



---

**THE HUI MUSLIM AND ISLAMIC TRANSNATIONALISM  
DURING REPUBLIC OF CHINA**

**Mai Jianjun**

Assistant Professor, Department of Fundamental and Inter-Disciplinary Studies (FIDS) Abdul Hamid Abu Sulayman Kulliyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (AHAS KIRKHS), International Islamic University, Malaysia

---

**Abstract**

The Hui Muslims is the largest Muslim minority ethnic group in China. During Republic of China (1911-1949) period, the Hui Muslims launched Islamic revival movement. Islamic transnationalism was one of the most important components of this movement. This article explores the phenomenon of Islamic transnationalism among the Hui Muslim community during this period. It finds out that Islamic transnationalism in the Republican period was influenced and propelled by several major factors, such as modern steamboat technology, the Hui Muslim overseas students, Sino-Japanese war and the flourishing Hui Islamic press. As a result, it enforced and increased the consciousness of transnationalism Islamic ummah among the Hui Muslim communities in China.

**Keywords:** Hui Muslim, Islamic Transnationalism, Republic of China.

## Introduction

The Hui is one of the major minority ethnic groups and the largest Muslim group in China. The general view among the historians regarding the origin of the Hui Muslims in China is that the Hui people are the descendants of ancient Arab and Persian Muslim merchants who came to China through ancient overland and maritime Silk Road during the Tang-Song dynasties (618-1279 AD), and the war captives from Central Asia and Middle East transported to China by Mongol army in 13th century.<sup>1</sup> The Hui Muslim was considered as foreign guest (*fanke*) during the Tang-Song era. Its identity gradually evolved until it became a distinctive ethnic group officially recognized by the government in the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties.<sup>2</sup> Immersed in an environment where more than 90% of the total population was the Han Chinese whose beliefs are dominated by Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, the Hui Muslims has undertaken great pressures to resist cultural assimilation, social and political discrimination and suppression. Tremendous sacrifices and efforts were devoted by the Hui intellectuals and Islamic scholars to retain the Hui's Islamic faith.

In 1911, Chinese nationalists overthrew Manchu Qing dynasty and established Republic of China (1911-1949). The Republican era (1911-1949) was a period of significant social and political change, marked by the emergence of new ideologies, political movements, and social groups. With the birth of the first democratic constitution in 1912, Chinese people was endowed with freedom of religion, freedom of speech and freedom of associations. Inspired by the nationalist movement and New Cultural movement in the Republic, Chinese Hui Muslims launched Islamic revival movement which was characterized by flourishing Islamic press and Islamic associations as well as the development of Islamic transnationalism. This article explores the phenomenon of Islamic transnationalism among the Hui Muslim community during this period.

## Historical Background

After almost three centuries, the Manchu Qing finally collapsed in the wave of Chinese nationalist movements. The Republic of China was established by Chinese nationalists led by Sun Yat-sen in 1911. However, the early Republic was unable to overcome the infighting between political and military factions. From the years 1916 to 1928, China's Warlord era, competing military cliques supported by western powers like UK, France, Germany and USA as well as Japan ruled a fragmented country, exercising power within their respective fiefs. A group of the Hui Muslim warlords emerged from the local elite to establish power over strategic areas such as Gansu, Ningxia, and Qinghai, building political leverage for the Hui Muslims. Non-Muslim warlords found it advantageous to team up with the local Hui Muslim leaders. By the end of the tumultuous Warlords Era, the Hui Muslims had become a group of increasing strategic importance to the state. Some Muslim leaders, such as Ma Fuxiang, and Bai Chongxi, held influential positions and played significant roles in military and political affairs. Their presence in the government gave the Hui Muslims a voice and representation at the national level.

