

The Silent March-Unveiling the Gentle Power behind the Consolidation of Islam in the Western Region of China

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Abstract: In tandem with the government's economic development plans of the western areas, a high level of awareness among grassroots is being translated into a vibrant momentum for progress, as the Muslims in the region actively take on the opportunities to better their lives and that of their communities. They especially recognize the need for a good education as the foundation to progress. This article presents the Muslim educational movement at a few levels, operating with a system integrating Islamic and mainstream knowledge and highlights the important role women play in the initiation and carrying out of these programs.

Key words: China . western regions . Hui Muslims . women . youth . integrated education . progress

CATCHING THEM YOUNG: EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

In the colourfully decorated classroom, the little children, boys and girls, about three to four years old, get up from their seats at the signal of the young teacher. They line up, four to a row, in the middle alley between the desks. In unison, each one shouting at the top of their lungs, they start to recite one of the short surahs (Surah: Each chapter in the Qur'an is called a sura. There are 114 suras in the Qur'an with different lengths. The last short suras are the ones usually recited in the prayers and are memorized.) from the Qur'an. After they finish the recitation, they start a song. Listening carefully I realize that it is the translation of the surah in Chinese. They swing their arms and hands in dance movements as they sing. And once they finish they all clap vigorously shouting, "I am so clever, I am so clever, I am really, really so clever"; then they get back to their seats pushing and teasing each other (Fig. 1).

This is the Shu De kindergarten 淑德幼儿园 in Lanzhou, capital of Gansu Province, one of the four provinces in the north-western region of China where live a high concentration of Hui Muslims. Surrounded by mountains from the south and north, Lanzhou city expands on the two sides of the upper course of Yellow River, where the river emerges from the mountains. It is notorious for having the worst air quality of all cities in China.

In this Muslim kindergarten located behind a narrow alley in Lanzhou, religious classes are

conducted in this kind of a vibrant and fun way, a far cry from the usual austere and serious environment one would expect from such classes. As I visit the other classes I see the same atmosphere of fun learning. The teachers are all young women, energetic and use modern pre-school learning methods to teach. They are often sent out for training; and experts on early childhood education are periodically invited to give speeches to the teachers and parents.



Fig. 1: Little boys and girls in the school

The kindergarten is affiliated to the Li Jiawan mosque 李家湾清真寺, but functions independently. The principal Ma Dongmei 马东梅 takes us on a quick tour of the premises. The kindergarten was founded 10 years ago, at her initiative.

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The main objective is to raise confident, knowledgeable children who will succeed in their primary education, but the longer vision is to assure the religious development of the Muslim children in the area. The teachers believe that reading from right to left, as Arabic is read and memorizing verses from young, helps in the development of the brain (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Quranic reading

The three year old students start by learning the Arabic alphabet, soon after, progressing to combined letters. The Hadith or the Prophet's sayings and deeds is mainly taught in the light of good moral values and proper behaviour. The lessons learnt are reinforced by staging dialogues between animal puppets in a very lively participating manner.

Simple Islamic history is taught through story telling on the Prophet's and the Halifahs' (Halifah [Khalifah]: Successors of the Prophet (saw) who led the Muslim communities.) life stories. By the time they leave the kindergarten at age six, the children are fluent in reading the Qur'an, have learnt the basic knowledge of faith and have acquired the habit of the prayer rituals.

The kindergarten also provides Chinese and mathematics classes so the children will have a comfortable and competitive start when they go to the national primary schools. Again in a fun way, they are taught Chinese history through idioms and proverbs. Once a month they take turns to stage a performance which boosts their confidence and teaches them to be independent.

I ask a few pupils if they like to come to school. Each one of them says yes laughingly and in a loud voice. One little girl just shyly nods her head then runs to the teacher to hide her face in her coat.

REINFORCEMENT OF A MUSLIM LIFESTYLE: SCHOOL GOING CHILDREN

In China, all children have to go to national schools from age 7. To allow the children to go on with their Islamic life and also to teach children who have not benefited from an early Islamic education, Shu De Kindergarten, among many others, started to organize holiday camps for primary school children. In the first year there was an enrolment of only 30 children; second year 60; now 6 years down the road, every year they can only accept 200, due to inadequacy of space and manpower. Many who do not gain entrance are left disappointed.

