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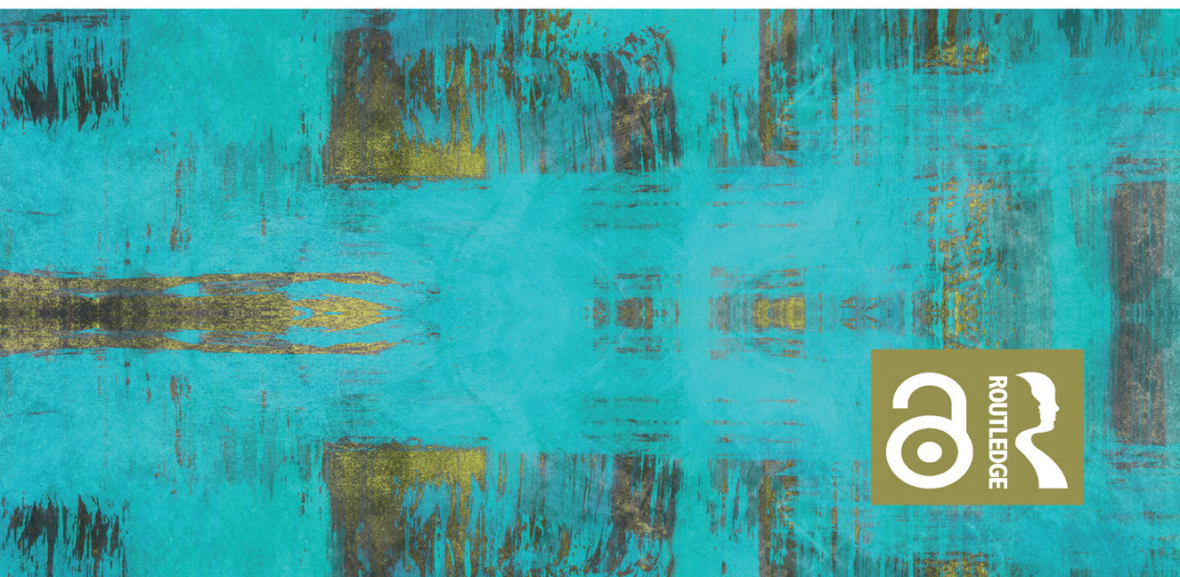
INSIDE THE EXPRESSIVE CULTURE OF CHINESE WOMEN'S MOSQUES

'THIS TURMOIL OF THE SOUL'

Maria Jaschok



"In this remarkable book, Jaschok takes us inside women's mosques, allowing us to hear a multitude of expressive voices: of the ethnographer herself, her collaborators, and most importantly, communities of Muslim women. Their words and their silences alike are sources of inspiring strength."

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"The author's encounter with Hui Muslim women is nothing short of miraculous, and while the author respectfully documents and examines the 'voices' of Hui Muslim women, she also reinterprets the meaning of 'silence' in a richly relational and reciprocal way. The themes in this book provide a new theoretical framework for gender and sociological research. I highly recommend this book to researchers and students of social sciences in general, as well as Chinese history, religious history and gender studies."

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Inside the Expressive Culture of Chinese Women's Mosques

This book presents a multi-voice narrative of the history and significance of current contestations over the increasing prominence of expressive piety in Hui Muslim women's mosques in central China.

By drawing on a 'Song Book' of chants, collected from the tradition of women's mosques, as context it reveals just how the increasing prominence of female voices has given rise to considerable misgivings among senior religious leaders over the potential destabilization of orthodox Islamic gendered practices. Providing a historical introduction to the place and function of Islamic chants, *jingge* and *zansheng*, the book gives a conceptual framing of female silence, sound, and agency in local translations of Confucian and Islamic precepts, and women's personal accounts of the role played by traditional and modern soundscapes in transmitting and celebrating Islamic knowledge and faith.

As a study of women's soundscapes and the significance of legitimacy, ambiguities, and implications of female sound, this book will be of considerable interest to students and scholars of Chinese society and culture, gender studies, cultural anthropology, and Islam.

Maria Jaschok is Senior Research Associate of Contemporary China Studies at the Oxford School of Global and Area Studies, University of Oxford, UK.

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Inside the Expressive Culture of Chinese Women's Mosques

'This Turmoil of the Soul'

Maria Jaschok

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A tribute to research partners and the Hui Muslim communities of central China

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Explanatory Notes

1. Chinese names: surname precedes given name in line with Chinese convention.
2. Chinese core terms are translated and defined at their first appearance; thereafter, they appear in *pinyin* (romanization of Chinese terms) as expressive of their specific context (see Glossary). The Glossary excludes Chinese terms which occur only once or are not specific to the expressive culture of women's mosques.
3. This volume follows on from two previous volumes in a trilogy on gender and Islam in the context of China, which were anchored in collaborative research and writing. Names, personal details, and places are anonymized or pseudonymized (e.g., surname and initials) to maintain interlocutors' confidentiality in relation to their participation in conversations and interviews. There is one exception, my longstanding research partner Shui Jingjun, where a pseudonymized name would not have made sense nor been respectful of her part in the project. It has ever been a point of pride for Shui, during our many productive years of collaboration, to be sharing with an international readership the unique history of China's Hui Muslim women. Current constraints on Chinese intellectual production have stood in the way of co-authoring this final volume in our trilogy. With the consent of my esteemed colleague and friend, I am thus giving her name where her role and participation in our joint research calls for acknowledgment of her scholarly presence in, rather than authorial responsibility for, the project.

Acknowledgements

Responsibility, Collaboration, and Authorship

That this book has been possible is due to the collective effort of longstanding research partners whose scope of work was greatly enriched when we, in turn, were joined by the many communities of women from central China's rich Islamic traditions of female-centered institutions of worship, celebration, and education. During the early years of this project, Shui Jingjun, Ba DM, Ge CX, and I continued a long tradition of collaborative research, fieldwork, and community engagement, which culminated in the printing of the first Muslim women's song book, *A Muslim Songbook from the Tradition of Women's Mosques in China*, published in 2017.[1] The SongBook is central to the making of this volume.

When our collaboration fell victim to the Chinese government's hardening prohibitions on international research linkages, I found myself entrusted with the responsibility to bring a multiplicity of voices, experiences, and research conversations – in the form of fieldwork diaries, notes, correspondence, interpretative threads noted in records of random conversations, prepared texts for public presentations never held, and the like – into the making of this third and final book. This book continues and builds on *The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam* co-authored with Shui Jingjun in 2000 and subsequently published and revised in the Chinese language in 2002; and *Women, Religion, and Space in China*, which appeared in 2011, again co-authored with Shui. These two earlier publications, based on collaborative work accomplished during a more liberal phase in the Chinese government's treatment of research collaborations, were the result of joint processes of knowledge production in its entirety, from conception to publication.

This third volume, however, forms a creative tribute to a collaboration born of necessity, friendship, and gratitude. It is a tribute not only to my research partners' participation in extensive fieldwork, but also to the many years where our professional and personal relationships were allowed to deepen and expand, encompassing our mutuality and diversity of approaches to learning as well as

1 中原穆斯林妇女赞圣与经歌汇编编写组 (*Zhongyuan Musilin Funü Zansheng yu Jingge Huibian-xiezu*, 'A Muslim Songbook from the Tradition of Women's Mosques in China') is referred to throughout the volume as SongBook (ZMFEC 2017); primarily for educational use in women's mosques, it is privately printed.

respectful acknowledgement of what still is to be learnt. Gratitude is due to the many women who, belonging to different provincial village and town mosques, participated enthusiastically in recording, transcribing, and interpreting often opaque and obscure lines of Islamic chants – which are at the heart of this book. These remarkable women came together to uncover, tirelessly and against many odds, the obscure origins and authorship of Arabic, Persian, and Chinese language chants. It was good to know that this work has become yet another, final, shared project between us.

In the same way that the community of researchers in central China's Muslim communities grew as our collaborative approach turned interlocutors into investigative co-partners, and so-called ordinary Muslim women (they were always anything but ordinary), led by their (female) religious leaders, proved intent on exploring their own history – our international network of research support also widened. The advice and support I received on the tantalizing ambiguities in translating passages in *jingge* (经歌 Islamic chants) – the epistemic center of the book – have been invaluable. I thank Mabel Lee, Cecilia Dongling Young, Ha Guangtian and Phyllis, and others for their receptivity and sensitivity in helping suggest meanings for opaque passages. I am grateful to my critical readers and listeners as the slow process of writing moved through its various stages. I am also grateful for the constructive comments of reviewers, known and anonymous, who proved tremendously helpful in shaping this book. I owe a great debt to Viv Wylie for her insightful comments and questions at an early stage of writing. Foremost, I owe much to the sharp and trenchant criticism, always positive, offered by Michelle Chew; she proved an exemplary copyeditor, attentive in her sympathetic reading and constructive in her critical recommendations.

We gratefully acknowledge the support provided by the Leverhulme Trust Research Grant (2014-17). Research on women's mosque oral traditions of learning was part of our investigation of women's lives in organized Islam in China and well preceded the award in 2014, but this collaborative grant enabled us to widen the scope of research (and allowed for the welcome opportunity to work with Rachel Harris and Ha Guangtian). Whatever failings remain here, they are my responsibility. Most of the early writing took place during the long months of the COVID pandemic, and I thank my family for their support in keeping my body healthy and my mind focused.

List of Figures

List of Chants

List of Acronyms

ACWF All-China Women's Federation
CCP Chinese Communist Party
GMD Guomindang or KMT (Nationalist Party of China)
HRPC Henan research project collection (private)

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Introduction

A Research Community of Discovery and Voice

The words quoted below come from a text used by the late Du *Lao Ahong* of an influential women's mosque in China's central province of Henan to prepare her weekly sermons. 'Living as Muslims, dying as Muslims, they shall safely enter Heaven' (他们为穆民而生活，他们为穆民而死去，他们安全的进入天堂). The sermons were intended to provide the women gathered for prayer with scriptural knowledge, religious guidance, words of exhortation, and consolation.[1] A group of ordinary Muslim women, assembled to worship, pray, and often chant their prayer, are taught by knowledgeable women endowed with the legitimacy of established authority. The ordinary women are taught knowledge of their faith for how to live as Muslims informed in the ways of preceding generations. Extraordinary in its ordinariness, this familiar, recurrent ritual evokes and encapsulates the sonic dimension of the history of Hui Muslim women in central China, which we explore in this third volume (Jaschok and Shui 2000a; Jaschok and Shui 2011).

Chinese women in early 20th-century rural China are characterized as illiterate, their lives steered from cradle to grave by paradigmatic, womb-centered life cycles encoded in neo-Confucian family morality and Islamic principles, ignorant of the world beyond village boundaries. These references distill and seemingly define the essence of 'ordinariness' so elusive to the researcher's gaze searching for that which qualifies as outstanding or unique and thus, significant. Discovering through the very process of engaging with such 'ordinariness' the stories of life *extraordinary* has been a part of my journey as an ethnographer of (Islamic) religious life of women. These discoveries were made possible by collaboration with women from various women's mosque congregations in central China's Hui Muslim communities, where together we recovered, recorded, and transcribed chants of worship and celebration, previously only transmitted orally from generation to generation of believing women. The choice made to select chants as the ontological and epistemic center of this volume was thus not merely to illustrate their diversity in form and content, but also for their enduring potency to the listener/interpreter in their existential and subjective resonance. Chants provide the thematic and mnemonic threads that weave themselves into conversations among chanters, listeners, and members of a community of women – expressed in the very structure of the book,

1 *Ahong zhishi bidu* (阿訇知识必读 A Primary Reader for *Ahong*), private print, n.d., 55.

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as fluid rather than linear, as open-ended rather than conclusive. My choice of such an approach to the visual as much as to the substantive *gestalt* of the book has been to advance a collective purpose: that is, to make Chinese Muslim women's extraordinary histories visible. In their wake, these resonant voices not only made apparent the ideological underpinning of what counts as the 'ordinary'; they also supported the research by helping to problematize related tropes of feminine gullibility, religious belief, and stunted agency.

Collaborative fieldwork, initial discussions, and academic presentations on research findings for this project, begun in 2014, were concluded prior to the first news of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2019. To this was added, during my years of writing, China's growing isolation and the government's tightening grip on religious and intellectual life, obstructing any meaningful research in the country. This makes the fruits of our collaborative work achieved – a record of female religious life during a historical moment of relative, if unevenly handled, flexibility in local management of religious communities – the more poignant and important.

The most intense work of the final years of fieldwork revolved around documenting, contextualizing, and interpreting contemporary practices derived from an oral tradition of praying, learning, and eulogizing. This oral tradition constitutes an integral and characteristic element of the unique culture of women's mosques in central China's Hui Muslim communities but was, until recently, given little scholarly attention. A resurgence of the expressive culture of female-led women's mosques, presided over and led with much energy by younger generations of well-educated and assertive *nü ahong* (女阿訇 female imam; see Chapter Four for a more detailed discussion), led to reconnection with seemingly 'lost' *jingge* (经歌 a diversity of Islamic chants which historically served pedagogical religious and social functions in the context of general female illiteracy), the infusion of *zanzhu zansheng* (赞主赞圣 traditional and modern eulogies to Allah and His Saints), and absorption of foreign traditions, such as from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan as well as Islamic songs within the *Nasyid* genre[2] popular in Malaysia. Moreover, the opening of opportunities for mosque-based groups of women (and occasionally men's groups) for public performances – the so-called *zansheng bisai* (赞声比赛), a friendly if competitive gathering of mixed-gender choirs from various mosques (more below) – brought *zansheng* to the attention of the wider public. Collective rituals, festive attire, and prospects of gaining the winner's trophy all added to the attraction of such festivals. But whilst enjoying considerable support from home audiences, there was also much criticism, even denouncement, of these occasions, viewing them as violations of Islamic prohibitions on female voice in public and mixed-gender spaces.

In 2016, during a visit to Islamic scholars and practitioners, I played an extract from a recording I had made the week before. I had attended the graduation ceremony of a large class of young and middle-aged Hui Muslim women in central

2 Malaysian *Nasyid* is an Islamic-style chant containing praise of Allah, stories about the Prophet, and words of exhortation (Sarkissian 2005).

China. The ceremony was coupled with performances of *jingge* and *zansheng* chants by several choirs from women's mosques in the area. Unlike the more competitive and often tense occasions when mosque choirs from all over Muslim China come together to compete for the best performances in the *zansheng bisai*, this had a more relaxed atmosphere. The women mosque choirs had traveled from far and wide to perform because it gave them palpable pleasure to demonstrate their learning and their home mosque's spiritual culture in front of an appreciative audience of mostly women and a few men, including imams and representatives from various local government ministries and Islamic Association branches. The joy of contributing to such a gathering clearly outweighed any competitive desire to triumph over other choirs. Beautifully clad in distinctive style and color, led by their *nü ahong* (female imam) or leading *jiaoshi* (教师 instructor), the chants were performed with utter dedication and audible delight. The audience was mesmerized. Consisting mostly of women from villages and nearby townships, the audience's attentiveness and stillness bore witness to the poignancy of the occasion: women performing for women in a unison of faith and harmony. I was permitted to record the chants, having introduced myself and the purpose of my attendance to the assembled crowd. It was an extract from this recording that I played to the group of Islamic scholars and imams, all men, a week later on my journey through Shanghai.

The men's reaction was instantaneous, and in stark contrast to the tone of our conversation preceding my brief demonstration of the women chanting one of their most beloved *jingge,* and a eulogy and declaration of faith in Allah (*zansheng*). It was not so much the chant or its content that preoccupied the outraged listeners, I came to realize, but the public nature of the performance by women, with my recording capturing the enthusiastic audience's very audible, excited sounds of appreciation and loudly whispered comments. 'This is *fitnah,* chaos, this really is chaos (是乱, 就是乱 *shi luan, jiushi luan*)', so declared a young graduate student who had accompanied his professor, an expert in extreme cults (邪教 *yejiao*), to the meeting. It was apparent he expressed what his seniors had felt and exhibited with such an undisguised sense of shock. A most profound violation of the sacred sound of Islam, a sound embodied almost exclusively in the masculine voice, had taken place which necessitated instant condemnation for the danger it constituted to the authority of Islam.

This incident has stayed with me ever since. It provided the impetus to create a collective initiative to record hitherto unrecorded chants, resulting in the Muslim women's SongBook of chants from the tradition of women's mosques. It became a project in which countless women and their leading *ahong* from diverse mosques in and around Henan province participated, to ensure the successful accomplishment of as comprehensive a record as was possible and to bring the women's pasts within the reach of future generations. The SongBook is central to this present book.[3]

3 The detailed process of making the first-ever Muslim women's SongBook (中原穆斯林妇女赞圣与经歌汇编编写组 *Zhongyuan Musilin Funü Zansheng yu Jingge Huibianxiezu*), has been described elsewhere (Jaschok, Shui, with Ge 2021).

What interested us, the collaborating researchers, and led to this present book's research was the question of whether the outrage that the (male) listeners felt at the sound of female voices pointed to a violation of what was assumed to be a definitive Islamic-sanctioned injunction on the exposure of female voices in public, non-familial contexts. And how far, and to what extent, such convictions held up against the traditions women were reconnecting with in a resurgence of faith nourished by recognition of women's ownership of past achievements. Out of what kind of silence was this achievement born when, as conventionally understood, silence is associated with the negation of voice and stunted agency, with a lack of capacity for self-assertion.

It seemed that what had not been asked was how the conventional understanding of silence might have served the longevity of women's own institutions, which sustained women not only in the absence of societal resources for their education, and allowed them to fulfilll familial functions and responsibilities, but also transcended normative barriers of a conservative gender-segregated society. How did such a deadening impact allow for the evolution of women's self-expression and collective life and enable them to join with other women outside the confines of their homes, whether for prayer or education?

Silence harbors, as feminist scholarship has come to recognize, many possible permutations of thought and action. Utilizing a variety of classical and more recent feminist approaches to the philosophy of epistemic injustice (Kidd, Medina, and Pohlhaus 2017), as well as feminist and postmodern theorizing of silence and voice, served to shape the interpretations I provide in this book. These interpretations bring an intersectional lens to the influence of religion as a much underrecognized factor in the making of complex gendered identities.

It is in the nature of a book based on what has been a profoundly collaborative project that not only the voices of precious interlocutors and their testimonies are heard, but much of the insights, textual interpretations, and the connective tissues of agential cultural forces in the book are also the source of our collective processes of thought and investigation. The long journey of discovering historical source materials, of previously unheard stories by different generations of women, given context through informal and formal conversations with members of their particular communities, was made possible by a close research partnership and the mutual trust born of longstanding collaboration. As previously noted, current political challenges, which have effectively severed continued collaborative work, have made it impossible to jointly see the manuscript into print (unlike other publications, such as Jaschok and Shui 2000a; and Jaschok and Shui 2011).[4] A critical and deeply poignant conundrum for this ethnographer has been the unavoidable compromise of what is an ongoing feminist project aiming to make visible, give

4 Alongside co-authoring numerous books and articles, Shui Jingjun and I have sought to describe the nature of our partnership and positionalities, and the slow evolution of our joint research methodology, shared principles, and divergent interpretations – which reflects changes occurring over many years in our relationships with women's mosque communities (Jaschok and Shui 2000b).

voice, grant audibility, and name identity. Instead, taking a step back, I had to aim for the anonymity of speakers wherever possible and meaningful, rendering them invisible in a homogenizing reference to 'Muslim women'. The diktat of a researcher's ethical responsibility has made the act of un-naming for a feminist no less ironic in its implications.

This present volume is authored in its final version by me, thus the need to identify myself as the author. But voices from conversations and interviews, theoretical discussions, and methodological deliberations come out of a collaboration that renders the final version a multi-layered text of multiple-voice narratives. The ultimate *gestalt* of the book is my responsibility. Texts, recordings, and notes entrusted to me are a humbling and critical reminder of others' trust in me, and of my accountability to the communities of women who allowed me the privilege to participate in many years of learning and discovery.

The anthropologist James Fernandez (2006, 170) refers to 'that humble lesson of *recognized partiality*', a researcher's acknowledgment that the discipline of anthropology and its construction of history 'ultimately, is taking place among a multitude of silences'. Our research collaboration sought mutually receptive ways to enable and generate among 'a multitude of silences' a multitude of voices and stories, perspectives, and interpretations, thus rendering and uncovering women's silence, in the words of Robin Clair (1998, 4), as 'a fundamental part of communication'. I am here reaching back into the early years of collaboration when my longstanding research partner Shui Jingjun and I reflected on opportunities and challenges presented by collaborative research across boundaries and contexts. And what I wrote then, in dialogue with Shui, is what I still hold to be true at this point of writing, namely that 'Commitment born of collaboration which became anchored in an enduring friendship has made this storyteller become part, somehow, of a collective narration of hope' (Jaschok and Shui 2000b, 53). It is the *raison d'être* of this publication that the current enforced silence of my research partners will not serve to obscure their words and deeds of hope.

Envisioning a Gendered Islamic Landscape

**Jingge *and* Zansheng*: Religious Expression and Cultural Legacies of Hui Muslim Women in China's Central Plain (*中原地区 zhongyuan diqu*)*[5]

This section sketches key features of Islamic culture in central China and the historical contours of Muslim women's self-expression in central China. Islam is recognized as one of China's five legal religious traditions (Article 36, Chinese Constitution of 1982), alongside Daoism, Buddhism, Protestantism, and Catholicism. Ten nationalities make up China's Muslim population (out of 55 officially designated nationalities, also referred to as 'ethnic minorities') amounting in 2010 to a population of about 23,308,000 (1.8 percent of the country's total population). Hui Muslims, the largest group, are dispersed widely across China, with the greatest concentration of Muslims, the majority Uyghur, to be found in the western province of Xinjiang. Other significant Muslim populations are settled in the northwest regions and provinces of Ningxia, Gansu, and Qinghai. Most Muslims belong to the Hanafi school of the Sunni tradition, with fewer identifying with Sufi, Salafi, and Shia traditions (Gladney 1996; Erie 2016).

Salient Features of Islamic Culture in Zhongyuan (Central) China

- Islamic religious culture is the creative outcome of both Muslim men and women
- Separate religious social spaces exist for Muslim men and women in mosques
- Different voices express the lives of Muslim men and women
- External and internal changes find a response in cautious but ongoing self-reconstruction

The History of Muslim Women's Self-expression in Central China

The Early Stage: Late Ming and Early Qing Dynasty (late 17th century)

Emergence of female religious education of women and of a Muslim women's culture: main characteristics.

(a) Male-dominated: Women's voices were shaped and influenced by men
(b) Encoding of multiple identities of Muslim women in central China: As good wives, good mothers, and good Muslims, women were encouraged to get involved in community affairs, to promote the development of women's education and women's mosque institutions. Rather than being limited to the domestic sphere, Muslim women were able to play a role in the collective activities of the community and cultural development of Islamic life

5 Shui Jingjun, Henan Academy of Social Sciences, prepared this section in conjunction with the research team for a presentation at the 'Ethnographies of Islam in China' conference, 27-29 March, 2017, London; translated, with amendments, by me.

(c) Ideas that circumscribe and limit the conduct of women – including, importantly, the notion that it is shameful for women to speak [in public] (女人的声音是羞体 *nűrende shengyin shi xiuti*) – were internalized and survive into modern times

The Second Stage (18th to 20th centuries)

- Progress in women's education resulted in the formation of women's mosques. Women were able to play more important roles in the preservation and reconstruction of Islamic culture in central China. Women's capacity for self-expression improved gradually
- Texts, languages, and forms of self-expression

(a) Texts: Arabic and Persian scriptures
(b) Languages: Arabic, Persian, Chinese (scholastic classical and oral)
(c) Multiple forms of self-expression: *woer'ci* (卧尔兹 sermon), interactive learning through question-and-answer, the practice of *fiqh*, recital (of the Qur'an), diverse modes of chants of praise, *zanzhu zansheng*, *jingge*

- Oral tradition and *jingge* culture
  Oral tradition was crucial because few female *ahong* or Muslim women in general at the time were literate. *Jingge* is a traditional term for Islamic chants through which to express religious belief and preserve cultural memory. Initially, *jingge* were written by men and primarily disseminated among women and men affiliated to their respective mosques. This changed when the *jingge* tradition was increasingly discarded by male religious leaders as incompatible with more austere Islamic practices and as reminiscent of deficient religious education. Rather than being a mandatory Islamic requirement, *jingge* were popular among interested Muslims who found its application to be useful in different ways; this was the case with women leaders for whom *jingge* became an effective tool of instruction. *Jingge* also entered popular culture. For example, a custom called *tiaojingge* (挑经歌) – when a bride was asked to recite selected *jingge* on her wedding night – came to be prevalent in some Muslim communities.

The Third Stage (present-day Muslim communities in central China)

- As *zansheng* and *jingge* increasingly define women's expressive culture, women study both new and traditional modes of *zansheng*; increasingly, the term *jingge* is being replaced by *zansheng.*
- More than ever, *Ahong* and Muslims in general demonstrate independent thinking. This refers to the interpretation of the meaning and practice of Islam vis-à-vis their own critical understandings of the Qur'an and hadiths; women in particular are developing critical responses to received Islamic rules and regulations.

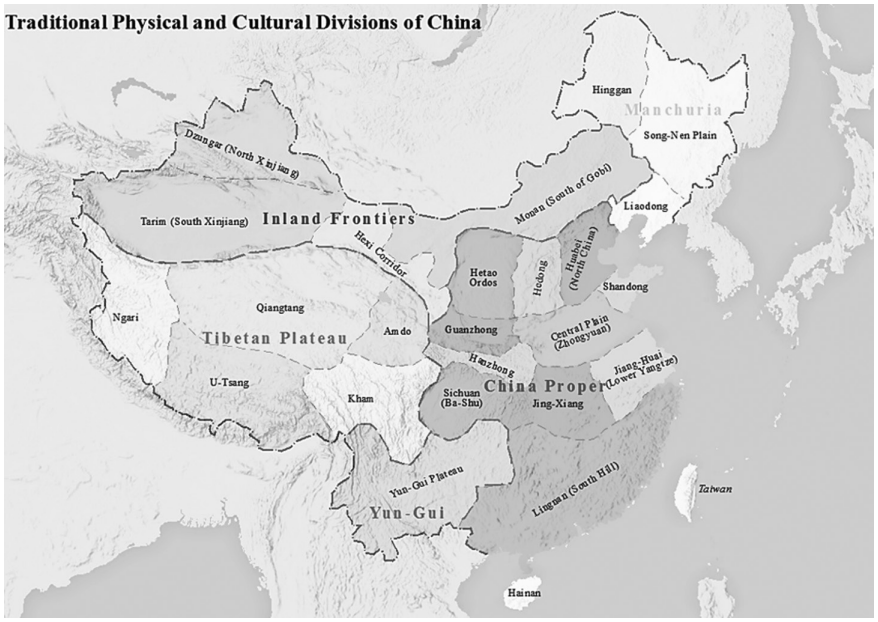

Figure 0.1 Traditional Physical and Cultural Divisions of China https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d3/China_Traditional_Divisions.png

- Of importance are the development of social media and media platforms, such as WeChat, enabling the emergence of multiple interpretations of issues surrounding the scriptural authenticity and practice of Islam.

Mapping China's Central Plain

The distinct Hui Muslim culture of China's central plain (中原地区 *zhongyuan diqu*)[6] frequently referred to in this book, includes the provinces of Hebei, Henan, Shandong, and Shanxi. The *zhongyuan* region can refer to Henan province only, but it also carries a wider connotation, including the provinces of Henan, Shanxi, Hebei, and Shandong. Unless indicated otherwise, the term as used in this volume highlights the unique cultural significance that Henan occupies in the gendered history of Islam in China. Not all Muslim communities supported women-only sites of prayer and education. For example, no women's mosques ever emerged in Uyghur Muslim contexts in Xinjiang province (Jaschok and Shui 2000a).

6 On early Chinese cosmology, see Pankenier (2013). The idea of China in antiquity is deeply anchored in what is known as the Central Plain, a territory reaching from the Yellow River valley to the north bank of the Yangtze, where early dynasties shaped the mythology and geopolitical project of Han China.

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1 The Songbook of Chinese Hui Muslim Women[1]

Recovering an Expressive Culture of Religious Piety

The remarkable history of several hundred years of transmitted oral culture generated by Muslim women's own mosques comes out of a shared faith which has inspired a sense of collective belonging that transcends gender and status. But it is also the product of an intermingling of Islamic and mainstream cultures, of local and global traditions of Islamic expressive culture. In recovering knowledge of such history, knowledge that could be produced only slowly, collectively – with many pauses and silences – grounded in an evolving collaboration of researchers and local communities of believing women, the ordinary lives of women have come to be revealed for their complex interior beliefs and aspirations. Deeply rooted in the unique Muslim female culture of China's central plain, we find expression not only of ordinary women's reception of the teaching of Islam, as instructed by their *ahong*, and understanding of their familial roles and duties, but also, in a world beyond domestic courtyards, their vision of social responsibility incumbent upon women of faith.

The history of women's mosques is a history of female voices, as illustrated here in the following lament on the transitoriness of crowded lives encoded with the moral injunctions and social segregation of neo-Confucian and Islamic gender regimes. At the heart lies a contradiction between two paradigmatic instructions: the all-encompassing religious duties of a good Muslim, and the all-encompassing moral duties of a good Muslim woman. The chant reveals both awareness of this seemingly irreconcilable conflict and its subjectively felt burden of fear and anxiety. And yet the fact of the collective voicing of this deeply felt conundrum by women, both within and outside the walls of historical women-centered religious and social spaces, and the place such chants hold in the expressive culture of female mosques, raises issues that create the impetus for this book. Their exploration demands that we turn to the history of a richly diverse female soundscape and its emergence from the uniquely Chinese tradition of Hui Muslim women's

1 This chapter contains extracts from an earlier article by me (Jaschok 2021), with permission from the *Journal of Religious Experience.* Throughout this volume, 'The Central China's Muslim Women's SongBook of Chants of Worship and Moral Exhortations' (中原穆斯林妇女赞圣与经歌汇编编写组 *Zhongyuan Musilin Funü Zansheng yu Jingge Huibianxiezu*), is referred to as SongBook (ZMFEC 2017).

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own mosques as they transformed, shrank, diminished, and expanded in influence across time and space, responding strategically and purposefully to obstructions to their survival and continued relevance. In the words of Jane Parpart (2010, quoted in Jaschok 2014, 66–67) who influenced an early, initial exploration of the implications of a rich legacy of women's tradition of recitation and chanting: 'While silence and secrecy can be symptomatic of passivity and disempowerment, as well as a means for reinforcing gender hierarchy…they can also provide the space for discoursing and consolidating inner resources, questioning the status quo, and developing long-term strategies for renegotiating gender relations'.

Lamenting Life[2] 叹人生 ***Tan ren sheng***

日月如梭昼夜忙，替叹人生不久常.

Life, like the shuttle [of a loom], day and night no rest, we lament how short our life.

古往今来君何在，文宫武将在哪厢？

From ancient times to the present, where are the powerful, where are learning and military might?

最多能活百十岁，有钱难买不老方.

At best we live to a ripe old age, no riches can buy eternal life.

长江后浪推前浪，一辈生来一辈忙.

The Yangtze River rolls on, wave after wave, and so generation after generation comes into the world and passes away.

曾记当年骑竹马，而今不觉两 鬓霜.

Remembering riding my bamboo toy horse, I am oblivious to the frosting of the hair at my temples.

生儿只说长不大，长达娶妻忘爷娘.

To give birth and take tender care of a child is a time of anxiety, yet when the time comes to take a wife, father and mother are forgotten.

看见媳妇怪喜欢，瞧见爷娘恼心肠.

Catching sight of daughter-in-law, there is great joy, but the sight of parents brings disharmony.

2 This chant came into great popularity during the Republican era (1912–49). It was contributed by Hu CF *Ahong* in April 2015 (ZMFEC 2017, 147). All chants in this volume have been translated by me.

劝君若到中年后，举好捏提行端庄.

Be advised when reaching middle age, bring offerings of *nieti* [alms] and conduct yourself with dignity and solemnity.

儿孙自有儿孙福，多千善功少奔忙.

Children have the blessing of their own offspring, do engage generously in good work and do not be overwhelmed by mundane tasks.

今世光阴如闪电, 抓住教门莫轻放.

In this world, time is like lightning, embrace faith and do not treat it lightly.

儿女财帛今世伴, 唯有善功后世常.

Children and wealth are worldly belongings, only good deeds become the foundation of Afterlife.

有心再想说句话，笔前墨尽纸不长.

As the heart wants to open up once more, upon lifting the brush, the ink dries up and the scroll runs out.

What does the popularity of *Tan ren sheng*, included in the first women's SongBook of recorded Islamic chants, tell us about the participants' religious imaginary and subjective sentiments? The chant opens with a most domestic metaphor, the shuttle of a loom that is the sound of the female sphere, an evocative and pervasive feminine soundscape. This sound resonates with chanters and listeners, bringing instant association with the busy schedules that constitute a traditional, female life-cycle. It is a sound anchored in the domestic space where the care of husband and children and the extended family dominates and shapes a woman's daily routine.

The opening line frames the lamentations with a seemingly unresolvable contradiction for women: their duty encoded in the very moral systems of Islam and neo-Confucianism, entailed in paradigmatic motherhood-and-wifehood, is in tension with duties enshrined in adherence to the five Islamic pillars of faith. Overwhelming this *jingge* is the sense of urgency that needs heeding as life passes by all too quickly and approaching mortality overwhelms with dread and anxiety. Musing on the inescapably fleeting nature of all worldly acquisitions, a fate shared by the powerful, privileged, and mighty, it is nature – here the evocation of the majestic Yangtze River and the perpetual motion of the tide – which brings a cruel contrast in its unending motion as humans are subject to a very different law: 'Generation after generation comes into the world and passes away', and so also the *jingge*. Childhood is evoked with a bamboo toy horse, and such is the power of this reminiscence that the nostalgic ride on childhood's beloved toy ends with an image of old age, the graying of hair, and with it the realization that the time granted in which to write one's life-story is running out.

A short lifespan is filled with the riches that only close family bonds can bring, the birth of, and care for, precious children, and witnessing the birth of further generations ensuring continuity. But an underlying subtext of anxiety, fear, and trepidation darkens the depiction of domestic idyll and ordinary life. Child mortality, ceaseless worry about a child's health, the imperative for a daughter-in-law to continue the family line, and the rupture of family relations if she brings disharmony and estrangement all play a part in unease over domestic strife and how quickly attention is deflected from what really matters. And the *jingge* issues a warning: all these apparent crises are, after all, quite humdrum matters. When fascination with wealth or absorption with family relations takes up time, and takes over life, this leads to neglect of diligent preparation for the Afterlife. Generosity and charitable conduct steeped in faith and awareness of what constitutes the ultimate meaning of human existence during latter stages of life must replace all else. Metaphors give expression to life passing 'like lightning'. The end catches humans unawares, brutally so. The last line does not spare the listener. Ready to lift the brush to continue with the record of life, instead 'the ink dries up and the scroll runs out'. No more words are forthcoming, no more sound is heard; the scroll as a record of the lifespan apportioned to an individual has come to an end.

Our interpretation and contextualization of chants from a previously largely hidden treasure trove of women's Islamic chants have created a first written record of the creative culture, recorded by women for women, emanating from the segregated spaces of women's mosques in the central plain of China. This SongBook (ZMFEC 2017), used as a resource for teaching and celebration, has had, within a short time, a widespread impact on occasions and festivities beyond women's mosque teaching. Moreover, the SongBook, an integral part of our research, constitutes – with its core texts and contextual conversations, mutual interviews, debates, and reminiscences, inspired by a collaborative journey of (re)discovery – the inspiration and essential resource for this book. An ethnography-based exploration of local and cross-cultural notions of agency and piety at the intersections of silence, faith, community, and voice, this SongBook captures a historical moment of a resurgent expressive culture of female religiosity before a time when the institution of women's mosque communities in central China once more faces existential challenges.