---

1. Huizu Jianshi *Bianxiezu*, *Huizu Jianshi*. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press, 1978. p 1.

2. Tongxian, Fu. *History of Islam in China*. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press. 2000. p 54

Since the late Qing dynasty till the end of Sino-Japan war, foreign imperialism became the biggest threat of the very survival of China as an independent country. China's sovereignty and territorial rights were severely compromised. China was in fact under partial or semi colonization. Especially during the Sino-Japan war, when vast territories of China were occupied by Japanese, millions of Chinese people were directly under Japanese rule, China was at the edge of total colonization by Japan. During the Sino-Japan war, in an effort to encourage unrest and possible secession, Japanese agents emphasized ethnic differences among the peoples living in the Chinese state. Shortly after the establishment of the colonial state of Manzhouguo (Manchuria) in Japanese-occupied northeast China in 1931, Japan founded Muslim associations that employed local Muslim leaders who were willing to cooperate in carrying out Japanese policies.<sup>3</sup> In the early 1930s, the Japanese army also began dropping propaganda leaflets from airplanes announcing its support for the creation of an independent Muslim state throughout Xinjiang and the Gansu corridor. This new Muslim country would be called Huihuiguo (Huihui State).<sup>4</sup>

The threats of imperialism and secessionism led to a change in the rhetoric of the Chinese nationalists from a Han-centered nationalist slogan, "quchudalu, fu wo zhonghua" (Expel the minority aliens, restore the Chinese nation) to one emphasizing the equality of all ethnic groups, "wuzugonghe" (The republic of five races), regardless of their racial, religious and cultural differences. Nationalist government led by Sun Yat-sen declared that "China was the Republic of five minzus (nationalities or races)," namely the Han, the Hui, Meng (Mongol), Man (Manchu) and the Zang (Tibetan). All five minzus were in one single family, and all were equal.<sup>5</sup> After the victory in overthrowing the Manchu Qing, the Nanjing Provisional Government of the Republic of China led by Song Zhongshan, framed the Provisional Constitution of the Republic of China in 1912. The constitution stated that "the people of the Republic of China are no different in race, class and religion before the law, all are equal" "people have the right of freedom of religion".<sup>6</sup> For the first time in China's history, the racial equality and freedom of religion were formally declared by Chinese government and written in country's constitution.

The social-political situation during the Republican era provided great opportunity for the Hui Muslims to launch Islamic revival movement in order to propagate Islamic teachings to both Muslims and non-Muslims in China, and promote and strengthen Islamic faith among the Hui Muslim communities.

During the Republican period, nearly 300 newspapers and periodicals were published by the Hui Muslims.<sup>7</sup> From 1900 till 1949, there were more than 100 the Hui Muslim and Islamic associations established by the Hui Muslims at provincial and national level.<sup>8</sup> A great number of new Islamic schools were built. What's more important, for the first time in Islamic history of China, the Hui Muslim students were

3. Qiu Shusen (ed), *The History of China's Hui (Zhongguo Huizu Shi)*. Yinchuan, Ningxia People's Press, 2012, p 650

4. Ibid.

5. Yu Zhengui, *Chinese Successive Governments and Islam*. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press. 2012, p 230

6. Ibid, p 231

7. Ma Bozhong. *The Statistics Table of China Muslim newspapers and periodicals During the Republic Period*. Huizu Yanjiu VolumE 4, 2008

8. Guo Qingxiang, "Luelun 20 shijiqianbanqi de huizushetuan" [Brief Introduction To The Hui Organizations In The First Half Of 20th Century]. *Ningxia Social Science*, Volume No 1. 1990, pp 55-61

sent in batches to study in universities in Muslim countries, which was one of the major factors contributed to the development of Islamic transnationalism in Republic of China.

### Islamic Transnationalism during Republic of China

China's Hui Muslims have a long history of interconnection and interactions with their coreligionists from other Muslim countries. From as early as 7-8 century, when Arab, Persian and Central Asian Muslims came to China through Silk Road, to flourishing of Sufi orders in Northwest China in 19<sup>th</sup> century, Islamic transnationalism through Islamic da'wah, education, pilgrimage and Sufi preaching made profound impacts to Islam and the Hui Muslims in China. Islamic transnationalism reached the high point after Manchu Qing dynasty collapsed and Republic of China was established.

Several major factors contributed to the development of Islamic transnationalism during the Republican period.

Firstly, during the time of the Republic, the modern steamboat technology made overseas travel much easier, the interaction between the Hui Muslims in China and their Muslim brothers in other Muslim countries increased enormously. Apart from pilgrimage and other purposes of traveling, as far as Islamic transnationalism is concerned, the most important forms of travel was undertaken by Hui Islamic scholars.