The holiday camp is full board, with a minimal fee of only RMB580 a month, equivalent to around US\$60, campers go home at weekends. Children from poorer families do not pay. Every year 40% of the children fall into this category. Children live a Muslim life, perform their daily prayers together, learn Arabic, the reading and meaning of the Qur'an, are taught Islamic and Chinese values and ethics, which are compatible in many ways. They get used to community living in which they are taught to be courteous and helpful with each other. When the children go back home after experiencing one or two months of Muslim life, they try to keep the habits at home and may even influence their elders.

Principal Ma says their education concept is to let the children be happy with and through Islam and firmly believes that Islamic education has to start early, be contemporary and dynamic. She praises the teachers, all of them young women, who are a dedicated lot. They accepted and continue to work there with minimal salary, in the belief that they are doing a worthy work. These young women, with their warm affection and sincere devotion are really the backbone behind this early awakening of religious consciousness in the mind of the little ones.

Shu De Kindergarten is just one of many that have mushroomed in Lanzhou as well as in many other Hui concentrated districts in Gansu Province. Islamic holiday camps are also gaining popularity among young children and youth. What is noticeable is that most often than not, it is the hands of women that are behind all these activities: they are the initiators, planners, workers, fund-raisers and hands-on teachers.

Little Muslim children are being taken care of as much as possible; orphans, migrant workers' children, children whose parents have both gone to work in big cities and are left with aging grandparents who are not

able to take proper care of them, school-going children who need extra tuition, somewhere, somehow, some young women find the courage and the funds to build a centre to place them. Besides the provision of material needs such as clothes, boots, books, meals, tuition, etc, there is also genuine care and concern, warmth and love, always accompanied with initiation to religious teachings and practice. Listening and interviewing them, what I hear is stories of hardship and sacrifice, but not complaint. More than once I hear: this is work in the path of God.

LINXIA FOREIGN LANGUAGE SCHOOL 临夏外语学校

Two multi-storey white-colour buildings stand at the end of a paved schoolyard. Each row of windows is topped with a relief that evokes the dome of a mosque. The courtyard is a sea of colourful headscarves; young girls chatting in groups wait for their class to start. This is the Linxia Foreign Language School, in Linxia, two hours' drive to the south from Lanzhou. More than hundred mosques, one almost every few minutes' drive around town and in the outskirts, reaffirm the name Linxia is known by: The little Mecca of the East.

The school has a long story in its formation. As early as more than thirty years ago, in 1977, just after the Cultural Revolution and Deng Xiaopin's loosening grip on religion in China, two Muslim educationists, Ma Zhizhong 马志仲 and Daud Gao Shijun 高士俊 started to promote the idea that education was the key for the Muslim community's development. "Seeking knowledge is the compulsory duty of every Muslim male and female" was their motivating guidance as the divine right of education for all. Ma pointed out the necessity for Muslims to have their own schools, publications and even hospitals.

Another educationist, Baha Undin Ma Zhixin 马志欣, heeding this call, started to promote the idea of reform of the Mosque schools, especially to give girls the right and space for education. Having been raised in a mosque school, Ma was deeply aware of its defects. The Ahong (Ahong: the person who leads the prayers and is knowledgeable in religious studies) teachers lacked sufficient understanding of Arabic, but on the other hand neither did they pay attention to Chinese language studies; so students were not good in either; and girls were not part of this education. Ma Zhixin and Gao Shijun started to hold classes in their own home, under the name 'Chinese-Arabic spare time class' for both boys and girls, in separate classes. This met with strong opposition and pressure to close down from some quarters, especially some clerics who stated that

having girls at school was against Islamic teachings. Ma and Gao persisted, reiterating that Islam teaches that 'in education, men and women are equal'. Ma firmly believed that when women are well-educated, families are well-educated and then societies are well-educated too (Quoted from the Linxia Foreign Language School's 30th year commemorative book, with the permission of the principal Ma Xiulan). Girls started to join the classes in increasing numbers. When the graduates were easily placed in companies and educated girls were seen to command more respect in society and work places, opposition gradually relented. However many misinformed fathers still did not allow their daughters to go to school.