History of Women's Voices, a History of Women's Mosques

The SongBook (ZMFEC 2017) is the outcome of an extraordinary collective effort by members of women's mosque communities, religious practitioners, and local Islamic scholars, together with researchers, to provide a record – their very own testimonial – of a rich, previously unheard history of generations of female voices of faith. Reaching back into the recent past of women's circumscribed spiritual, intellectual, and physical mobility, when her predecessors were confined to limited educational and ceremonial duties inside the mosque compound, the elderly Mu *Ahong,* an influential supporter of our project to record women's chants, holds that she is following in the tradition of reformist female *ahong* from the Republican

era (1912–49) when she uses her voice as a vital link between past and present.[3] And it is her hope that the living link between a reaffirmed cultural heritage and present-day leading women as vocal transmitters of this heritage thus also sustains and strengthens the institutional standing and influence of female-led traditions and their place in China's Muslim society.

Such chants of prayer, worship, and emotions, their popularity revelatory of the interior world of believers, are given center-stage in collective performances of intensified feeling. They provide us with rare glimpses of an imaginary where a world is at peace and in harmony, enabled by and rooted in an idealized principle of gender-based complementarity (性别合作 *xingbie hezuo*) concerning responsibilities, duties, and rights (ZMFEC 2017, 10). At the core of a sensory expressive culture of female-gendered religiosity, they elevate the ordinariness of life to a heightened sensory experience whereby significant resources of collective strength and validated agency are marshaled.

A Record of Women's Expression, a Legacy to Bequeath to Descendants

The SongBook constitutes a powerful testimonial to the strength, courage, and belief of women who grew up under a moral system that commanded women to speak with self-abnegating modesty, out of public sight and hearing. But it also demonstrates that these same women were indeed not silent, and ultimately, not silenced. Partitioning curtains and walls that formed the symbolic and socio-spatial borders of women's assigned spaces for religious learning and worship were never, and indeed never could be, hermetically sealed. Thresholds between inner and outer social spheres were crossed by women constantly, throughout the day, fetching, carrying, questioning, leaving, returning. And would it not be the case that women – returned home from their mosques, still resonating with the sounds of chanting – were likely to continue humming tunes and trying out newly learned words when going about domestic tasks and caring for children? Derived from a richly evocative soundscape that had come to imbue women-led authoritative spaces with the possibility of hope, their chants were of deepening influence over those who sought their guidance.

It is thus possible to argue that whilst women could not make themselves heard and were not listened to in the public spheres of male leadership, inside women's spaces, however, their own traditions evolved, inscribed by their life experiences and spirituality. The voices which for many generations practiced pronunciation of foreign tongues and scriptural languages, and affirmed belief in the pillars of

3 In a long account of her educational work among a women's mosque congregation in Zhengzhou, the provincial capital of Henan province, Mu *Ahong* told me her story from her point of view as a 'teacher of women's souls'. This is how she refers to her role. We sought her approval for the SongBook project, which she gave readily. (She expressly wished to remain anonymous; thus, this is not her real name.) The conversation in preparation for the SongBook took place in August 2016 in Zhengzhou, Henan province.

Islam, which committed to memory essential guidelines for a good Muslim life and Muslim women's responsibility for family and community, which celebrated the great female role models in the history of Islam, and which lamented loss and bereavement but held on to the promise of the Afterlife. These voices, loud and clear, come from women who are fashioning, together, a record of their claim to equal worth.

This SongBook is a record of women's voices that speak of faith, religious belief, the impact of determined women, and the meaningfulness of lives lived with integrity and devotion to family, community, and nation. At its heart is an unshakable belief in God and in human beings' capacity – if one abides by the essence of Islam – to be steered onto the pathway of justice and compassion. These convictions prompted a few women religious leaders to take on the responsibility of editing this record of their oral tradition for the preservation of a proud history of women-led Islamic institutions, unique in the global Ummah of diverse Muslim contexts. They also intend for this SongBook to constitute a source of knowledge for the benefit of future generations of women (and men) who want to raise their voices in age-old traditions of worship, praise, and celebration. It speaks, moreover, of a collective effort by many women who together have brought to life this rich and diverse oral tradition. Through consultation, discussion, conversations, and meetings, as well as internet communication, whether involving leading *ahong* or ordinary Muslim women, all have made this book a unique window into the richness of women's history and its multiple legacies.

The linguistically diverse influences noted in the chants derive from ancient Persian, Arabic, and Chinese, thus at times making it difficult to trace a given chant's origins. Yet it is this linguistic mosaic that provides a fascinating intimation of the varied ways by which Islam arrived in China and settled into a diversity of Islamic traditions and Muslim cultures so characteristic of Chinese Islam. When considering the multiple functions of these chants – serving worship, education, ritual celebration, and the collective affirmation of belonging to the Ummah of believers – we realize the important part they played in a most distinct and noteworthy history of Islam. More specifically, they constitute an oral tradition marked by women's learning, aspirations, yearnings, and faith. The history of *jingge* (经歌) and *zansheng* (赞圣) is inseparable from the history of Muslim women in central China's Hui Muslim settlements, and thus, embedded in a cultural landscape of traditional receptivity to diverse beliefs and ways of life. In this region evolved a long history of women-led institutions from temporary facilities to permanent sites of learning and worship guided by appointed, proficient women *ahong*. Never a simple and straightforward nor uniform or linear history, the story of institution-building and the installment of leading women in positions of religious authority grew out of the specific conditions under which gender and Islam evolved in the course of modern Chinese history. It is also, importantly, a history of voice.

Voices come in many manifestations, in the form of speech or song, loudly rendered or quietly whispered, in spaces that are public or curtained off and walled in. And voices are always gendered. That is, they are marked by the moral codes of historical time and place that assign to women spheres of duties and rights,

entitlements, and dependencies. The history of women's mosques is the history of many generations of women who spoke, wept, consoled, preached, and chanted. It is thus a history which embraces all the many forms of female voice. Whilst there is no linear historical trajectory, we may nevertheless note a trajectory from sounds barely audible, because confined to segregated spaces curtained off from public hearing, which allowed illiterate women in private rooms to acquire the rudimentary aspects of Islamic learning to the most recent development of audible voices in open spaces. This development is also marked by changes in the form and content of sound that have pervaded women's mosques over more than 300 years.

As the *jingge* and *zansheng* assembled in this SongBook tell us, the chants are intimately linked with the material and spiritual life that shaped women's religiosity, which in turn, was shaped by the women who brought them to life and gave them ever new relevance. The chants allowed women to understand both the fundamentals of Islam through knowledge of sacred words from the Qur'an and the performance of religious rituals to sustain devotion and belonging. Furthermore, the act of communal, chanted prayer expanded the spirit and strengthened faith by providing emotional consolation and the promise of the Afterlife. And it always needs remembering that this story of the emergence of the unique culture of women's mosques unfolded against a historical background of general female illiteracy, patriarchal dominance over women's proper moral conduct and sphere of duty, the uncertain fate of Islam, and a general lack of social opportunities for the majority of women until the contemporary period.

Writing Women into Tradition

A recent resurgent expressive culture has led to the writing and composition of new chants, informed by both aspirations and the challenging perplexities of being Muslim in a highly nationalistic country where religious commitment must be reconciled with protestations of patriotic loyalty. New Islamic chants (穆斯林歌曲 *musilin gequ*) can be heard in classes, in mosques attended by men and women, teaching the fundamentals of Islam and intensifying collective exuberance in belonging to the true faith. Formerly the prerogative of men only, women nowadays predominate when it comes to a resurgent expressive culture of faith. And this resurgence has brought into circulation Persian *zansheng*, connecting with a language that was once the defining characteristic of women's mosque teaching, before educational reform during the late 1990s made opportunities for learning Arabic an educational feature also of women's mosques. Moreover, closer connections not only with Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East but also with Southeast Asia, whether through pilgrimages, educational visits, or commercial trade, have further expanded the repertoire of chants. The extraordinary history of several hundred years of transmitted oral culture generated by Muslim women's own mosques comes out of a shared faith that has inspired a sense of collective belonging transcending gender and status but which is also the product of an intermingling of Islamic and mainstream cultures, of local and global traditions of Islamic expressive culture.

The SongBook's nearly 300 chants, recovered through collective rituals of remembering by older generations of believers – indeed, too many chants have entirely vanished from memory – have given rise to unprecedented acknowledgment of their intrinsic value and the revelations of religious spirituality, moral values, and shared belonging. It has also led to recognition of the importance of gendered spheres where ritual and informal expressions of professions of faith take place. Faith and Muslim life, expressed in colloquial language and evocative images, set to appealing popular tunes, have proven effective pathways to connecting with past generations of faithful believers, with history once more a precious source of pride and belonging.

Throughout their history, the chants of *jingge*, perhaps as old as the mosques in which they were chanted (see Chapter Two), could be heard within and beyond the gates of Islamic sites where men and women worshiped separately, creating a joyous soundscape for family and community celebrations. But it is the culture of chanted prayer and learning in women's mosques, to be described more closely in forthcoming chapters, that evolved in the course of the late 19th and early 20th centuries to supersede in significance the older traditions associated with men's mosques, serving to sustain, even reawaken, a collective Muslim memory of precious Islamic knowledge.

There has, moreover, been a remarkable change in the kinds of spaces where chants can be legitimately performed. Formerly confined to the seclusion of women-only sites of prayer and gatherings, starting in 2005, so-called women's songs of praise (女性赞圣 *nüxing zansheng*) have become the staple of song contests. Women's chants have moved outside the mosque and into the community. Mosque choirs are in popular demand, their performances are seen as heightening the intensity of significant occasions, whether they be weddings, name-giving ceremonies, or any other milestones of significance to a family or the wider community. There is widespread appreciation of mixed repertoires of religiously informed *zansheng*, older *jingge*, and current popular, tuneful chants that reflect local cultural influences.

Nevertheless, a certain trend can be noted: that is, a marked development from a historically dominant culture of *jingge* (with its spectrum embracing a diversity of worldly and religious, often gendered, topics and themes) to the greater spiritual intensity of *zanzhu zansheng*, reflecting the resurgence of Islam noted by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists of Islam in China (Harris, Ha, and Jaschok 2021). The resurgence in central China's Hui Muslim communities of the importance of women's mosques led by charismatic *ahong* is what has enabled a reinvigorated religious education and revival of collective practices of prayer, whereby ordinary women sustain their sense of worth and notable pride in the uniquely gendered history of Islam. In a context of strengthened Chinese state authority over all spheres of society, the solidarity and sense of belonging engendered by expressive communal rituals also brings vindication of an enduring commitment to being Muslim in a non-Muslim society.

Probing the enduring faith of Muslim women in modern Chinese society is to take stock of accumulated learning acquired over many generations of leading

women teachers and *ahong* who interpreted universal Islamic principles for application in women's everyday practice of faith. Their role in China's *zhongyuan* Muslim culture is all the more remarkable when considering the diversity of Islamic traditions in China (Gladney 1996; Harrell 1995) and their contrastive gendered cultural practices (Harris, Ha, and Jaschok 2021). A recent ethnography of the Jahriyya Sufi order, who predominantly settled in the northwestern region, illuminates how the authority of male sounds continues to reify paradigmatic gendered life-cycles for indispensable service to ritual and familial life, whilst repudiating women's rightful ritual participation (Ha 2022). In the Hui Muslim communities of central China, as the following chapter demonstrates, a tradition of female-centered learning and worship has allowed for learned women to play supportive, often transformative, roles in religious, organizational, and interpretative capacities.

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2 Chants as a Bridge to Remembering Past Lives[1]

Once Learned Never Forgotten

Telling Stories, and Storytellers[2]

'Chanting *jingge* is good, makes you remember where you come from', thus mused the 74-year-old Dan *Lao Taitai* as she recalled learning about the history of her faith and of her people through chanting (see below for more details). When, in the late 17th century, Muslims searched for a suitable way to transmit their culture in the central plain of China, the participation of learned women in the project of female education led in subsequent decades to the eventual establishment of permanent, female-only spaces of prayer and education. This became the antecedent of a unique institutional and cultural tradition of *qingzhen nüsi* or *nüsi* (清真女寺/女寺women's mosques), hereafter referred to as *nüsi* (Jaschok and Shui 2000a). This tradition is inseparable from the soundscapes created by women's collective recitations and chanting, the tradition generally referred to as *jingge* orIslamic chants in general. A unique tradition spanning over 300 years within a unique institution of female religious life, it seemed from women's initial responses to researchers' questions that *jingge* had been largely 'forgotten'; neither had it, until recently, received due scholarly attention (Jaschok and Shui 2005; Shui and Jaschok 2002, 135). Yet this tradition speaks to the history of women, to their communal life and faith, to their relations with men, and to male religious authority. While acutely and anxiously aware of the ever-present danger of untold suffering befalling negligent female believers, their family-centered responsibilities as wives, mothers, and carers nevertheless rendered the performance of religious duties a source of tension for women. The *zansheng* (chants of worship and praise) below, in a most eloquent language, reveals profoundly pious subjectivities, riven by deeply felt despair and the fear of spiritual abandonment. Urgent pleas for

1 This chapter contains a partial reproduction of Jaschok and Shui (2005) 'Gender, Religion, and Little Traditions: Chinese Muslim Women Singing *Minguo*' by courtesy of permission granted by Veit D. Hopf, LIT Verlag – Berlin, Schumannstr. 7c D – 10117. Berlin, Germany (22 October 2019).

2 In this section, interviews with women remembering the history and their own experiences of *jingge* are taken from preparations made for a 2017 documentary film 经歌与赞圣: 中原穆斯林妇女的信仰表达和文化传 ('*Jingge and Zansheng*: Religious Expression and Cultural Legacies of Muslim Women in Central China'). Shui Jingjun, Maria Jaschok, W.H., and S. L.L. worked in collaboration with six influential women's and men's mosques in Henan to produce the documentary funded in part by a Leverhulme Trust Research Grant (2014-17).

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divine guidance are left without response because the voice of guidance has ceased. A painful silence has settled where once words of revelation were communicated. The lament below is moreover a reminder of other kinds of silences, which, if dread and despair over the frailty of the human condition are left unchallenged, will cause the souls of believers to 'fall into anguish'.

Fatimah's Lament[3] 瓦穆随白塔湖 ***Wamusuibaitahu***

哎！使我好遭丧啊！ 我的指望割断了，但愿我的母亲没有生我就好了！（比俩立）.

Ai! What grief has befallen me, aiyah. Hopeful anticipation is cut short; it would have been better for my mother not to give birth to me.

哎！因为封印万圣的圣人的逝去了，而断绝一切真诚之人的领袖，而使我好悲哀啊！

Ai! It is so that the saint, who surpasses the multitude of many saints, has passed away, abandoning the faithful people now bereft of their leader, making us lament in grief!

哎！因为敬畏真主之人的逝去了，而断绝一切真诚之人领袖，使我好遭丧啊！

Ai! It is so that the revered Allah's messenger has passed away, taking away all the devoted people's leader, casting us into misery, aiyah!

哎！真主的启示从天上断绝了， 而使我好悲伤啊！的确，从今天开始，从听你讲话上无份了！从今以后听不见你的赛俩目了！

Severed from Allah's heavenly revelations, I fall into anguish! Truly, from this day onwards, I no longer hear your words! In days to come, I no longer hear your *Salamu*!

This is a rarely performed chant, a chant of raw intensity and heightened emotion, which I had the privilege to record, listening together with a large group of women from a local mosque. Invited by the *ahong* to visit her women's mosque in a remote township in Henan province to document the diversity of local *jingge* as part of ongoing research, I was again made aware of the impact of our presence as

3 This traditional *zansheng* chant marks the passing of the Prophet Mohammad. Whenever performed, these occasions can be highly emotionally charged, evoking both Fatimah's tearful, inconsolable grief and lamentation at the death of her father, but also reminding singers and listeners of the loss of beloved relatives and friends. Recovery of this chant, due to the mode of transliteration from Persian to Chinese adopted by transmitters, may only ever be an unfinished process, with some of the original meaning unrecoverable. What has been recovered constitutes the combined effort of Jin JG *Ahong*, Hai WZ *Ahong*, Ge CX *Ahong* (April 2016), and Ding LY *Ahong*, aided by the support of the student Zhang SL (August 2016) (ZMFEC 2017, 25–27).

researchers and the significance of being entrusted by women to share what they increasingly had come to recognize as their own unique story. A story of pride, they felt, worthy of making known to Muslim and non-Muslim women both within their own country and outside of China.

Invited jointly with my research partner, Shui Jingjun, we are widely known for our longstanding partnership and commended for our friendship, shared research ethic, and dedication to trustworthy storytelling (Jaschok and Shui 2000b). It also proved an occasion when I became acutely conscious once more of my identity and others' perception of my role in a sensitive and complex research environment. What I observed was a group of listeners visibly moved, but not stirring from their cushions, not joining in the chanting nor giving rise to emotional expression as they were wont to do without the presence of an outsider, however familiar or trusted she might be. This demonstration of caution, arising from familiar strategies of self-preservation (that is, their awareness of how a foreign presence complicates even an ordinary event, let alone rituals accompanying the recital of religious eulogies), the women's partial omission of the more usual collective demonstration of ritual participation involving performers and audience recalled my attention to limitations faced by the outsider as researcher/participant. It also reinforced the responsibility I carried as researcher/observer, trusted by the women around me that in the ongoing dialogue with research partners, in the listening to voices from their communities, and through our understanding of the wider history of sacred sound, we would find empathetic ways to complete and widely share their story.

A Sonic History of Hui Muslim Women in Central China

Going back to the beginning of our discovery of a long tradition of women's chants or *jingge*, it was a time of urgency as it dawned on us in the early months of research how important the recording would be of what might be recoverable from women's oral tradition (Jaschok and Shui 2005). It was crucial, we felt, to salvage precious traditions of worship and self-expression, in form and content, within the cultures of Islam, together with Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism). The oral traditions were part of the popular cultures of women and men in Chinese society, of which Buddhist and Daoist traditions have been studied more amply (Dong 2002[4]; Jaschok and Shui 2011). We were able to invite a wide range of participants for this ambitious project, from ordinary believers and religious practitioners to professional and amateur researchers. This was to facilitate communication and conversation among people from different backgrounds and enable mutual benefit through knowledge and expertise contributed by a diversity of participants. Moreover, we sought to facilitate women's awareness of the value of their contributions to the legacies of Chinese mainstream culture. Through a meaningful oral history project encompassing opportunities to learn media and technical skills, our research

4 Professor Dong Xiaoping's project (while she was at the Normal University of Beijing) concentrated on Buddhist and Daoist traditions of chants to the exclusion of Islam and Christianity.

interlocutors/partners sought to reconnect with their own history, devise plans for collecting chants and stories, and discuss interpretations and various uses of collected chants and source materials. It became an oral history of believing women's rich culture of faith, education, and common purpose. To quote the feminist philosopher Li Xiaojiang on the significance of oral history for the entry of Chinese women into the main frame of the historical canon: '…the [oral history] project is an important part of women's self-knowledge, self-validation and development'.[5] It is thus not only a matter of visibility, or audibility; it also brings important additional transformative aspects to historical scholarship. Resort to unheard sources of knowledge raises issues as to who are the knowers whose statements receive due attention and legitimation through formal institutional conduits of learning.

At stake in this comprehensive and detailed project of recovering orally transmitted traditions of *jingge* and of stories told in women's mosques were related and mutually influencing local traditions that had developed in Buddhist, Daoist, and Catholic women's places of worship in local Henan culture – which evolved into a richly constituted, unique Hui Muslim *zhongyuan* culture (ZMFEC 2017, Preface). During our ethnographic research in Henan, we unearthed the richness, diversity, and legacy of these traditions and saw as a critical task the salvaging of precious records of women's inner life in danger of permanent loss. Those who remembered were of advanced age, their memories constrained by frailty and weakening powers of recall.

Songs and stories form part of local cultures and traditions that are dependent for transmission on space, interpreters, performers, and a sustaining listening culture. Rich in content, they tell of women's faith and aspirations, of women's life in the family and in the community, and of the mutual influences of diverse religions, including local and popular cultures of folksong. Through our many years of research in Henan and adjacent provinces, we cultivated networks and contacts to reach our elderly informants – Muslim women and women of Buddhist, Daoist, and Christian faiths – effectively and quickly.

The value of the proposed project rested in the preservation of local, peripheralized histories for a critical reappraisal of Chinese mainstream history, of significance nationally and internationally. Ultimately, however, the most important value of recovered women's chants, we realized, would be to Muslim women themselves.[6]

5 Quoted from Li Xiaojiang's address in the second oral history workshop (20世纪妇女口述史 Twentieth Century Women's Oral History) in Zhengzhou, 14-16 March 1994. Here we must acknowledge this great oral history project on Chinese women's history in the 20th century, the research phase of which was designed and led by Li. Interviews in the early 1990s addressed topics such as war and women, the women's movement, minority nationality women, women as half of the sky, the lives of rural women, and more. More than 20 provinces or cities were included in the project which resulted in the publication of several volumes; see also Li Xiaojiang 2003.

6 The story of the quest for unrecorded chants, of their recording and compilation, is described in detail in a recently published co-authored account. The SongBook project's impact was transformative for

The Place of *Jingge* in the History of Women's Mosques

How did *jingge* become an important part of women's learning of religious scriptures and guidance in Muslim morality and conduct? We cannot entirely determine the precise origins or age of *jingge* chants as there is little or no written evidence. Women *ahong* would often state that *jingge* came down to them through the generations. Some believe that its history coincides with the history of Qur'anic schools and women's mosques over 300 years ago. Others argue that the history of *jingge* predates even the history of women's mosques.

Muslim women's general knowledge of the origin and place of *jingge* in women's mosque culture is vague and ranges between 'several generations' to 'more than two hundred years'. Based on an analysis of the songs' content and characteristics, and judging also from the scope of transmission of the renowned Qing scholar Liu Zhi's (ca. 1655–1745) work, we suggest that their origins lie in the emergence of Islamic female education in the early Qing era when popular tunes must have appeared the most appropriate means of spreading rudimentary religious knowledge (Jaschok and Shui 2000a). Whilst the origin of many *jingge* is uncertain, some accounts by members of the older generations of women and men link the earliest chants to the origin of the first Islamic cultural movement (i.e. early 17th century, when the Ming dynasty gave way to a more hostile environment under Qing imperial rule during 1644–1912). It was a movement that sought to stem the diminishing force of Islamic faith and Chinese Muslims' knowledge of their faith by devising major translations of seminal scriptures and facilitating the expansion of education for all.

With the development of women's Qur'anic schools and mosques, the influence of *jingge* would also have spread (Jaschok and Shui 2000a). Such beginnings might explain why *jingge* have always been considered inferior to sacred hymns, a part of the worship in men's mosques. As 'rudimentary' educational tools, and given perceptions of women's spiritual deficiencies, *jingge* were tainted by the gender of those who utilized them.

Two traditions evolved in this oral culture: *zanzhu zansheng* or *zansheng* (赞主赞圣 chants in praise of Allah and the Prophet) passed down the generations in Persian and Arabic; whereas *jingge* were transmitted in Arabic, Persian, and, in the greatest numbers, Chinese language.[7] *Jingge* appear in a diversity of genres and are expressive of the cultural life of Muslims, with tunes from both mainstream non-Muslim traditions and locally popular musical forms. Whilst Arabic recitals of Qur'anic chapters are vocalized in rhythmic beat, chanting of Chinese-language *jingge* may be found to borrow heavily from folk tunes, popular in society at large.

all participants. With a generous print run in 2017, *ahong* and religious instructors were able to put these chants to educational, ritual, and celebratory use (Jaschok and Shui, with Ge 2021).

7 The terms *zanzhu zansheng* and *jingge* are often used interchangeably. The term *jingge* is not uncommonly used to refer to all genres that constitute the chanting traditions associated with mosque culture in *zhongyuan* China (see below for more information).

To summarize the major uses of *jingge*: they were used as an educational tool to teach young girls basic Islamic knowledge and scriptural languages; they added animation and pleasure to the discipline of learning, much like the function of music lessons in modern school curricula; and they were considered useful as accessible and easy methods of instructing mature women in religious knowledge. *Jingge* also brought emotional release, speaking to women's suffering, aspirations, and sacrifices, but also affording consolation when experiencing grief, unhappiness, and loss. Chants enhanced and shaped communal life in a women's mosque by the pleasure they provided and reinforced a more emotional identification with the women's own site of congregation, making the mosque community a family of like-minded women. Finally, the recital of Arabic and Persian *jingge* had the effect of strengthening Islamic faith and identity, by evoking suffering in exile and by sustaining the collective memory of a spiritual origin in an Islamic homeland, which has given rise to what might be considered a form of relational piety.[8]

Gendered Voices

The mother of Mai FL, who teaches Arabic language classes, is a female *ahong* in Henan province. According to Mai FL, she is always mindful of the fact that she comes from a lineage of several generations of *ahong,* some locally famed for their scriptural erudition.[9] The voice of Mai FL's mother was considered good, and she was known for having a large repertoire of *jingge*. She was only little when she was taught by her grandmother the chants which she recalls to this day.

Ding LM *Ahong,* from an influential women's mosque in central China, stated that *jingge* has 'a history of more than two hundred years'.[10] This statement is based on information from her old teacher, a respected woman *ahong* whose family's contribution to the transmission of *jingge* stretches back over seven generations. Bai YL *Ahong* – an *ahong* of the younger generation whose erudition accounts for her prestigious appointment with an urban women's mosque – held that the history of *jingge* is inseparable from the history of women's mosques, reflecting an ever-expansive and lasting response to women's spiritual and educational needs. Hai WZ *Ahong,* from a medium-sized women's mosque in rural Henan, considers the beginnings of *jingge* to predate the history of women's mosques because 'a large part of *jingge* was created by men, transmitted in early times by male *ahong*; however, when it comes to reciting and learning, this is done mostly by women'. For most of the older generations of women, their predominant, enduring, and

8 Here I am building on Ian Burkitt's (2016) work on 'relational agency'. I explore the notion of relational piety in a forthcoming chapter for *The Cambridge Companion to Women and Islam,* edited by Masooda Bano (Jaschok forthcoming).

9 Interview with Mai FLtook place in August 2016 in a country town in Henan province.

10 Interview with Ding LM *Ahong* took place in August 2016 in a small provincial town in Henan province.

once precious memory is of recent times, of learning *jingge* at their local women's mosques when still small.[11]

The evaluation of *jingge* as an inferior didactic tool and its association with deficient religious knowledge, as well as with social contexts of poverty and marginality, may be seen as emblematic of the difficult course of female religious organization in China's Islam. The use of a common Chinese language and the reliance largely on oral transmission appear in stark contrast with the more highly regarded *shige* (诗歌 sacred hymns). *Shige* are copied and transmitted by male scholars, and because they survive in print, they are preserved as the representative heritage of Muslim religious life, their language and style considered appropriately elegant, refined, and poetic. Equally popular among male and female Muslims, *shige* have become the acknowledged conduit of Islamic core beliefs, through which morality and human sentiments are invoked and ritualized. The importance of songs belonging to *jingge,* on the other hand, remains unacknowledged, classified as educational tools of the most rudimentary kind, and serving the needs of the lowly educated.

The fate of the *jingge* tradition exposes multifarious inequalities: on the one hand, men's religious culture, emphasizing literacy and access to Islamic knowledge through the written word; on the other hand, the tradition of women's mosques with their dependence on the so-called *nürenjing* (女人经 Women's Qur'an, consisting of abridged Persian texts to convey Qur'anic teachings considered pertinent to women's moral guidance), reliance on *xiaoerjing* (小儿经[12] a minor script, relying on Arabic/Persian transliterations of Chinese), and on a core oral culture of instruction, worship, and transmission.

Not surprisingly, associations of *jingge* with illiteracy, rural backwardness, low spirituality, their exclusion from use for worship, worship as chanted recital of chapters of the Qur'an only, and *zanzhu zansheng* made *jingge* suspect. It was regarded as a poor vehicle of Islamic faith as well as being ill-suited for a modern society governed by an ideological binary between the progressive (socialist) woman, whose liberation will always be one of the Chinese Communist Party's proudest achievements, and the woman fettered to, and diminished by, religious belief. It would take many conversations about the significance of the rich content of (re)discovered *jingge* in the making of Chinese Muslim women's *own* history, alongside leading *ahongs'* and researchers' concerted efforts, before the women moved beyond abstract memories into deeper exploration, be it among *ahong* or ordinary believers. Progression from rejecting these chants as an embarrassing legacy and antithetical to modernity, to accepting them as a place of pride in

11 The interviews with Bai YL *Ahong* and Hai WZ *Ahong* took place in June 2016, in rural townships, Henan province.

12 We use *jing* 经 rather than the more common *jin* 锦 to reflect the meaning attached by women interlocutors to the sacred task of communion with God's works as transmitted by the Prophet; that is, *jing* (sacred scripture) rather than *jin* (beautiful) (Shui and Jaschok 2002).

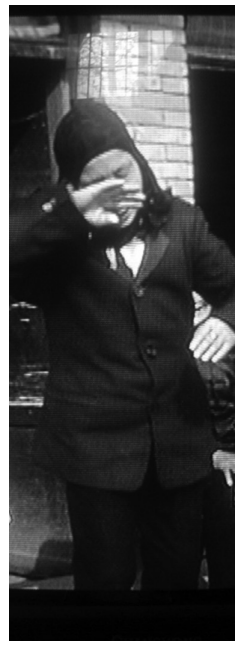

Figure 2.1 Creating a record of *jingge* for future generations, Henan research project collection HRPC, ca. 1998 (anonymous photo)

Chinese Muslim women's history, continues to be an ongoing project of research and discovery.[13]

Jingge *as a Bridge to the Past*[14]

When approached by us, the researchers, most interlocutors initially responded that they could not remember: 'What is in the past is past' (过去就过去了 *guoqu jiu guoqule*). The past had become an abstraction filled with official speak of 'the feudal' and 'the backward' in which religion as 'the old' featured as a defining 'Other' of Maoist liberation of women for the new China. Harrowing experiences, collectively and individually, of religious identity being associated with ignorance and ignominy before the institution of more liberal policies, from the 1970s

13 From the 1980s onward, mosques printed their own religious materials, including *jingge* as an initiative by Hui scholars and religious practitioners during the Republican era (1912-49). The materials are now a highly popular and esteemed corpus of religious hymns comprising: *Jingwei Zhenzhu zhi lu* (Zhengzhou Yuyuanli Mosque n.d.); *Liu Zhisan lao ahong shiji* (Liu Fuli 1993); and *Musilin changshi* (Zhengzhou Beida Mosque 1994).

14 Amended extract from co-authored chapter by Jaschok and Shui (2005), with permission from LIT Verlag.

onward (Leung 1996; MacInnes 1972, 1989; Tong 1999; Uhalley and Wu 2000), had turned into a vague forgetfulness for many of the older women we approached. David Coplan (1991, quoted in Rees 2000, 98) refers to oral genres as 'a people's autobiographical ethnography'. But a collective history of persecution and decades of the suppression of religious practice has effectively expunged many such traditions. 'Abstraction is memory's most ardent enemy', Judith Miller (1990, quoted in Schwarcz 1998, 23–24) says; 'It kills because it encourages distance, often indifference'.

When the researchers persisted beyond initial protestations and prolonged pauses, sometimes, deeper attitudes emerged and shifted organically. Older women responded with embarrassment alternating with excitement, with pleasure giving rise to pain, as the *jingge* were recalled. When the singer was positioned comfortably with the researcher's tape recorder placed close to her, the other women congregated around her, and the room would fall silent, barely a hush to be heard. During the chanting and remembrances, when tears fell, younger women were ready with tissue paper to dry the wrinkled cheeks of their elders. There must be 'cultural forms and occasions for remembering', Laurence Kirmayer (1996, 193) observes. The singer, the group of listeners, and the researchers together created the occasion, an instance of sacred and social time.

Guo JF *Ahong*, a resident *ahong* at an urban women's mosque, often illustrated the impact of *jingge*, chanted by someone with a good voice, by referring to an elderly member of her congregation, Li *Shetou* (社头 *shetou,* a member of the mosque management committee). Li *Shetou*, who had attended the Women's Mosque from earliest childhood, was well known for her recital of the Qur'an and chanting of *jingge*, thus according to Guo *Ahong, she* most effectively spread the message of Islam, enchanting everyone with her beautiful voice. She chanted even when by herself. But when Li *Shetou* was in the Prayer Hall (大殿里 *dadianli*) everyone would flock around her. After finishing *Hufutan* night prayer (虎夫滩 *salat al-'isha*), possibly because women felt more relaxed, they would then plead with her: 'Li *Shetou*, please, one more *jingge*'.[15]

Ma *Shetou*, 86 years old, remembered that at the age of seven or eight, she was sent to the mosque to learn *jingge* and recite from a popular textbook, *Haitie (*亥贴), comprising 18 chapters and verses from the Qur'an for teaching rudimentary Islamic knowledge. Like countless other little girls, she formed much of her knowledge of Islamic beliefs during these most formative years; her learning was helped and reinforced by the fact that much of the text was taught by means of collective reciting (Wang Jianping 2001). The 74-year-old Dan *Lao Taitai* provided a more comprehensive response, stating how much she liked chanting, which she thought was not much different from ordinary singing, thus it is '…easy to learn. What is learned when little stays in the memory. Chanting *jingge* is good, makes you remember where you come from. Once learned, never forgotten'.[16]

15 Interview with Guo JF *Ahong* took place in June 2002 in Kaifeng, Henan province.

16 Interviews with Ma *Shetou* and Dan *Lao Taitai* took place between June and August 2016 in Henan.

The Obligation of *Shahadah*, Space, and Voice[17]

The Five Pillars of Islam are the five obligations that every Muslim must satisfy in order to live a good and responsible life according to Islam. They consist of: *nian* (念 *Shahadah*) – sincerely reciting the Muslim profession of faith; *li* (礼 *Salat*) – performing ritual prayers in the proper way five times each day; *zhai* (斋 *Zakat*) – paying alms (or charity) tax to benefit the poor and the needy; *ke* (课 *Sawm*) – fasting during the month of Ramadan; and *chao* (朝 *Hajj*) – pilgrimage to Mecca. One of the five core obligations, and of particular relevance here, is the recital of *nian gong* (念功 *Shahadah*) which includes two kinds of recital: *mo nian* (默念 silent) and *di nian* (低念 murmured recital). These obligations, however, are gendered in their observance and facilitation of obligation at both doctrinal and institutional levels.

It is this first pillar of Islam – the sincere profession of faith – that had assumed highly circumscribed, male-centered forms, stunting women's yearning to give voice to their inner worlds. Tightly circumscribed in form and function, the performance of *Shahadah* predominantly belonged to the rituals of worship in men's mosques. Thus, the evolution of more collective rituals of prayer and worship in women's mosques, enriched by the tradition of oral religious instruction of largely illiterate women, culminated in opportunities for women to expand the chants' range and depth of emotion. The increasing significance of *jingge* culture then transcended mere functional purposes, becoming the conduit for deeply felt emotion and identification with female sociality. Feelings would be intensified in the act of collective chanting, as faith became resonant with sound. It is such deep sensory experiences that made the penalization of the public female voice so punitive and drove women to contest and start questioning the validity and application of the concept of *xiuti* (羞体, a local term for *awrah*)[18] which denied women the right to voice. *Xiuti* is a pivotal Islamic concept referring to the provisions ofSharia law that do not permit the exposure of the human body or any body parts to the gaze of others. The debate, featured in the following chapters, is ongoing, expressive of leading women's convictions that they too have the right to enter the sensory world of religious practice and all its ramifications of steadfastly held convictions and deeply felt belonging.