In 1913 Wang Haoran Ahong<sup>9</sup>, one of the most prominent Islamic scholars and educators during Republic of China visited Istanbul after his hajj trip, he was granted a meeting with Sultan of Othman Empire. The Sultan gave more than a thousand Islamic books to Wang Ahong and sent two Quranic *hafiz* to go to China with him.<sup>10</sup> After his return, Wang Haoran Ahong founded several Muslim primary schools in Beijing. Later He went to Shanghai, Henan, Nanjing to promote the new Islamic schools and many followed his ambitions and founded more schools in many places of China where the Hui Muslims settled.<sup>11</sup>

In the early 1920s another great Hui Islamic scholar and Quran translator, Wang Jingzhai Ahong visited Cairo and built the initial contacts with the Azhari ulama, making the presence of Muslims in China publicized in Egypt through mass media for the first time.<sup>12</sup> In 1932, Ma Songting Ahong, the president of Chengda Teacher's Academy, the most important Islamic school in Republic of China, visited the king of Egypt and the president of Al-Azhar University and brought back over four hundred books donated by the king and Al-Azhar University as well as two professors from Al-Azhar.<sup>13</sup> Based on these donations Chengda built a library and named it after King Fuad.

---

9. Ahong is a Persian word, means imam, scholar.

10. Ying Boqing, *The Biography of Wang Haorang Ahong*. Chinese Muslim, No. 2, 1982, pp.8-11

11. Ibid

12. Feng Jinyuan, "Wang Jingzhai Ahong", In: Bai Shouyi (ed), *The History of China's Hui*. Beijing Zhonghua Book Store, 2007, p 1435

13. Mao Yufeng, "Muslim Educational Reform in 20th-Century China: The Case of the Chengda Teachers Academy". *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* [Online], 33, 2011. <<http://journals.openedition.org/>> Accessed September 1, 2020.

Secondly, the Hui Muslim students who were dispatched by Chinese Islamic schools to study in overseas Islamic universities, especially Azhar University in Egypt, served as an important transnational bridge between Hui Muslims in China and Muslims in other countries.

Since 1930, more than 40 Hui Muslim students in six batches from Chengda Teacher's Academy, Shanghai Islamic Normal School and Mingde Islamic school were sent to study in Al-Azhar University in Egypt.<sup>14</sup> Though they called "students" they were in fact mature scholars who had worked as imams, translators, and Arabic instructors in cities and provinces across China.

One of the most important works these Hui overseas students did was translation of important articles and books by prominent scholars in Egypt. The articles on variety of topics from the *Al-Manar* and *Al-Fath*, the two famous journals in Egypt were translated by the Hui Muslim students studying in Egypt and regularly published on Islamic journals in Republic of China.<sup>15</sup> In 1933, *Risalah al-Tawhid* by Muhammad Abuduh was translated into Chinese by Ma Jian, one of the most excellent Hui students and scholars in Azhar, and serialized on Yue Hua journal in China till the end of 1934. Another Hui Azhari student Pang Shiqian translated The History of Islamic Law by Professor Muhammad Khuzuli of the University of Egypt, and began to serialize in 1933.<sup>16</sup>

Not only Arabic and Islamic books and articles were translated into Chinese, but also Chinese classical books and philosophy were translated into Arabic and introduced to Egypt as well. Ma Jian translated Analects of Confucius (551–479 b.c.e.), the Lun Yu. In 1935 his translation was published in Cairo as *Kitab al-Hiwar li Kunfushiyu* (Confucius's book of dialogues).

Thirdly, the military defeat in the war against Japan forced the nationalist government of Republic of China to seek supports both politically and financially from other countries including Muslim countries in Southeast Asia and Middle East. In 1938 the Chinese Nationalist government began to send official missions to various parts of the Islamic world to publicize its side of the Sino-Japanese war. Between the years 1938 and 1942, four official missions were dispatched to countries such as Egypt, India, Turkey, Malaya, Afghanistan, Iran, and Iraq, etc.<sup>17</sup> Besides official missions, the Hui Muslims themselves also sent delegations to many Muslim countries. From 1937 to 1942, six Hui Muslim goodwill mission delegations visited Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern countries to seek support from their brothers and sisters in those regions. Their visits were warmly welcomed. In return, Muslims from Southeast Asian countries also organized goodwill mission delegations and visited China.<sup>18</sup>

Fourthly, the flourishing Hui Muslim Islamic press during the Republican period played a significant role in promoting Islamic transnationalism in China.