Eight years later, as the general economy improved, the school bought its first premises and also changed its name to Chinese-Arabic Women School. The year 1989 was a memorable one for the school when it was recognized by the Linxia Autonomous Prefecture Education Department as a private vocational-technical school. In 1997, the school ended its house-schooling mode and with a newly designed curriculum, began the formal schooling mode. A very successful fund-raising activity resulted in the purchase of the current building, to which a dormitory was added 10 years later. The Chinese-Arabic Women School changed its name again in 2008 to today's Linxia Foreign Language School (LFSL) (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Students at the Chinese-arabic women school

The success of the school was due on a great part to the change in curriculum that anchored the teaching partially to the curriculum of the mainstream national education. According to Principal Khadija Ma Xiulan 马秀兰 (School visit and meeting with Ma Xiulan, 15 November 2010, Linxia), the school's principles are based on "To learn advanced culture, science and

technology and try to cultivate a new type of Muslim women and national professional experts. At the same time through the Islamic education the students receive, we wish to inculcate in them moral integrity and a sense of responsibility to the society and nation.”

Part of the mainstream curriculum are taught under ‘cultural courses’; they include Chinese language and literature, computer knowledge, Chinese ethics, history, law, folklore and politics. The ‘specialized courses’ are those related to Islamic teachings, even though the names suggest that the focus is on Arabic language, such as Arabic language and reading, grammar, conversation, translation and writing. The Arabic intensive reading and translation definitely includes reading and understanding of the Qur’an. This may not be explicitly put on the curriculum. The government is aware of this but shuts an eye in respect of the ‘cultural customs’ of the Hui. The communal dormitory living facilitates the learning, practicing and internalizing of a Muslim lifestyle.

The students gave a performance demonstrating their fluency in Arabic language and their proficiency in the reading of the Qur’an as well. The performance ended with the rendition of two soulful Nashid (Nashid: Poem sung in the praise of the Prophet (peace be upon him) in Chinese by a group of eight students.

Upon graduating, the students receive a diploma recognized by the education department; however the cultural courses they take in the school are not sufficient enough for them to be successful in the national entrance examination for universities. Often the outstanding students apply to and are accepted by higher learning institutions in other Muslim countries such as Malaysia, Pakistan, or in the Middle East. They are also in high demand as teachers in other similar schools. The teachers are well qualified, all fluent in Arabic, have at least a college degree, mostly locally trained and in increasing numbers, returnees from colleges and universities overseas. The students hail mainly from Gansu province but there is also a big number from all parts of China. They have to pass a strict entrance exam before being admitted. Successful poor children pay little or no fees. Currently there are 760 students enrolled and as of today there have been more than 4000 graduates. The success of the Linxia Foreign Language School and the recognition by the education department opened a large avenue for other Muslim girls’ school to be founded, taking the LFLS as a model. Today there are 66 such schools in China, dispersed in various areas where there are concentrated Muslim communities.

The composition of the students exposes the Muslims’ thoughts and life in this Hui community. There are three types of students:

- i. Those who were not successful in the national entrance exam to enter a high school.
- ii. Students whose parents (usually the father) who do not wish their daughter to be ‘corrupted’ by the Han young people’s lifestyle in a co-ed national high school, which is often an excuse to keep their teenage daughters separate from boys, preferably just at home and to marry them off at a young age.
- iii. Students whose parents (usually the mother) who wish for their daughter to come to this school so that she may later serve the Muslim community, by becoming a teacher in a Muslim school.

I will start with the latter batch. Many mothers now are proud that their children are learned and practicing in religion and wish their daughter to be useful in their own community. They are not so mindful about the low salary and the long working hours. They also happily welcome the orphans that their teacher daughters bring home some weekends. This type of students assures a continuous supply of teachers to the Muslim schools, from kindergartens to the adult students’ schools and more important than this, they are the ones who play the stabilizing role in the continuation of Islam in their family and communities.

The second batch of students tells how Islam in China is still so much imbued in the old Chinese culture. Many fathers of young girls start to be strict about their daughters going out, even to school, as they reach puberty. Sometimes the girls are even taken out of the national school where they study, even if they excel at school and often without the consent of the child. Then either they are sent to a Muslim girls’ school such as LFLS if they are lucky, or they just sit at home waiting to be married off.

This, the father says is in the spirit of Islam. In reality, as devout as the father may be, he actually heeds the ancient Confucius ethics about girls, rather than recognizing and practicing the spirit of equity between men and women in Islam and that seeking knowledge is not only a right but a duty for Muslim women as it is for men. In some Muslim communities in this remote area in northwest China, young women are kept at home. One story related to me is especially poignant: When the groom’s family came to take away the bride from this family, the next door neighbour was totally caught by surprise: Did they have a daughter in the family?