But what are the different and unique traditions of vocal cultural traditions that evolved in the gender-segregated spaces of organized Islam? They are, firstly, the distinct musicality of voices that make up the religious life of male believers,

17 Written with Shui Jingjun, this section forms part of our concluding research into the context of the cultural development and evolution of Muslim women's religious voice in central China, in preparation for a presentation at the 'Ethnographies of Islam in China' conference, 27-29 March 2017, London. (The conference was organized by the research team in charge of the 2014-17 Leverhulme Trust-funded research project.)

18 羞体 (in Chinese Islamic/Hui language 经堂语 *jingtangyu*, which grew out of mosque culture) denotes *awrah* (Arabic) – i.e. that which must be concealed from the gaze of others. *Xiuti* in a Han, non-Muslim context refers to the attributes of (female-gendered) bashfulness, shyness.

reciters, and listeners; that is, *bangke* (念邦克, *nian bangke* or 宣礼, *xuan li*, the call to prayer), *kaijing* (开经, recitation of 古兰经, the Qur'an), chanting of *zanzhu zansheng* chants (赞主赞圣), and more. Secondly, there are a variety of modes of recitation that include *dusheng* (独声, the solo or lead voice), *qisheng* (齐声, a chorus), *lunliu zantong* (轮流赞诵, taking turns chanting praise), and more. When the voice is loud and clear, sonorous, melodic, and beautiful, thus Shui Jingjun notes, it touches the heart, and a reciter who possesses a profoundly resonant voice (that is, the male voice) leaves deep memories.

Dignity and modesty necessitate the concealment of the so-called private parts, but not exclusively those of female bodies. It was during the recent years of public performance of *jingge* by women's mosque choirs that the concept of *xiuti* became more emphatically expanded to include the concealment of the female voice. Female voices, if made audible, should thus be performed – and heard – only within this restricted understanding, within the confines of women's gatherings in *qingzhen nüxue* (清真女学, female madrassas), or *nüsi* (women's mosques).

The gendered culture of collective spaces and their sonic traditions[19] have resulted in two types of collective spaces. There is, on the one hand, the male-centered collective space, the men's mosque, and, on the other hand, a female-centered collective space, the *nüxue* or *nüsi*. The two spaces complement each other in meeting the ritual and religious needs of their congregations, but they are also distinct in their scope, functions, and social interactions, locally and transnationally. One consequential demarcation of such gender segregation has been the shaping of a cultural tradition that has engendered distinct male and female voices. As a historical legacy of the chanting of the Qur'an and the *zanzhu zansheng* (chants of praise), a process of intermingling many kinds of vocal traditions gradually came about through the distinctive cultural soundscape associated with Hui Muslim communities in China's central plain.

Ceremony of *Zansheng* and Localization of *Zansheng* Tunes

Many kinds of occasions (whether liturgical or marking family milestones with religious rituals and prayers) have their specific ceremonies and their many characteristic tunes; their impact, as far as receptive audiences are concerned, can be profound. *Zansheng* tunes in Muslim communities in central China constitute a richly diverse tradition that may be classified into diverse types, consisting of both lively and plaintive tunes. The former is represented by a tune preferred for pleasant, joyous occasions (爱推阿 *aitui'ah*), while the latter is represented by the more melancholic chant to accompany occasions of grief and mourning (瓦暮岁白塔乎 *wamusui baitahu*). It is said by the women, with much justification, that an *ahong*

19 Traditional settlement patterns among central China's relatively dispersed Hui Muslim communities (*fang* 坊) tend to reflect preferences for living in local mosque-centered residential settlements. Where women's mosques exist, their gendered nature complicates homogenous conceptions of Muslim sociality.

able to render the more plaintive chants with emotion and sincerity will move all listeners without fail to tears. The SongBook recorded the most popular versions for the benefit of future generations (ZMFEC 2017, 26–27).

The soundscape of religious life is marked by the recital of the Qur'an, by the chanting of *zanzhu zansheng* in the form of ceremonial music – where these chants might be performed in single voice, collectively, or by taking turns – with their impact on the listeners shaped and intensified by the regularity of prayer that marks the continuity of life. Conveying a sense of both precarity and reassurance, they are tonal reminders of spiritual beauty beyond the mundaneness of everyday life. But it has ever been the male voice which intones the rhythms of religious life, whether the Morning Prayer (晨礼 *chen'li*, *Fajr*), Evening Recital of the Qur'an(宵礼后 *xiao'li hou*, *Isha'a*), or Chants of Praise (赞主赞圣 *zanzhu zansheng*).

Copying to Learn

When Christine Ehrick (2015) refers to a 'patriarchal soundscape', she observes how a normalized male-gendered sonic sound may come to represent qualities conveying the kind of authenticity, the profound truth, that legitimizes the speaker's role and the words thus spoken. 'Hearing' is predominantly, seemingly naturally, accorded to the male body as a carrier of the legitimacy of the spoken word (Ehrick, *ibid.*).The tradition of *jingge* as part of the history of women's mosque culture arose historically in response to female illiteracy, embedded in the gender-segregated spaces of learning. As such, the uses of *jingge* received support from the wider Islamic leadership, intent on female ritual instruction, and neatly aligned with prohibitions on female visibility and audibility. In the assigned spaces reserved solely for women's religious and moral improvement, it was only over time that chanting from the growing repertoire of *jingge* became a responsive and interactive way of expressing emotion and faith relatively not immediately constrained by patriarchal injunctions.

We are still far too ignorant of the cultural legacy that evolved within organized female religious traditions in China, and thus of the sentiments, knowledge, and visions which women invested in them.[20] But gender has been inscribed upon performance, form, and transmission. As with certain Buddhist *jingge* (庙会经歌 *miaohui jingge*, songs performed on temple feast days), which are performed only by women and taught only to other women, the early mode of transmission among Muslim communities in central China depended on men to copy down the lyrics. Women teachers would memorize the words through oral recitation and commit to paper their pronunciation. As mentioned above, women's often tentative literacy

20 中国民间歌曲集成, 河南卷 *Zhongguo minjian gequ jicheng, Henanjuan* (*The Chinese Folksong Collection*, *Henan Volume*), published in 1997 by the Henan Volume Editorial Committee, was based on fieldwork largely conducted during the 1980s. It only treats Buddhist popular chants, called *jingdiao* (经调 scriptural tunes); there is no mention of Islamic or Christian traditions – which have been left to the purview of a few scholars in the fields of religion and Hui popular culture. On the history of *geyao* (歌谣 folksong), see Yu and Yang (1993a) and Liu and Qi (1996).

in scriptural languages and, even more so, in the Chinese language resulted in a writing system known as *xiaoerjing*, or minor script, which mixed Chinese characters with Arabic or Persian linguistic loans. Because locally prevalent dialectical pronunciation would shape an individual *ahong*'s understanding of the Arabic and Persian alphabets, this led to greatly diverse, sometimes even opaque, renderings of original meanings. This in turn has complicated, often outright limited, access to meaning outside an *ahong* writer's local circle or those in receipt of her instruction. *Xiaoerjing* evolved in the course of the early 20th century into a more standardized system of writing with the expansion of the practices of copying, teaching, and performing chants (念经歌) as an integral part of an *ahong*'s educational duties, thus contributing to the (partial) survival of this unique tradition of women's mosque culture.[21]

Here it is important to note that *nü ahong* use the verb *nian* (念) exclusively as in *nian jingge* (reciting *jingge*), rather than the verb *chang* (唱) ordinarily employed in connection with the act of singing. *Nian* conveys the solemn religious character of *jingge* which, *nü ahong* are adamant is a distinguishing mark of this tradition. The same careful use of terminology is true of Buddhist women's reference to the recital of *jingge* (*Zhongguo minjian gequ jicheng, Henanjuan* 1997, 351).

The Concept, Characteristics, and Genres of Jingge

A term not to be found in standard dictionaries, the tradition of *jingge* nevertheless has a firm place in the popular culture of religious believers in central China, as ubiquitous in Islamic as it is in Buddhist and Daoist traditions. Today, Chinese Catholics and Protestants tend to use the term *lingge* (灵歌 song of the soul), but during the Republican era (1912–1949) Christians too recited *jingge*. Chants belonging to *jingge* have been considered by scholars as part of a sub-genre of *minjian gequ* (民间歌曲 folksongs) and are relatively little studied.[22] Yet, as Daniel Neuman (1991, quoted in Rees 2000, 98) points out, reflecting on the relation between music and history, 'music is the medium – the crucible in which time and its memories are collected, reconstituted, and preserved – and history, its message'.

The concept of *jingge* in Muslim culture is in the first instance anchored in folk culture (further discussed below), sharing with other religious traditions an important conduit of vocal religious expression in familiar idioms of popular ballads, often with rhymes and of a poetical nature. Cross-borrowings and infusions of folk music as a characteristic of the patriotic sonic repertoire of an early Communist soundscape created yet other, more political associations, as in the case of *Meili Gaitou* (美丽盖头 *Beautiful Headscarf*), a *jingge* featured in Chapter Eight. The

21 Helen Rees (2000, 36), who studied Lijiang *dongjing music* (洞经音乐), remarks on the male dominance in Yunnanese local religious traditions, and how age and gender determine the performer, performance, and context. Exceptionally, a few Buddhist laywomen's groups, such as the *mamahui* (妈妈会 women's group), 'held temple meetings on the first and fifteenth days of each month, during which they recited Chinese language sutras and ate vegetarian food'.

22 A study by Arkush and Dong (2000) addresses this aspect of popular culture; see also Rees (2000).

expressive culture of women's mosques came into its own when such practices ceased in men's mosques, following educational reforms and more austere changes that diminished the importance of the *jingge* tradition. A female-gendered influence came to bear on the eventual shaping of a repertoire of *jingge* chants used for didactic purposes, and on the nature and conditions of performance and dissemination.

Three Broad Types of Jingge Based on Linguistic Criteria

To meet the need for Arabic knowledge, phonetic chants served as useful learning tools in female education. Of importance were Arabic-pronunciation practice songs, with attractive tunes that were easy to learn and remember. Among these were *bianba* (编巴, a pronunciation exercise of Arabic words in strict alphabetical order), *luanba* (乱巴), and *tiaozebu* (跳则布, a pronunciation exercise of Arabic words in random order).We surmise that *bianba* or *luanba* emerged as important educational tools during the first important Islamic cultural movement (late Ming/early Qing) when its major educational initiative targeted ordinary Muslims for the first time, including women (Jaschok and Shui 2000a; Shui and Jaschok 2002); many were the creations of contemporary Muslim scholars. Considered suitable for the level of children, they remain educational tools in women's mosques today. We know that before the early 1950s, mixed classes were taught *bianba* or *luanba* in individual men's mosques (e.g., in Haizhuang, Fengqiuxian, Henan); however, it is no longer the practice today.[23] This category of songs is now a feature exclusive to women's mosques.

Commenting on a Persian language *jingge*, Guo JF *Ahong*, an enthusiastic singer, remembers how her learning was facilitated by a variety of instructional chants, such as the aforementioned *tiaozebu*, which forms the basis for studying Islamic knowledge alongside the widely used *bianba* and *luanba,* with 28 Arabic letters recited repeatedly. Not unlike jingles, thus Guo *Ahong* explained, they made it possible to remember what otherwise would have been impossible for most women to keep in their memory.[24]

Yao BX *Ahong* appraised the uses of *jingge* from the point of view of teaching illiterate women a language utterly unfamiliar, appreciating them as a teaching tool of the greatest efficacy: 'Moreover, rhymes make it easy to remember, really useful as a method of teaching'. How else, she says, could these women be inspired to learn Persian language *jingge* such as the popular *Fenlan fenlanyi* (粉兰粉兰依), also known as *Fatumai fangxian* (法图麦纺线), a much-loved hymn of praise. Learning through repeated collective chanting, following the guidance of the *ahong* – so Yao *Ahong,* a leading advocate of the use of *jingge* today, maintains – not only sustains Muslims' memory in central China of their ancestors' cultural legacy (先祖文化遗产 *xianzu wenhua yichan*). It also teaches women religious

23 Interview with Liu JW in June 2002 in Kaifeng, Henan.

24 Interview with Guo JF *Ahong* in June 2002, in Kaifeng, Henan

knowledge through the example of outstanding Islamic role models such as the daughter of the Prophet, Fatimah, and the Prophet's wife Ayesha.[25]

The long history of the transmission and influence of diverse local dialects has often obscured *jingge's* linguistic and semantic origins. In this case, it is the memory of the individual *nü ahong* which becomes the guide to pronunciation, tune, and interpretation. From the point of view of women singing these *jingge*, their collective chanting of a scriptural language, taught to illiterate women through countless repetition, mesmerizes and – as interlocutors reiterated when asked about the pedagogical value of such teaching – engenders an aura of sacredness, transcending the opaqueness of meaning into a near-mystical experience.[26] For *nü ahong,* the *jingge* could become effective sources of inspiration, vital aids in instructing the core precepts of faith, principal Muslim duties, the lives of saints, and ritual knowledge. They also tell of women martyrs, female paradigms of Muslim virtue, and salvation through submission to God.

Ahong, in the course of interpretation, translates the meaning of a *jingge* first into *jingtangyu* (a linguistic medium fusing Arabic, Persian, and Chinese into a unique form of communication most widely used for Islamic education and dissemination), and then into everyday language. Whilst the narrative sweep of songs has changed little over time, local differences may be noted in details of interpretation and emphasis, relating to an individual *ahong*'s learnedness, subtlety of understanding, pedagogical skills, and importantly, the ability to express and move her congregation with intensity of emotion.

Chinese Language Chants and The Gendered Heritage of *Jingge* and Women's Mosques

Most numerous, popular, and rich in content are Chinese language chants, with appealing rhyme, plain language, and memorable tunes. Easy to understand and easy to remember, they proved popular teaching aids for conveying rudimentary religious knowledge, stories from the life of the Prophet, moral exhortations, and much-loved narratives of exemplary women's lives. As will be illustrated in the following chapters, Chinese language *jingge* – rich in content and local cultural influences – disseminate ritual and doctrinal knowledge in a most effective way, compounding didactic exhortations with evocative tales of lives of piety, lives spent in the expectation of a just God, and of a final judgment, noting true believers' fulfillment of fundamental duties. Chants also feature as plentiful reminders for women to follow the pathways designated for embodying Islamic female morality (妇女道德 *funü daode*), the virtues to be enacted by Muslim women in daily life, and the duty of care incumbent upon them for the spiritual and material well-being of their families.

25 Interview with Yao BX *Ahong* in June 2016, in Kaifeng, Henan.

26 Conversations discussing this took place in a women's mosque in July 2016, in Henan province.

Only in rare cases do we know a *jingge*'s author. For the majority of these *jingge*, anonymous interpreters and singers have over generations preserved, shaped, and, whenever they felt it was called for, altered phrasings and words to reflect changed realities. Exceptions are Li Fuzhen *Ahong* (李复真阿訇) and Wang Chunli (望纯理) whose contributions to the cultural history of Islam featured prominently in conversations between the women and researchers. At the end of the Qing dynasty, the Shangqiu *ahong* Li Fuzhen (1935) brought out a compilation of *jingge* under the title *Mumin quan shange* (穆民劝善歌 *The Muslim People's Songs of Persuasion*), which became a staple of worship for Muslim female congregations; it continues to constitute an important part of central China's Muslim cultural repertoire (Yu and Yang 1993b, 359).

During the Republican era (1912–1949), Wang Chunli composed many popular *jingge* which contributed to the rich genre of *Qingzhen quanjiaoge* (清真劝教歌 *Islamic Songs for Religious Instruction*) (Wang 1922), containing widely circulated songs such as *Funü quan jingge* (妇女劝教歌 *Islamic Songs for the Exhortations of Women*), still performed today (Yu and Yang 1993b, 357–59). The most effective popularizer of Islamic popular songs during the early years of the Republic, Wang Chunli turned to popular ballads and tunes to attract attention to the message of Islam. Muslims, both men and women, liked and retained what they heard (Zheng Daoming 1985, 1313).

In the 1920s, a spate of publications of all these popular Islamic songs accelerated their nationwide dissemination among the Muslim population (Yu and Yang 1993b, 598–600). When the older generation of Muslim women, particularly the older *nü ahong*, recollect life during their youth, Wang Chunli of the Republican era features as their teacher and an authority figure of towering importance. He bequeathed to Muslim women the enduring legacy of the *quanjiaoge* (劝教歌 chants for religious instruction), and these chants today are still copied by hand by an older generation of women *ahong*. The affection and respect with which the Muslim scholar Wang Chunli is remembered acknowledge the profound impact of the Islamic cultural movement – in which he played an important part – on succeeding generations of Muslim believers.

The flowering of *jingge* during what Muslim women from Henan refer to as their 'golden years' embraced the Republican era and continued into the 1950s. The context within which women's mosque education and spiritual faith flourished – especially between the turn of the 20th century and the late 1950s before Chinese Communist Party (CCP) government policies brought all religious activities to a halt – was that of general nationwide educational reforms and their impact on major religious organizations. To compete with other religious educational institutions and activities and their recruitment of female students, Islamic scholars and educators facilitated education delivered by women *ahong*. As many, particularly older women, were illiterate, Islamic educators and reformers, such as Wang Chunli in Kaifeng – where the most influential women's mosques were found – laid the groundwork for the oral transmission of religious learning on which enterprising religious female leaders could build (Jaschok and Shui 2005).

Victim Narratives and Other Readings

Whilst the content and form of *jingge* show much continuity and only minor adaptations to reflect personal or collective circumstances, their evaluation by women has shown more radical changes. For example, a well-known *kuhua* (哭花 a song of lamentation, literally: weeping flowers), about a woman grieving the loss of her husband and the transience of all worldly certainties and pleasures, was regarded by the over 75-year-old Li XR, a mesmerizing *kuhua* chanter, as a 'real' and profound account of courtship, 'making the whole world shed tears'.[27] The narrative concerns a young woman who meets a young man at a mosque. He persuades her to read the scriptures, and their attraction develops into mutual love. Before the marriage can take place, he leaves for Weihe county in Gansu province to study Islam; there, he dies. The young girl weeps at night, shedding secret tears, lamenting her loss. She is overheard, so says the story, and her lament recorded; thus it came to be known to many women. Li XR remembers that it was meant for the ears of middle-aged and old women only. She was allowed by her parents to learn these *jingge* at the women's mosque during the 1940s.

In contrast, the 80-year-old Ding *Ahong* dismisses the same *kuhua* with much contempt as 'pointless'.[28] After much prompting, she tells her version of the narrative of the beloved's loss: a woman loses her husband who died from drinking cold water; but here a widow's mourning turns into a rejection of tears and religion. In a cynical turn of events, she ends up marrying a man who pursues a commercial trade. Perhaps Ding *Ahong*'s criticism of the excessive sentiments in these laments cannot be understood unless one understands her biography. Deserted at a young age by her callous husband, left to care for an infant and to support herself through her religious work as an *ahong*, she only retired at the age of 80. When we visited her again in the summer of 2002, she was living in degrading poverty, dependent on charitable members of the local Muslim community.

Another interlocutor, Dan *Ahong*, locates her story in Weihe county in Gansu province.[29] In her version of the *kuhua*, a most intelligent young girl, Lan Ying, starts reading the scriptures at 13 years of age. Two years later, she marries Zhang Mingzhi, an *ahong*, but tragically he dies shortly after. This forms the prelude to the recital of the *jingge.* Dan *Ahong* knows this song by heart, but she too judges the tradition as 'pointless'. Yet, when Dan *Ahong* recites it, it is rare if at least some of the listeners do not weep.

The performance of *jingge*, prompted by probing researchers, reawakens in elderly listeners nostalgic associations of childhoods spent in women's mosques, of words diligently learned, enthusiastically chanted, and barely understood. For others, these chants are evocative of women's 'bygone era' of suffering and continue to bring out conflicted responses today. Considered not suited to the modern age,

27 Interview with the late Li XR took place in June 2002, in Kaifeng, Henan province.

28 Interviews with the late Ding *Ahong* were conducted during a visit I made in June 2002, in a small village outside Kaifeng, Henan province.

29 Interviews with Dan *Ahong* took place in June 2002, in Henan province.

many an interlocutor felt that performing age-old laments on the fate of women was not conducive to increasing the standing of Muslim women among their non-Muslim fellow countrywomen.

Another *ahong* provided an illustration of religious leaders' authority in shaping the transmission of chants, giving specific *jingge* their stamp of approval, and thus ensuring their continuous use in the repertoire of women's mosques, while excluding others as 'redundant' and no longer relevant to contemporary women. Feng *Ahong* has been in charge of the religious life of an urban women's mosque in Henan for more than a decade. During a visit to a women's mosque in August 2016, I used the opportunity for a private conversation to congratulate Feng *Ahong* on the good performance of her mosque choir at a recent public event. We also discussed the choice of *jingge* for the creation of the SongBook, envisaged as an important reference for future generations of *ahong* and teachers, regardless of the nature of their association with a women's mosque. I remarked on the emotional rendering by one of her colleagues of a *kuhua* chant, a performance I had witnessed on my way to her mosque. I told my host that the *kuhua* performance had caused much weeping among listeners, and I asked if she had in her *ahong's* repertoire of chants any of the *kuhua* chants I personally found so moving.

To my surprise, given her love of singing and performing, Feng *Ahong* initially objected to discussing, let alone playing, the recording of a *kuhua* chant. As she put it, such a reminder of 'the darker times' that women had passed through was no longer proper, no longer suited to a time when modern Chinese society had created untold advantages for *all* girls and women and made them equal in all spheres of life. After some more critical remarks on my preference for such 'feudal' songs, as she saw it, she relented enough to express her fondness for a specific *kuhua.* She then proceeded to chant the *kuhua* with much passion and intensity. Nevertheless, we ended my visit with her performance of more recently popular chants and a discussion of their new content, which Feng *Ahong* considered a more accurate reflection of the opportunities modern society offered to young Muslim women.

Chants of Exhortation

A category of *jingge* called *quan xiaoge* (劝孝歌 chants of exhortation) demonstrates a certain infusion of local Han folksongs, both in style and content. Such chants were transmitted from the early 17th century and were in continuous use in women's mosques until the beginning of the 1950s. Often solemn and didactic in nature, praising filial piety or hailing virtuous women, they testify to shared gender prescriptions and the fluid intermingling of diverse local traditions (Arkush and Dong 2000). A closer examination of the *quanjiaoge* also allows for a tentative understanding of how, and to what extent, Muslim women during the years of the Republic might have participated in social change (see Chapters Five and Six) for illustrations of and conversations about *quanjiaoge*).

These Chinese-language *jingge* merge several relevant themes. When, gradually over time, a female-centered sound culture, *yinsheng wenhua* (音声文化), emerged from the eclectic influences that shaped *jingge,* it not only highlighted

an impressive continuity in the transmission of a unique, sacred legacy. It also testified to the ability of generations of interpreters of inherited chants to adapt to changing times whilst never faltering in their adherence to fundamental Islamic principles. Unable to be more precise in dating the emergence of specific genres of chants that constitute the diversity of *jingge*, it is noteworthy how transliterated Arabic chants, Persian songs praising outstanding Muslim women, and Chinese chants of admonition written especially for women, and more, of which we have knowledge, have become the treasured legacy of the current generation of *ahong* we interviewed. It is a legacy that has facilitated the claim by religious leaders to women's creative share in the development of Islam.

My colleague, the Hui sociologist Shui Jingjun, makes it a core interpretation, based on a close reading of *jingge*, that the most popular chants reveal characteristics of Muslim communities in the central plain that are, relatively speaking, pluralist, tolerant, open, and inclusive – and reflective of changing times. This is helped, she argues, by a longstanding diversity of ethnic and cultural influences in a traditionally linguistically diverse environment, which finds expression in the complex musical textures (多种音调 *duozhong yindiao*) of the languages of *jingge*, Chinese, Arabic, and Persian. The singers must be able to command such techniques when performing the variety of tunes that include ancient Arabic and Persian borrowings and local folk music. As stated in the SongBook's Preface, this richness of multiple sources of influence makes *jingge* both a deeply affective conduit of belief as well as an efficacious pedagogical tool (ZMFEC 2017, Preface). In successfully fusing tradition and innovation, religious piety is sustained but also re-energized with resurgent claims by Muslim women leaders for continued social and gender transformation as a most authentic practice of progressive, or 'modern', Islam in China.

Gender, Gender Complementarity, and Performing Female Piety

Because of the increased preference for Arabic language chants today, giving rise to unprecedented levels of Qur'anic recitation, the repertoire of Arabic hymns and songs has increased exponentially, in contrast to Persian language chants which are slowly diminishing in status. This development is linked to the growing popularity of the aforementioned *zansheng* competitions and their impact on Muslim communities in central Chinese provinces. What has given rise to the prominence of such competitions in local celebrations of Islamic culture? The focus of heated, even polarizing, local discourses among religious practitioners and many a believer, but also the alliances formed across gender and mosque membership, makes these developments deserving of closer observation.

In 2005, in order to salvage and sustain *zansheng* chants as part of central Chinese Islamic cultural heritage and to promote the creation of new chants, the Islamic Association of Kaifeng city, Henan province, held the First *Zansheng* Competition (首届赞圣比赛 *shoujie zansheng bisai*). This was subsequently followed by more such events in and around Kaifeng.

Objections from several senior *ahong* (male and female) mainly related to two concerns: namely, that *zansheng* chants are part of a sacred text and cannot be

submitted to a contest; and that it was 'not right' for women to perform publicly in a mixed-gender setting. These conservative voices were authoritative and unwavering in their criticism of concerning developments bound to threaten long-kept injunctions on the Islamic core principles underlying gender segregation. However, over time, the popularity of and attendance at *zansheng bisai* events increased. Events were organized jointly between (women's and men's) mosques and local government officials, and the voices of support, if often ambivalent, thus could not be ignored. Supportive male *ahong* had become vocal in their advocacy of *zansheng* chants, describing these as 'culturally rewarding activities'. Moreover, increasingly strong support was voiced for mixed-gender *zansheng* competitions as 'the best opportunity to promote Islamic culture' and 'heighten the enthusiasm of all Muslim people for Islam as well as increase religious knowledge' (Zhao Agang 2015).

Younger women *ahong* tended to prioritize the need for positive and concerted organizing, underlining their conviction that finding evidence of women's voices in the Qur'an or in the hadiths constitutes the most convincing source of legitimation and support. Participation in *zansheng* competitions, so women *ahong* argue, makes it possible for female and male Muslims to demonstrate solidarity, improving 'outmoded' conventions and 'feudal' mindsets. Participation in discussions with male counterparts over the legitimacy of their advocacy for more progressive readings of scriptural sources – arguing over the practical issues of performance in mixed-gender venues with large male audiences – came to be seen as the most effective way of negotiating for changing opponents' mindsets. It is thus possible to contend that central China's Muslim women express their belief and understanding of the core precepts of Islam through their engagement in positive action, through their celebrated history of women-only spaces, and through their willingness to jointly organizing and participating with men in events highlighting the voice, female and male, through recitation and chanting. It is also the basis of pride often voiced by women *ahong* that their *zhongyuan* culture is anchored in the principle of gender complementarity as an exemplary demonstration of what women and men might be able to achieve together. It is not implausible, thus one *ahong* claimed, that with the passage of time, the space for women's religious participation will expand to a point where the female element of organized Islam plays a decisive role in the development of *zhongyuan* Islam. Frequently stated as an outstanding characteristic of *zhongyuan* Hui Muslim culture, the history as told by women in subsequent chapters in this book offers a more nuanced interpretation.

Nevertheless, the close collaboration of religious professionals across gender and mosque membership is an evident feature of local *zhongyuan* Muslim culture, a historical characteristic informing the complementarity of gender relations to this day. The fact that most chants are entirely anonymous – with a few notable exceptions – therefore mirrors an important assertion made by local Muslim women: namely, the nature of solidarity between Muslim women and men, and the joint effort made to convey the faith that binds them – when the external environment is all too often hostile – in close ties of belonging. Moreover, a frequently reiterated assertion by informants has been the role played by male religious practitioners in

providing (perhaps more accurately, handing over to) illiterate rural women the precious key to an enriched imagination and the opening to a world beyond the domestic threshold.

The influence of *zansheng* was historically nurtured by male *ahong* as a form of religious ceremony and daily custom; however, this eventually diminished due to a crisis in men's mosques relating to institutional succession and educational reform during the early 20th century. It ultimately lessened the role of *zansheng* in favor of a more austere culture of learning. As a result, the lyrics of a large number of traditional *zansheng* were lost, but not all.

The canon of *zansheng* and *jingge* chants that survived when the *zansheng* tradition passed to women's mosques offers a unique confirmation of women's capacity for agential religiosity. Women's safeguarding and expansion of chants otherwise lost to collective memory raise questions over how contingencies of time, place, and external interventions shape the processes by which local values and encoded practices indigenize faith. Before taking this line of analysis further in Chapter Four, the following chapter explores the wider discursive context of international and Chinese scholarship within which we can investigate feminist core notions of gendered silences, agency, and voice as they infused the soundscapes that came to be invested with the piety of Chinese Hui Muslim women.

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3 Theorizing Silence, Voice, Identity, and Cultural Fault-lines

Strategies of Silence and Powers of Omission

The following words of significance, frequently consulted by the late, revered Du *Lao Ahong* in her sermons on *Zhuma* (主麻 Prayer Day), the Day of Gathering, come from an *Islamic Primer* (*Ahong zhishi bixu*, n.d.), a well-used text which I would catch sight of when visiting her at the women's mosque in Zhengzhou, Henan, where she occupied an influential role as resident *ahong*. 'The Prophet Muhammad said: afterwards we passed a dwelling and discovered a fragrant scent and a refined voice. And then I asked: Ai, Archangel Jabra'īl! What is this? He said: this is a fragrance from Heaven, and it is also the voice from Heaven. Heaven spoke: Ai, so it is, my Lord!'.[1] This same quotation also inspired countless conversations and observations with Du *Lao Ahong* during frequent visits made by us, the researchers. She personified to women around her the most trusted authority and credible conduit to the promise of Afterlife enabled by their faithful enactment of authoritatively guided knowledge. In the same vein, as the respected religious leader with a voice of strong religious and social resonance, she would also enter periods of silence, a silence from which she then re-emerged to carry on her work with full voice, as if uninterrupted. Neither in her silence nor in her words did she ever falter, nor did her powerful presence ever diminish.

Out of what silence, we ask, emerges a history, culture, sustained belief, and distinct female identity that – by the richness of its heritage – questions the assumptions so often associated with women's history, making women's silence seemingly intrinsic to the gendered chronicles of the un/making of civilizations? New scholarship urges us not to neglect the 'sonic dimension' of women's histories of emergence into public spaces, expressive of silence, muting, and assertion of sound, but also, more so, of women's coming-to-voice within given gender regimes and gender definitions. 'Sound is important in the qualitative study of gender, since learning gender roles not only means visible aspects of those roles: we learn gender through the total sensorium' (Järviluoma *et al*. 2003, 84). When considering the survival and enduring presence of female *ahong*-led women's mosques in Hui communities of central China, whether in their over 300 year-old history or seen against the current, increasingly notable backdrop of local Islamic patriarchy

1 Archangel Jabra'īl (Gabriel) is one of the most important Islamic angels, the channel through which the Qur'an was revealed by God to Muhammad (Wang Jianping 2001).

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and global trends favoring women's exclusion from religious and secular roles of authority, the significance of sound – and, moreover, of voice – becomes apparent.

As we describe later in fuller detail, against a historical background of strict gender segregation, backed up by neo-Confucian and Islamic strictures, a new oral tradition of learning enabled educated women, initially the wives and daughters of *ahong*, to instruct illiterate women in rudimentary religious knowledge, to give basic religious literacy using selected *sūrahs* (索拉 *suola* or *sula* in the local pronunciation)[2] from the Qur'an and texts from the hadiths (圣训 *shengxun*). They taught the essence of Islamic faith, the main pillars of Muslim duty, and core ritual and moral practices to guide Muslim women in their ordained primary duties as wives and mothers. When shielded from the outside world by curtains and walls, the sound women listened to most attentively was the female voices of their teachers.

But female sound has acquired more contested connotations – and become at its most controversial a target for disapproving male and (some) female *ahong* and senior members of various Islamic *jiaopai* (教派 sects or schools). For these critics, the resurrection of expressive traditions of collective learning and worship, associated most specifically with *nüsi*, is judged a troubling aberration from prescribed conduct. Yet these chants or *jingge*, at the heart of our discourse, embody women's spiritual lives and provide testimonies of the richness of temporal and spatialized imaginaries, which secular voices barely touch and rarely bring to speech. And it is in the segregated history of central China's Hui Muslim women's collective sites of prayer and celebration that this significant oral tradition arose to infuse domesticated, muted voices with spiritual and emotional content. Women's lives, concealed under the mantle of ordinariness, were by no means ordinary.

When did women emerge – from a silenced religiosity overwritten by the noise of patriarchal domestic life – into collective spaces of shared spiritual longing? When did a silence inscribed by neo-Confucian gender morality and Islamic injunctions open up the possibility of religious salvation, as well as transformative, hearable sound and audible collective voicing? To answer these questions, we must trace the complex and varied developments by which early temporary and *ad hoc* spaces, made available for female religious learning, evolved into legitimate sites of enduring transmissions of gendered faith practices and facilitated what became the culture of women's mosques in central China's Hui communities. It is thus necessary to concern ourselves with the transmitters and transmissions of sounds that transformed the culture of silence to grow an aural architecture of sounds of transformation, which would, when an external environment allowed for, create authoritative voices of instruction, guidance, and moral intervention resonating beyond the original borders of gender segregation.

Sound reveals itself as fluid, contingent, relational, and always gendered. Unlike the rigid teachings based on static canons upheld by juridical pronouncements, sound engendered in the oral tradition of women's communities and mosques

2 *Sūrah* 索拉: the Qur'an consists of 114 *sūrahs* of uneven lengths.

has pervaded daily life and practices in manifold material and cultural situations. Women's soundscapes thus provide a record of the most intimate inscription of beliefs, ritual milestones, external impacts, and markers of the most personal, near intangible, transitions.[3]

Silence, Sociality, and Communication

The relationship between silence and voice, as Malhotra and Rowe (2013) point out, remains ruled by a dominant Western understanding of voice as a privileged object of study, as expressive of power and patriarchal exclusion of women, because to be silent is to be disenfranchised – as it is only if women 'have voice [that they] possess both the opportunity to speak and the respect to be heard' (Rakow and Wackwitz 2005, quoted in Malhotra and Rowe *ibid.,* 4). Instead, it may be necessary for us to understand silence as a phenomenon embedded within a wider, complex matrix of societal relations, to see silence as context-contingent and relational, appearing in multiple manifestations of voice and power (Clair 2013; Fiumara 1990; Malhotra and Rowe 2013; Visweswaran 1994; among others). Silence makes every voiced statement an act of omission, of concealed absences which demand of the researcher, to borrow from the words of Visweswaran (1994, 49), the quest for 'situational knowledges'.

Quoting from the work of Robin Clair (1998, 4), we believe that 'exploring silence as a fundamental part of communication, culture, and conflict may illuminate the complex nature of social relations', looking at the ways in which silence is structured into language and, by extension, how the 'interests, issues, and identities of marginalized people' are 'silenced and how those silenced voices can be heard'. Scholarship from within postcolonial studies, critical pedagogy, and communication theory, as well as philosophy and phenomenology, argues the need for reopening the case on silence as a cross-cultural issue of race and gender dimensions: as 'silences are embedded and performed in specific contexts, silence emerges in multiple manifestations in relation to voice and power' (Malhotra and Rowe 2013, 6). Anthropological work has advanced the task of mapping silence (when does it occur, under what conditions, how it is deployed, by whom, and for whom), studying silence in relation to power and identity. Maria-Luisa Achino-Loeb (2006), for example, situates interrogation of silence as a core aspect of identity.