14. Yu, 2012, p 279

15. Benite *Taking 'Abduh to China: Chinese-Egyptian intellectual contact in the early twentieth century*. In James L. Gelvin and Nile Green (ed.) *Global Muslims in the age of steam and print* (pp 249-267). University of California Press, 2014, p 253

16. Masumi Matsumoto. *Rationalizing patriotism among Muslim Chinese: The impact of the Middle East on the Yue Hua journal*. In Stéphane A. Dudoignon, Hisao Komatsu, Yasushi Kosugi. (eds.), *Intellectuals in the modern Islamic world: transmission, transformation, communication* (pp.117-142). New York: Routledge, 2006, p 131

17. Bodde, Derk. "China's Muslim Minority". *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol. 15, No. 18, 1946, pp 281-284

18. Qiu Shusen, 2012, p 571.



Almost all Islamic newspapers and periodicals founded by Hui Muslims set up a special column to provide information about Muslims in other parts of the world. Some Hui Islamic journals such as Yue Hua engaged in exchanges with 22 Islamic journals from other countries.<sup>19</sup> This greatly increased the consciousness of transnational Muslim ummah among the Hui Muslims in China. In 1934, China Islamic Da'wah Association (zhongguoyisilanbudaohui) sent Yin Guangyu to attend the second World Islamic Conference held in Jerusalem, and he delivered a speech in the conference.<sup>20</sup>

### Conclusion

The special social-political condition during Republic of China period provided a great opportunity for the Hui Muslims to launch Islamic revival movement. Islamic transnationalism, as an important component of Islamic revival movement during the Republican era, was influenced and propelled by multiple factors. First, the modern steamboat technology facilitated enormously the interconnection between Hui Muslims in China and Muslims in other countries. Second, The Hui overseas students as a transnational bridge contributed significantly to the interaction between the Hui and their coreligionists in middle east. Third, the Sino-Japanese war forced Chinese nationalist government to actively engage in establishing good relationships with Muslim countries. Lastly, the Hui Islamic press played a significant role in promoting Islamic transnationalism in Republic of China. consequently, it enforced and increased the consciousness of transnational Muslim ummah among the Hui Muslim communities.

### REFERENCES

- Benite, Zvi Ben-Dor (2014). Taking 'Abduh to China: Chinese-Egyptian intellectual contact in the early twentieth century. In James L. Gelvin and Nile Green (ed.) *Global Muslims in the age of steam and print* (249-267). University of California Press.
- Bodde, Derk (1946). China's Muslim Minority. *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol. 15, No. 18.
- Feng Jinyuan (200/). "Wang Jinzhai Ahong", In: Bai Shouyi (ed), *Zhongguo huihuiminu shi* [The History of China's Hui]. Beijing Zhonghua Book Store.
- Guo Qingxiang (1990). Luelun 20 shijiqianbanqi de huizushetuan [Brief Introduction To The Hui Organizations In The First Half of 20th Century]. *Ningxia Social Science*, No 1. pp 55-61.
- Huizu Jianshibianxiezhu (1978). *Huizu jianshi* [Brief History of the Hui] Yinchuan, Ningxia People's Press.
- Ma Bozhong (2008). *Mingguo shiqi zhongguo musuling baokan tongji biao* [The Statistics Table of China Muslim newspapers and periodicals During the Republic Period]. *Huizu Yanjiu*, No. 4. pp. 48-63.
- Mao Yufeng. Muslim Educational Reform in 20th-Century China: The Case of the Chengda Teachers Academy. *Extrême-Orient Extrême-Occident* [Online], 33 | 2011. Retrieved September 1, 2020. <http://journals.openedition.org/>
- Qu Shusen (2012). *Zhongguo huizu shi* [History of the Hui in China]. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press.
- Tongxian, Fu (2000). *Zhongguohuijiaoshi* [History of Islam in China]. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press.
- Ying Boqing (1982). *Wanghaorn a hong zhuanlue* [The Biography of Wang Haorang Ahong]. *Chinese Muslim*, No. 2. pp.8-11.
- Yu Zhengui (2012). *Zhongguo lidai zhengquan yu yisilan jiao* [China's Successive Governments and Islam]. Yinchuan: Ningxia People's Press.

19. Matsumoto Masumi, 2006, p 127

20. Ma Bozhong. *Huangpu Military Academy Instructor: Yin Guangyu*, <<http://www.zghzxw.com/content-42-2756-1.html>> Accessed August 24, 2021.