiteracy rates within the last decade, a stark regional inequality is obvious. Gender disparities in both rural and urban areas and regional inequality between women endure: there is nearly a 70% decrease in illiteracy among Uyghur women in urban areas compared

to 60% for women in the countryside, leaving in the year 2000 the illiteracy rate of rural Uyghur women nearly double that of urban Uyghur women.

Literacy is measured in terms of a person’s ability to recognize a certain number of Chinese characters. Lack of Mandarin literacy has undoubted economic impact, limiting employment opportunities in the wider labor market where interaction with Han Chinese demands linguistic competence. On the other hand, the generally high level of illiteracy present among particularly rural Uyghur women might be interpreted as an expression of their determination to preserve their ‘Uyghur culture’ through resistance to learning the ‘language of upward mobility’ alien to their own culture.

	1990			2000			2005		
	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female
Urban	18.14	15.88	20.39	6.46	6.17	6.74	7.46	6.44	8.41
Rural	29.40	26.51	32.29	12.80	12.30	13.31	10.39	9.49	11.32

Table 1: Gender-disaggregated illiteracy rates of urban and rural Uyghur men and women<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, given the heavily gendered literacy rates, one might conclude that state policies contribute to the educational disempowering of this most vulnerable group either through lack of political will or complicity with local patriarchal institutions, whether through blocking girls’ access to education or confining them in the home. However, a closer examination of the complex interplay and dynamics underlying female education is required: what mediates between state policies and the family’s decision to have a child educated in state schooling? What makes these policies eventually *more* detrimental to minority women in rural areas as opposed to women in urban areas? Why is it that minority enrolment rates in middle schools have dropped significantly in some areas while not in others? Can any factor other than economic constraints explain these developments? Girls’ chances of schooling would not need to depend on their claim to the family’s

<sup>1</sup> *Source:* Xinjiang Population Census in 1990, 2000 and 2005. China 1% Population Sample Survey – Xinjiang According to the Chinese government, a full census will be conducted every ten years. An inter-census population survey, also called 1% population sample survey, will be conducted in-between two full censuses.

limited resources, if their parents were to believe that education is of the same importance to their daughters as it is to their sons. Relaxed state family planning and lower marital age would not necessarily have to translate into subordinate positions of women, if they were to enjoy a certain degree of control over their own bodies. The different realities facing rural and urban ethnic minority women point to the important facilitating role played by the community and to the significance of their local cultural milieu from which the justifications and sanction for traditional social norms are drawn.

## **6. Contexts and uses of education**

### *6.1. Education at the intersection of religion, culture and identity formation*

Islam, as a religious system – its professional personnel, its believers and their interpretations of its tenets and religious laws – influences all aspect of the daily life of Muslim men and women alike. Education, as a site of cultural reproduction, is thus symbiotically linked to the survival of Islamic faith and Muslim identity. However, by the same token, it is also a state's most urgent priority to exercise control over this same site. Education thus becomes the field of tension where the vested and competing interests of the state and of patriarchal Islamic institutions intersect, their respective dominance marked by controls over bodies and minds of recipients of education and by the moral and social consequences on society.

Issues and challenges underlying ethnic minority girls' education in Xinjiang interlink with complex geo-political, religious, cultural, and gender concerns at various levels of society. The Chinese government in fact has launched numerous development policies in the region; however, the outcome has been ambiguous, with local development processes complicated by enduring

unequal gender power relations within the patriarchal structures of family and the mosque, and reinforced by ethno-religious influences that play into local, regional and global contexts.

The interplay of competing sources of authority at the meso-level of society may be interpreted as the manifestations of more or less covert resistance on the part of ethnic minorities to the Han state, playing itself out differently in rural and urban areas. Such responses that so commonly translate the preservation of a given local culture and religious practise into political demands for greater Islamicization of social life require further research (Tsui, 2003). Local ideals, aspirations, values and life-worlds that constitute the community in which ethnic minority women in Xinjiang reside are a subject deserving of closer investigation. It is not unlikely that in facing a more globalized world and perceived threat to their existence, there may be among Muslim communities in Xinjiang those who will increasingly rely on a stricter interpretation of Islamic laws so as to safeguard and reinforce their cultural and ethnic identity, muting the voices of those with weak religious, political and public representation. As a result, the 'undisputed tradition' justified by references to religion and identity 'is accepted as a natural and self-evident part of the social order, which goes without saying and *is not open to questioning or contestation* - that which is accepted the "undiscussed, unnamed, admitted without argument or scrutiny" (Agarwal, 1994, p.58)'. For those girls who dare to defy such cultural decrees, current fieldwork indicates, do so often at great risk to their personal safety ('Women in Muslim Contexts' research, 2006-2011). Moreover, having knowledge only of one dominant culture of authentic 'Muslimness', constantly living under the severe gaze of family and community, very few can resist gender prescriptions all too often enforced in the name of religion and tradition of which they have too inadequate an understanding so as to challenge interpretations(NGO-Committee on Freedom of Belief, 2001./42). Under these circumstances, women's agency and capacity to challenge or transform the parameters of their 'natural' life cycle are, and remain, heavily circumscribed.