Kamala Visweswaran (1994) talks about the way that anthropologists are accountable to 'strategic' uses of silence by those they interview, raising difficult issues of hearing, listening, and interpretation. This is also the contention made by Malhotra and Rowe (2013, 7), who maintain that 'Every act of inscription, or

3 The Hui Muslim prayer terminology, as scholars have pointed out, derives from varied loans and highly localized linguistic borrowings. Sun and Knüppel (2020, 223) distinguish between direct and indirect loans; i.e., between derivations from Arabic or Persian, and semantic loans, or calques, constituted through the local language. This richly diverse terminology is a salient feature of conversations, interviews, and collected chants from central China's (中原 *zhongyuan*) expressive Hui Muslim culture.

assertion of voice is simultaneously an act of omission. Each time we speak, something is said and so much more is not said'. The ethnographer, ever aware of the partiality of all knowledge, is thus obliged to pay attention to omissions, pauses, and strategic silences.

The anthropologist William O. Beeman elaborates further. 'Silence as a phenomenon', he writes, 'can be defined only in contrast to sound, moreover, it is established in contrast to *particular,* culturally designated sound. Therefore, silence is *de facto* a type of sound, contrasted with other types of sound. It is the element of contrast that is important, and this contrast is likewise construction' (Beeman 2006, 24, original italics). Such contrast emerges in connection with problematic linkages with the past. Thus, the anthropologist Gerald Sider (2006, 149) maintains:

> Silences, as we have seen, construct the (or a) present both against, and different from, the past, and also, as we shall see, construct the (or a) present both within and against an impending future. The separation of the present from the past, which is often an antagonism to the past, and also the romantic separation of the past both from its more real self and from the present, also separates the present from the future.

Silence informs the boundaries of exclusion that exist within a given culture, and such permeable boundaries are intrinsic to the very construction of culture. Culture, at its core, is a continuity of nation, citizens, kinship, 'surrounded by people whose lives are far more profoundly delineated by the chaos and the ruptures that power characteristically imposes. Between culture and chaos are slightly permeable walls, which can most usefully be termed silences. The best definition I can build for the term "silence" is that it marks the boundaries of culture, with the chaos that power and culture characteristically impose on its victims on the other side of silence' (Sider *ibid*., 152).

But as scholarship demonstrates, exclusion from a given culture – here constructed of what I have termed a patriline of Islamic faith that delineates, for the more orthodox Chinese (male) religious practitioners, an ordained segregation of Muslim men and Muslim women – has not everywhere resulted in immovable victim status.[4] Arising from this are ethical implications for the researcher, her obligation for sensitive and nuanced observation and analysis. Cheung King-Kok's (1993) work on the stereotyping of Asian-American women writers, so Malhotra and Rowe (2013, 9) write, teaches us 'that as cultural workers we must become fluent in reading what is not said, or what is actively omitted, to unravel the imperative to domination embedded within any efforts to represent or know "Others"'.

4 See Ha (2022), Harris (2020), and Raudvere (2003). We, Jaschok and Shui (2000a), interviewed male *ahong* who justified the exclusion of women from mosque spaces in their region with the explanation that, as far as Chinese Muslims are concerned, the priority had to be the faithful performance of all core pillars of Islam by men, who are entitled to the necessary material and religious resources by virtue of their descent from a patriline of early Arab ancestors.

Cheung (1993) builds her theorization on the literary creations of three Asian-American women writers; her concern, focused on the uncovering of appropriated cultural Others and the instrumentalization of 'silence' as a hegemonic device, also carries resonance for this study. Ethno-religious identity in contemporary China is formed within a maelstrom of patriarchal injunctions that shape the very institutions of female-led Islamic mosques, their spiritual culture, daily practices, and scriptural references. In light of Cheung's analysis, it might be argued that Hui Muslim women, embarked on a search for 'forgotten' traditions, engage in what Cheung calls a 'double-voiced discourse', anchored in gender and membership of an ethnic minority. As Cheung (*ibid*., 5) explains, this term serves to bypass 'authoritarian narration' to 'signify the instability of "truth" and "history"', situating silences in the intersecting forces of marginalized gender and ethnicity.

It might be argued that Chinese Hui Muslim women – who during the months of 2015 and 2016 undertook our joint project of recording largely unwritten chants from their oral tradition of learning – had come to query not so much the 'truth' of the established canon of *shige*, part of an early male-centered tradition, but rather its status as representing *all* knowers and the entirety of *all* knowledges. Under the leadership of literate female *ahong*, women from different generations and religious backgrounds incorporated and built on early male-gendered traditions to incorporate whatever might be salvaged from women's chants of prayer, celebration, and moral exhortations. Recorded, transcribed, annotated, and re-narrativized as a female-gendered history of an expressive culture of women's mosques, the recent compilation of a rich corpus of diverse chants might be said to have replaced an age-old, male-dominant tradition of scriptural and cultural transmission (ZMFEC 2017; see Jaschok and Shui 2005, 259). The outcome, the (private) publication of a SongBook by women for women, was driven by the joint initiative of leading religious practitioners and members of women's mosque congregations, dedicated to enriching teaching materials for the use of women's mosques (see Jaschok and Shui, with Ge 2021).

This SongBook has come to throw into relief the questionable assumptions and fixities of dominant perceptions of passivity and acquiescence of women and the necessity for gender-segregated confinement whether socially, culturally, or on religious terms. Indeed, as the following chapters will illustrate, the project of writing up yet unwritten, beloved chants served to rehabilitate what had been a suppressed – because stigmatized – collective memory. Instead, the unifying momentum and notable pride that arose when women together created a record of words and chants and stories, a written record of their lives, moreover enabling its entry into the memory archive of Muslim religious culture in China, brought women to the realization of the potency of their action and agency, of the significance of their cultural contribution to their local communities as well as to the wider Ummah (ZMFEC 2017).

Chinese Feminism and the Making of Counter-memory

The work of the influential feminist philosopher Li Xiaojiang (李小江) (2002) – and her conception of a gendered 'counter-memory' as a questioning of Chinese

exclusionist mainstream canons of history, yet neither hostile nor adversarial – provides a relevant framework of reference here. Over the years, it might be argued that both Li's thinking and mode of intellectual engagement have moved emphatically into more dialogic and consultative directions, in a (self-)conscious juxtaposition with what she considers a more adversarial Western feminist philosophy. As stated in an address she gave in 2002 to her Chinese fellow historians, the task of writing Chinese gender-centered history is complicated by the late commencement of such work. When, in the wake of more liberal policies during the 1990s, Chinese academics gathered to take stock of gender studies at home and abroad, Li Xiaojiang emerged as the leading critical voice. Their late arrival in the hallowed halls of international academic discourse, according to Li, created a situation whereby Chinese gender studies could be said to have been delineated and defined by others in a thriving market of global feminist discourse with Anglo-American feminist scholars dominating an ever-expanding canon of knowledge which entered global academic discourse as 'Chinese women's history' (Li Xiaojiang *et al*. 2002, 44).

This conundrum left Chinese scholars, in Li's opinion, with two kinds of 'resources', or discursive frameworks, by which to undertake the production of gender research. One framework derives from a tradition of women's history writing since the May Fourth Movement (1917–1921)[5], while the other is a construct of Western feminist historical scholarship. Such limitations, in her view, form the basis for women/gender scholarship in China, giving rise to an epistemic straitjacket that excludes, and silences, all other (divergent) positionalities. Its historical roots could be said to lie in the deeply problematic merging of what Li calls 'history science' and 'women's liberation' (妇女解放 *funü jiefang*) which re-storied a historically heterogeneous alliance of women's movements and organizations into the All-China Women's Federation (全国妇联 *quanguo fulian*) as the sole institutional representation of liberated, paradigmatic socialist womanhood. This institution also came to constitute one of the main pillars of the CCP state's legitimacy, which in subsequent years, following Communist military and political victory in 1949, would be at the beck and call of policies serving a systemic consolidation of government power over a vast and unstable country.[6]

Adding to the conundrum is what Li critiques as the 'postcolonial problem' (后殖民 *hou zhimin*). This is a problem by which a Marxist, class-based analysis classifies Chinese thinkers and activists associated with the 'East' as belonging to a bygone (18th-century) era, and those associated with the 'West' as locked in an alien ideological discourse. This has led to an outcome labeled by Li (Li Xiaojiang *et al*. 2002, 45) as 'futility of interpretation' (解释的徒劳 *jieshide tulao*). Postcolonial discourse, according to Li, has thus ended in alienation and the production of 'Others' on their own home soil. This leads her to the assertion that in this volatile, unpredictable juxtaposition of the global and the local, historical

5 The May Fourth Movement sought intellectual revolution and socio-political reform.

6 For an overview of scholarship on Chinese nation-making, gender, and made-in-China feminisms, see Gail Hershatter (2004) and Wang Zheng (2017).

interpretation must always stay connected to, and be grounded in, the history of the 'local' (本土 *bentu*). When it comes to intellectual engagement with the outside world, this then constitutes both moral 'capital' (资本 *ziben*) and a 'foundation' (依据 *yiju*) of history (Li *et al., ibid*.).

Building on such a foundation, it is Li's emphatic argument that women and gender studies in China must achieve a rightful place of influence by engaging critically and constructively with the androcentric mainstream canon of historical writing. There is no shortcut. To move forward is to engage in dialogue, to go 'beyond gender theory' and bring together the diversity of positionalities, backgrounds, and disciplines (*ibid.*, 46). And it is in this vein that Li urges the pursuit of historical, contextually sensitive scholarship and of a Chinese epistemology that makes 'gender' the overarching subject matter in a global dialogue to transcend boundaries of nationhood, race, and culture.

Li (Li *et al.* 2002) ultimately proposed a more nuanced examination of gender informed by multiply-constructed identities to move beyond binary thinking, stressing complementarity instead of divisive polarities and identifying a plurality of influences to account for the shaping of gendered subjectivities. In this theoretical development, she comes close to Saba Mahmood's (2005) construction of agency as embedded in women's abilities for strategic, agential engagement with the patriarchal norms of their habitus, however restrictive. Only when gender theory is severed from the reductionist binaries of 'East' and 'West', Li (Li *et al.* 2002, 47) says, '…can 'different perspectives [facilitate] a deepening understanding of human beings themselves and the ways of human existence'.[7]

De-colonising Chinese Gender Discourse

In light of the above discussion, a brief detour into the most relevant theoretical and methodological directions in Chinese gender studies as they have evolved over the last decades is necessary. Most specifically, scholarly developments on the uses of oral history methodology and methods have contributed to uncovering the voices of women previously unheard, presenting alternative perspectives and positionalities, and thus querying the representativeness of received scholarly canons by setting the foundations for a Chinese feminist historiography (Li Xiaojiang *et al*. 2002; Zheng and Lü 2002, 444–48). The gathering of historians of mainstream history and with a gender studies background – called by Li Xiaojiang in May 2002 to discuss the relationship between history, historical science, and gender[8] and thus a reconfiguration of the state of the field – made clear in vivid detail the emerging multitude of voices and positionalities from within previously rigidly defined disciplinary and scientific boundaries.

7 In Chinese: '从不同方向上深化对人自身以及人类生存方式的理解' (*Cong butong fangxiangshang shenhua dui ren zishen yiji renlei shengcun fangshide lijie*).

8 Li was the lead editor of *History, Historical Science & Gender,* a volume of conference proceedings that took its name from the conference; it came out in late 2002.

Key presentations, comments, and exchanges from the conference highlighted issues such as generational fissures (conventionally trained historians interacting with members of the younger generations well familiar with discourses in Western academe), gender (the ambiguous impact of gender identity on research directions), and uncertainties over the standing of gender scholarship and its significance to China's overall contribution to global academic discourses.[9] One of the participants, the anthropologist Xu Xinjian (徐新建) (2002, 299) from Sichuan University, drew attention to the important role played by intellectuals in the construction of the historical subject: 'Therefore, to be the "historical people" is not to be real people but are as such constructed by others. From the point of view of "fictional anthropology" that now concerns me, history considered "history" as such, must be put in quotation marks as this is essentially literature, both construct and imagination'.

For Li Xiaojiang, the most urgent task was the facilitation of a much-needed dialogue between male and female scholars to challenge the adversarial political stance, which she continues to hold as the salient characteristic of Western-centered feminism. Reliant on Western feminist scholarship and Chinese academic work (largely since the May Fourth Movement), she identifies a critical need to engage with traditional scholarship (defined by androcentrism) to allow for the emergence of a gender-centered framework constituting multiple voices and undergirded by a diversity of disciplines and approaches. Li (Li *et al.* 2002, 47) asked her colleagues: 'so, is it not possible for us to find a common topic, and under this common topic promote indigenous research'[10] whilst encouraging respectful listening to each other's voices? Li considered the dialogic exchanges and respectful listening to each other's viewpoints at the said gathering an outstanding characteristic of Chinese academic culture.[11]

Relating Gender and Islam

The historian Kang Xiaofei holds that the potential of 'religious resources' at the disposal of Chinese believing women acts as a source of empowerment, enabling women 'to negotiate with or resist patriarchal authorities, to define modernity and tradition in their own terms, to improve their current status, and to seek higher meanings in life' (Kang 2016, 558). It is a perspective which is a rarity in mainland

9 This discussion took place well before the ideological grip over intellectual life in China tightened, adding a further straitjacket of censorship all too often enacted in the silence of self-censorship.

10 In Chinese: '那么，我们是不是能找到一些共同的话题， 在共同的话题下推动本土研究' (*Nemma, women shibushi neng zhaodao yixie gongtongde huati, zai gongtongde huatixia tuidong bentu yanjiu*).

11 It is noteworthy that Li's note of aspiration and request for more mutual understanding to bring about an autonomous Chinese gender studies is a feature celebrated as characteristic of central China's Hui Muslim culture. At the time of my writing (in late 2023), however, the grip of censorship in China is complicating the hoped-for progress toward 'indigenous research' and an epistemology through which to position Chinese scholarship within the global discourse.

Chinese scholarship. Unlike the 'gender critical turn' noted by the feminist historian of world religions, Ursula King (1989), which has transformed the relationship between the disciplines of theology and gender studies in many academes internationally, the concept of religious feminism in Chinese language scholarship remains to this day an oxymoron.

Current political sensitivities in China further limit opportunities for needed research, and thus publications in this field await more liberal times. The research conducted for state-of-the-field articles on Chinese language scholarship in the multidisciplinary field of gender, Islam, and minority women's lives confirms this view, presenting a situation unlikely to be remedied in the foreseeable future (Jaschok and Shui 2013; Jaschok 2013; Jaschok and Man 2023). When it comes to research into issues surrounding the historical matrix of Islam, women, gender, and identity in contemporary Chinese society, Chinese academics tend to focus overall and in the main on women's 'problems' within the framework of social science inquiry and policy analysis. In this regard, worthy of note are research reports and documentations by young academics at the beginning of their careers, with many of these remaining unpublished. A selection of such master's dissertations and doctoral theses testifies to the merit of contextualized social inquiry and a widening of the research subject, which references concepts from anthropological and gender studies (Jaschok and Shui 2013).

Nevertheless, there is writing, even if still rare, which appears to be opening new relevant lines of inquiry, suggesting the richness of the field which yet remains largely dormant. For example, Ma Guifen and Zhao Guojun (2012) examined the continued division of labor between men and women in traditional rituals. They found both a strengthening of traditional gender divisions while women participants also derived spiritual solace and psychological compensation. Evidence of rich ethnographic findings also comes from the work of Jin Xiaoyan (2015) and Zhang Juan (2012). Jin (2015) investigates ablution rituals in funeral rites where, she contends, the ritual of ablution of the corpse (着水 *zhaoshui*) opens a symbolic passage into the Afterlife, with women, alongside men, acting as crucial agents of mediation between polarities of cleanliness and impurity, awe and punishment, substance and spirit. Zhang's (2012) thesis identifies a strong sense of national identity among Hui women, which she considers runs parallel with an evident weakening of religious belief.

Other work conducted by young researchers, as discussed more comprehensively in our state-of-the-field article (Jaschok and Shui 2013), looks at the impact of religious and secular leaders on Muslim women; the role played by education in shaping gender roles and relations; the impact of a secular urban environment on young women; and various implications of inter-ethnic marriages; and the lack of political representation which impacts rights advocacy and policy reforms and implementation. Researchers agree that greater participation in the labor market would raise the level of Muslim women's *suzhi* (素质 broadly defined as 'capacity'). This, in turn would help women access legal resources to fight for their rights, whether in issues of land inheritance, contract enforcement, or support for divorced and widowed women. These views reflect the urgent issues confronting Muslim

women's minority status in Chinese society, but also reflect the non-Muslim positionalities of most researchers, who predominantly tend to give more credence to the empowering impact of legal and socio-political resources rather than to cultural and religious resources.

Most intriguing are academic publications that discuss the place and function of religious agency in a secular society, and the legitimacy of Muslim women's public engagement in community affairs. This is familiar debating territory in international scholarship, contributing a particular Chinese angle to arguments brought by Islamic feminist thinkers like Saba Mahmood (2005) – who contends that women's religious agency may engage in manifold and often non-adversarial, yet no less proactive, ways with the surrounding world. This challenges the ethnocentric premises of Western feminist models of emancipation. Within this limited area of work, writers have explored the local contexts and indigenization of Islam under neo-Confucian influences, with women being identified with strength and integrity of tradition of belief and the intangible cultural heritage of the Muslim people (e.g., Han and Ma 2012; Zhou Xiaoyan 2012; among others). Such ethnographic research can tell us how multiply-constituted religious practices are shaping the subjectivities of Muslim women, and how they bring consolation as well as strength and serve to cement a communal solidarity among fellow female believers. This is a fertile area of investigation which is more necessary considering the diversity of geopolitical contexts and local cultures within which Hui Muslim women mediate the manifold pressures of home, mosque, and the omnipresent authority of the state.

In contrast with other areas of research, and most pertinent to our study of the expressive culture of women's mosques, publications concerning religious education have become more numerous, addressing, among other issues, the continued role and function of mosques and madrassas. Whilst prior to 2000 few researchers devoted attention to the topic of *nűxue,* female madrassas, or *nűsi* (women's mosques) in China, in recent years Chinese scholars have studied issues of Muslim identity and the role of northwest China's madrassas in a context of Islam's growing urbanization and internationalization (see Jaschok and Shui 2013). They have begun to explore the impact of female madrassas in northwest China on gender identity and gender norms in relation to women's rights, progress, and development; and they confirm the strong impact of religious education on shaping female gender identity, citizenship, and national allegiance (Jaschok and Shui 2013).

The viewpoint that female madrassas and women's mosques have a positive, transformative impact and an empowering role, when female education and social mobility are otherwise limited, has been put forward by several Chinese scholars in the field. This has led to many writers urging for greater government support for institutions which, it is argued, function as vital conduits of religious and social education.[12] Moreover, over this last decade, scholars have started asking questions

12 At the time of writing (2023), both academic advocacy in the area of female religious education and the call for supportive government action are being called into question as political tightening continues.

about the different ways that Muslim women's schools and women's mosques respond to changing societal developments (Hu Liping 2013; Ma and Xiang 2013; Ma Qiang 2011; Ma Qingxiang 2014). For example, the anthropologist Ma Qiang (2011) holds that whilst the Muslim community faces a series of challenges in the context of rapid urbanization, such challenges also provide opportunities for the development of women's schools and women's mosques. As a common space for women to learn and communicate with one another, women's mosques and schools not only resist the problem of secularization, but they are also breaking with the tradition of male monopoly over religious authority and resources.

Focusing on *nǚxue* in China's northwest region, Hu Meijuan's (2014) doctoral thesis concludes that although women's sites of learning and worship cannot be equated with Western feminist criteria of female-owned space as an empowering resource, a female subjective consciousness evolved over time: as women's own spaces became more available, their sense of belonging grew as they invested their presence in such spaces. These developments resemble much of the feminist quest elsewhere. That is, women need spaces of their own in order to emancipate their spirit. Hu concludes with an admonition against an uncritical application of both Western feminist theorizing and Islamic fundamentalist injunctions.

Looking at the prospect for future scholarship, while, as in earlier publications, researchers are still mainly concerned with Muslim women in northwest and southwest China and with the study of Hui and Uygur Muslim women, other Chinese Muslim nationalities are now also becoming the focus of research interest. Furthermore, increasing numbers of Chinese scholars are turning to the comparative study of Muslim diversity in the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia; in the process, they are engaging with other Islamic feminist perspectives on core debates around Islam and women. It may thus be that what is still a marginal, if not marginalized, area of Chinese knowledge production will come to yield the kind of indigenous work through which, in light of Li Xiaojiang's (2002) exhortation, a distinct intersectional Chinese voice commands authoritative hearing within the debating chambers of international academe. It would serve a vital function of sharing knowledge cognizant of both lived practices in Muslim contexts internationally and a uniquely gendered history of China's diverse Muslim communities. An important aspect of this uniqueness is a complex and multifaceted history of the gendered soundscape of women's mosques.

In the case of women's mosques, emotions of hope, fear, joyous anticipation, or fear of Afterlife have arguably 'sounded' the traditions of collective learning, memorization of scriptural passages, and celebration. It is thus that representations and contestations over gender manifest themselves through the aural. Contingent on time and space, differing conceptions of male and female Muslims' religious duties, power, and privileges make sound 'a signifier' of the gendered hierarchies of power and entitlements both in the secular and sacred spheres of life.

Consequently, the interpretation of aural performances obliges the researcher/recorder not only to listen but also to reach into the more intangible processes of this soundscape's beginnings, when silence enshrouded the gendered space that patriarchy assigned to women. From this seemingly circumscribed and gender-coded

ground emanated processes that became enablers of performance and voice. Critical of a one-dimensional view of silence, Rowe and Malhotra (2013, 2) theorize silence as invested with potency and agency:

> …as a space of fluidity, non-linearity, and as a sacred, internal space that provides a refuge – especially for nondominant peoples. Silence is a process that allows one to go within before one has to speak or act. This is crucial if our work as activists, writers, and creative artists is to come from a grounded place that connects the spiritual with the political.

Before entering into the unique history of the soundscape of Hui Muslim women's mosques, its origins, transmission, and the central role played by women whose creative uses of sound enabled the enduring legacy of *jingge* (see Chapter Four), it is useful to bring together the scholarly voices that influenced us in what Christine Ehrick (2015) considers needful explorations of the link between gender and sound as categories of historical analysis. Too little attention is paid, Ehrick maintains, to the gendered nature of sound and the sounding of gender.

The concept of gendered soundscapes (Järviluoma, Moisala, and Vilkko 2003) brings together gender, sound, and history, and it is a concept, I argue, relevant to a study of the soundscape of women's mosques. Emily Thompson – quoted by Ehrick as defining most succinctly the 'change over time' in sound, of its perception and of 'hearing' whereby the soundscape acquires a centrality as a category of historical analysis and as an 'aural landscape' speaks of an 'auditory or aural landscape…a physical environment and a way of perceiving that environment' (Thompson 2002, quoted in Ehrick 2011, 72). I now return to the discussion of the presence of silence in such an 'auditory landscape', reflecting on interpretations of the communicative power of silence, its revelation of complex patriarchal relations and injunctions but no less of its transgressive possibilities that rest within the ambiguities of gender-segregated spaces.

Silence 'as a Space of Possibility'

The approach to women's expressive oral tradition – and its project of recovery as part of the remarkable resurgence of religious expression in China's Hui Muslim women's mosques (as will be further discussed in the following chapters) – derives from within an interpretative framework of silence. It is a silence molded by patriarchal heteronormativity into a dual system of neo-Confucian and Islamic gender segregation. It is also a silence that is imbued with agential potency.

Here we place ourselves within an orbit of authoritative voices in feminist scholarship to provide insights into the different ways in which silence has come to signify different and at times conflicting viewpoints. These are differences that not only play into broader feminist debates over intersections of androcentric power, privilege, and knowledge but which also have very specific ethnocentric connotations when it comes to considerations of the histories of women of religious piety and the nature of religious agency. Vocal performance is shaped by gender and history, according to Christine Ehrick (2011), but so are its absence, silence,

prohibition, and stigmatization. Scholars such as Jane Parpart (2010) have drawn attention to the strategic application of silence by women which may turn silence into a potent form of agency and resistance.

The history of the female voice has been a drawn-out trajectory from inaudible sounds (sound as 'auditory or aural landscape' rather than as a distinctive voice) to its public performance, subject to a great number of religio-cultural caveats and injunctions. In a study of ancient Greece and Rome, Anne Carson (1995, 121) remarks that the European history of a silenced female gender is significant and enduring:

> Putting a door on the female mouth has been an important project of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present day. Its chief tactic is an ideological association of female sound with monstrosity, disorder and death.

Indeed, the understanding of female sound as akin to nature, to all that is unformed, untamed, raw, and propelled by uncontrolled emotion, forms part of a binary gender trope that resonates across cultures. Women, bound up with representations of nature, become nature, in stark contrast to representations of male-gendered performance. 'No man would make such a sound. No proper civic space would contain it unregulated' (Carson *ibid*., 125).

These are fascinating insights that resonate elsewhere, including in Chinese cultural discourse. As when a leading *ahong* in early 21st-century central China ruminates over how women's performances of *jingge* intensify the emotions of participants and audiences alike but are so reviled by the more orthodox male imams, and what is made of the contrast offered by leading male choirs (never to the advantage of women), where their sound is associated with a formal, properly constrained, unchanging ritualized orthodoxy. When Carson speaks of a European tradition that abhors female sound as a root of contamination of civic (i.e., male) spaces and which carries adverse implications for the survival of civilization, this deeply ingrained detestation of the female voice 'out of place' can be found elsewhere.

Bronwyn Davies (2000, 55) provides a poststructuralist position on agency: 'Within the humanist discourses that predominate in the social sciences, agency is synonymous with being a person. It is used interchangeably with such concepts as freedom, autonomy, rationality, and moral authority'. Judging this mode of thinking to be highly problematic, Davies (*ibid*.) advocates for 'the possibility of unhooking the concept of agency from humanist versions of the person and redefining it in feminist poststructuralist terms'. That is, from a poststructuralist theoretical position, 'the subject itself is the effect of a production, caught in the mutually constitutive web of social practices, discourses and subjectivity; its reality is the tissue of social relations' (Henriques *et al*. 1984, quoted in Davies *ibid*., 56). Humanist discourse has historically assigned the capacity to act rationally to men who were fully entitled participants in civic society, and not to those who, because of their gender, class, and material circumstances, could not avail themselves of those resources that sustained privileges afforded by education. Women, among other marginalized groups, have thus been seen as ever lacking here, particularly

where gender intersects with other ideological and material obstructions, entrenching the power of discourse, according to Davies (1991, 2000), to anchor and perpetuate gender inequality. In the words of Carson (1995, 130, italics mine):

> Every sound we make is a bit of autobiography. It has a totally private interior yet its trajectory is public. *A piece of inside projected to the outside.* The censorship of such projections is a task of patriarchal culture that (as we have seen) divides humanity into two species: those who can censor themselves and those who cannot.

But while expected to be silent, so says Lydia McDermott (2014, 200), women's assigned roles remain that of 'emotion-bearer' for their communities, producing 'a ritual voicing of emotion, sound without words'. In conducting research cross-culturally, understanding the gendered implications for women of the tension between marginalizing silence and being bearers of communal identity requires sensitivity to contextual contingencies; that is, an understanding of how women under given circumstances negotiate a multiplicity of roles, assigned and aspired, which constrain or expand their agential interaction with structures of tradition and forces for change.

Moving Across Cultural Contexts and Discursive Histories

Cheung King-Kok (1993) objects to what she sees as the Eurocentric framing of women from Asian cultural contexts, marking women's speech and silence as polarized, hierarchical, and gendered. Cheung examines silence (which she sees as oppressively associated with stereotypes of Asian-American women) through the lens of culture, race, and colonialism, by which a critical understanding of the implications of silences unpacks a spectrum of meaning, including intimations of 'oppressive, inhibitive, protective, stoic, and attentive silences' (Cheung *ibid*., 26). As Cheung reminds us, researchers involved in cross-cultural work, moving across distinct discursive histories, ignore the intrinsic bias of word and silence in given languages at their peril. For example, in both Chinese and Japanese languages, the term 'silence' – and thus its antonym – carries distinct nuances of assumptions and orientations. Whereas in the English language, the term 'silence' is commonly held to be antithetical to 'voice' and mutually defining – 'the most common Chinese and Japanese ideogram for "silence" [静 *jing*] is synonymous with "serenity" and antonymous with "sound", "noise", "motion", and "commotion [动 *dong*]"' (Cheung *ibid*., 127). In the United States, Cheung adds, silence is generally looked upon as passive, while in China and Japan the term traditionally signals pensiveness, vigilance, or grace.

Such multifaceted conceptions of gendered and embedded silences necessitate a re-thinking of the notion of assertively, verbally voiced agency beyond received notions of female-gendered passivity and inactivity. Of interest is Danielle Dunand Zimmerman's (2015) juxtaposition of masculinist agency framed as autonomous and self-directed, contrasting with conceptions that center on the relational nexus in which women engage and perform a multiplicity of roles. Agency as a relational

construct is realized through engagement with meaningful relationships and responsiveness to the importance of maintaining social connectedness. Crucially, however, it is a receptivity and engagement based on mutual recognition, on the others' rights to be heard and respected, averse to hierarchy, deference, and self-abnegation. This has implications for how we consider the comparative standing of women in environments marked by identities apparently antithetical to emancipation, as is the case with dominantly religious contexts. As Zimmerman *(ibid.,* 4) points out, '…people and groups' social location is context dependent and not a static or fixed category'.

Jakeet Singh's (2015) questioning of the explanatory 'limits of intersectionality' in scholarship on religious agency ties in, fascinatingly, with questions that arise from the history of Chinese Hui Muslim women who for centuries lived in the liminal spaces of ethno-religious and patriarchal classifications. This dual marginalization defined women's relations with Han Chinese civilization, in all its varying historically contingent forms, creating a liminal status shared with other members of their Hui Muslim communities. It was a status that encoded Hui Muslim women's life cycles in gender norms derived from both neo-Confucian and Islamic gender regimes (Jaschok and Shui 2000a, 2000b, 2011).

Intersectional analysis has become an integral part of feminist analysis of context-contingent matrices of identity. This approach has come in for criticism. The shift from focus on identity to structural oppression and power is critiqued by Jakeet Singh as not paying attention to the 'positivities' in believing women's lives which a focus on identity would permit (Singh 2015, 659). Of relevance here is Singh's criticism of feminist intersectionality in its relative negligence of women's religious agency. Exploring theorization of religious agency and its impact on intersectional theory, Singh's advocacy of the expansion of notions of agency, or of action as agentic, has emerged importantly from scholarship on religious (particularly) Islamic subjectivities. It sensitizes awareness of the ways that a secular-informed intersectionality excludes alternative forms of agencies. Such an argument can be seen as part of feminist scholars' engagement with the 'postsecular turn', among which must be counted the influential voices of Rosi Braidotti (2008), Judith Butler (2009), and Saba Mahmood (2005) – whose radical reframing of gendered agency contributed to the queering of a hegemonic strain of Eurocentric theorizing.

Borrowing from Burke (2012), Singh (2015, 661) refers to four types of religious agency:

> Women who participate in 'gender-traditional' religions often: resist, challenge, and seek to modify their religious traditions ('resistance agency'); feel emotionally or psychologically empowered by their religious practice in the complex contexts of their everyday lives ('empowerment agency'); accrue nonreligious, material benefits from their religious practice ('instrumental agency'); or seek to live up to, or inhabit/embody, religious norms for a wide variety of reasons internal to the religious practice itself ('compliant agency').

Jakeet Singh points out that the fourth type, 'compliant agency', provides for the most relevant notion of 'agentival capacity' informed by religious faith, antithetical to modernist criteria of emancipation. Instead, the concept of compliant agency intimates daily enacted and immersive practice of religious norms and their purposeful compliance.

Christine Keating (2013, 25) brings further nuance to Singh's conception when she differentiates among 'three kinds of engaged and oppositional silences: silent refusal, silent witness, and deliberative silence'. Keating argues that silence and force need to be disentangled: whereby the conventional understanding of silence as 'enforced' performance excludes a consideration of voice which may, under given circumstances, be equally the outcome of coercion. It may thus be the case, so Keating *(ibid.,* 27) contends, that silence is the outcome of a *refusal* to be complicit in an oppressive master narrative, rejecting voice as contrary to conviction and belief. Silence may also signify the function of *witnessing*, allowing for a collective demonstration of solidarity to support and sustain 'an anti-dominant self' that rises above the constraints of an oppressive regime. 'Deliberative silence' is understood as a form of validation in silencing 'repugnant' or undesirable yearnings or impulses, becoming in the process truer to oneself. Arguably, the purposeful motivation to resist injustice through refusal to lend voice in complicity – opting instead for deliberative silence in support of justice denied and, more assertively, denying reification of injustice which may portend desirability of change – signifies the possibility of subversion. The question then, as Keating *(ibid.,* 29) puts it, is: 'Whom do these desires serve?'. How do popular notions of the gendered emancipatory act as *public* voicing serve to obscure the agency of religious women who choose silence?

Referring to the work of the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (see Quatman 2020), Tony Lynch makes the point that part of this deliberative silence is the choice of withdrawal into a silence that allows for communication with the self as essential to self-finding and as a choice to stay apart from the contamination of worldly desires and pursuits. This includes the notion 'that communication with oneself...is forever silent, and it is in the withdrawal from worldly pursuits that, in silence, we may engage with our "true self"' (Lynch 2001, 267) as an expression of the individual's agency.

How does the foregoing debate apply to believing women who grew into adulthood as members of a non-Muslim mainstream society? What meanings have they ascribed to their lives during times of Communist Party state-coerced silence, and how were such deliberations – whether agential or consensual, whether to challenge, protect, sustain, or acquiesce – enabled by women's history of collective expressive cultural traditions?

Confucian Cosmology, Muslim Femininity, and Speaking to Identity

When we consider the philosophical and cultural roots that helped to shape gendered traditions of voice and silences in the Chinese context, contextualization is required beyond assumptions evoked by the powerful metaphors of core notions

of feminist discourse. Scholars like Eva Kit Wah Man (2016) have contributed to considerations of alternative models of thinking about constructions of gender and to the transcendence of binary thinking. Man acknowledges the difficulties for feminists in considering holistic and unifying alternatives to Western binary thought, as Confucian cosmology appears to share a similar superior status of masculinized principles and values over essentialized femininities. But, as Man *(ibid*., 16) points out – and this seems to me to also be a crucial argument for discussing gender-assigned silencing – '...the superior relation of the mind over the body is simply a symbolic and dynamic phase moving toward (human) harmony. The principles of holistic unity and organic balance are meaningful ideas distinct from the mechanical-atomistic model of which feminists are critical. These principles are also basically indicative of the concrete experiences of life, history, and time'. To add here a further poignant reminder by Man *(ibid*., 8), this 'holistic unity and organic balance' must 'comprehend difference' in terms where no one category from among many possible categories of representation would 'stand in' for the other or be allowed to suppress the nature of the other.

It is important to keep in mind that the notion of voice – which has come to represent such a central potency of feminist agency and performativity – has also acquired a metaphorical significance for 'textual authority' (Ehrick 2015) which may conceal new fault-lines of injustice. That is, we are reminded of the imperative for historicization by which the wide spectrum of aspirations encompassed in the metaphor of voice – such as cultural agency, self-perfection, redistributive justice, political enfranchisement, and pursuance of ideals – enables us to account more faithfully, and justly, for the diversity *and* the commonalities of the personal and structural circumstances in which women make their lives count within the historical contingencies of place and time.