In one home where they extended hospitality to us, men did all the serving, bringing in the delicious dishes one after the other, engaging with us in lively conversations. When we asked about their wives, sisters and daughters, the answer was 'they are in the kitchen'. They did not show up in the beautifully decorated very modern living room in spite of our asking. But the 82 year old matriarch, straight as a fiddle, was there from the time we entered the house. She held court, spoke about the need to spread the teachings of Islam, told us about their family history, how she kept so fit at this age by working and taking long walks, about healthy diet and was very knowledgeable and humorous. Only as we were leaving, the younger women were called out from the kitchen, at our insistence to thank them for the meal. Out came a few pretty women, smiling easily and willing to talk. We were surprised to learn that the baby one of the women carried in her arms was her grandchild; she herself barely looked in her mid-thirties and the mother of the child was like a high school student. I had a few minutes private talk with one young girl, a niece who lived with them, when she took me out to the washroom. Her father had died in an accident and her uncle was taking care of her. He had taken her and his own daughter out of school at a young age. When asked what she did, she said: nothing, I've been at home since I was taken out of school. I asked if she liked school, if she wanted to go on. She said yes, she liked it very much and wanted to go on, but had to obey her uncle. Now she was just sitting at home waiting to be married off. She was only sixteen. When I jokingly said I have a son who is 19, shall we take you as our bride? Her eyes sparkled and immediately said 'Yes, When?' I felt very bad, as I never thought she would take it seriously.

Many enlightened Muslim imams and academics express dissatisfaction about this custom, especially that it is perpetuated in the name of religion; but established traditions are not easy to change, ironically because it is believed that it is commanded by Islam.

The first type of students reflect one reality that still has to be faced: these are the drop-outs from national secondary schools due to insufficient marks and tell the sad truth about the lagging behind of Muslim children and the community in general when compared with the Han children and in the face of the big economic advancement of the whole country. Poverty may be one important factor; lack of a beneficial pre-school education might be another factor; illiterate parents certainly play a big role; the inferiority complex as a minority Hui group that plagued the community for centuries seems to be diminishing, but may still be very real among many. It used to be that either you choose an Islamic education and be rather

incompatible in the mainstream society, or, if you are able, you continue in the national schools and somehow lack the necessary consciousness and knowledge to lead a healthy Muslim life. But what this school provides now is, together with an Islamic education, some degree of applicable knowledge to be competitive for a decent job, be able to contribute to society and a spirit of confidence and independence. The students do not, however, have the required standard to go towards a national university degree, or a professional career; therefore are not able to have a valuable share in nation building in the big image. Not yet. The hope to a better future for women in the Muslim communities will depend on the educated women who are also familiar with the needs of the mainstream society.

The kindergartens and orphanages, the holiday camps, the Hui social service centres, the voluntary associations, all strive to remedy this lag with the mainstream and are successful in many ways and to some degree. The young Hui men and women I met in Lanzhou and Linxia are confident and engaging, most of them imbued with a strong spirit of volunteerism when it comes to Muslim matters. For the Hui community to come to par with the nation, we may probably wait one more generation, but the Muslim youth seem to be on the right path.

FINDING PEACE IN THE GOLDEN YEARS

In the centre of Lanzhou city, on the bank of the Yellow River, stands the imposing Lanzhou Xiguan Mosque 兰州西关清真寺. First built in the 14th century, the mosque reflected a Chinese architecture; it also served as a guest house to travelling Muslims from the Silk Road. It was reconstructed in the 17th century and renewed with extensions many times until it became a sprawling palatial building. Even though the People's Republic of China had declared it a cultural heritage for protection, it did not escape the random destruction of religious buildings during the Cultural Revolution.

After freedom of religious worship was restored, the reconstruction of the mosque took 17 years to complete, being finalized in 2003 to take its present form (Fig. 4). Today, apart from being a place of worship, the mosque also serves as an educational, cultural and social activities centre for Muslim adults and children. In its premises there are refresher classes for Mullahs (Mullah: boys and men who are prepared to become Islamic teachers and Imams who lead prayers), the Sino-Arab Women's School, a kindergarten and holiday activities for children.

The school I wish to present below is the Sino-Arab Women's school, affiliated to the Xiguan Mosque, but run independently. This school is very different from the High School for girls. There is none or very little tuition fees; the school runs mainly on voluntary contributions by students, donations from the Muslim public and business people and fund-raising activities; the students receive a certificate of accomplishment, which is not recognized by the government; there is no condition for enrolment, anybody who wishes to join is welcome; there is no age limit; however there is a very systematic teaching method.