## 6.2. *Dongxiang Muslim women; educating the force of habit*

In Hanzeling Village in Dongxiang Nationality Autonomous County, Gansu, comprising a total of 249 households and 238 families, a primary school provides education for five grades. Out of a total of 229 students, 77 are girls. These statistics are regarded by local government officials as evidence of successful implementation of central government policies, indicating parents' acceptance of daughters' rights to education and physical as well as social mobility. The anthropologist Ma Yaping reports that, as of 2007, despite exemption from educational fees and various official campaigns to encourage Dongxiang Muslim parents to send their daughters to school, and keep them at school, the average schooling for girls is two years, at most ('Women in Muslim Contexts' research project, 2006-211, unpublished Report).

With women bound up with family and confined to their home, the education many respondents aspire to most ardently, so the anthropologist Ma Yaping has found, is religious education: to support and console them in daily life, to gain greater knowledge of the wisdom of Islam, to prepare for afterlife, and to smooth relations with family members around them. Representative of the many conversations with Dongxiang Muslim women is the following observation by a middle-aged woman, living her entire life within the walls which surround the family home:

'Girls do not have the chance to study in school. There's no use for me to have literate culture. What is the use of that for a farmer? I know how to farm anyway, [laughs], education is pointless. I prefer to study at the mosque; of the two options [secular or religious education], I prefer to study at the mosque [confident, determined tone]. Being a Hui [a Muslim], praying is most important. Whether or not you study in school, as long as you know how to work on the land, it's all right. Women don't leave the house anyway' (Interview conducted in September 2007, 'Women in Muslim Contexts' research project, Ma Yaping, unpublished Report).

Among Dongxiang Muslims in Gansu Province, deficient government education and also deeply ingrained religio-cultural ambivalence over the relevance of secular education to women's primary responsibilities as wives and mothers, makes improved access to Islamic education a central aspiration for local women. Living their days in the 'safe space' of their homes, as before them generations of women have done, it is religious knowledge which is seen by these women as potentially most transformative of the quality of life. Religious more than secular education is obviously elusive to women who have little contact with the government school system. But given the ubiquity of mosques (for men only), by their very local nature access to mosques would allow women to make greater inroad into village life than is possible in the limited benefits derived from state education. Moreover, Chinese Muslims have their indigenous role model.

We started out with a question over the role of religious education in women's lives, in increasing women's choices and their willingness to exercise their rights. Whilst the tradition of women's mosques under the leadership of female *ahong* such as are to be found in Henan province, may right now be still inconceivable for Dongxiang women, when Islamic education was first made available to 17<sup>th</sup> century Hui Muslim women in central China, their seclusion from public society was seemingly equally fated to remain forever unchallenged. Yet, a modest initiative for segregated Islamic education for Muslim women culminated over time in women's own institutions presided over by a female leadership where they could pray and learn. This made for the emergence of women's strong sense of their own (equal) worth and in great pride over their own culture and independent traditions. Some women *ahong* have moved into public positions, into positions of authority, providing role models for others to follow. Religious education in many women's mosques has expanded to incorporate knowledge of the secular world and of vocational learning. Whilst undoubtedly China's constitution and legal provisions have granted Hui Muslim women the *rights* to participate in mainstream society on an equal basis with non-Muslim women, we would argue however that it was the historical opportunity granted to women by opportunities for Islamic

education (institutionalized as women's mosque) which enabled women to create together with men a *legitimate social and cultural space* in their communities in which to exercise these rights (Jaschok and Shui, 2000). Where women negotiate multiple identities – whether as women, as members of an ethnic group or as members of a religious tradition – secular and religious education have a role to play in addressing both socio-political and religious needs.

### 6.3 *In conclusion*

Education is a site where state and society are reproduced and/or challenged, where tensions arise over control of resources and space, as well as over definitions of culture, identity and progress.

State interests and power prerogatives, government treatment of minority populations and management of religion intersect with geopolitics to shape the flexibility women have to negotiate rights and entitlements. Whether religious or secular, education for female Muslims in China provides rich grounds for the investigation of central power contestations between an assertively secularist state and local Muslim communities. How traditions of female religious education are contested, downgraded and modernized place their advocates and critics right at the intersection of central development discourses. If women are the 'boundary markers' of social identity, their construction takes place in a field of force that is the site of education.

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<sup>2</sup> This article is an output from the programme Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts, funded by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) for the benefit of developing countries. The views expressed are not necessarily those of DFID.