In investigating what stigmatizes female sound as 'out of order' in the history of Chinese Hui Muslim women, a complex and entangled matrix of encoded femininity comes into view (see Chapter Four). Historically, rulings on the education of women's bodies and minds to match ideals of paradigmatic Muslim femininity were underlined by overlapping and mutually reinforcing matrices of secular and religious injunctions. Importantly, *sancong side* (三從四德 neo-Confucian concepts of Three Feminine Obediences and Four Feminine Virtues)[13], and the Islamic concept of *awrah* (concealed part of the female body which denotes defectiveness, blemish, weakness), were locally translated into *xiuti*, offensive to the eyes and ears of strangers. Voice in this context thus acquires a multiplicity of meanings, aspirations, and consequences. Access to such an understanding, in all its limitations, is then predicated on access to knowledge of what constituted a meaningful life for women within their specific historical contexts. It is also predicated on our

13 At the core of Confucian moral principles and social behavior, popularly referred to as 'Three Obediences' (defining the duties of maiden daughter, chaste wife, and dutiful widow) and the 'Four Virtues' (pertaining to *fude* (妇德 women's virtue), *fuyan* (妇言 women's speech), *furong* (妇容 women's appearance), and *fugong* (妇工 women's work)).

interpretations of the symbolic and material dimensions of the worlds within which women engaged as they sought to balance and negotiate the conflicting pressures and expectations of their lives. As for the researcher, as Robin Clair (2013) notes, comprehension of another's silence, whilst always partial and thus debatable, must mean that it is also always to be invested with meaningfulness, that it must always be open to interpretation.

We have before us a gendered soundscape and a cacophony of voices that bring to the foreground questions over the crucial role played by hearers, listeners, and transmitters of transformative knowledge and the resources they needed to marshal. The following chapter seeks to understand their part in preventing or indeed exacerbating the 'testimonial injustice' of Muslim women's unheard histories and exclusion from the canon of their country's national story. 'Testimonial injustice', Heather Battaly (2017, 233) writes, 'is a disposition to fail to see speakers as credible when they are credible, due to the hearer's identity prejudice'. It has therefore been important for women who face such disadvantages to employ strategic measures to secure allies from within the group of powerful hearers.

As described more fully in subsequent chapters, where Muslim women in central China faced multiple objections to their desire to share the richness of the expressive culture of mosque chants in public mixed-gender spaces, they invited support from sympathetic male *ahong* whose participation they knew could help facilitate accomplishing their objectives. Crucially, men were asked to add their voices to the voices of women, not to displace nor to speak on women's behalf. Such male religious leaders were known to support their female counterparts in their insistence on gaining wider, institutional recognition for women's contributions to Islamic culture of faith and, as we shall learn in the following chapter, to gain support to affirm learned women *ahong*'s equal spiritual authority, legitimizing their (still somewhat tentative) critical interventions in interpreting Qur'anic and Hadith passages.

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4 Vernacularizing a Global Faith

The Happier an Atmosphere

Sound reiterates and constructs aspects of social inequalities of class, ethnicity, belief, and gender. Sound is also a conduit to discover the most intangible aspects of research, those which concerns beliefs, convictions, emotions, and aspirations. 'The happier an atmosphere, the more people will accept the faith' was the frequently stated conviction of Ge CX *Ahong* whenever she was called upon to give reasons for her fondness of chanting.[1]

Women's chanting – loudly, collectively – sets free sentiments in the participants and the listeners, as the mood generated enables words that might otherwise have been left unsung and unheard. A key function of sound, signifying complex processes of change, at the most local level is illustrated by the controversy aroused by the emergence of female voices in public spaces, fiercely contested in debates among female and male Muslims in central China over such developments' doctrinal and moral ramifications. Where prohibition of the female voice served centuries of gender segregation and the hierarchy of religious leadership, discussions today among Muslims of all backgrounds and generations point to the influence of global political Islam in its most severe objections to female sound as *awrah*, the imperfection of women dictating the imposition of their concealment, of silence. But other, more local influences are also at work. The vernacularizing of Islamic practices is inseparable from women's historical participation in the institutional development of Islam, particularly in central China's Hui Muslim communities – where the injunction for gender segregation in all aspects of Islamic worship and education gave rise to developments which would ultimately culminate in the establishment of women's mosques.

The origin of contemporary women's mosques, which enjoy various degrees of autonomy and self-determination, has its *raison d'être* in the religious diktat for segregation and for female-only spaces, removed from the gaze of men (Jaschok and Shui 2000a). That women were able to turn spaces of segregation into spaces of self-reliance and transformation relates to opportunities offered by socio-political and ideological fluctuations in Chinese central government policies, and during Republican-era reformist impulses which also affected Islamic education (Jaschok and Shui 2005). This was the case in the early 1950s and again in the mid-1970s

1 Interview with Ge *Ahong* took place in August 2016, in Henan province.

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when government policies and regulations concerning religious sites, internal organization and establishment of democratic management committees, leadership by consultation and election, and an expanded scope of activities were turned into positive contributing factors that strengthened women's religious institutions, internally and externally (Jaschok 2012). There is, however, little or no evidence of the role of the All-China Women's Federation – which in theory represents the interests and rights of *all* Chinese female citizens – in this development. Whereas overall progress in women's legal, political, and social rights is inseparable from the role played by the Federation (despite its not inconsiderable limitations, see Jaschok 2003; see also Zhou Yunyun 2019[2]), the conspicuous, ideological conundrum presented by women of religious belief allowed for only the most tenuous of interactions. Moreover, Muslim women were excluded from Chinese state feminist narratives based on a secularist paradigm of Maoist women's liberation theology (see Chapter Five). In consequence, the significance of unique women-led, women-centered institutions (i.e., women's mosques) remained invisible. The silencing of these religious women's history in the annals of China's national and (until recently) in official Hui Muslim histories did not, however, prevent Muslim women from forging their own pathways toward a religiously informed gender justice.

Resurgent Sounds

Within the context of a local resurgence of women-centered expressive religious culture (Jaschok 2021; Jaschok and Shui, with Ge 2021), what core concepts have shaped the oral traditions of female-led traditions in central China's Hui Muslim culture? What do we know of the history of local translations of global Islam, as gendered and historically contingent practices; and what accounts for abiding resistance to the exposed female voice within Islamic circles? Building on these questions, what do resurgent and contested forms of women-centered worship and celebration say about the travel from 'sound' to 'voice'? If, as the anthropologist Adam Chau (2008) maintains, the 'social heat' of 'sensorially rich manners' helps to institutionalize sensorialized sociality, creating new social arrangements and identities, what may we deduce for the future of female-led religious spaces from this intensification of an expressive collective culture, and for their role in shaping the future of Islam, both local and translocal?

Building on the definition by Peggy Levitt and Sally Merry (2009, 441) who see vernacularization as a 'process of appropriation and local adoption of globally generated ideas and strategies', certain findings are relevant to women's under-recognized role in proselytizing Islamic faith in China, specifically given the history

2 Zhou Yunyun provides a searching neo-institutional analysis of the dilemma faced by the All-China Women's Federation in seeking to bring about the mass organizational reforms requested by the Communist Party (2015 directive), including expanding its scope of representation. The current context of increasing re-politicization of all mass organizations has limited the effectiveness of needed radical structural and ideational reforms.

of an expressive sound-culture of female-led organizations in central China's Hui Muslim community. This leads to the question of how we are to understand the significance of female sound in diverse Muslim contexts as *Zwischenformen*; that is, as phenomena which are situated in, but resonate beyond, the intermediate spaces of voice making (Broy 2017). Using Levitt and Merry's analytical framework, localization of a global meaning system in the first instance entails a transfer of religious beliefs and norms – subject to multiple tensions relating to essential and cultural properties of religion, to contingencies of place and time, as well as to relations with the state and its representative institutions (Betts 2013; Frankel 2021). This is most palpably the case with Islam and its multiple lines of division sustained by historical and doctrinal divergence over issues such as the nature of succession and leadership, core principles of faith, and mandatory practices. Moreover, it is necessary to pay attention to organizational conduits through which communication travels, and to the nature and receptivity of local organizations. In turn, this entails a focus on female-led organizations' openness to transnational discourse as well as on their political location and thus their ranking within the patriarchal systems of both the state and the religious organization.

Levitt and Merry (2009) observe that vernacularizers 'convey ideas from one context to another, adapting and reframing them from the way they attach to a source context to one that resonates with the new location'. The ability of elite women interlocutors (in this case, women *ahong*) to move between contexts makes their role one 'of power and vulnerability' (*ibid*., 449). Moreover, to have an impact requires adopting influences at a *local level* which resonate with existing norms and practices, transforming consciousness and subjectivities whilst global values of Islam are retained as identity markers of membership in a translocal community of faith. Yet, as Levitt and Merry hold, an important distinction is to be made between changes that arise organically within received traditions – making such change more incremental in nature – and changes that are the result of external influence where transmitters of new trends or influences may encounter local resistance.

Force of Moral Authority and Threats of Innovation

The Islamic injunction of *bidaerti* (比德儿替 *bid'a*) circumscribing female *ahong*'s functions and scope of authority within the specific context of female-led Islamic institutions is embedded in a non-Islamic sexual morality which applied to *all* Chinese women.[3] The idea and application of x*iuti* – a Chinese concept (meaning bashfulness, shyness) reframed in the local Muslim context to denote

3 *Bid'a* (from the Arabic): a core Islamic principle, *bid'a* traditionally signifies heterodoxy, an aberration, *haram*, from the unchangeable essence of Islam. There is, however, greater ambiguity when the term is employed locally by Hui Muslim women, as when they refer to their tradition of women's mosques and female imams as commendable innovation, *hao bidaerti* (好比德儿替), i.e., good for the development of Islam. Their critics are more wont to refer to *huai bidaerti* (怀比德儿替), i.e., bad for the development of Islam (Jaschok and Shui 2000a).

an embodied chaste femininity requiring concealment from the public gaze – dictates very particular and specific restrictions on women's religious authority as preachers and interpreters of scriptural texts and their confinement to the inner quarters of women's mosques. The emergence of concern in some quarters of the Islamic patriarchy over the prevalence of incidents they regard as publicly defying directions on the concealment of *xiuti* relates to a growing enthusiasm, particularly among female-led women's mosques in central China, to bring *jingge* and *zanzhu zansheng* (chants in Praise of Allah and the Prophet) performances to public, mixed-gender events.

The combined force of neo-Confucian and Islamic moral gender codes assigned women to inner quarters and domesticated their social roles. It mandated symbolic and physical borders of exclusion that necessitated women worshiping in segregated sites, the erecting of walls, and the shutting of gates to ensure protection against the outside world. That is, within the neo-Confucian moral system, women were limited to the domestic sphere and care for the familial realm, which translated within the terms of the Islamic code to roles restricted to assigned duties inside a given *nǜsi*.[4] Such designation to secular and religious inner quarters mandated women's public invisibility, modest clothing, and meek deportment. Performance of the female voice in public spaces would have been associated with women of loose morals and questionable respectability, and not something to be associated with pious and submissive Muslim women. Thus, it was the voices of men that were heard reciting Qur'anic *sūrah*, preaching *woer'ci* (*al-Wa'z* sermon), and reciting *zanzhu zansheng* on the occasion of *Id al-Fitr* (marking the end of Ramadan and fasting), *Id al-Qurban* (Festival of Sacrifice), and *Mawlid al-Nabi* (birthday of the Prophet). Indeed, festivals attended by women[5] were presided over by male *ahong*, requiring that women and children remain in a backroom, outside the men's mosque, or inside the rooms of a women's mosque, where they were to continue their tasks or childcare whilst listening to a sermon, well out of sight. Also, male *ahong* were historically in sole charge of ceremonies such as weddings, funerals, or *Niyyah* (rite of intention) ordinarily held at home.

Re-encoding Lived Islamic Faith in the Face of Fitnah (Luring into Temptation)

The very origin and evolution of female-only Islamic sites of education and worship are shaped by an overriding priority: that is, not to create, even if inadvertently, innovations that might be considered reprehensible or violations of received tradition. Issues surrounding the Islamic principle of *bid'a* (averse to innovation)

4 More detailed historical background on three early authoritative voices which markedly contributed to the codification of Muslim women's moral conduct – such as Wang Daiyu (ca. 1584–1670), Ma Zhu (1640–1711), and Liu Zhi (ca. 1655–1745), scholars of the Ming and Qing dynasties – can be found in Jaschok and Shui (2000a, 47–56).

5 For example, festivals marking Fatimah al-Zahra (the Prophet's daughter), *Yawm al-Ashura* (Day of Commemoration in the first month of the Islamic calendar), and *Laylah al-Bara'ah* (Night of Forgiveness).

are highly contested because they are intrinsic to interpretations of tradition, innovation, and reform. The production of female sound, which became an indispensable pedagogical tool in the religious instruction of largely illiterate women, was one such controversial tradition. It was considered a reprehensible innovation even when it served to facilitate religious knowledge ultimately beneficial to the survival of the Islamic faith.

Women's chanting was confined to closed spaces and associated with a historically specific function of instructing uneducated, ignorant women, and thus perceived as an inferior, inchoate sound. Their chanting was 'largely outside of the realm of what R. Murray Schafer calls "signal": sounds listened to consciously and that often convey messages and/or authority' (Schafer 1993, quoted in Ehrick 2011, 72), which were the prerogative of men. And in this regard, Muslim women were ruled as all Chinese women were, by the rigors of womb-centered life cycles, which shaped kinship roles in service to the patrilineal family system and excluded women from political, social, and cultural resources at the disposal of men. The generalization of universal female illiteracy as shared by all Chinese women, however, requires a more nuanced and intersectional understanding.

The scholarship of Patricia Ebrey (1993) and Susan Mann (1992), among others, on the early history of female education, has drawn a complex picture of female members of elite families and female heads of powerful families who might take advantage of opportunities for their own benefit or that of their family's, even in contravention of the more restrictive gender morality of neo-Confucianism. Women of wealth, status, and resources were thus allowed to join, even if in limited numbers, the ranks of poets, essayists, and public educators. And they did so in tension with the dominant gender regime that eulogized reticence, concealment of talents from the public gaze, and dedication to a domesticated existence of reproductive service at the disposal of a husband's patriline.

Following the establishment of the Communist Party government in 1949, much was done to eradicate some of the most glaring systemic inequalities in the domestic as well as the public spheres. Educational and cultural institutions pervaded by Confucian family morality were targeted through legislation, policies, and grassroots campaigns, with gender equality constituting one of the core ideological pillars of Communist legitimacy. But government-sponsored campaigns and propaganda – reinforcing the mantra of women's rights to an equal share of benefits arising from the reform of patriarchal institutions, which took center stage during the early years of political consolidation, alongside other reforms – ultimately yielded to other priorities (Croll 1978; Davin 1976; Du Fangqing 1988; Gilmartin *et al*. 1994; Li Xiaojiang 1994; Stacey 1983; Wolf 1985). The promise of a future of full gender equality failed to materialize (Kruks *et al*. 1989).

Whereby Ebrey and Mann brought factors of social class, wealth, and kinship status into the discussion of a more complex gendered history of female education, when considering education and its significance to the history of Muslim women, another factor comes into view: religion. The reason why the beginnings of what would become an institution dedicated to Muslim women's education – however rudimentary in its initial forms and functions – emerged as early as the late 16th

century is due to the central place Islam bestowed on education and scriptural knowledge, on ritual observances, and adherence to strict guidelines in daily life mandatory for an informed faith-centered Muslim identity. Nevertheless, it was ultimately a historical crisis, which threatened the very survival of Islam, and the creative cultural and educational responses by Hui scholars and religious practitioners to the crisis, that provided an opportunity for the religious education of Muslim girls and women. It provided legitimacy of access to basic scriptural and ritual knowledge for all female Muslims in their role as primary educators of future generations of Muslims. Women's indispensable participation in the great project of recovering Islam became the driver for facilitating female education.

The origin of the first Islamic cultural movement (in the early 17th century when the Ming dynasty gave way to a more hostile environment under Qing imperial rule in 1644–1912) was a very real fear among Chinese Muslims that Islam might become a diminished force, besieged by hostile forces from without and weakened by growing ignorance of the essence of Islam from within. It was a movement that sought to stem the diminishing force of Islamic faith, and Chinese Muslims' knowledge of their faith, by devising major translations of seminal scriptures and facilitating the expansion of education for all. The contribution of knowledgeable, trusted women was asked for; importantly, wives and daughters of *ahong* acted as teachers in a highly gender-segregated society. It became their task to provide rudimentary instruction to women for facilitating Muslim family morality and the proper upbringing of children.

As described in our earlier work (Jaschok and Shui 2011; Jaschok 2014), what eventually developed into fully autonomous women's mosques formed a distinct history of *zhongyuan* Muslim culture in central China, more so than for Muslim communities elsewhere in the country. During its humble beginnings, women were confined to segregated spaces, largely private rooms, with religious instruction initially provided by male *ahong* from behind screens. Only eventually did the temporary sites and limited facilities become the permanent mosques and the professionalization of female teachers prevalent in current times. Initially, wives or widows of male *ahong* served the needs of the community of women when their domestic duties permitted. But when women's mosques came to offer adequately safe spaces, female *ahong* who were no longer the primary carers of children and in charge of households could choose to reside at the mosque. This allowed them to give greater attention to the duties of instruction, prayer, and counseling, as well as to expanding the influence of the mosque, which was most evident after the re-opening of religious sites following China's reforms during the 1980s.

Historically, the local socio-economic and cultural contexts, size of Muslim communities, opportunities for female education, and training of female *ahong*, but also a leading female *ahong*'s individual ability and capacity and her relationships with male counterparts, have determined women's mosque status. The spectrum ranged from their dependency on male mosques in all vital institutional functions to relative (and rare) autonomy. This diversity of factors, internal and external to the Muslim community, accounting for the status and influence of a given women's mosque, persists to this day. They are most marked in rural areas

where – compared with the upsurge of religious and educational impacts of women's mosques in townships and cities – rural women's mosques are circumscribed by disadvantages of poverty, less well-trained leadership, and inferior standing in their community.

It is thus in the more urban, well-connected, and materially stable communities that we note developments which have contributed to the current phenomenon of growing expressive religiosity under capable women *ahong* and a concomitant expansion of their external influence. Only then could greater autonomy flourish, and women turn a historically segregated space into a site of transformation, where women of often humble origin and as members of otherwise disadvantaged communities benefited from an inspiring culture of learning. Over time, women strengthened their relative status as believers through increasingly assertive proclamations of gender equality in faith. This was evident in the changing deployment of the very language by which women's mosques were traditionally characterized as vessels of vulnerable purity and therefore in need of protection.

For example, a standard description of women's mosques associated with desirable characteristics of traditional femininity, such as *jie* (洁 closed-off sites of learning and worship expressing modesty and ideals of purity), came to denote for women believers an assertive and exemplary faith, a piety anchored in deliberately pursuing a 'true' Muslim life. Thus, *jie* and *anjing* (安静 conveying serenity), in women's subversion of older meanings associated with the disciplining of women's minds and bodies, have undergone a transformation – from strictly defined and confined segregated spaces for the religious advancement of ignorant women to a space of superior spirituality of austere faith. The juxtaposition of traditionally more modest-sized women's mosques with the expansionist drive of larger, more opulent, more well-connected men's mosques has been re-storied. The contrast came to support the claim by some of the more critically-minded female *ahong* that women are equal to men in their spirituality; indeed, women might even function as role models in their principled conduct of exemplary religious leadership (Jaschok 2014).

The Transmitters

Ahong *as Change Makers, Chants as the Sound of Gender Justice*

What commonly dominates local conversations about the proper application of Islam to daily life in general, and specifically to the rights and conduct of Muslim women, is mostly shaped by the opinions and judgments expressed by *ahong* and teachers. Two such strong voices come from among the generation of popular, educated, and assertive female religious leaders.[6] Their thinking and reflections

6 Ge CX *Ahong* and Ba DM are religious leaders and educational reformers of influence and status. Their participation in our research collaboration goes back many years, as interlocutors were transformed into active research collaborators, and collaborating colleagues into friends. Their imprint is everywhere in this book, in conversations with me, and in their interviews conducted with other

on how challenges to Islamic faith in mainstream society's modernizing discourse must be met by women of steadfast faith is equaled only by their confidence in the cause of gender justice. The sense of purpose these two influential change makers hold comes through in the following reflections, which are kindled in turn, and moreover intensified, by the responses of members of the wider Muslim community and the palpable resurgence of women's chants of faith.

Ge CX Ahong*: Leader, Teacher, Lead Chanter*

The energetic and cheerful Ge CX *Ahong* heads one of the more influential women's mosques in the provincial capital of Henan province. Only in her late 40s, she is a teacher of such caliber that she attracts dozens of women to her daily classes. I wrote in 2014 how, together with her *shetou* (社头 mosque manager) and a few other women, Ge *Ahong* was inspired to turn her mosque into a hub of Islamic education, particularly for girls and women. Her relentless pace of work became visible to me when she participated in my colleague Shui Jingjun's regular workshop meetings, where a local non-Muslim social activist was invited to share with a sizeable audience of Muslim women successful narratives of inspiring women engaging in local and regional charitable and social causes. Whilst busy with her own tasks, Ge *Ahong* has also always been intensely involved in the work of other *ahong.* Nor does she ever turn down invitations to cooperate, where relevant, with officials representing local branches of the Islamic Association. In other words, as she would often reiterate, she appreciates the importance of offers of social and economic resources available in the wider non-Muslim society for furthering Muslim wellbeing.

For example, some highly successful educational initiatives involved the cooperation of cadres from local *fulian* (妇联 Women's Federation) branches and volunteers from *minjian* (民间 home-grown) initiatives. As she related to me, a priority for Ge *Ahong* has always been the advancement of Islamic knowledge through education and the popularization of Islam by bringing fundamental knowledge into mosque classrooms and prayer halls. Always with an eye for opportunity, she made use of a nearby abandoned mosque in a poor Hui community that lacked the necessary financial means to afford both *ahong* and religious instruction. Ge *Ahong* offered the teaching services of the most capable members of her mosque management committee, which ensured the children's continued education and, in the process revived the community's determination to fundraise for an *ahong*'s wage.

Beyond activities related to Ge *Ahong*'s position at her mosque and in the local community, she was instrumental in further expanding the charitable outreach of a development fund, an initiative of her mosque made possible by generous

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religious practitioners and members of their respective women's mosque congregations. They were also instrumental in producing the SongBook collection of largely previously unrecorded chants from the oral pedagogical tradition of Hui Muslim women's mosques.

donations from members of the mosque congregation for charitable purposes. And she is in the process of establishing linkages with foreign Muslim communities to contribute *nieti* (乜提 alms) to local charity, its work being overseen by the women's mosque management (according to Ge *Ahong*, the government permits *nieti* unlike other types of donations that might be considered compromised by links to political organizations).

In the following section, Ge *Ahong* tells in her own words the story of her life and what led her to become such an influential *ahong*, teacher, and educator in a provincial city. Her words matter. Her authority is clearly demonstrated in the conversations/interviews she conducted with women from her own congregation and beyond, exploring the place and impact of *jingge* in their individual and collective histories. Ge *Ahong*'s opinions are listened to with much respect. This, however, does not mean that she has no critics. As she makes clear in her account below, she is criticized for her advocacy of 'innovative' teaching, and her preference for incorporating chanting in her scriptural knowledge classes is considered by some religious leaders to be in direct violation of fundamental Islamic injunctions, that is, *haram*.

Ge Ahong in her own words: Providing Legitimacy, Speaking with Authority[7]

'I was born in Henan province. My father was a worker, and my mother was a teacher at a primary school. Because my grandfather was an *ahong*, my mother's mother and father's mother were people who often did *libai* [礼拜 attend worship]. My father studied Islamic knowledge at a college in another province when still quite young. Later, he became a worker due to the Cultural Revolution.[8] Because the elder members of my family valued religious education, I studied Islamic knowledge after I graduated from high school in 1990. My father sent me to an Arabic language school in another county to study the Qur'an, annotations of the Qur'an, the hadiths, religious doctrine, *Sharia* law [教法礼仪 *jiaofa liyi*], and Chinese language. Before graduation, I was sent to Shahe village near Zhumadian city to practice as a trainee *ahong*. After I graduated, I was able to stay at the school as a teacher. Later, I also taught in Changzhi city of Shanxi province and in Taikang county, Zhoukou city. In 2002, I was invited by a township women's mosque to become their *ahong*. From 2005 to the present, I have been engaged as *ahong* to lead [the influential] women's mosque in a large city in Henan.

My many years of teaching experience, of understanding the link between good teaching and constant learning, provided me with a solid base to set up a study class when I became an appointed *ahong*. Am I able to recite the Qur'an?

7 Ge *Ahong* wrote the account of her life and conversations with Muslim women from her mosque and elsewhere in preparation for the 'Ethnographies of Islam in China' conference, 27–29 March 2017, London. She was, in the end, unable to attend the conference.

8 Government policies during the Cultural Revolution (1967–1977) were particularly harsh on religious leaders, with reassignment to menial work being a common form of coercive 're-education' and punishment.

I can read all books of the *Qur'an* and can recite four books or so straight from memory. As for the chants we call *zanzhu zansheng* [chants of worship], I am not good at chanting. So, I collect lots of *jingge* and then give the tunes and lyrics to those who can chant very well. When these women have a good command of the new chants, they teach these songs to other people. New *zansheng* are growing in number. Generally, there are more Arabic *zansheng* and Chinese-Arabic *zansheng* than Persian language *zansheng*, of which there are very few.

I learned some chants during my student years. These chants were taught to me by a student from Shandong province. She taught us, having received instruction from her own *shifu* [师傅 a colloquial address for a female *ahong*]. At that time, you know, such instruction could not have been arranged in a formal class, because it was not acceptable for women chanted loudly in public, and everyone could hear them. Such a thing was truly rare at that time. But this *shifu* said that these chants not only have a role to play [in our lives as Muslim women] as they are providing us with moral admonition, but it is also important to understand how they enliven students' leisure time when students feel their lives to be dull. And therefore, she said, it is important to arrange for students to learn these chants after night class, and to use their voice.'

Source of Authority

In relating the wisdom of earlier generations of *ahong* as a source of inspiration for the current generation of middle-aged and young *ahong*, Ge *Ahong* sought legitimacy from a female tradition of learning. But she also possesses personal strength and determination and insists on the value of an expressive faith in the face of resistance and, at times, outright opposition to the use of *jingge.* Much discussion among leading religious women also centered on necessary observations of propriety. Thus, it was made clear to critics of *jingge* that due attention was placed on appropriate context to praise, read, and recite; that women *ahong* fully understood that recital of Qur'an and chanting of *jingge* and *zanzhu zansheng* have their place in different religious ceremonial, ritual, and public contexts (see Chapter 2). Even in the more relaxed atmosphere associated with public events and popular activities, propriety of modest dress and serene performance when participating in *zanzhu zansheng* competitions are considered an imperative practice expressive of the dignity of Muslim women.

It is worth noting that several officials in charge of the Islamic Association's local branches have been most willing to reinforce the legitimacy of, and moreover to energize women's love for, *jingge* competitions. Many lively accounts by participants relate to the successful convening of *zanzhu bisai* (赞主比赛 *zanzhu* competition) under the auspices of the provincial branch of the province's Islamic Association. This Association has also held several contests for the best sermon presentations. Ge *Ahong* proudly shared that she had won second prize twice and the third prize once. Such activities, convened by Association officials, lent an air of legitimacy to women's participation in public events and also encouraged women *ahong* to speak publicly and with confidence. Another benefit of such large

gatherings was the increased opportunity for making social contacts and promoting friendly relations among different mosque communities and their leadership. This, in turn, served the rapid spread of popularizing a *jingge* culture particular to women's mosques across central China's counties and even beyond.

With the fast-growing trend for mixed-gender activities, a fine balance had to be observed. Whilst women were advancing the right to proclaim their faith before the community of believers, in public gatherings, out in the open, they also wished to be seen adhering to the strictest injunctions on female conduct and appearance. This is relevant to both female performers and audience members.[9] As Ge *Ahong* related to me, the requirements for the women in the audience during chanting of the Qur'an is to cover their *xiuti* (i.e., all parts of the body except for the face and hands), which is mandatory regardless of the presence or absence of men. When, however, the event features the chanting of *jingge* and *zanzhu zansheng*, there are less strict requirements; nevertheless, all women are most conscious of not prejudicing their chances at a successful outcome of their group's performance through informal attire. Such events usually prompt the purchase of new *gaitou* and new cloaks for the specific purpose of public performance.

Ge* Ahong *in her own words: Providing Legitimacy, Speaking with Authority
(continued)

'If women conduct themselves nobly and speak properly, their voices are not regarded as *xiuti*…', Ge *Ahon*g continues, '… there is much more chanting these days. We have chanting in situations when only men are allowed to visit the site of the grave and women are forbidden to attend. In other kinds of activities, both men and women can attend. If we are in such a situation, men do the chanting and women just listen. Women, on the other hand, recite the Qur'an if the occasion is of special importance to women, and there is no man present.

I am often asked the question of whether the voice of women is *xiuti* [*awrah*]. During my study, I often heard some elder *ahong* and old folks say that the voice of a woman is *xiuti*. This interpretation gave me much to think about and left a deep impression. Later, I taught some women to recite the Qur'an loudly and learn to speak about their faith. This gave rise to some queries [from Ge *Ahong*'s critics]. So, I studied this problem and found there was only one place which mentioned 'the voice of women' in the Qur'an, that is, in the thirty-second passage of Sūrah 33, *Al-Ahzab* ['The Confederates'] which says: "The wives of the Prophet, you are not like other women. If you respect Allah, you should not speak gently lest some people who suffer illness in their mind covet you. You should speak gravely".[10]

9 Large-scale activities most commonly take place in the spacious courtyards of large (men's) mosques. However, such special occasions are used to extend invitations to include sympathetic or influential non-Muslim officials, leaders from neighboring non-Muslim religious organizations, and benefactors.

10 The formal translation in the Qur'an (*Qur'an, The Holy*, 1934, 1207) reads: 'O Consorts of the Prophet! Ye are not like any of the (other) women: If ye do fear (Allah), Be not too complaisant Of

This sentence is directed at the wives of the Prophet, which means women should speak gravely when they face the public. This cannot be considered a proof that the voices of women are *xiuti*.

I didn't find any other evidence in the hadiths. According to my study, I think during the times of the Prophet, women attended social activities in every aspect of life. Women acted as soldiers, doctors, scholars, and so on. They were our role models, proving that Islam gave women important rights and freedom. When Islam was introduced in China, the country was deeply influenced by Confucian culture. Feudal thought restrained women's behavior. What we see today isn't the real essence of Islam. If women conduct themselves nobly and speak properly, their voices are not to be regarded as *xiuti*. The status of men and women is one of equality. The only difference between men and women is related to the division of labor. The voices of men and women are the same. But what difference we see [around us] has to do with attitudes of kindness or evil intent or still relates to the level of wealth and income. This is how I see this.'

Ba DM: Chronicler of Past Injustice and Future Promise

For Ba DM,[11] a close friend and collaborator of Ge *Ahong*'s in many educational and social initiatives, the most urgent concern relates to recalling injustices of the past: that is, how continued gender discrimination finds justification in entrenched patriarchal norms which, she holds, compromise the progressive message of hope of 'true' Islam for women of faith today. This necessary reform could only be obtained, Ba believes, if the role of talented women leaders is made central to sharing messages of a progressive Islam as a message of hope. Ultimately, Ba maintains, such confirmation of leading women's spiritual power could benefit all women, which would also be to the advantage of Islam.

It is in this context that *jingge* culture acquires, once more, a transformative influence akin to the reform period of early 20th-century Republican society. However, previously tools for illiterate women to obtain knowledge of the fundamentals of Islam, these *jingge* are in contemporary times the key to women's claims to equality. What is at stake in all these debates over women's vocal performances in public spaces, in the interpretation given by Ba DM, might be considered as going beyond contestations over the intrinsic value of *jingge* and *zansheng.* Issues are raised concerning women's ownership of, and claim to, a highly gendered history of Islam in China and the necessary reintegration of women's voices into contemporary societal relevance.

At stake here is the release of a culture locked into stultifying injunctions – which thus created silenced languages of emotion, belief, and aspiration that

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speech, lest one In whose heart is A disease should be moved With desire: but speak ye A speech (that is) just' (see also Chapter Two).

11 During the time of our research collaboration, Ba DM had no formal *ahong* appointment, so I omitted reference to her title.

should be unlocked in order to generate a resurgence of faith. Ba DM has even been interested in exploring how women think about the place of faith in their lives, individually and collectively, within the wider context of an aggressively secularist, non-Muslim host society. She ponders questions such as: How have women come to enter the more intense daily commitment to prayer demanded of practicing Muslims? How have women reconciled their identity as citizens of a beloved country, ideologically and legally committed to equal opportunities and status for women, with Islamic conceptions of gender complementarity? She begins with some personal reflections:[12]

Ba DM, in her own words

'Chinese Muslim women insist on the purity of their beliefs; however, historically, thinking back to women of previous generations, it is a fact that in many ways they were influenced by Han-Confucian culture in lifestyle, customs, and thinking. For instance, I am thinking of how women were forced to bind their feet, forbidden to go outside to attend public activities, be heard, and speak their mind. How they were forbidden to interact with anyone outside their family. All they could do was stay home, raise kids, and care for their husbands. Even when Muslim women performed their religious prayers, they were confined to their home. Due largely to social and economic developments, these things have now disappeared forever. These days, most Chinese Muslim women go out and take part in social life. Nevertheless, there are still views prevalent among Chinese Muslim women that are difficult to erase. Such as "The voice of a woman is *xiuti,* meaning *awrah* in Arabic; and this signifies that a woman must stay home".

In recent years, lots of mosques offer religious courses for both middle-aged and older female Muslims. These courses include reciting the Qur'an*,* interpreting religious knowledge, and praising the Prophet. In addition to these religious courses, there are also various cultural exchange activities. For example, the competition where we come together to chant in praise of Allah and the Prophet, it is called *zansheng bisai*, well, we have had such events several times in Kaifeng city. Thinking back, in May 2015, it was the first time that the Zhengzhou Islamic Association in Henan province held such a chanting contest at a large men's mosque. Muslims came from all over the province eager to take part in this contest. The impact was just great and its influence simply wonderful. This event not only received support from all Muslims, but really it helped also to promote Islamic culture.

However, now, this kind of contest is questioned by some because it allows women to take part, with their voices mingling with men's voices. And then some people think that because praise of Allah and the Saints is a very solemn and serious religious ritual, this must take place only in a specifically appointed time and

12 Following her initial reflections (during the summer 2015, Henan province), Ba DM also conducted some interviews herself. They form part of our wider collaboration to salvage the history of Chinese Muslim women from oblivion.

place. And then there are some who hold fast to the opinion that male and female Muslims shouldn't perform such a solemn act together, in the same place. A third view holds that Muslim women should not be chanting the praises of the Prophet loudly in public because, you know, "The voice of a woman is *xiuti*". And so, it goes on, you know.

Although doubters are fewer in number than was the case in the past, they have a negative influence, particularly when it comes to the ways that women think. I say we must go further in investigating the present situation of female Muslims. We must pay closer attention to Muslim women's *xinsheng* (心声 voice of the heart). Based on this kind of deep understanding, we must learn how they stay steadfast in their religious belief, and how they share and spread the tradition and ways of our faith.'

In this recollection by Ba DM of a collective experience which she regards as a turning point for Muslim women more widely, the role played by chants from a seemingly forgotten past of collective female culture brings to the fore how this initially maligned tradition (Jaschok and Shui 2005) has become a vital key to understanding women's 'voices of the heart'. The revived chants reconnect women with previous generations of women – as past voices of yearning and aspiration – and have been accompanied by reinvigorated claims for women's constitutional rights being relevant in the religious sphere. Conversely, claims by believing women for their right to be heard play into an emerging collective confidence that principal values and social morality, to live in harmony and respect the dignity of others, have much to contribute to mainstream society.