Fig. 4: Lanzhou Xiguan Mosque

The school started in 1991 with one teacher, a few students and one classroom. It slowly developed into what it is today, a fairly well-equipped school with 13 classrooms, more than 10 teachers and more than 200 students. There is one section for younger women and another section for the elderly students. Like many other individual learning centres, this school also has a portion where working adults, men and women, may join the evening or weekend religious classes. I am more interested to visit the elderly students. At the moment of visit, there were 6 classes for elderly ladies going on.

In one of the classes, around 20 elderly women are seated at desks, each with a copy of the Qur'an open in front of them (Fig. 5). Most of them look above 50 years old. The young teacher is listening to them read, in quite a good accent and rather fluently. These ladies have been learning for three years. I am introduced to the oldest lady in the class, 82-year old Gu Xiuzhen Nainai (grandma) 古秀真 奶奶. She looks so pleased to be there (Fig. 6). Another lady said Gu Nainai never missed one single class.

I ask if there is anybody who would volunteer to be interviewed. After a few moments of shyly looking

at each other, one woman gets up. What I wish to know is how come at this age and at this stage of her life she is willing to come to class every day; half of the year braving the bitter freezing cold of Lanzhou; and the other half, the sweltering heat and the suffocating pollution. Many of them travel far to come. I was told one nearly 80 year old great-grandmother walked two hours every morning to come for classes, carrying a simple tiffin for lunch and tea and took the same route back on foot late afternoon. She did this journey every day for three years, because 'She wanted to make up for the time of her religious ignorance and wanted to be a real Muslim before she returned to Allah'. (Related by the principal).



Fig. 5: Class for adult



Fig. 6: Elderly women joining the class

Gu Cuiping 古翠萍 stands up. First in a very steady voice, she tells about her teenage years during the Cultural Revolution. She grew up without any knowledge of religion only having vaguely heard her grandfather saying that they were Muslim. At this stage

her voice starts to quiver and tears roll down. Half crying, she relates how she had to work at a young age; later there was the added responsibility of taking care of two little children. She did not know how to pray, nor did she know the meaning of the Qur'an. One day as she was cycling past a mosque, she heard the reading of the Qur'an; it sounded so beautiful to her ears. She told herself then, if Allah gives me the opportunity this is what I am going to learn one day. Now her children are grown up, so she decided to come to this school. This is her fourth year; she can now read the Qur'an and understands the meaning. She also knows how to perform the prayers. She says she is grateful to Allah for granting her her wish.

Zheng Xiufang 祁秀芳's father was a high level official in the Party. There had never been any talk of religion in her home. She only came to know about it when she married into another Hui family at the age of 20. The parents-in-law were very kind and told her to learn slowly. In the factory where she worked, one retired worker started a class during lunch time. She joined the classes, but did not learn much. Whatever she learnt in the day, she would have forgotten in the evening. Then for many years she had no opportunity to go on. Now that she is retired and back in Lanzhou, she heard about this school and joined; she is very happy that she has improved so much. She says knowledge increases her 'iman' (faith).

After the first one spoke, the dam broke. Many of them wanted to tell their story. Many tears were shed, from the ones who spoke and also from many who listened. There was no more feeling of shame that they were only now gaining their religious knowledge, at the twilight of their life; that during all their adult life they had not prayed, that they had had no knowledge of the Qur'an. Rather a certain sense of pride and gratitude prevailed. Proud that they are familiar now with the Holy Book, that they can perform their daily prayers, that they understand Arabic and can even write it; grateful that they are granted this opportunity to learn.

They all spoke highly of the teachers, all of them women, dedicated and patient and the blessings they would get for giving this gift to so many. One lady told me she asked her two daughters, both university graduates, to come here to work as teachers, they willingly obliged. The teachers work with a paltry salary: the principal gets RMB700, just a little more than US\$100 and teachers receive between RMB400 to 500, less than US\$100. Whereas, knowing fluent Arabic, they would have been very much in demand in any of the newly established Middle East business enterprises or Chinese companies doing business with these countries and there are many of them, with a starting salary of RMB3,000. When asked, these young

women just said, we are happy doing Allah's work. When asked if their husbands had ever opposed to or were unhappy about this decision, one of them said: I put this as a condition to marry him. Husbands are supportive. They come together to clean the school at weekends, do the needed repairs, look after the children and actively participate and assist in fund-raising events.

