The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam: A Mosque of Their Own

Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun
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This remarkable collaboration of primarily Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun (with contributions from nine other mostly Muslim Chinese women who are duly acknowledged), contains a wealth of information on a subject that most

scholars of Muslim communities have never considered or perhaps even imagined: the existence of *bona fide* women's mosques in China. Through painstaking historical, archival, interview, and field research, the authors lay out a convincing argument that such mosques have existed in China and continue to experience a "rapid increase" (p. 15), at least since the late Ming dynasty (sixteenth to seventeenth centuries), proliferating in northern China's central plains region (mainly Henan, Hebei, Shandong, and Anhui) during the Qing emperor Jiaqing's reign (1796-1820) (pp. 67-69).

This work sheds light on "how women [in China] engendered and sustained faith, aspiration and loyalties under often challenging conditions" (p. 5) – which is putting it mildly. Strenuously caught between Confucian, Islamic, and patrimonial requirements, they developed an institution of learning and cultural transmission perhaps unique to the Muslim world. While the authors never fully address why "women's mosques" and madrassahs developed so fully in China (and almost nowhere else), they do richly demonstrate the extraordinarily important role these religious and educational centers have played in preserving and promoting Islamic understanding among China's Muslims, known as the Hui national minority (with a year 2000 population of approximately 9.8 million, out of a total 20.3 million Muslims in China, according to the especially accurate PRC state census).

While the authors claim these women's "prayer halls" (the Chinese term is ambiguous) and the women who lead them are fully-fledged *ahongs* or imams (again, the Chinese term, like the Arabic and Persian equivalents, is not clear about the teacher's actual status), the issue here is whether they have any authority over men. Since they clearly do not, *ahong* should be taken in its more general sense of "one possessing advanced Islamic knowledge" or training, and does not imply institutionalized authority beyond the sphere of women (and children, which in most instances includes boys). Nevertheless, it is significant that they have such organized authority, training, and separate prayer halls or mosques among themselves.

The issue of whether a prayer hall (*libai tang* or *qingzhen nusi*) exclusively reserved for women is actually a "woman's mosque" (*nu si*) is really a matter of semantics, since mosques in China are often referred to as "prayer temples" (*libai si*). The real issue is whether the women are organized separately from the men and if their mosque is considered independent. Usually, women's prayer halls are adjacent to the main mosque, as the authors illustrate (and thus, unfortunately, the maps only give a general indication of the mosque locations since they are subsumed under the men's), or women are given a curtained section or outlying room of the main prayer hall in which to pray. But the authors also discuss several totally independent women's

mosques that are nowhere near a larger mosque that includes men. In any case, the work clearly shows that these mosques serve as important social nodes that do much to galvanize nationwide Muslim women organizations in China and thereby contribute to increased Muslim women activism, either in social welfare programs, education, or even new mosque building.

The existence of extensive women's Islamic educational training and active women's organizations in the mosques of Yunnan and Henan suggests that such bodies have a long history in China. In the more conservative Muslim areas of the northwest (Gansu, Ningxia, Qinghai, and Xinjiang), women are more restricted from public participation in ritual and leadership, and thus there are fewer examples of such mosques. We also do not find them among the other Muslim nationalities (Uyghur, Kazakh, Dongxiang, Kyrgyz, Salar, Tajik, Baonan, Uzbek, or Tatar, in order of higher population numbers), who, being concentrated in the northwest, are perhaps unaccustomed to this practice.

Once again, this raises the question of why in China, and more specifically, why in north central China among the Hui Muslim Chinese, did this institution emerge and endure? This fascinating work provides many clues to this enigmatic puzzle, but, unfortunately, no satisfactory answers. In the "Epilogue," the authors suggest that the "peripheral minority" status of Muslim women in a secularizing state (Confucian and Communist!) is a critical factor; yet we have not seen the rise of similar institutions among Muslim minority women in Europe, the Americas, or Asia. The multiple challenges Muslim women in China must negotiate between family, home, mosque, work, public sphere, and the state is best understood by letting China's Muslim women speak for themselves, which this book, through extensive quotations, inclusive authorship, and several appendices and glossary, splendidly accomplishes, as the following quote by a Ms. Yang Yinliang Ahong from the northeastern city of Harbin so vividly demonstrates:

> Since I was appointed *nu ahong* [female imam or teacher], I have never wavered from the principle of loving the motherland and our religion. Carefully observing my responsibilities, I have dedicated all my efforts, however insignificant, to the service of the party, the country and to religion with the help of the limited knowledge I have acquired, thus gaining trust, respect, and admiration from our Muslim brothers and sisters (p. 287, and repeated at the end of the Epilogue, p. 306).

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