Transmitter of Traditions: Ge CX Ahong continued

Educating Women to Educate Society[13]

As Ge CX *Ahong* frequently recalls, many an older Muslim woman has related to her how in the not-too-distant past women *ahong* seldom went outside their mosque to attend activities, and men rarely went to women's mosques unless there was an emergency. As she put it, there was in fact plenty to occupy women *ahong*. Their daily responsibilities included not only preaching *woer'ci* (sermon), reading *Taobai* (讨白 *Tawbah*, prayer of repentance and commitment to following the way of Allah), *zanzhu zansheng* (eulogies in praise of Allah and the Prophet), and so on; they also provided instruction on pious Muslim conduct and in the daily discipline of prayer and mandatory worship.

With so much to think about, according to Ge *Ahong,* it was helpful for many ordinary Muslims to be reminded of their duties with the help of didactic *quanjiaoge* – chants which exhort pious conduct and warn of secular temptations, considered by their transmitters as most applicable to women's daily life. Even now, some older people, more than 80 years of age, can still recite these *quanjiaoge*

13 Based on our conversations during summer 2016 when Ge *Ahong* was preparing a joint presentation of the findings of our collaborative study of Hui Muslim women's history in China.

without fail, because their 'catchiness' provides a wonderful and effective mnemonic function. It is interesting that these traditional *quanjiaoge* are referred to by many as *wudiao* (无调 tuneless) although they were not necessarily without a tune. According to Ge *Ahong*,[14] because the language in the *jingge* of old was then opaque and inaccessible, and their tunes 'from a contemporary point of view… were not beautiful enough', they slowly diminished in popularity. As Ge *Ahong* put it: 'The content of *jingge* is undoubtedly important, but a beautiful tune moves people more'.

In the course of time, the educational work of female *ahong* changed in several respects, adding to and diversifying their historical core duty as teachers of ritual and religious knowledge. Traditional education, and here Ge *Ahong* agrees with Ba DM,[15] has developed and changed greatly in recent years.

Up to the 1990s, traditional women's mosque education entailed the education of *hailifan* (海里凡 *khalifah*, or *ahong* candidates)[16] by female *ahong*. Under female *ahong*, *hailifan* studied scriptural passages and extracts from hadiths curated especially for women; what is popularly referred to as the *nürenjing* (女人经 Women's Qur'an). Its content encompasses the core pillars of Islam, general religious knowledge, doctrinal observance, *jiaofa liyi* (教法礼仪 observation of the *Sharia*), and so on. Persian was the dominant language, and the study of the five books of the Women's Qur'an took three years to complete. Only then could *chuanyi* (穿衣 ordination ceremony) take place, transforming the female *hailifan* into a fully-fledged *ahong*.

Ge *Ahong* reflected on how, in the past, Islamic doctrine and knowledge were taught mainly in Persian, but nowadays some parts of the Qur'an are taught in Arabic, in a mode of recital called *taijiweidai* (台吉威代).[17] It used to be that after morning prayer, women *ahong* would take a long time to recite the more extensive version of *Taobai*, adding other chapters of the Qur'an and frequently used 18 sūrahs. This is no longer the norm. Some women *ahong* are known to recite the abridged version of the *Taobai* and shortened passages of the Qur'an. Others, according to Ge *Ahong*, do not recite the Qur'an at all but instead perform *dua* (都阿 the act of prayer).[18] To perform *jie dua* (接都阿) means that after praying or chanting the Qur'an, a worshiper raises her hands murmuring 'May Allah allow my wish', and then uses the palms of her hands to wipe her face, from the forehead downwards. This important ritual is called *jie aminai* (接阿米乃 receiving *aminai*). In the past, Muslims had to raise their hands several times to receive *aminai*, but in some places, this has been confined to the raising of hands once, and Muslim

14 Personal communication, courtesy of Shui Jingjun, February 2016.

15 From notes prepared for a joint presentation at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Center for the Study of Islamic Culture, March 2016.

16 Students of Islamic knowledge, often candidates for Imamate, are preparing themselves for religious life.

17 *Taijiweida*i: recital of the Qur'an performed at a moderate pace.

18 *Dua* 都阿, also appears as 都哇 or 杜阿意行义: *du'a*, an Arabic transliteration, refers to the act of prayer.

worshipers may even finish worship without receiving *aminai*. In the past, it was obligatory in some places to recite certain chapters of the Qur'an on *Zhuma* (Prayer Day), but these strictures no longer apply, and an *ahong* is at liberty to recite the chapters of her choice.

As Ge *Ahong* recalls, in the past, female *ahong* recited the Qur'an only in mosques. Now, she says, they can go out and are able to recite the Qur'an at the appropriate time, wherever they are, if separate rooms are set up for them.

Changing and Safeguarding Faith under the Authority of Women *Ahong*

The censoring of voice brings distinct implications as it is not only the female voice as sound that is censored to enforce *haixiu* (害羞 meekness of demeanor) and castigate *renao* (热闹 demonstrative loudness). What is at stake here is voice as an expression of agency and viewpoint, of authority and socio-political presence. In this field of political force, the role of women leaders comes to the fore; as far as the wider community of women is concerned, this is a crucial factor for understanding continuity and processes of change, as it is a respected *ahong* who is able to justify the legitimacy of something that might strike ordinary women as deviating from tradition. Trust in the guidance provided by their own appointed leader, their *ahong,* explains much of women's readiness to receive and accept reforms of teaching practices, of content, and modes of performance.

As Ge *Ahong* relates, understanding of the faith, *jiaomen* (教门),[19] can run deep wherever there is even the most rudimentary knowledge of Islam. Such knowledge expresses itself in the most mundane aspects of daily life, easily identified in the language of interaction that makes Muslims readily distinguishable from non-Muslims. The fluent movement from secular linguistic conventions to spontaneous greetings in Arabic when encountering fellow Muslims – such as extending greetings of peace, *sailiamu* (赛俩目 *Salaam*), mastering core Islamic expressions of faith, as in *qingzhenyan* (清真言 *Shahadah*), and so on – are key signifiers of identity and membership in the Muslim community, while simultaneously signifying Muslims' dual identity as citizens of the Chinese state. Muslim daily life is nurtured by participation in rituals and ceremonies which mark life at home and at prayer, such as *qi jingming* (起经名 bestowal of faith name),[20] *mingji* (明记 anniversary commemoration of a family member's death), individual vows, votive offerings, praying for the dying, and burying the dead. Then there are days of the religious calendar that must be observed, such as *Zhuma* (主麻 Prayer Day), Ramadan (尔德节 '*Id Qurban*), the day of reciting *Bailati* (白拉提 *Laylah al-bara'ah*),[21] *Gaiderye*

19 *Jiaomen:* a frequently used colloquial term (1) to refer to the Islamic religion as such; and (2) to convey a heightened, aspirational state of religious piety.

20 *Qi jingming*: according to the traditions of the Hui people, when a baby is born, the parents invite the *ahong* to give the baby an Arabic name.

21 *Bailati*: *Laylah al-bara'ah*, 15 August according to the Islamic calendar. On this day, *ahong* are invited into a home to lead the whole family in chanting *Taobai* in Arabic, expressing their remorse

(盖德尔夜 *Lailah al-Qadr*),[22] and so on. All these occasions involve recital and common chanting to sustain the spiritual community of believers. As Ge *Ahong* put it: 'By this means, even the people who only hold on to shallow belief can bathe their soul in peace'. The presence of an *ahong* is indispensable on these occasions.

Male *ahong* chant at wedding ceremonies (尼卡哈 *Nikaha*), preside over burial ceremonies (站者那则 *Zhanzhenaze*), and lead the prayer on *Zhuma*. Where ritual duties are performed in the intimate sphere of women's lives, marking milestones of the female life cycle, these have over time become the rightful responsibility of women *ahong*. Whether blessing the arrival of a newborn or overseeing the washing of the body of a deceased member of her mosque, these activities are the inward expression and outward manifestation of faith, *jiaomen,* and their guardian is the *ahong*. It is incumbent upon all *ahong*, says Ge *Ahong,* to ensure that their instructions are properly internalized and transmitted as a precious legacy for the next generations.

Seeking to sustain the place of faith in modern Chinese society, according to Ge *Ahong*, is to take advantage of the accumulated legacy of learning acquired by generations of believing women as they translated overarching principles of faith into everyday practices of piety. *Shengyin* (声音 voice), she explained, reaches into the silence of interiorized religiosity and reveals – and releases – the riches of women's spiritual and emotional life, enabling women to play an important role in reconnecting with their cultural and educational Islamic heritage. Women benefit from such a foundation for their self-confidence, laying claim to rights and entitlements that reflect the wider social and political reforms of modern Chinese society. By reaching back into the recent past of women's restricted mental and physical mobility, when their predecessors were confined to rigidly prescribed educational and ceremonial duties within the mosque compound, Ge *Ahong* is gaining a voice as a vital link between past and present.

Memories of the past are strong, of times when women *ahong* rarely or never ventured forth from the women's mosque. Steeped in this history, women religious leaders at the forefront of educational and institutional change are aware they need to put to strategic use their talents and available resources. Historically, according to Ge *Ahong*, a woman *ahong* would be heard only within the mosque. Older women remember how rarely their *ahong* left the mosque compound and how rarely men were seen entering women's mosques. Only when political and socio-economic developments helped to unfetter women from bound feet, from physical and social confinement in the service of domestic and reproductive duties, and – equally important – from gendered exclusion from religious, institutional, and cultural life, have Chinese Muslim women been able to emerge into public life.

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for errors committed over the past year.

22 *Laylat-al-Qadr*, the Night of Power, is when the first verses of the Qur'an were revealed to the Prophet.

Awrah and *Xiuti*: The Global and the Local in the Formation of Female Muslimness

I return to the meeting I had with male *ahong* and Islamic scholars in Shanghai in 2016 (see the Introduction). During our conversation, I played an audio file of *zansheng* performance by a women's group in Henan to demonstrate the growing participation of women in friendly, competitive *zansheng* events. This brought on their irate condemnation of such practices as *luan* (乱), *fitnah*, expressive of the ever-present threat of social disorder.[23] As Ehrick (2011, 72) points out in relation to western contexts of patriarchal suppression of voice: 'Female silence has traditionally been heard as indicative of modesty and chastity, while female public speech suggested promiscuity, hysteria, and subversion'. More than that, when policing of sexuality is applied to the principle of *awrah* and the female voice threatens disorderly impact on the masculine sphere of authority, women's fundamental rights to participate in authoritative decision-making are at stake. Quoting from Vivienne Wee's (2012, 25) study of Muslim contexts in Indonesia: '…the pressure on girls and women to cover ever more bodily parts and to mute their voices is likely due to Islamist perceptions of social disorder as continuing unabated despite large numbers now covering their heads, which is therefore seemingly insufficient'.

Indeed, some of the critics against the continuation of female-led Islamic institutions, as mentioned above, speak of the threat of feminization *nüxinghua* (女性化) of Islam. With that come allegations that in certain Hui communities in central China, *haram* practices have taken hold. Among these, the resurgence of *jingge* and *zansheng* traditions are considered most symptomatic of undesirable developments. Women must speak, sound is thus inevitable, but to give them a voice as an instrument for self-expression, let alone a collective voice, is to threaten the destabilization of an Islamic ordering of gender and social relations. These voices of condemnation are not, however, left unchallenged by leading women *ahong* and their allies (including some male *ahong*).

In 2016, when modestly attired Muslim female choirs from various women's mosques in central China's Henan province performed selected *jingge* (Islamic chants) in front of a mixed-gender Muslim audience, it was an unprecedented event for this observer. However, the influential Ge *Ahong*, an avid participant in this significant event hosted by a large men's mosque, shared with us a brief history of friendly competitions bringing together choirs from mosques around the county of Henan. Her account also gives insight into the extent of her influence:[24]

'In May of 2015, the Zhengzhou Islamic Association held the first *zanzhu zansheng* (赞主赞圣 chants in Praise of Allah and Prophet)[25] event. It was hosted by a

23 Women as a source of, and threat to, social disorder has its own history within the Confucian moral universe, anchored in literary and popular culture (see Rosenlee 2006).

24 Taken from Ge *Ahong*'s notes for a presentation prepared in 2017, shared with and translated by me.

25 The terms *zanzhu zansheng* and *jingge* are often used interchangeably. The term *jingge* is commonly used to refer to all genres that constitute the considerable corpus of Islamic chants associated with China's mosque culture.

local men's mosque. This event gave rise to much praise but also many objections. Criticisms focused on the improper presence of women in public. Secondly, for women and men to attend activities together was regarded as violating deeply held Islamic taboos. In my opinion, it was perfectly fine for a woman to attend such religious activities. Although the women put on performances in public and showed their faces to the public, they all dressed neatly and behaved properly. The women attended some activities with men, but the whole process was serious and solemn. Our study class [a class from Ge *Ahong*'s mosque] took the lead to apply for three performances in the contest. To make the events go smoothly, the secretary of the local Islamic Association encouraged other people to take us as an example. And because we created such a great example, other [women's] mosque leaderships applied for permission to join in the occasion. They had no hesitation. And the whole thing went smoothly, and you could say the event played a very good role in promoting Islam.'

Awrah: ***Its Impact on Women in Muslim Contexts Elsewhere***

The only references in classical Islamic legal texts (*fiqh*) that pertain to covering what are considered the private parts of female bodies are, in the first instance, related to worship. Secondly, they are intended to prevent exposing unmarried females to the gaze of men (Mir-Hosseini 2012). The Islamic injunction is based on this passage from the Qur'an which states: 'On the occasion of worship, you must be clothed' (*Sūrah* 7:31). Accordingly, during worship, it is obligatory to conceal those parts of the body that must not be exposed to the gaze of others, i.e., non-kin males. Both women and men must cover their *awrah* as an integral part of the ethical code of Islam. The *awrah* of men consists of the area between the navel and the knees, whilst women's *awrah* covers their entire bodies, except for the hands and face. But the definition of *awrah* is highly gendered as it is highly fluid and context-specific.

Islamic ruling further stipulates that during worship no more than one-quarter of *awrah* can be exposed. These rulings pertain to males from the age of 12 and to girls from the age of nine. The Book of Prayers (*Kitab al-Salah*) outlines rules of concealment during worship as a part of a Muslim's duties to God (*'ibadat*), while women's exposure to the gaze of men comes under injunctions from the Book of Marriage, as part of social or contractual acts, *mu'amilat* (Mir-Hosseini *ibid*., 129–130). The Book of Prayers is the only source, according to Mir-Hosseini, which requires the concealment of specific parts of the body, *sitr al-'awrah* (covering over private parts), during prayer and in (male) society. It intersects with a second conception in the Book of Marriage of women's sexuality as the source of *fitnah*, danger to social order, requiring imposition of control and segregation *(ibid.,* 130).

The concept of *awrah* is ubiquitous but also contested and controversial. Critiquing broader Islamic tradition's legal views on gender relations as 'not the only or the most benevolent ways that Muslim jurists could have interpreted sacred texts', Sa'diyya Shaikh (2015, 110) challenges dominant 'narrow gendered legal definitions'. She contends they reveal ambiguities if given close reading. She

continues: 'Today, it is imperative that Muslims seeking to live faithfully recognize that there is nothing fundamentally universal, foundational or necessary about such patriarchal conceptual frameworks' *(ibid.,* 110), inviting women to look more closely at local translations and adaptations which expand or shrink the application of *awrah* to women's bodies and social mobility. In the words of Vivienne Wee, writing on the politicization of the female Muslim body in Indonesia: 'Moral panic arising from fear of *fitnah* [social disorder] underpins the enclosure of, first, a woman's hair, then ears, neck, arms, legs, then the very shape of her body, extending even to her voice' (Wee 2012, 33).

Wee shows the temporally contingent nature by which the moral diktat of *awrah* expanded during the 1990s and accelerated further during the 2000s, inspired by the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and by the availability of translations of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood publications that were of a highly prescriptive nature. As bodies became enshrouded in concealing, voluminous garments, women and girls came to experience growing censorship on any expression of individuality, such as may be conveyed through choice of color, display of body shape, body language, and voice (Wee *ibid*.). Thus, with each aspect of female self-expression performance censored, circumscribed, or denied, a regime of gender segregation becomes entrenched and naturalized, whereby a patriarchal soundscape of dominant male voices remains the sole sonic representation of the Islamic world.

Leading the Change in Education, Expanding the Scope of Influence

The title of female *ahong* refers to those who are ordained and appointed to official posts. The title is also given to women who no longer occupy the position of female *ahong*, but whose relevant qualifications and completion of the ordination ceremony (穿衣挂幛 *chuanyi guazhang*) permit them to engage in various mosque-related public welfare activities. Women teachers providing instruction in the language of the Qur'an, can also be addressed as *ahong*.[26]

Introduced earlier in the chapter, Ba DM has been an active, influential participant in our many years of collaborative research. She is respected in the community for her deeply felt piety and her evident dedication to the safeguarding and transmission of women's mosque cultural traditions, old and new. Ba DM's family is well-known locally for having produced 13 generations of *ahong* to date (in 2023).[27] Educated in the tradition of women's mosque learning, her account of the Ba family genealogy is thus also an account of wider changes in religious education and the emerging role of women as teachers of Islamic core tenets and their application to women's moral conduct (*funü daode*).

26 On Hui Muslim terminology and the use of the term *ahong*, see Sun and Knüppel (2020).

27 From notes prepared for a conference held in Hong Kong in March 2016 (Center for Islamic Studies, Chinese University of Hong Kong), followed by subsequent conversations with Ba DM in Henan (during the summer 2016).

Ba DM's personal knowledge goes as far back as her grandfather's generation and includes her father, uncle, and aunt, all of whom served as *ahong*. Her aunt was the first woman *ahong* in the family, and following ideological relaxation and more liberal government policies toward approved religious traditions during the 1980s, Ba's aunt became the first resident *ahong* to serve the sizable congregation associated with the village women's mosque in Henan. She continued to serve in her post until her death when she was nearly 100 years old.

Recounting the story of several generations of women in her family – women widely renowned for their lifelong piety and depth of religious education – Ba DM describes with much pride and emotion their progression from recipients of mosque education to role models widely respected for conduct steeped in *zongjiao gongxiu* (宗教功修 religious merit): 'Up to the present, thirteen generations of *ahong*, well-known since grandfather onward, including father, uncle, and aunt. Aunt is the first female *ahong* in the family. Following the reform in the 1980s and the opening of the first women's mosque in our home village in Henan, she became its resident *ahong*, remaining so well into her nineties. My husband's family too is religious, with eight generations of *ahong*'.

Prior to the 1990s, women's education comprised dissemination of general religious knowledge, with many *nűhailifan* (女海里凡 female students) intending to become *ahong* themselves. Under the guidance of their instructor, usually a woman *ahong*, they would spend intense years at the mosque, memorizing the five books of the Women's Qur'an (*nűrenjing*).

Figure 4.1 The Ba Family with a tradition of female and male *ahong*, HRPC, n.d. (contributed by Ba DM in 2016)

Figure 4.2 *Hailifan*, students of Islamic knowledge, HRPC, 1980s (contributed by Ba DM in 2016)

Figure 4.3 Newly ordained *ahong*, HRPC, 1980s (contributed by Ba DM in 2016)

Compared to earlier generations of female *ahong*, the overall standard of education and the role of female *ahong* today show notable change.[28] No longer almost entirely confined within the walls of a women's mosque, more professional training has become available, at home and abroad (*hailifan* have been known to travel to Iran, Malaysia, and Pakistan, for example, to gain further education). Much notable improvement in the quality of cultural and religious education relates to increased educational resources in recent years, surpassing those previously available. The knowledge of religious instruction among the most outstanding *ahong* does not fall short of their male counterparts'. More general access to the internet – perhaps most importantly the use of the popular WeChat platform – has allowed access to new information without the need for male intermediaries. Outstanding members of the younger generation of *ahong* are very visible in organized group activities, attending, as already indicated, and indeed often organizing competitive

28 This section incorporates Shui Jingun's notes made in preparation for our joint presentation at the 'Ethnographies of Islam in China' conference, 27-29 March 2017, London.

sermon presentations (卧尔兹讲演比赛 *woer'ci jiangyan bisai*,) and *zanzhu zansheng* competitions (赞主赞圣比赛 *zanzhu zansheng bisai*), and the like.

In addition to increasing external engagements, a general drive to provide Muslims with opportunities for learning, at home and abroad, has led to additional educational initiatives. Women *ahong* are actively involved in conducting a variety of classes, inside and outside the women's mosque, which cater to varying levels of Arabic linguistic proficiency. These classes attract beginners as well as advanced learners; they tend to be all-female classes but not exclusively so. Teaching methods have also undergone change, being more readily adapted to meet women students' needs. For example, chanting and recitation are ready-made tools to aid elderly students with their learning of Qur'anic passages, who derive much spiritual contentment and pleasure from the collective performance of *zansheng* chants and popular Islamic tunes.

Ba DM considers the ongoing improvement in the education of women, particularly women *ahong* of the younger generation, an inspiration for reformist impulses that are slowly whittling away the inertia of the old – building on societal advances and women's reinvigorated capacities and genuine eagerness to facilitate advances in religious female education. Muslim women's voices are heard as they propagate Islamic culture as an integral part of their growing activities, as they network, organize activities to support older women, educate the young, and contribute to education in citizenship. Where necessary, and if local objections inhibit more innovative instruction, women have been known to revive the tradition of providing education at home. However, the dominant trend is a preference to move from home (内 *nei*) to the public sphere (外 *wai*). Ba DM illustrates this in her depiction of the spectrum of activities spanning education, mobilization, inspiration, and missionizing – all of which greatly expand the formerly confined and segregated spheres of duties. Ba says that the voices of women are asserting themselves in ways that matter, that strengthen their confidence and increase the influence of their beloved faith. And this phenomenon is related most particularly to an increased visibility of women in mixed-gender gatherings, bringing together mosque leadership and select members of mosque congregations from around the region for ritual and popular festive occasions.

Ba's account of a woman *ahong*'s duties supplements the account given by Ge *Ahong*. Duties consist of leading prayer, providing solutions to perplexing religious or secular issues, and washing the bodies of deceased women. In relation to accomplishing women's *funü gongxiu* (妇女功修 women's fundamental merits) – a gendered version of the Five Merits of Islam, of which fulfillment is the most crucial duty of all Muslims – according to Ba, women do not raise their voices when reciting prayer; rather, it is only the *ahong* who raises her voice as she leads prayer, in order to convey its meaning for all to follow and understand. An *ahong*'s formal voice can also be heard outside worship, as for example after prayer during Ramadan, when reciting over the bodies of deceased Muslim women, or when visiting families belonging to her mosque to receive alms (捏提 *nieti*). This is different from earlier times when a woman *ahong* was permitted to recite at the body of the deceased only inside the mosque. When both female and male *ahong* attend

a religious ceremony, it is the male *ahong* who recites or delivers the sermon. This means that in current practice even where a woman *ahong* has assumed the role of reciter, she would recite separately from her male counterpart.

Returning to earlier reflections on the relational construction of women's silence (see Chapter Three), Christine Keating's (2013) notion of 'deliberative silence' – understood here as silence impelled by a negotiated consensus for an aspired outcome – offers a useful key to understanding a woman *ahong*'s purpose when it comes to bringing gendered nuances to performances of ritual life. This may be seen in the frequently reiterated consensus among Hui Muslim men and women that a mutually acceptable gender relationship will require continuous balancing between needful innovation and principled adherence to fundamental Islamic precepts. This negotiated consensus, arguably, constitutes a marker of shared identity and self-conscious pride for *zhongyuan* Hui Muslims, male and female, setting them apart from Muslim communities elsewhere in China.

Xiuti *Re-/Interpreting* Awrah *for Local Women*

Based on reading available Islamic scholarship and in-depth conversations among *ahong* on issues of female voice, supplemented by evidence from her own lengthy study of the scriptures, Ba holds that injunctions on concealing private parts of the body from the gaze of others apply to *both* men and women. Therefore, prohibitions on the unseemly exposure of the body, according to Ba, 'do not have any bearing on voice' as otherwise they would also apply to men – and to the male voice.

The voice of women is not *xiuti*. Ba DM's confident assertion, frequently heard, emerged from conversations she initiated to help us understand the extent of support for women's public performance of *jingge*.[29] She helped organize extensive conversations with several open-minded *ahong* whose perspectives were enunciated clearly and unambiguously. A certain consensus emerged: namely, that different viewpoints must be considered and respected, when looking at issues of interpretation. Religious texts must be understood for deeper implications, not confined to superficial reading and uncritical acceptance of others' viewpoints. Ba DM gives the example of 'do not speak in a seductive language', from which a very specific injunction and a general prohibition on the public exposure of the female voice have been deduced. This is not called for in an age when women are increasingly educated and self-assertive, and when women, she says, know very well the difference between right and wrong, between truth and fabrication.

29 Again, to remind the reader, Ba DM, like many other leading figures in the period of resurgent Islamic faith, had started out as an interviewee to become, in time an important research partner, making our research a joint project of recovery of Muslim women's history. Conversations relevant to this volume took place in the summer months of 2014, 2015, and 2016 in different locations in Henan province.

Drawing together the many viewpoints of the *ahong* interviewed, the current state of knowledge and understanding gives women the right to provide z*hengming* (证明 convincing proof) for their argument without fear. That Muslim women's case for a public voice is derived from their unique historical, institutional, and cultural track record of lived spirituality, so Ba DM contends, must ultimately gain the respect of all. Ba furthermore asserts her case for gender justice that is derived from Qur'anic pronouncements on women enjoying the same freedom and right to speak as applies to men.

The frequently cited high status in society enjoyed by the Prophet's wives is seen as lending credence to the legitimacy of women's claims to audibility beyond mosque gates. Illustrating how women *ahong* are revealing their capacities and talents, their impressive record of education and ongoing learning, and their participation in public discourse, Ba DM describes how women *ahong* came to intervene in public debates by providing more nuanced interpretations of hadiths which are all-too-often are cited to deny women the right to question extant restrictions. One popular hadith, cited as evidence for rightful insistence on women's adherence to the propriety of silence, confines women to clapping of hands during prayer only. With recital having been the sole prerogative of men, this hadith has come in recent years under critical scrutiny by women and male *ahong*. Its critical exegesis limits negative references to concern over any disturbance caused by women talking only during times of prayer. As women sit behind men during prayer, it is held that such talking is therefore more likely to disturb the worship of others, both male and female. But what is truly at stake is proper conduct during prayer, so Ba DM contends, rather than applying the hadith 'randomly' to other contexts, even where women give voice to expressions of faith or make themselves heard as engaged participants, as is proper, in the affairs of their communities.

Awrah ***to*** **Xiuti*****: Vernacularization and Entangled Meanings***

Ba DM, in her role as a respected senior member of the local Muslim community, often proudly remarked on the changes brought about by education and the re-energized culture of influential women's mosques under inspiring women *ahong* leadership. Nevertheless, she would equally frequently remind herself and her listeners of the impact of enduring core notions, especially the concept of *awrah* (that which must be concealed from the public gaze). When it comes to prohibitions of female voice and public voicing, according to Ba, it is necessary to bring the highest, evidence-based standards to the task of local interpretation and application of *xiuti,* a local rendering of *awrah*. It is thus the term *xiuti* which is most often used and which shapes the discourse among women, more rarely the Arabic/Islamic term *awrah*.

In the case of Ba's often-cited family history (see Figure 4.1) of generations of women who excelled as religious leaders, these were praised as much for their piety and erudition as for their adherence to duties assigned to women *ahong* – as properly reflecting the gendered scope of women's spirituality. This meant that the duties of previous generations of women *ahong* in her family, according to

Ba, were confined to leading prayer, counseling women on rudimentary Islamic ritual knowledge and its application to daily life, and the occasional washing of the bodies of deceased women where permissible. Prayers were recited in silence, and only when the *ahong* led the prayer did she raise her voice in recitation. A female *ahong*'s rightful domain – her physical presence, leading voice, and guiding authority – belonged to the women's mosque, and was defined by an overarching gendered injunction, *xiuti*, as a spatial and existential enclosure of female belief. This injunction on restricted mobility was unquestioned then.

Here, an additional observation might be helpful. *Awrah,* in its colloquial translation, has become *xiuti,* a ubiquitous term with its own cultural legacies, continuing to be closely entangled with a 'feudal' cultural vocabulary defining the violation of paradigmatic traditional femininity as a source of 'shyness', or more strongly, of 'shame' and 'disgrace' that is associated with a past era of 'backwardness' and inequality. It is a time to which women frequently refer as 'the dark era' (see reaction to *kuhua* chants in Chapter Two), a time of oppression from which women are held to have been 'liberated' by the Communist Party state. However, the use of the term *xiuti* continues in Islamic religious discourse, receiving an Islamic imprint with its exhortation for women to conceal their source of shame, including their voice, from the gaze of (male) strangers. Discourses around Islamic meanings of *xiuti* thus carry complicating mnemonic legacies from a past when women were judged by the criteria of strict neo-Confucian gender morality. How this translation complicates but also sharpens women's awareness of patriarchal practices among Muslims becomes perhaps most apparent in the intergenerational conversations among women, which illustrate well the inner conflicts of women who experienced Communist progressive women's rights legislation and policies that are overall welcomed, and that also throw into doubt unconditional adherence to a patriarchal gender morality within the Islamic meaning system. We shall return to women's discussions pertaining to this conundrum in later chapters.

In order for women to continue on the path of progress and safeguard progress brought about by advances in female-centered religious education in the course of general educational reforms instigated during the Republican period, and again in

Figure 4.4 Transcribing and copying Arabic language *jingge* by hand, HRPC (anonymous photographer)

the years following a relaxation of government policies under Deng Xiaoping, as Ba DM repeatedly stated, it is imperative that the evidence cited by both advocates and critics of women's claims to equal religious rights be subject to the utmost scrutiny.

Engaging in *Fiqh*, Re-Engaging With Patriarchal Discourse

A *sūrah* (*Sūrah* 33.32 Al-Ahzāb) cited most often by Ba DM, and by others, and regarded as being at the core of debates over Qur'anic injunctions, is as follows:

> O Consorts of the Prophet! Ye are not like any of the (other) women: If ye do fear (Allah), be not too complaisant of speech, lest one in whose heart is a disease should be moved with desire: but speak ye a speech (that is) just.[30]

Quoting a popular hadith by Abu Hurayrah (601–678) from a collection of often-cited hadiths, *Musinaide* (穆斯奈德), Ba DM elaborates that the hadith permits women under certain circumstances to clap hands (拍掌 *pai zhang*). That is, the Qur'an (*Sūrah* 33.32) addresses the wives of the Prophet whose status commands that they conduct themselves with solemnity. The hadith holds that when it comes to ordinary women, they are given permission to clap their hands, to be physically expressive in a limited way. It is for the men to recite the sacred words. But why clapping of hands? Indeed, Ba continues, the issue of *xiuti* as far as the scriptures are concerned relates only to physical expressions or bodily manifestations; there is no mention of voice. This, she maintains, is confirmed by the hadith from Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī's collection of hadiths on all matters relating to the Prophet, traditions, and work (*Buhali shengxun shilu quanji* 2008), a book found in most Muslim households and commonly held to contain the most reliable texts.

Only after several women *ahong* carefully and jointly deliberated upon the evidence provided was a convincing case made for the argument that women's voices are not *xiuti*. The relevant sūrah mentioned above addresses itself clearly to the Prophet's wives, whose exemplary conduct was to confirm their suitability as the Prophet's consorts. But when considering which rules apply to certain rituals, Ba holds that there is no prohibition on women speaking. She furthermore references a classic Sunni *tafsir*, a widely used commentary on the Qur'an by Ibn Kathir[31] (2009, 1041). As Ibn Kathir states in his commentary, this particular exhortation is directed at the Prophet's wives to speak in a solemn voice, mindful of their station, so as not to arouse evil intentions in men's hearts to interact with them as a husband would, freely and in a relaxed manner. So, in the first instance, the Prophet's wives

30 *The Holy Qur'an*: all translations in this book are based on translations/commentaries by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (*Qur'an* 1934).

31 Ibn Kathir (ca. 1300–1373) is considered both controversial and popular due to his straightforward approach to exegesis, for which he adopted an accessible and convincing style. However, he is also thought of as problematic and selective in his use of sources and viewed as somewhat traditionalist, even dogmatic. For an appraisal of Ibn Kathir, see Johanna Pink (2010, 40).

are exhorted to consider their status and relationship with the Prophet, demanding from them an exacting standard of conduct. Ordinary women are to take their cue from such role models, exercising solemnity and avoiding tender, that is, seductive, language. This serves as a reference, a reminder of what is at stake, so Ba argues, rather than a set of rules to be applied literally.

Since the late 1990s, when we began our research into the history of women's mosques, we came to observe changes revealing shifts in perceptions and in ritual performance, indicating inroads made by Hui Muslim women into previous androcentric spheres of religious authority. Much of this shift may be due to an unprecedented insistence by women, as illustrated by Ba DM and her colleagues, that it is also up to them to carefully scrutinize the relevant arguments and cited evidence which in the past only male authority could deliver. Nevertheless, debates continue today over where and when women *ahong* may conduct rituals and recite prayers. Where male and female *ahong* are both present at a religious ceremony, the male *ahong* presides and leads the prayer; and although women *ahong* can lead prayer, this continues to be done only in a gender-segregated congregation.

It is this account of the changes occurring over generations of women *ahong* in her family that made Ba DM reflect on tensions that emerged in the course of this last decade over female voice, especially female voice in public. How did contrasting viewpoints on the issue of *xiuti* emerge from interpretations based on the same scriptural evidence? And how much passion was ignited among debaters, in particular among female religious practitioners?

Interpreting and Vernacularizing Scriptures

Zansheng contests and women's participation in these popular contests have engendered the most numerous debates: Should the female voice be considered *xiuti* (*awrah*, shameful), and should Muslim women therefore perform *zansheng* in public?[32] According to Guo JN, a middle-ranking cadre within the regional Islamic Association, and among the vocal supporters of the early *zansheng* contests in Kaifeng city, there were a great many objections but no one could come up with sufficiently convincing evidence to halt the contests.

Vigorous advocacy by women on the legitimacy of *zansheng* and *jingge* performances testifies to their hold on women's religious imagination – as voices of historical and spiritual sources of faith. Mai FL *Ahong* was quite clear on the distinction to be made between the female voice of seduction (诱惑人的声音 *youhuorende shengyin*), which makes men indulge in desire and should be forbidden. But such prohibition does not apply to women speaking in a regular voice,

32 Long and recurrent debates among participants in the making of our documentary film '*Jingge* and *Zansheng*. Religious Expression and Cultural Legacies of Muslim Women in Central China' documentary film (2017), with many arguments featured in the documentary, were a perfect illustration of the diversity of viewpoints and of the influence of *ahong* in general when it came to shifting long-held positions on *xiuti.* The documentary formed part of the storytelling mission of our common research project.

she maintains. The young Feng YL *Ahong*, resident *ahong* of an influential Henan women's mosque, agreed that when women *ahong* gather, they frequently touch upon this issue: 'The question as to whether the female voice is *xiuti*, we have all heard the older generation hold forth. We have not yet come by the evidence to support such an argument. And then some *ahong* said that the Prophet's wife, Ayesha, helped spread the knowledge of a great many hadiths. If women's voices are *xiuti*, would the Prophet have permitted his wife to do so? On our part, we argue that the female voice should on no account be considered *xiuti*'. Feng YL *Ahong* was joined in this position by a member of her mosque, Hu YF, who argued that no prohibitions stand in the way of women proclaiming the faith of Islam. 'In these modern times, we should use whatever means is at our disposal to reach our goal', Hu says, 'We are doing this after all out of the goodness of our hearts. We may all be women, but times have changed. Women now take on the greater burden of responsibility for transmitting faith'.

Hong *Xianglao*, who in her role as *xianglao* (乡老 appointed member of the mosque management committee) was entrusted with the management of her mosque's affairs, was forthright in her indignation over continued gender discrimination. According to her, the Qur'an or the various hadiths are not to be consulted for all and every eventuality. On the other hand, there is nothing in the Qur'an or the hadiths to say that women cannot recite the Qur'an in public, nor is there a single passage prohibiting women from spreading the faith of Islam in the most effective way possible.