The visit to this adult class was a most emotional experience. I thought about Muslims who live in free countries where from young are exposed to religious knowledge and may live their religion in the family and society. How much do they appreciate this natural freedom? Most often it is taken for granted and not even taken seriously by many. These old ladies, after living for decades under a repressive regime that later became oppressive and violent towards religious practice and even thoughts, they are the ones who really appreciate tasting now the freedom to get acquainted with their faith and they feel it deeply. They sacrifice their restful and carefree days they should be looking forward to in their old age after long years of arduous toiling, to savour the deep satisfaction they find in, as one of them said tearfully, "to become a real Muslim".

CONCLUSION: THE POWER OF THE FEMININE TOUCH

Islam has lived in China, uninterrupted, for more than 1300 years. Given the greatly assimilative nature of Chinese culture, the Hui Muslims have been able to, alongside their Chinese characteristics keep to their Islamic religious inheritance.

Vibrancy of Islamic life in China today is obvious, especially so in the western region where there are pockets of concentrated Muslim communities. From the late 70s, early 80s, with the end of religious persecution, Muslim activities started to show up and slowly gained momentum. This becomes noticeable as soon as one enters any of the Muslim concentrated areas in the region. Chinese architectural minarets dot the skyline. White skull caps and colourful scarves roam the streets. Every other eatery is 'qingzhen' 清真(清真Qingzhen. The two words literally mean pure and true. This is a meaning and a symbol of Islam in China. Mosque in Chinese is called Qingzhensi, temple of pure and true. Qingzhenguan denotes a Muslim restaurant) 。 Shops with a sign of crescent and moon tell that the owner is Muslim. The festive prayer such as at the Festival of Sacrifice, Eid-il-Adha, gathers an impressive congregation of 20000 believers at the city stadium in Linxia (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Muslim congregation

The most beneficial and sustainable work is accomplished in the education sector. From the kindergartens, orphanages, with children starting from three years old, to school-going children's summer camps, Muslim girls' high schools, day and evening schools for secondary and high school students from national schools and working young people, the mosque schools for adults and the elderly, Muslim journals and magazines, the increasing number of Muslim websites manned by university students, literally from the dynamic and modern Islamic education is shaping knowledgeable new era Muslim communities. The younger batch of imams and the Muslim academics are aware and supportive of the necessity and benefit of education, especially women's education. Wealthy Muslim businessmen, increasing in numbers, lend their support through generous donations.

There is no denying that as the women come forward, they are playing an important role in the shaping of the Muslim family and society. At the "Forum for the cultural and educational development of Muslim Women in the western region" held on the 13th and 14th of November 2010 in Lanzhou, out of 36 speakers, only two were men. The Hall of 200 was packed mainly by women and there were many who stood at the back and the side aisles. Audience participation was very dynamic. Presenters were from different backgrounds: academics, graduate school students, literary personalities, grassroots workers, successful entrepreneurs, some with only primary school certificate and even Party officials; each speaker was confident, knowledgeable in her own way and many gave this same message: A sound and true Islamic understanding and way of life from young, combined with contemporary knowledge and participation in nation building to assure compatibility with mainstream society are the key to the healthy

development of the Muslim societies in China. Muslims in China cannot forsake their Islamic heritage, neither can they ignore that they are part of the Chinese nation. They were born with both identities. They need to find a balance by nourishing both with a good education and correct understanding of the two cultures. The chanting of the Nashid in very touching Chinese verses just like the kindergarten children singing the surah in Chinese, the large menu of Chinese food compatible with Islamic diet requirements, Chinese Muslim calligraphy blending one art into the other, are only a few examples of the intertwining of the Islamic and Chinese culture into one. This is the natural way to live Islam in China.

It was a pleasure and a big awakening for me on this trip to observe how the women, in their soft but determined approach, are becoming the stabilizing force in this important revival of Islam in China and ensure that enough compassion, energy and passion continue to fuel the momentum, individually, in the family and in the society in securing Islam's repositioning in Western China.

Note: The article is the first in an intended series exploring the vibrancy of a Muslim presence in the western areas of China and takes women as central characters. Methodology used is mainly on personal visits, observations, casual talks and interviews. The author does not seek any theory; the main objective is to inform. More photographs may be supplied should there be a need.

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