Zhang FY (male) *Ahong,* from a town mosque in a southern county of Henan, has proven a firm ally of pious women wishing to play a more decisive role in spreading the message of Islam. According to him, he found no evidence in the Qur'an that would stop women from being more assertive and outgoing, especially when it comes to the development of Islam, which for him is inseparable from women's vital contributions made over time. Thus, objections should not be made by mechanical reference to the past. According to Zhang *Ahong*, as society is developing, so is Islam. Muslim women have always played and are playing an indispensable role in the promotion of Islam. New interpretations of representations of Muslim women in the Qur'an and the hadiths, and the role models provided by outstanding Muslim women, have inspired women's enthusiasm and motivation. The impact of all this, so another male *ahong*, Fu *Ahong*, maintains, is evident in the ever more common occurrence of public and mixed-gender *zansheng* gatherings and recital of *jingge* by women.

Many events have already become part of women's cherished collective memory, such as the successful performance of *zansheng* during Kaifeng city's traditional Hui Muslim martial arts celebration in 2011. On another memorable occasion, in August 2016, a graduation ceremony was organized by a rural mosque, which included performances by choirs from various women's mosques in the county. Their rendering of *zansheng* in front of a large, deeply moved audience of women and men, adults and children, as well as invited local government officials and religious leaders (see Figure 10.2). In that same year, a charity event was organized by various mosques to which some of the most expressive women's mosque choirs

were invited to perform *zansheng*. In certain towns in Henan province, I was told, it had become fashionable to invite Muslim women to jointly perform *zansheng*, whether to celebrate *Mawlid*, the Prophet's Day of Birth, or a family occasion such as a wedding. Hai WZ *Ahong* says that in her town each mosque makes the performance of *zansheng* an integral aspect of *Mawlid* celebrations. Many invited *ahong* will, in the first instance, invite successful women choirs to perform *zansheng*, and only afterwards will they then preach the sermon. Weddings are joyous occasions and the women's performances have been given a warm welcome and are much appreciated. Feng YL *Ahong,* who refuses to engage in binary debates over the respective merits of old and new traditions, instead argues: 'Really, we mustn't care too much about whether something is new or old. If our emotions are aroused, that's good. On no account can we lose tradition. We can accept some new things, but we must never abandon old things [if they arouse emotion], we must ensure that they are passed on'.

Zhang FY (male) *Ahong* adds the observation that the recital of *zansheng* fulfills a dual function: the promotion of Muslim cultural heritage, with a particular emphasis on central China's Muslim culture, and the development of the Islamic faith. Moreover, female *ahong* and Muslim women are not merely the heirs of a female mosque culture; they are also considered the initiators of a new trend and creators of new chants, respectful of the traditions of women's mosque cultures and yet not confined by them. Through continuous learning, reflection, and action, they are seen as promoting the development of China's women's mosque traditions.

Changes are taking place, albeit slowly. Interlocutors, who have been most intensely involved in the vernacularization of their faith, believe these trends reflect both general social developments and changes in Muslim society, providing evidence of increasingly open-minded attitudes among Muslim women and men, particularly in urban areas. It was perhaps the mode of our approach to research investigation, crucially and significantly collaborative, which helped to capture this development at a time of multiple possibilities, when our preference as researchers was for learning through dialogue, and for mutual learning and change.

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5 State Power, Women's Liberation, and Traditions of Faith

Researching Spaces Owned, Spaces of Possibility

In examining the 'Chinese religious field', Nikolas Broy (2017) expands Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the 'field' to encompass a more dynamic, heterogeneous, and complex feature of China's religious pluralism. The role of the state as a 'regulative and domesticating power' (Broy *ibid*., 299) – which binds together the multitude of actors and institutional forms that create China's multifaceted religious landscape – adds to a volatile, unstable mix of two spheres of power interacting with varying efficacy. The two spheres of power are firstly the religious field of China, delineated by society or the state of China (we refer here to both the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China); and secondly, the Chinese religious field 'which embraces the global religious interactions of Chinese religious communities and actors and thus goes beyond the concrete place of 'China' (as a bounded state) and which intervenes with many other religious fields' (*ibid*., 317). The multitude of territorially bounded religious fields thus also forms part of a global religious field, which through the interactions of diverse religious communities and actors, religious systems, and regulations accounts for the volatility of its constitution.

This interaction reflects the contingencies of time and place by which communication, or exchange, alternates – and sometimes invites – conflicts and violence. Following Bourdieu, Broy (2017) traces certain features of the nature of markets, of demand and supply (of religious practitioners and clients). But there are also other 'Zwischenformen' (Broy *ibid*., 318) that demonstrate the fluidity and dynamism of religious fields whereby the binary between static religious structures and their formal post-holders and the masses of devoted believers no longer holds. In addition, as in a market society, the state plays a regulatory and controlling role through legal, political, and financial regulations and policy measures. The religious field is thus understood as 'totality of all religious interactions in a society' (*ibid*., 289) which allows for the integration of variously constituted religious structures, organizations, and communities, specific and diffuse, that make up China's religious culture.

It is important to note, however, that the plurality characterizing China's religious landscape contains significant differences in the ways that religions are treated by the state. Historically, ethnically, and geopolitically, main religious traditions are inscribed with enduring narratives that resonate in the present. Whilst it is argued that in certain ways all religions are antithetical to the present Communist

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state – that at certain points of crises all religions are lumped together as 'Other' and are potentially destabilizing to the state project of national cohesion and political consolidation – a more nuanced understanding will consider how some religions are in liminal states of greater precarity than others (Laliberté 2011; Leung 1996; MacInnes 1989).

This is the case when it comes to Islam. Its long history of unevenly paced incorporation into the cultural and religious meaning-systems of China has given rise to complex and diverse Islamic traditions and sects and, concomitantly, to diverse ethno-religious formations of Muslim populations. Muslim settlements can be found across the vast nation, but the geopolitically most important, and sensitive, are those located in the variously volatile borderlands of China (Gladney 1996; Harrell 1995). Scholarship on Islam in China has thus focused mainly on the complex, multiple issues impacting the relationship between the political center and Muslim populations. They examine how Muslims might be able to gain an economic foothold temporarily or settle for good, be treated as assets to state interests or fall foul of changing state priorities, be successful in developing spatially defined religio-cultural collective identities, or find themselves on the defensive and in conflict with successive central Imperial and subsequent Republican and Communist state projects.

However, China's highly diverse Muslim population, organized and circumscribed by regulatory policy regimes varying in severity over time and place, might be considered as existentially diasporic, with the very essence of Islamic identity bound up with origins outside China's territorial boundaries (Rosey Wang Ma 2005; Weng 2014). Identity as a Muslim is forged in the foundational Five Pillars of Faith, one of which, the *hajj*, leads Sunni Muslims (most of China's Muslims belong to the Sunni tradition) to depart from their country of birth to the homeland of their faith, as a deeply felt ritualized authentication of Muslimness (Jaschok and Shui 2015). Men are increasingly joined by women as more Chinese Muslim families have been in the financial position to support elderly, including female, relatives to take part in pilgrimages to Mecca, to accomplish one of the fundamental commands of Islam. For returned women *haji,* as we learned in many conversations, the experience of the pilgrimage became profoundly life-changing, resulting in closer identification with and deepened emotional investment in their mosque, with each visit to the mosque reawakening cherished memories and a turmoil of emotions of the *hajj* (Jaschok and Shui 2015), in turn sharpening the existential, socio-political, and highly gendered ramifications for believing women based on the Chinese party-state's ideological and political investment in a closely policed 'national imaginary' of cultural identity and political authority.

Gender-related constraints have played, historically and in modern times, into women's pilgrimages of shorter time spans and shorter distances, closer to home. Scholarship tells us that religious spaces, as in this case Islam, have historically provided for a refuge from the ordained, domestic female life-cycle, provided for spaces which, through their traditions and practices, offered an alternative for women, a counter-space of meaning, identity, and purpose. Although concerned with women's close affinity with the Buddhist religion, Zhou Yiqun's (2003)

study of female religiosity, spatial mobility, and male Confucian paranoia in Late Imperial China over myriad temptations for gullible women to turn away from the 'sacred' hearth of ancestral rites to fall for the temptations of the (Buddhist) 'temple', thus threatening women's role in the institution of family, raises intriguing references. Arguably, across a diversity of religious traditions in China, women have throughout history explored possibilities for themselves away from family restrictions and hierarchy. Under able and capable women *ahong*, Islamic spaces, even if their communities were more loosely organized than religious female communities from different faiths, held out no less the promise of transformation, spiritual as well as social – as, for example facilitating in disadvantaged areas, sites for women-centered activities for the purposes of education, social gathering, and affirmation of mutual support.

To discover the stories, traditions, and rich cultural legacies that evolved out of these seemingly marginal and silenced women's spaces involves challenging and complex journeys for researchers too, both physical as well as cultural and intellectual. These journeys of discovery, and no less, of self-discovery, are as relevant to the work of interpretation as they are to the task of discovery.

What does it involve for the researcher to be research-curious about marginal spaces when undertaking collaborative ethnography in an antagonistic research environment? When insufficient care could compromise colleagues as much as individuals and communities to be visited, indeed might need to lead to a sudden termination of research as such. Before moving to subsequent chapters of conversations and chants, I want to illustrate something of the process entailed in getting 'there' – a process which is always also an integral part of discovery. How did we, the two main researchers, negotiate our own respective insider/outsider marginality of status when undertaking a precarious journey into uncertainty and unpredictability as we traversed a minefield of political domains, sought out local networks of hoped-for support and likely obstruction, all for the purpose of allowing us, the researchers, to gain official permission for safe access to sites of religious communities and (hopefully) mutually fruitful conversations with their members.

Researching, Researchers, Research Communities

Hu Meijuan's (2014) critique of the current state of Chinese language scholarship within gender and Islamic studies, and the uncritical application of both western feminist theorizing and Islamic fundamentalist injunctions, resonates with much of western feminist thinking (see Chapter Three). And there is little disagreement about the need to envision other ways of imagining and creating knowledge. What all-too-rarely forms part of debates over future directions in scholarship, however, is both the challenge and the learning to be wrought from research anchored in collaborative modes of investigation. What learning might be accomplished in an interactive matrix of relationships of insider/outsider researchers and a community of interlocutors, making discoveries together not only in the field but also through relationships that define multi-sited areas of ethnographic investigation?

In our article on cross-cultural collaboration (Jaschok and Shui 2000b), my research partner Shui Jingjun and I describe the changes we experienced as researchers, colleagues, and friends. Not only did we discover and learn over time each other's individual, professional, ideational, and cultural characteristics, but we also experienced the other in the face of shared challenges as research was conducted against a background of wider socio-political fluctuations which, frequently, had direct consequences for permissions to visit sites, engage in interviews, and spend time in communities. How crucial it was for me to understand my research partner within the context of her social, political, and professional networks, to understand the forces which shaped her decisions and our ongoing conversations, was illustrated during a meeting we held with local officials, organized at the beginning of a new phase of fieldwork interviews in 2003.

The notes from my April 2003 field diary evoke the atmosphere prevalent at the time of our visit to Kaifeng city in Henan province, the pressure we were under to try to reassure Kaifeng city officials of our trustworthiness. After all, much was at stake. We had made a request to visit women-centered sites of prayer and education, which were representative of women's share in material assets and their status in the organizations of major religious traditions. Reviewing my diary entries conveys something of the element of temporality that shapes ethnographic opportunities and challenges. Only when impressions are immediately recorded can one retain a record of the emotions brought out by a particularly sensitive fieldwork atmosphere, whether due to constant or fleeting tensions engendered by national policies or local causes.

Successful negotiations for permission to interview religious leaders in new research sites might result from a senior cadre's sudden whim or be achieved only at the end of an exhausting meeting and thorough inquisition. Seemingly smooth and promising conversations with officials from the religious affairs department might be halted suddenly, never to be resumed, or promises for future meetings abruptly canceled.

Mutual understanding of this precarious situation carried us, the two researchers, through repeated rejections and prolonged periods of waiting for access to local authorities. Our analyses of local conditions and the possible causes of obstruction included appraisals of my impact as a western researcher on sensitive issues of religion, but also noted my (insider) colleague's tendency to quickly let go of the quest for permission, citing familiarity with city officials' attitudes and biases. We were thus each other's critical questioner as much as we were also a locus of observation for the other. And we lent each other support in the face of bureaucratic obstructionism, sometimes outright hostility. Ethnography is not conducted outside time but carried by the fluidity of political moods, local agendas, fear of vulnerability and repercussions, always inside a given time and place, always a most personal experience, bounded by locality while not immune to the various pressures from the outside world.

Journeying into Multiple Sites of Discovery

Before embarking on the first of several planned in-depth visits to Kaifeng's religious sites, we needed to introduce ourselves to officials representing the city's religious and ethnic affairs authorities. As an insider researcher, a Chinese and Hui Muslim, as well as a well-known and cautiously trusted advisor on local matters of ethnic and religious import, my research partner's task was a very different one from my own role as an outsider, a western non-Muslim researcher. But we were united in our objective to secure permission to travel to identified sites, spend significant time with female religious leaders and their congregations, and obtain prior approval from the relevant authorities for a prolonged presence in the city by providing opportunities for questions over the purpose of our research.

In Pursuit of Permissions and Allies

As soon as we arrived in Kaifeng, my research partner Shui insisted that we pay our respects to the relevant leaders of the Religious Affairs Bureau and Ethnic Affairs Bureau. Here, we were greatly helped by a young official, Ma, who worked in a small office in the local branch of the Chinese Patriotic Islamic Association (中国伊斯兰教协会 *Zhongguo yisilanjiao xiehui*). Of long acquaintance with my research partner, Ma went out of his way to support our research project, which he regarded as beneficial to China and aimed at bringing understanding of the situation of Muslims in China to the outside world.

We required support and approval from his superiors, who were clearly unwilling to approve a research project that asked (as they saw it) awkward questions, was too involved with women's rights concerns in the religious sphere, and, in any case, due to the participation of a western researcher, posed potential and incalculable trouble. This expression, 'troublesome' (麻烦 *mafan*), occurred in all the conversations related to us by Ma, and it spelled a potential impasse. We might be barred altogether from mapping Kaifeng's history of religious and cultural pluralism, a central part of our plan to examine the impact of evolving gender notions on selected religious sites under the changing political regimes of Republican and post-1949 Communist governments.[1] How to reassure the local authorities, and by what means, had formed a considerable part of our and Ma's discussions. We decided to invite all relevant parties to lunch in one of Kaifeng's best-known halal restaurants. Following Ma's recommendation, we went to the office of the Ethnic Affairs Bureau to issue the invitation and ask for recommendations for the guest list. This list became somewhat longer than expected. In the end, we were joined by representatives from what Ma and my research partner Shui considered the core departments needing to be informed and reassured in order for us to obtain the required permissions. The larger-than-anticipated number of middle-level officials

1 This was the fieldwork that produced our co-authored publication in the English language (Jaschok and Shui 2011). It was a sequel to our first study of the history of women's mosques in China (Jaschok and Shui 2000a), of which a revised version was subsequently also published in Chinese in 2002.

who came to join us – we expected two and were joined by seven – signaled the extent of official concern over our sensitive research project, and, equally important, over the participation of a western researcher in such fieldwork.

The meeting started with introductions and much curiosity about my Chinese language credentials and ability to survive in a 'developing' country. It should be added that most of the officials were perfectly aware of my background, the many years of Shui's and my collaborative research and numerous publications (which have also appeared in Chinese), as well as my frequent visits to Henan province. The somewhat reserved atmosphere while we were waited together with the middle-level and junior cadres for the head of the Ethnic Affairs Bureau's (局长 *juzhang*) delayed appearance changed drastically when he arrived. An elderly man with an undoubted aura of authority, it became clear that everyone was waiting for him to set the tone by which this occasion was to be treated. The quiet chatter came to an abrupt halt when, to Shui's surprise, the host issued an invitation to a local halal restaurant he considered had a reputation greatly superior to the one we had selected for the event. In other words, this lunch was to be treated as having a serious purpose. In the context of our quest for official support and research permission – which everyone understood – this conventional way of entertaining guests and expressing courtesy to a foreign visitor was a sign that our host intended to bring this matter to a definite conclusion. That if we proved ourselves to his satisfaction, the *juzhang* had the authority to grant permission for our research to go ahead.

Although only a short way away, we were driven by an official car to the halal restaurant in the center of Kaifeng's old Hui Quarter. Following menu discussion and ordering, the *juzhang* regaled us with a lecture about the status of women in China which, in his view, might be considered as much more favorable to women than elsewhere in the world, although he admitted it still lacked in certain respects. Most emphatic were his references to certain 'weaknesses' (弱点儿 *ruodiar*) in the nature of women which naturally, as he put it, had a ready market in religion. And he exhorted us researchers to understand the persistence of religious life – when Communism had confidently predicted an early withering away of religious faith – as having its roots in this fatal flaw of women, in their gullibility that cannot withstand the seductiveness of religious practitioners' flummery.

As the lecture continued, the senior official warmed to the subject matter and adopted a somewhat more conciliatory tone. He acknowledged that religion could provide support in times of crisis, providing 'consolation' (安慰 *anwei*) to women in need as not all social problems had yet been resolved by the Communist Party government. It was therefore important to display tolerance for the continuation of traditional practices, however undesirable. Proper regulation of such religious venues was needed, but it also needed stating, admitted our host, that churches, temples, and mosques fulfilled many purposes. They provided opportunities for women to congregate for mutual support, find a listener or a counselor willing to lend an ear to accounts of family disunity or some sort of crisis, or simply to satisfy the female urge, the *juzhang* smiled, for social gossip with like-minded women.

Then, in a sudden change of mood, we were told about his mother, who until her retirement was revered as a popular middle school teacher. She was also a devoted

member of the Communist Party. After retirement, our host revealed, she returned to the women's mosque (in a nearby county town) where she had received religious instruction as a child. She had not been back since attending middle school. His mother is now a devout Muslim. To the surprise of junior officials present at the lunch, his account of what he called the 'ideological fallibility of women' was rendered in an indulgent tone of voice, accompanied by occasional laughter.

The greatly softened atmosphere created during the telling of the story of his mother and our expressions of interest had, we were made aware some time later, helped open the door to fieldwork approval. We were quite speedily granted research permission, which allowed us to pay visits to several women's mosques in the county, including the mosque where the *juzhang*'s mother still regularly worshiped. Nevertheless, just before our departure from the restaurant, our host returned to his earlier exhortations for us to avoid misguided conclusions on the continued presence of religion vis-à-vis the Communist Party's success in liberating women for a more progressive and dignified future. As we were ushered into a waiting taxi, the *juzhang*'s parting shot was that Communism can never be reconciled with religious faith, and it was only old age that could account for his mother's reversion to superstitious, backward belief.

The positive outcome of the lunch compensated for the exhaustion we felt afterwards. We had proven ourselves 'responsible', accountable to the proper authorities, and had satisfactorily answered questions concerning the nature and purpose of the research, which were considered reassuring. We would thus be less likely to encounter interference during the coming weeks of interviewing, networking, visits to historical and contemporarily influential mosques, and adjacent religious sites.

As I made notes that night, I confronted the lingering sense of discomfort I had felt throughout the day (a discomfort that was to be my constant companion for days to come). I had followed the guidance provided by my research partner, who was so acutely sensitive to the political moods and the state of local power politics; but I was also concerned about the commitment we had made by her frequent assurance that this research project would be carried out by us free of 'trouble'. On my mind were concerns over the implications of our concessions to political realities. What in our research observations and findings might it not be possible to write down, might not – could not – appear in print? Within hours of our return to our accommodation in the vicinity of Kaifeng, we had held the necessary conversation about our tacit agreement that afternoon to fall in line with restrictions in order to gain permission – which was all the more impactful given the courtesies extended to us at lunch.

Our conversation focused on the political sensitivities associated with Kaifeng's prominent place in the annals of China's cultural and religious history, as well as sensitivities relating to Kaifeng's central significance to our study of female-centered sites of religious worship that thrived within a distinctive tradition of religious pluralism (Jaschok and Shui 2011). Historically, when a city over time develops a pluralism of religious traditions and institutions and distinct communities of faith living in close proximity to one another, times of political repression

yielded the diminished presence or closure of religious institutions and persecution or expulsions of religious leaders. In our work, we had noted degrees of more liberal governance of the religious sites we visited, particularly in the early 2010s. But constraints were never completely absent, and were more strictly enforced, often at short notice if the central government or local authority dictated a tightening of existing rules in response to perceived or actual political volatility.

Such tighter policies impact any or all of the main religious traditions that have marked Kaifeng's urban landscape for centuries, where churches, temples, mosques, and shrines, often in close vicinity to each other, populate Kaifeng's winding lanes and alleys. Wandering the lanes of the old city, one finds evidence both of an all-pervasive surveillance apparatus – for example, a branch of the Public Security Bureau (公安局 *gonganju*) housed next to a small Catholic church frequented by nuns from a nearby convent – and of an enduring, mutually tolerant, and supportive culture of multiple faiths and traditions. At the same time, how individual religions and institutions survive, protect their relative independence from external interference, and negotiate relations with government authorities, does vary. Such differences depend on a variety of factors, such as the public standing of their religious leader, support from allies within the political establishment, or the relative material wealth and size of donations commanded by a mosque or temple. Those who align most closely with official perceptions of a Han Chinese civilizational identity – for example, Daoist and Buddhist religious institutions – have more flexibility in their engagement with officialdom, compared with religions framed within potentially troubling narratives of 'foreign' or 'alien' origin (as in the case of Islam and Christianity), however longstanding their presence in the country.

During times of volatility and unpredictable government policy, however, these differences merge and all religious traditions become the generic 'Other' to the state. The challenge for the researcher is to assemble holistic yet nuanced and multifaceted knowledge of gendered lives steeped in a multiplicity of local cultures of faith and subjectivities, which are informed and shaped by overarching religious values that play into locally and collectively shared rituals of worship, prayer, and celebration guided by trusted women and men.

Shared Hope and the Tyranny of Ideology

A mosaic of diverse religious and ideological meaning-systems, crisscrossed by multiple, complex connections, links religious locations, spaces, sites, or buildings – with each space speaking to a distinct history of beliefs, its rituals, institutions, and expressive culture. Potentially deeply conservative yet simultaneously open to impulses for change, gender inscribes itself on the map of this multifaceted sociality, marking the cultural landscape of central China. It is where Hui Muslim women have laid claim to varying degrees of independence, whether economically, legally, and/or to a degree also in the religious sphere, particularly in the latter half of the 20th century and in the early 21st century. During moments of political liberalization and its concomitant openness, influential women *ahong* with backing

from their congregations applied the Maoist gender rhetoric of *nan nü pingdeng* (男女平等 equality between men and women) as a relevant principle to Islamic religious organizing. Yet these same women are – and continue to be – judged in their gender identity by the yardstick of an ideological secularist paradigm as being 'deficient Chinese'; their identities as members of religious faith groups render their progression toward a superior (socialist) consciousness as a destabilizing oxymoron.

Against the Odds, a Shared Paradigm of Women's Liberation and Male-Female Equality

Giving ideological and political contexts to an entry from my fieldwork diary – that is, the care and caution exercised by us, the researchers, in ensuring the safety of the sites we hoped to visit, but also to highlight what is at stake when ethnography draws attention to believing women in contemporary Chinese society – I turn once more to the important scholarship of Li Xiaojiang (1994), where she presents her thoughts on the relationship between 'women' and 'China', on patriarchal reinventions, and on Chinese women's entry into public life. According to Li's analysis, with 'family' as the central and significant gender marker that had defined Chinese women across time and space, this historical axis was reconfigured in the wake of the Communist assumption of power in 1949. It changed the site of women's domesticated dependency but not the plight of dependency. With dependency shifting from subjection to the husband's lineage and household – that is, from women's subservient status in a traditional family-centered domestic sphere – to dependency on the nation-state. In this newly forged primary relationship, women's public role and participation remain defined, and constrained, by enduring patriarchal prerogatives of ownership over them. In Li's (1994, 3) succinct language: 'Women belong to the state' (妇女属于国家 *funü shuyu guojia*).[2] During this historical shift, a widening of the scope of women's dependency has occurred, considering the state's far-reaching structural tentacles, whereas, according to Li (1994, 3), 'for contemporary Chinese women's lives, its role and nature is much like an enlarged family'.

This extension of historical domestic dependencies now reaches into the multiple patriarchal functions of the nation-state. While Communist governments may have offered women a greater variety of resources, choices, and lifestyles, the central dependency that defines the fate of Chinese women continues to shape the narrative of reframed modernity. The essential marker of female gendered lives, of 'belonging to' (属于 *shuyu*) a patriarchal power, connotes a status that locks women into a state of passivity throughout history, and throughout a historical

2 The translation of *guojia* (国家) as state, nation, or country is contingent on the discursive context. As Tani Barlow (2004) remarks, the inevitability of catachresis in the writing of history, compounded, I suggest by the ambiguities of translation, is also an opportunity for capturing the slipperiness of evasive meanings and for examining the very perpetrators of the politicization of meanings (see specifically Barlow's chapter on 'Theorizing "Women"').

trajectory of socio-political change from feudal to Communist gender relations. This continues to render gender regimes, even within the multiple adaptations assumed during progressive developments, as perpetually hierarchical. Women's lives are still shaped by patriarchal power defined on the back of an essentialized femininity, with patriarchy relocated from the domestic family to the national family. In this continuity, the symbolism of nation as family and the symbiotic linkage of family and nation retain their potency and central relevance under the autocratic government of Xi Jinping, which has defined the early years of the 21st century.

Explaining the distinct nature of Chinese women's history, Li Xiaojiang juxtaposes 'the women's liberation movement' (妇女解放运动 *funü jiefang yundong*) against the 'western women's rights movement' (西方女权运动 *xifang nüquan yundong*). Li (1994, 5) maintains that western feminist entry into China in the early years of the 20th century made its adversary the 'feudal society' (封建社会 *fengjian shehui*) its adversary, with its androcentric and gender-unequal characteristics, rather than men per se (Li 1994, 5). Early calls for reforms in the situation for women in China, for equality between men and women, found a resonance in the call for women's rights in western contexts; this changed with the consolidation of Communist Party leadership over the country in 1949. What, in the dying days of imperial China and in the Republican era during the early years of the 20th century, had formed part of both revolutionary and reformist discourses, created iconic martyrs to the righteous cause of women's voices in national debates over political and social change.[3] After 1949, however, there was no longer a formal place in Chinese public life for legitimate opposition by individuals and diverse groups and organizations against a rapidly centralizing political system. From then onward, and with the 'accomplished' liberation of women a mainstay of CCP legitimacy, the diversity that had been characteristic of the early feminist and women's rights movements came to an end.

After 1949, in the words of Li Xiaojiang (1994), whilst the Chinese state 'liberated women' from the 'patriarchal family' (父权家庭 *fuquan jiating*), 'patriarchy' (父系制度 *fuxizhidu*) persisted. In the shift of location of patriarchy from *pater familias* to the state, women retained their assigned 'functionality' (职能 *zhineng*). The shift from 'women belonging to the family' (家庭中人 *jiating zhongren*) to 'belonging to the state' (国家的人 *guojiade ren*) served the molding of a progressive socialist femininity. Li (1994, 6) refers to this state policy as a 'miracle' (奇迹 *qiji*), and as a historical reality: 'I think that this is a new starting point for understanding the history of the women's liberation movement in contemporary China'.

The emphatic point made by Li in 1994 was that the women's liberation movement, in entrusting its transformative cause to the Communist Party state, became a potent symbol for the cause of a newly established state ripe with promises of radical structural changes. In the process of consolidating power, the promise of

3 Foremost revolutionary activists such as Qiu Jin (1875–1907) – who was also a feminist and a writer/poet – have had an abiding impact on feminists today. See an early profile of Qiu Jin by Kazuko Ono (1989).

continuity across the envisaged necessary changes in women's equal rights in both the public and private spheres became ultimately re-storied as women's patriotic service to the needs of the new nation-state. Based on this analysis, Li determined that for Chinese women to bring about agential emancipation, only purposeful extraction from the patriarchal state's tradition-bound grip can bring about genuine transformation. Women's liberation as bestowed by the state could never accomplish the social transformation to which only women themselves can, and must, lay claim (Li Xiaojiang 1994, 7).

Whilst Li expressed concerns in her various lectures to international audiences (famously at Harvard University in 1992) about 'conceptual pitfalls' (概念的陷阱 *gainiande xianjing*) that obstruct progress for a mutually enlightening cross-border feminist discourse (Li Xiaojiang 1994, 8), this important Chinese feminist philosopher had little to say about conceptual pitfalls at home. Although she does include women of faith in later publications as part of comprehensive oral histories of Chinese women, there is no critical conceptual discussion over Chinese secularist assumptions underlying women's liberation. As I maintain in an earlier publication, it is important to understand that the 'eradication of religion and construction of socialist womanhood were both defining elements of the state's formative phase of consolidation' (Jaschok 2003, 658), which entailed the exclusion of women whose membership of communities of faith marked their relegation to a 'feudal' and 'backward' history of pre-1949 society.[4]

Learning About 'Feminisms in Other Places'

As I am moving toward the latter half of this book, with chapters beginning to focus on the evocation of the powerful oral soundscapes of Hui Muslim women's mosques, inhabited by listeners, chanters, reciters, and audiences random and purposeful (including us, the researchers), the concept of 'listening silence' becomes pertinent. As we, the researchers, moved into spaces of silence inscribed by faith and gender, a long historiography around feminist core notions of agency, submission, and choice reveals illuminating insights and troubling ambiguities in equal measure.

A concept borrowed from the philosophical work of Gemma Fiumara (1990), 'listening silence' as spaces between words are invested by listeners with a diversity of meaning, laying bare a repertoire of meanings associated with silence which may exacerbate marginality but may also empower the sound maker. Their construction, as Rowe and Malhotra (2013) point out, is indicative of collectively constituted

4 During my visit in summer 2023, I learned of Li Xiaojiang's current (private) initiative: an oral history project that commits a large community of Buddhist nuns to the daily task of diary writing. This project is supported by the senior nun. It is not meant for academic publication, Li told me, but is about leaving a historical record, 'making previously invisible women visible once more'. It contrasts with an earlier oral history project, led by Li Xiaojiang and funded by the Ford Foundation (2000–2003), 'China Women's Oral History', which had under-emphasized the fate of believing women during the revolutionary years of Chinese Communist Party consolidation of state power.

social relationships and of relations of power. By facing one another, without setting borders, one genuinely listens. In the act of opening oneself to the knower, listener and speaker jointly embark on a precarious journey of transformation.

Thinking about the act of listening in the context of women's mosques, what women crave relates to certainty of salvation, *houshi* (后世 Afterlife), to be well prepared for during life on earth. Women's mosques offer women different kinds of silences. For instance, a silence women define as *anjing* (安静 stillness, calm, or quiet) that is nevertheless always bound up with – as far as worship at their 'own' mosque is concerned – another essential quality, that is, *chunjie* (纯洁 unblemished state of a soul, purity of heart). It is the silence of women's mosques as a replenishing counterpoint to the overwhelming tasks of domestic space, where silence resounds with the piety of women's convictions. In women's mosques, the anticipation of reward in the Afterlife resulting from the informed discipline of prayerful silence, the exercise of spiritual and religious practices, and sometimes of stillness and a coming to self, creates a silence of rich potency and a gathering of words of knowledge (Cheung 1993; Jaschok 2014).

Popular Hui folktales tell of the times when Muslims' survival in China depended on marrying Han Chinese women. When no words of knowledge from women were forthcoming, nor welcomed, before female religious education became a tool of Islamic survival during the late 17th century, women were told to mind their domestic duties and not concern themselves over their ignorance of their Muslim husbands' faith. In the earliest phase of our research, male *ahong* justifying the absence of women's mosques in their communities cited women's exclusion from 'a patriline of faith' (only men belonged in the lineage which, thus the enduring myth goes, claimed direct descent from male Arab forebears) as a way of emphasizing religious identity as the birthright of men, with women as belonging *to,* rather than belonging *in,* the lineage of faith (Jaschok and Shui 2000a, 193; Li and Luckert 1994).

Relational Matrix of Politics of Space and Potency of Silence

Extensive scholarship in sensory anthropology and gender studies frames the exploration of gendered origins and the persistent legacies of gender divides in the social production of sound within core notions of agency and empowerment. This scholarship lays the foundation for extending critical insights into 'feminisms in other places' (Visweswaran 1994), which cemented the contribution of intersectionality to feminist contextual analysis (see Crenshaw *et al.* 1996). Building on the scholarship on silence and its relationship with voice (Carson 1995; Cavarero 2005; Parpart 2010; Parpart and Parashar 2019; see also Chapter Three), we attend to the impact of the wider ideological and political framing of empowered agency on the emergence of a collective female voice, and the significance of sound in local expressions of female/male religiosity in Islamic cultures in central China's Muslim communities.

This discussion belongs to a wider conversation that questions our understanding of dialogues among feminist voices from different philosophical, ideological,

and epistemological traditions and positionalities. Among scholars whose research interests in identity formation lie in intersections of secularist modernity, religious agency, and gendered nation-making, we count the important theologian of Asian religion, Kwok Pui-lan (2000). Introducing the research area of feminist theology in diverse Asian contexts, Kwok sets the scene across a wide and complex demography totaling more than half of the world's population. Here we find the birthplace of major global religions and the historical sites of colonial power expansion. She uncovers the historical trajectories of postcolonial quests by colonized peoples for independence and a collective identity, against a backdrop of enduring and newly emerging inequalities in a fast-changing political, economic, and technological world order. It is in light of this vast, volatile, and complex history that nuanced treatment is called for, says Kwok, to do justice to such heterogeneous populations within their own political, cultural, and economic contexts.

Analyses of societal change brought about by education, a globalized economy, economic migration, and the climate emergency, however, must include a close examination of their impact on women's capacities to claim, and insist on, equality of roles in both familial and public spheres. As Kwok contends, Asian women have generally found it difficult to question their countries' master narratives, rising from the ashes of colonial occupation as paradigmatic traditions of Asian womanhood were threaded into national identity politics. Yet, at the same time, Asian women also had to define themselves against another kind of hegemony: western-derived standards of emancipated femininity.

In this tension between local patriarchal traditions and western models of female progress, there opened opportunities for 'new possibilities for negotiating identity, exploring cultural hybridity, and articulating different cultural practices and priorities' (Kwok Pui-lan 2000, 19). This necessitated viewing women's agencies as embedded in intersecting identities of gender, religion, and race, and having the capacity to negotiate multiple identities (Zimmerman 2015). Heightened sensitivity by women because of their own experiences of gender discrimination, as Kwok Pui-lan (2000) writes, made possible critical readings of their own theological traditions and their relevance to addressing and reforming, systemic injustices inflicted on members of marginalized communities.

Kwok evokes the richness of religious and spiritual traditions in Asia, which have also developed specific cultural, spiritual, and gendered references. China, however, presents a unique set of issues in that the Communist Party state – whatever economic, cultural, or technological reforms and adjustments have taken place, particularly since the 1980s – has retained a tight political grip on religion and religious collective life throughout its history. Whilst temporary liberalization, following Deng Xiaoping's wide-ranging reforms in the early 1980s, allowed for the growth of religious membership of legally recognized denominations and for more open expression of religious faith, even during these years the state-sanctioned surveillance of religious sites rarely relaxed.

At the time of writing in 2023, what have always been modest – and always circumscribed – concessions to people's right to practice religion are now all but gone. Moreover, even during the years when religious practice was relatively

tolerated, women of faith were excluded from the state's ambitious drive for modernizing its commercial economy and the attendant educational and vocational reforms. Women's exclusion from China's aspired modernity had its ramifications. Such secularist developmentalist ideology accounts for their absence from official and popular portrayals of female role models, and for their invisibility in women's magazines and in social and social media. Furthermore, as discussed earlier in relation to Li Xiaojiang's (1994, Preface) philosophical thinking, this absence was reflected in a dearth of scholarship on gendered religious identity.

Listeners and Listening to Silence

When Muslim women's communities reach into their (largely) unwritten history and record, transcribe, annotate, and perform chants dearly beloved by previous generations of believing women, they become participants in 'communicative practices' (Kidd *et al*. 2017) that subvert cultural and religious injunctions on the sound of female voices held fast until recent times (see the following chapters). Notions of silence and voice – as informed by the gender of the women who instructed, learned, worshipped, and chanted in places assigned to them exclusively – are therefore importantly framed within the philosophical debates around 'epistemic injustice'; this 'refers to those forms of unfair treatment that relate to issues of knowledge, understanding, and participation in communicative practices', offering 'distinctively ethico-epistemic and socio-epistemic framing' (*ibid*., 1). These themes are explored in major philosophical traditions but also in social and intellectual movements such as feminism and liberation theology, seeking to decolonize the patriarchal intersections of gendered voice, authority, legitimacy, and credibility. In other words, questions about who the listeners are, who is listened to, and whose voices matter in ways that shift systemic red lines are intrinsically questions about the perpetuation of injustice.

The philosopher Ian James Kidd (2017, 386) holds that 'epistemic injustice' reveals the impact of prejudice, silencing, and exclusion on marginalized groups: 'If so, such corrupted traditions perpetrate epistemic injustices that prevent women and others of being able to report and make sense of their spiritual experiences'. The expressive culture from the long history of women's mosques, from which the chants and eulogies – the textual core of this present book – are taken, was inhabited and inscribed by women of piety and spirit, of faith and pragmatism; in other words, by women who were anything but stunted in their creativity. Such a history does not sit easily with a binary of voice and oppression. Whilst Rita Gross (2002, quoted in Kidd 2017, 387) points out that 'adequate theology cannot be done on the basis of erasing many voices', current projects of recovering seemingly 'lost' traditions testify that the voices of women thought of as marginalized and thus stunted have not, in fact, been so erased. This same mission propelled a collective undertaking of Muslim women's communities and researchers to make audible what had historically been denied listeners. When feminist theology identifies powerful instances of epistemic injustices in the spaces in-between-words, in the silencing of women's experiences and wisdom (King 1989), it unjustly denies

the lives many women made for themselves, lives which moreover refute the morally defective and sinful female state of received scriptural traditions. It is thus that silence must be understood as relational and context-contingent. As Achino-Loeb (2006, 2) points out: '…silence, while universal in its form as perceived absence, is indicative of repressed, unobtrusive presence and functionally tied to the context'.

Importantly, silence understood as absence 'exists only in the ear of the listeners' who 'willingly or willfully ignore or veil the pregnant presence encompassed by each instance of silence' (Achino-Loeb *ibid*.). The feminist philosopher of religion, Pamela Sue Anderson (2004, 2012, 2015) made it her life's work to uncover the gendered bias of western religious traditions and the devastating, inhibiting impact on the spiritual development of women. The exclusion of women from the shaping of religious imagery and the core concepts that constitute the canonical theological discourse, she held, has resulted in an impoverishment of religious thought and life. It is an insight of relevance beyond western theology. Urging sensitivity to gender, race, and 'epistemic location', tradition-bound religious study must comprehend the consequences of its failure to include the testimonies and records of women's religious lives, stifling their contribution to the canon of religious hermeneutics and practices.

Spaces for Women From Where to Claim Meaning

Power co-opts silence to assert control over others, essentializing race and gender inside a silent habitus, so says Achino-Loeb (2006), to make silence constitutive of identity. But is absence from the annals of historical writing evidence of lives without legacy? Our probing of silence has never been about abrogation of the right to voice, but is instead an exploration of its place in women's histories, of women's ownership of silence from which arose sonic traditions within silence – not confined by silence.

Saba Mahmood (2005) has challenged views of subjective freedom bequeathed by Western moral philosophy. She maintains that to understand pious women within Islam, one must conceive of a subject defined in its relation to the textual and imagistic representations of the divine. Women who engage in a religious practice of this sort, she argues, ought to be understood as engaging in ethical practices of self-cultivation. From an Islamic faith standpoint, the subject of ethics embodies a living and practiced relation to the divine, requiring a different notion of subject-formation. For believing women, to cultivate faith is thus a form of ethical conduct, not a manifestation of female gullibility and passivity.

Mahmood has been critiqued for a lack of nuance in her analysis of othered subjectivities, neglecting the dynamics of change and the desire for change from dissenting voices within given religio-social contexts. It is here that the story of Hui Muslim women from central China gains poignancy: justifying their claim for a place in women's history which evolved from within a culture of deliberative and creative silence. The story of the creation of the SongBook (ZMFEC 2017) – from remembered, largely unrecorded chants from the women's mosque oral culture of worship and learning – is a story of recovery, of making audible 'disappeared'

voices within its contextual culture of pious sentiments and hierarchical social relationships. Moreover, the process of recovery was made possible because support for the resources needed for the work's success came from some, like Ge *Ahong* and Ba DM, who had shifted from the role of listener to becoming advocates for women's rights to be heard. Indeed, these roles are symbiotically connected.

Tani Barlow (2004, 17) notes that 'subjectivity, the province of feminism, is shaped in heterogeneous time'. The issue of subjectivity raises an issue over the historical subject of feminist enquiry, a feminist history written in the 'future anterior mode',[5] as less interested in the nature of claims to subvert gender identities as it is interested in 'the politics of claiming' *(ibid.,* 16). China's female- and male-led sites of prayer and education are steeped in a time and space that embraces both the past and the future with their distinctive religious and political resonances, with gendered conceptions of identity, loyalty, faith, submission, and entitlements extending into both secular and sacred spheres of life. The researcher is obliged not only to see and visualize, but also to *listen* to performative gender as a window into a religious imaginary of time past and to come.

Relying on collaborative and multi-voice ethnographic research into Hui Muslim women's reclaimed expressive culture allowed us to discover the sensory abundance of a 'sacred, internal space' – a confluence of Confucian ritual culture and the richness of Arabic and Persian thought and imagery resonating in the chants of Islamic worship and the social ethics which evolved into a unique Islamic ritual tradition that 'entered the very souls of central China's Muslims' (ZMFEC 2017, Preface, 4). Spaces once assigned to women to safeguard against violations of socio-religious norms of gender segregation had become, in the course of female-centered ownership, spaces of transformative possibilities.

In the following chapters, I explore women's accounts, interweaving these with poignant *jingge* (chants), of their personal memories of living faith and engaging with a secularist state ideology which requires mandatory silencing of all outward expressions of religious belief. At the same time, these are also narrations of collective agency and of the regaining of religious identity (Jaschok 2012), narrations of how from within such silences and their gathered possibilities arose creative responses, enabling – during a period of religious resurgence after the 1980s – a collective undertaking of recovery and transmission of the rich transcripts hidden in female-centered cultures of enduring faith.

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5 'Emphasizing future anteriority shifts attention away from ideal typical or representative women per se to writing and thinking focused on decoding women and their proposed future role' (Barlow 2004, 16). The interest is thus in the singularity of a moment of intervention and how the thinking propelling the intervention comes to constitute a political event.

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6 The Right to be Heard

Chants of Turmoil, Chants of Gladness

Chants make their performers tremble with 'turmoil' and fill their hearts with 'gladness'. In this chapter, these words come from conversations among Muslim women as expressions of women's sensory experiences and of their expanding horizons of knowledge, no longer obscured by ignorance and fear of the penalties for religious ignorance. Feminist scholars have noted how canons of established learning serve purposes which – far removed from the accumulation of impartial, universal knowledge through (ever-gendered) power over processes of selection, acknowledgment, preservation, and transmission – reify and normalize powerful lines of separation, even exclusion, of marginalized, unheard texts from authoritatively sanctioned bodies of universalized knowledge (Elshtain 1986; Stanley 1997). As stated in previous chapters, this observation applies no less to the canons of fundamental core scriptures of organized religions. Such canons' principles of sacrosanctity serve to validate gender lines of exclusion through theological and aesthetic criteria, thereby allowing androcentric gender norms to stigmatize excluded texts, and their authors, as having flawed spiritual worth and inferior value. This understanding throws light on the contrastive fates of chants that form part of Islam's written canon in China: the tradition of *shige* (诗歌) on the one hand, and the chants from the oral tradition of *jingge* (经歌) which formed – and still form – an enduring pedagogical tool of religious instruction in the women's mosque oral tradition of knowledge transmission.

In what might be called a 'gynocentric' construction of a female framework of writing (Showalter 1985), influential religious practitioners, female *ahong* of standing and credibility, have led the initiative for a revisionist, revelatory journey of discovery of women's creative and largely concealed traditions of prayer, celebration, and education. They have developed counter-narratives asserting their right to be heard, which have begun to question the infallibility of received interpretations within Islamic orthodoxy as patriarchal or – in the language used by women in the following conversations – as 'feudal'.

Chants from the Past, and the Right to be Heard

Bringing back one of our influential co-researchers and participants, Ba DM remembers the beginnings of a project involving all generations of Muslim women across Henan: those who could remember the chants that enabled countless young

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girls to chant their faith, to gladly enact their commitment to Muslim life in unison with others; and those who could ask questions, record, transcribe, and contribute to a record of women's faith. This project was to become the women's SongBook (ZMFEC 2017; see Chapter One).

In Ba DM's words: 'Two *ahong* invited Muslim women from all over Henan in August of 2015 to gather in a village outside of our [provincial] capital and attend an informal forum. There was a good opportunity for communication and much discussion about special concerns, and most questions had to do with Muslim women's voices. Must these voices really remain hidden? Are they a source of *xiuti*? Do Muslim women have the right to study alongside male Muslims, and are Muslim women allowed to communicate with male Muslims, interact with them, share the same space? There was also a lot of lively discussion that had to do with women's proper dress and wearing of ornaments. I remember how we created such a good atmosphere. As many women were somewhat reserved, and a number quite shy, this proved an effective way of creating a relaxed and chatty atmosphere. We needed to do this because the women had attended different religious classes and some of them did not know each other too well. Therefore, we brought the women together. We suggested that whoever was comfortable would have an opportunity to respond in more detail to any question that we might have when it came to learning of different traditions of *jingge* and *zansheng* and sharing their life experience with all of us'.

Embodying Words: The Sensory Aspect of Chanting

The most traditional category of *jingge* – the Persian language *manshadai* (曼沙代) – was a frequent topic of conversation among older women and those who had been taught by senior members of their families. The transmitter of the *jingge* was usually a woman *ahong*, someone who had sufficient knowledge of the Persian language to convey the chant's meaning and thus could transmit its emotional power. This involved teaching the chant line by line, in patient repetition, to her congregation of women, who were all illiterate in the Persian language. Responding to the collective sound rather than its specific meanings, ignorance of the language did not exclude the stirring of emotion among the chanters. On the contrary, in interviews and accounts of women's experiences of chanting, such *jingge* strongly resonated with, and intensified, a collective experience of reawakened and thus deepened spirituality. These experiences clearly spoke to a longing and yearning for salvation in ways that reciting translated texts could not evoke; the chants were revelatory of a sensuously evoked Afterlife and intensely felt collective experience of euphoria.

To illustrate the sensory power of chanting *jingge* and collective joy, what follows is an extract from a conversation during the summer 2016 between Ba DM and Ba QM, the latter a 46-year-old woman from a township with a thriving women's mosque.

Conversations Among Muslim Women: 'This Turmoil of the Soul'[1]

Ba DM asks: *Did you ever hear the older generation chant* zansheng, *or* jingge?[2]
Ba QM: Yes, many times. I remember how they would be chanting *Aituiou* and *Mansha*. These were really popular. Listening to these *zansheng* is celebrating the virtue of the Prophet, and we were always so touched. We felt such inner turmoil.

Imagine, when you hear zansheng*, whether it is in Arabic or Persian, are you excited by the beautiful voices or by the tunes? Do you think it is necessary to understand the words, the meaning of* zansheng*?*

Ba QM: Oh, it's really necessary to know the meaning. Listening to the beauty of sound, this is something. This turmoil of the soul, this is something. [But] Listening to *zansheng*…that is praising the virtues of the Prophet, in listening my heart is bursting to do battle [rec.: Ba QM was trembling]. Very excited. Ah, yes, I am very excited.

One of the *zansheng* that arouses such emotion, when chanted in unison and with dedication, is the following chant, *Manshadai*.

Manshadai 曼沙代 ***Filled with Gladness***[3]

我之愉悦，因为那赞颂与赞念

Filled with gladness, I am singing and reciting in praise of Allah

一旦世间没了赞颂与赞念，我的生命将何所依？我的生命将何所依？

A life without song and recital in praise of Allah, what is there to life? What is there to life?

1 This is an extract from the first of eight conversations featured in this book. Preparations for the content and format of the conversations recorded and reproduced here took place during summer 2016, involving us researchers, *ahong*, and senior *shetou* from various women's mosques in Henan province.

2 Ba DM's questions are henceforth given in *italics* without attribution. N.B.: In all the conversations in this volume, interviewers' questions appear in *italics,* and their added observations are enclosed in square brackets, preceded by rec:, [rec: …]. I have used square brackets wherever I amended my translation for the purpose of clarification and contextualization.

3 This traditional *jingge*, of which the origin is unknown, is liked by many elderly Muslim women, although it was not included in the Persian language repertoire chosen by *ahong* for the Muslim Women's SongBook (for more Persian language *jingge*, illustrating their penetration into the expressive culture of women's mosques, see ZMFEC 2017). This chant, alongside other *jingge* beloved by Chinese Muslim women in central China, now forms, with the express consent of my colleagues, part of the 'Sounding Islam in China Collection' (British Library reference number: C1822, BL Sound Archive, London).

我之愉悦，因为对胡大的感赞。一旦世间没了对胡达的感赞，我的生命将何所依？我的生命将何所依？

Filled with gladness, I gaze admiringly at Allah. A life without admiration of Allah, what is there to life? What is there to life?

以下赞先知穆罕默德及前四任哈里发艾布伯克勒、欧麦尔、奥斯曼、阿里，先知的女儿法图麦，阿里和法图麦的儿子哈散和胡赛因，词略

Praise be the Prophet Muhammad and the first four appointed Caliphs Abu Bakr, Umar ibn al-Khattab, Uthman ibn Affan, and Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's daughter Fatimah, and the son of Ali and Fatimah, Hussein [these words are spoken].

The emotional intensity in rendering the chant increases with each repetition that follows, evoking a human existence excluded from the community of faith, an intense dread expressed in the repetition of the exclamation: 'What is there to life? What is there to life?'. Another chant often cited by women as arousing strong emotions is the following Arab language *jingge,* a chant of faith, *Yimani* (伊玛尼). It is equally central to the corpus of chants of commitment associated with the core pillars of Islam. Translation from the Arabic into Chinese was overseen by Ding QY *Ahong*, in July 2016. Arabic passages in this chant are reproduced from the SongBook,[4] because they were handwritten by the *Ahong* herself (ZMFEC 2017, 70–1).

Yimani 伊玛尼 ***(Faith, 'īmān)***

关于女子，我们要知道，伊玛尼是教门的根本，学习伊玛尼是头一件主命，哪个人不知道伊玛尼，在他上没有伊玛尼，没有教门，没有 بِنَكَاحَ.

As for women, we need to know that 'īmān is the foundation of Islam, learning 'īmān is the first most important command, whoever does not know īmān, who is without īmān, there is no Islam, no بِنَكَاحَ …

أَلْإِيمَانُ إِقْرَارٌ بِاللِّسَانِ وَتَصْدِيقٌ
بِالْقَلْبِ بِمَاجَاءَ بِهِ النَّبِيُّ عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ
مِن عِندِ اللَّهِ تَعَالَى .....

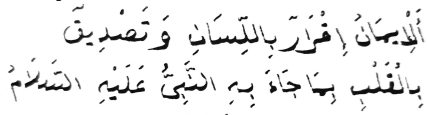
人问你伊玛尼是什么？你说

伊玛尼是凭着蛇肉的招认，心里的诚信，诚信那个我们的圣人 عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ.. 近在 اللَّهُ تَعَالَى 御前拿来的那个一总是实的。

4 The SongBook was funded by the Leverhulme Trust Research Grant (2014–2017) for use by local communities.

人问你伊玛尼的根本是有几样？你说：一阿玛尼的根本是有两样：伊玛尼 مُجْمَلٌ 伊玛尼 مُفَصَّلٌ.

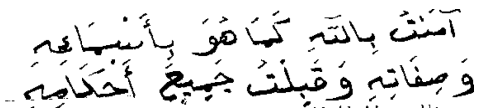
Everyone asks what is ‘īmān. You answered



‘īmān comes from the serpent’s confession of guilt, from the sincerity of the heart, the sincerity of our Saint عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ. Only in the presence of Allah اللَّهُ تَعَالَى there is eternal truth. Everyone asks, what constitutes the foundation of ‘īmān? You answered: the foundation of ‘īmān is two-fold: ‘īmān مُجْمَلٌ ‘īmān مُفَصَّلٌ ...

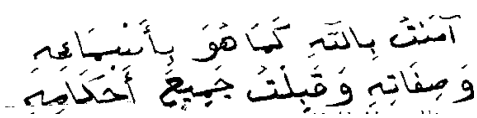
有名伊玛尼 مُجْمَلٌ 是（包总伊玛尼）

There is a name for ‘īmān مُجْمَلٌ that is (including all that is ‘īmān)



我归信主，就照于他是同着他的一些 إِسْمٌ （名字）与同着他的一些 صِفَةٌ （品德）的那样做，我归心主与我承领了他的 إِسْمٌ （教律）的一总.

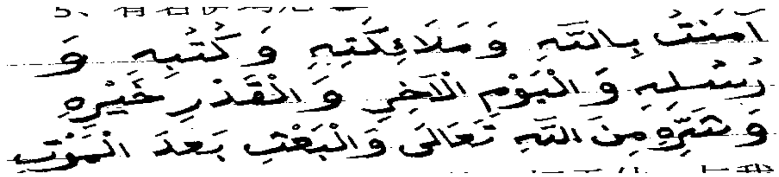
有名伊玛尼 مُفَصَّلٌ 是（细分伊玛尼）



I returned to Allah, just as those did with Him إِسْمٌ (name) and those that with Him that abide by صِفَةٌ (morality). I returned to Allah and I believe all إِسْمٌ (Islamic commands).

The glory of ‘īmān مُفَصَّلٌ is (taking care to understand ‘īmān)[5]

5 The bracketed insertion was most likely made by the chant’s transcriber, Ding *Ahong*, for the benefit of non-Arabic speakers, to draw attention to the multi-layered mystery of ‘īmān.



我归信主与我归信他的一切天仙,[6] 与我归信他的一切经典，与我归信他的一切钦差，与我归信后世的日子，与我归信好歹的定夺是从 اللّٰه تعالىٰ … 御前，与我归信死之后复活是实的。

I return to Allah, and I return to all His messengers, and I return to all His scriptures, and I return to all His ambassadors, and I return to the days of Afterlife, and I return to the final judgement of good and evil اللّٰه تعالىٰ, before the divine presence, I return to resurrection after death.

As Ding QY *Ahong* explains, this traditional *Yimani jingge* is deeply expressive of Islamic fundamental faith. Where the Arabic language was retained in the chant, it was to stir emotion and intensify affect, with the Chinese translation serving ease of access to, and understanding of, the powerful evocation and confirmation of the centrality of belief. By switching between Arabic and Chinese, learning (of deeper religious meaning), memorization, and heightening of feeling are ideally facilitated (ZMFEC 2017, 72). The final and most significant point is the ultimate untranslatability of core professions of the faith in Arabic. In this way, an alien tongue for most Chinese Muslim women – perhaps analogous to Latin for many lay Catholics (prior to the Second Vatican Council in 1969) – becomes the believer's conduit of communication with the divine. The divine's mysterious nature and seeming inaccessibility to those traversing the worldly domain, yet promising succor and redemption from the overwhelming mundaneness of a familiar world, can be viewed as a liminal sacred space somewhere between silence and voice.

From Pedagogical Tool to Expressive Culture of Women's Mosques[7]

To understand the significance of orally based pedagogical traditions of women's mosque teaching is to reflect on a Chinese history and culture of manifold gendered exclusions. Whether seen within the wider historical context of China's record of

6 Note that the transcriber Ding *Ahong* uses the expression *tianxian* (天仙) instead of the more usual *tianshi* (天使), as the former is more appropriate for an Islamic context. 天仙 carries a meaning more familiar from Chinese legends and myths, with its reference to mythical fairies, and is thus associated with superstition rather than the Islamic faith. The term 天使 is generally accepted in Chinese as referring to angels in a Catholic context. 天 refers to Heaven and 使 to messenger or servant; so 天使 can be interpreted as being a messenger from Heaven or servant of God.

7 With permission from the editors of *Studies in Adult and Community Education*, this section includes extracts from my article (Jaschok 2008).

female education,[8] within the Islamic context and the patriarchal shaping of the Islamic canon, or as embedded in the neo-Confucian and Islamic moral injunctions of an 'institutionally-determined silence' (Clair 1998, 187), such gendered exclusions undergird hierarchies of power, authority, and legitimacy. Feminist postmodern theorizing of how silence communicates and expresses what is otherwise absent (Clair 1998; Daly 1973; Parpart 2010; Tannen and Saville-Troike 1985; Olsen 1989) helps to frame the potency and poignancy of oral traditions that allowed Muslim women in central China's mosques to learn religious as well as secular knowledge, and to express and communicate their faith.

We outlined in Chapter Two the history and origin of *jingge* and discussed the most influential and revered popularizers of Islamic chants, Li Fuzhen and Wang Chunli, who enabled the introduction of chants into the learning culture of women's mosques, chants diverse in form, content, and function. We reconstructed the evolution of diverse traditions in their transformation during the educational reforms of the early Republican era: from their exclusive use in men's mosques to their defining and powerful application as tools of religious instruction for illiterate women.[9] In the process, *jingge* came to be associated with the sphere of women's mosque culture, as women were entirely dependent on them for oral instruction; *jingge* were thus associated with illiteracy and inferior levels of understanding of Islam and its essential sources (Jaschok and Shui 2005; Jaschok 2008). Yet it is important to remember that even at an early stage, the incorporation of *jingge* into the culture of women's mosques was informed by optimism and reformist impulses.

Women's mosques benefited from creative outpourings at the most popular level when, between the turn of the 20th century and the commencement of the Republic in 1912, Islamic tracts and widely known religious chants were published and distributed among Muslim believers. The most recent appearance in print of a collection of such chants, in our 2017 SongBook (ZMFEC 2017), could be regarded as continuing the tradition of popularizing faith through appealing, easily memorized chants. It also continues a mutually enriching interdependence of oral tradition and

8 Even regarding the more recent record of female education in China, there is ample scholarship showing the enduring inequality in opportunity-enhancing outcomes resulting from undeniable overall progress in female education. In addition to multiple problematic and intersecting factors, gender continues to complicate the use of modern education as a capacity-enhancing tool for women in an era of commercial/technological transformation on the one hand, and patriarchal (if adapted) continuities on the other hand (Bauer *et al*. 1992; Bailey 2006; Liu and Carpenter 2005). The unintended consequences of China's one-child family policy have revealed agential possibilities in equitable educational opportunities for women but also structural limitations (Tsui and Rich 2002).

9 Women's mosques were cited by Catholic, Protestant, and Methodist missionaries active in Henan at the turn of the 20th century to illustrate the flourishing state of Islam (Jaschok and Shui 2005, 265–68). The entire province of Henan had about 300 mosques, while the city of Kaifeng demonstrated its importance as a religious center with its numerous sites of worship. In the 1910s, seven mosques for men and eight women's mosques were listed in Kaifeng. More than 30 *ahong* and over 120 *hailifan* (students of Islam preparing to be ordained as *ahong*) were at the service of a community of over 3,500 Muslim households (Jaschok 2008; also see Shui and Jaschok 2002, 133–42).

written sources. However, as previously noted, this privately printed SongBook (ZMFEC 2017) is the first-ever such compilation undertaken by women, including the women *ahong* who were among the initiative's leaders. Local Muslim women and researchers in Henan jointly recorded, transcribed, annotated, and prepared this book of traditional and contemporary chants for the pedagogical and ritual use of women, at home and in their women's mosques. The chants used throughout this volume come from this invaluable local women's project.

Translation/interpretation was the most sensitive and difficult part of the process of recording previously unrecorded chants for posterity and use in worship, as well as for pedagogical and celebratory use. Described in detail in Chapter Two, *zanzhu zansheng* (or *zansheng*, chants in praise of Allah and Prophet) and *jingge* are the two traditions that evolved in the oral culture of female religious learning. *Zansheng* were passed down the generations in Persian and Arabic, whilst *jingge* were transmitted in Arabic and Persian, but primarily in Chinese. As Josephine Pui-Hing Wong and Maurice Kwong-Lai Poon (2010, 152) point out, 'translation is a practice mediated by social relations of power'; that is: 'The understanding of culture – as a system of dynamic, ambiguous, and conflicting meanings, intertwined with language and discourse, mediated by power, to create and recreate the sociocultural world – is critical to the discussion and debates about translation in cross-cultural research' (*ibid*.). Translators are at the heart of this mediation of meaning.

Against a background of oral traditions teaching illiterate women a mostly rudimentary grasp of religious concepts, it is the authority with which leading religious women – the *ahong* – are imbued by members of their mosque congregations that grants them the power to shape the very religious imaginary of women, their place in the secular world of female responsibilities and duties as good Muslim wives and mothers, and of *houshi* (Afterlife), a prospect of hope that is also, always, tinged with dread. It is their *ahong*'s interpretation of the text of a given chant selected for collective singing and her guidance of a collectively shared process of learning which can infuse the collective mood toward trepidation or toward reassurance and consolation. It is the *ahong*'s ability to elaborate on an often opaque language and apply unfamiliar concepts to guide women's local world that renders adherence to daily Islamic practice less daunting, less mystifying. The task of 'vernacularizing' (Levitt and Merrit 2009; see also Chapter Four) overarching global values does not merely apply to chants of Persian and Arabic origin, but also to Chinese language *jingge* with their admixture of classical language, sinicized Islamic terms and phrases, and metaphorical allusions. The power of such mediation locks into place hierarchy and subordination and, importantly, dependency. But for most women approaching their *ahong* in times of crisis and confusion, it is a welcome, even sought-after dependency on their respected and indispensable guide to salvation. The female *ahong* is an authority who can dispel ignorance, providing an informed understanding of Islam's pillars of faithful practice and of conduct expressing proper and seemly Muslimness in a non-Muslim society.

The chants provide a treasure trove offering guidance on fundamental Islamic duties and injunctions, prohibitions, and ritual obligations, but also open up our understanding of the tangled, subjective world of emotions and affect. According

to Clair (1998, 40), 'Aesthetics encourages that the lived experience be viewed *as expressive activity*' in all its aspects, allowing 'a means for silence to escape and become expression', including expressions of challenge to dominant structures of power for the right and opportunity to be heard. The chanted *jingge* and *zansheng* from Hui Muslim women's tradition of oral learning, silenced until recently by the relegation of *jingge* to the female sphere of inferior spirituality, have become a means of irrepressible subjective self-expression and the powerful communication of shared faith.

Conversations Among Muslim Women: 'Islam is Life Itself'

Ge CX *Ahong* asks[10]: *How old are you this year?*

Cheng XY[11]: I am 45 years old now.

You are 45 years of age. So how did you first have contact with Islamic faith?

Cheng XY: I have got instruction in Islamic knowledge from the time that I left school. I was then in my teens, and I followed Zhao *Ahong,* learning with her for two years. I knew nothing. Actually, I did not understand anything. When Zhao *Ahong* told me to worship, then I worshiped. When told to recite scripture, I recited. I just followed her. And I did not understand what I was saying. And you can say this [state of ignorance] went on, I should say, until my 30s. Then, because I got some basic learning of *jiaomen* [foundational principles of Islamic faith] and had a little foundation, in my thirties I continued to learn to study the faith. But I learned with the help of a new study method. Ah, then I really came to understand the meaning of Islam. Islam is life itself, *aiyah*, and not just about praying and reciting scripture. Only then I really understood.

As previously indicated, a significant development re-energized the usefulness of women's mosques and the influence of their resident *ahong*.

Whereas traditional *jingge* constituted part of an early expressive culture of male mosque congregations during the late years of the Qing dynasty (1636–1912), they reached women's mosques only during the educational reforms of the early Republican era (1912–1949). Turning now to the genre called *quanjiaoge* (chants of exhortation), which belongs among traditional *jingge*, nowadays an established part of the expressive culture of women's mosques, they have proven popular to this day. Having originated during the transition period from the Ming to Qing dynasties, in the 16th and 17th centuries, the influence of these Chinese language chants has been particularly profound. Their exact dates may no longer be recoverable, but their plain and instructive words of exhortation resonate as of old. The following chant is one among several traditional chants in the SongBook, urging

10 Ge CX's questions are henceforth given in *italics* without attribution.

11 Cheng XY, 45 years old, is a member of a women's study class in a small town in Henan province.

the faithful, women and men, to live lives in preparation for the Hereafter (ZMFEC 2017, 7). When she was very young, the 75-year-old *hajji*, Hai XL, learned this chant by heart from the *ahong* at her local women's mosque.

Quanjiaoge 劝教歌 ***A Song of Exhortation***[12]

各位穆民仔细听，真主命令要遵行，

All Muslims among you, listen carefully, Allah's commands are to be obeyed,

阿訇劝讲要记牢，忏悔二字主答应.

We must remember what the *ahong* advised us, that Allah promised [to accept] penitence.

若还不听阿訇讲，人活百岁要无常，

Those not listening to the *ahong*'s words, even if living to a ripe old age, there is no escaping from mortality,

无常之后受审算，自作自受真可怜.

After passing through death, we receive judgment, having made our own fate, is this not wretched.

叫你礼拜怕啰嗦，叫你封斋怕挨饿，

Asking you to worship, you fear long-winded sermons, asking you to fast, you fear hunger-pains,

你把钱财看得重，你把父母看得轻，

As for wealth, you treat it seriously, as for your parents, you treat them lightly,

父母恩情比海深，你这一辈还不清，

Our parents' benevolence is deeper than the sea, a lifetime cannot repay the debts we owe,

孝顺儿女享主恩，忤逆儿女受罪刑.

Children who practice filial piety enjoy Allah's mercy; disobedient children receive punishment.

大病来临害在身，取名天使随后跟，

Fatal illness wrecks the body, calling upon the soul, the angel awaits,

12 This chant was recorded in May 2014, prior to the beginning of the SongBook project, when Ge CX *Ahong* developed a passionate interest in preserving the cultural heritage of women's mosque history.

人人无常都一般，身上穿个白布衫，

In death we all become ordinary, our bodies shrouded in garments of white cotton,

手里不拿一分钱，怀里不揣一分钱，

Our hands do not keep a single coin, our arms do not carry a single coin,

家中儿女放声哭，痛苦流泪真伤心，

At home the children are crying out, pain and grief make the tears flow, ah, such sadness,

哭哭啼啼送门外，一直送到黑坟坑，

There is the sound of sobbing as you are taken away, carried all the way to a dark grave,

进了坟坑把门封，没有窗户没有门，

Having entered the grave, the door is sealed, there is no window, no door,

没有光亮没有灯，只有天使来审问，

There is no light, no lamp, only an angel comes to bear account,

享福受罪自承担，儿女各回自己家，

Blessing and suffering, it is for you alone to endure, the children return to their homes,

家有银钱千千万，财产难渡这一关，

Family wealth is counted in thousands of silver coins, none of that you own passes through the gateway [of death],

置下财产子孙分，千下善恶归本身，

Material wealth is the inheritance of descendants, while all deeds, good and evil, are yours to bear,

千好得好主恩赐，千歹得罪受罪刑，

A thousand good deeds, and the Lord bestows rewards, a thousand evil sins, and the Lord metes out punishment,

奉劝穆民细心听，人人都要顺主命.

Advise the Muslim people to listen attentively, each of us must abide by Allah's commands.

When asked about the relevance of these chants to the 21st century, beyond the sheer love of performance, Mai BL, a respected member of the local women's community, gave a simple, unambiguous answer: each woman 'must abide by

Allah's commands as a kind of family tradition'. But a more detailed account of her life conveys something of the challenges she had to negotiate to remain committed to the obligations of the Islamic faith. Mai is representative of her generation of women who prioritized the need to provide for the family as best she could during years of full-time work, unable to keep to the strict prayer schedules to which all Muslims are subject (although women are under a lighter regime as their domestic duties are considered more urgent than calls to prayer).

However, she also exercised caution during more politically hostile times when it was not wise to stand out as a pious and committed Hui Muslim. During the busiest years of Mai's life, the duty incumbent upon all Muslims to attend to prayer was left to the older generation, to those with more time to spare and approaching the end of their lives. This was true for many of the women interviewed. In Mai's case, when she was young, she could safely entrust religious duties to senior members of her family, well-known for having produced several generations of respected *ahong*. The following is an extract from a conversation between Ge CX *Ahong* and Mai about Mai's experience:

Conversations Among Muslim Women: 'A Kind of Family Tradition'[13]

Ge CX *Ahong* asks[14]: *Can I ask you about your family background? Are your family members all devout Muslims? Did some of them ever serve as ahong in a mosque? From your personal experience, how did your religious faith develop over time?*

Mai BL: Talking about *ahong*, members of my family have been serving as *ahong* since the generation of my mother's grandmother. My maternal grandparents are *ahong* too, thanks be to Allah, and this has continued right down to my mother. What's more, their belief in Islam is steadfast. I think this is a kind of family tradition.

Oh, you are a truly religious family, because your family served as ahong *from your grandmother's time.*

Mai BL: My mother's mother was an *ahong*, not my father's mother.

Oh, your mother's mother. That means that it is your maternal grandmother's family we are talking about. How many generations of ahong*?*

Mai BL: That would be my mother's grandmother, my grandmother, and my mother. As far as I know, that would make three generations of *ahong*.

13 This conversation with Mai BL, 61 years old at the time, took place in the summer 2016, in Henan province.

14 Ge CX's questions are henceforth given in *italics* without attribution.

As Mai later recounted in a further conversation (see Chapter Seven), it was only later in life, after retirement, that she engaged more profoundly and methodically with her faith, finding her own way to a deeper understanding of the scriptures through the guidance of an *ahong*. This *ahong*'s 'unique' fusion of traditions of women's prayers and collective piety and innovative means of instruction, according to Mai, brought *yimani,* knowledge of the faith, into her soul and purpose to her life. It allowed Mai, silenced by lifelong familial and societal pressures on all her waking hours to fear for her salvation, to unburden herself and regain purpose in her life.

Claiming Speech That Compels Listening

The aspiration to give voice to those presumed to be chaotic, irrational, and incapable of systematic thought is a claim to coherence and thus to agential capacity. But in the struggle for coherence, such 'metaphorical references to "voice" tend to privilege its discursive connotations, which relegates the embodied voice to a service role of rendering audible the coherent thought' (Anastasia 2014, 262). The value of voice relates closely to appearance, to an acoustic intervention in a particular time and space that goes beyond the word to others' receptivity – and thus to the unpredictability of listeners' responses to uncalled for or unconventional sound. 'Voices', according to Anastasia (*ibid*.), 'enter our bodies through the ear and/or as felt vibrations and act as vocal vectors – means of escape from stratification and suppression'. The voice does not, therefore, direct itself simply to the word; its acoustic affect instead registers where others listen most warily, most anxiously, most often in ambiguous, potent silences.

Exploring silence as 'the elusive moments of human communicating' (Brenda Dervin 1993, quoted in Clair 1998, 5) offers an escape from conceiving of the past, of past generations' lives, from within a gendered binary of repressive silence and agentive voices. It enables an exploration of 'the silencing aspects of communication and the expressive aspects of silence…where all of life will be a continual, becoming, unfolding dialectical process' (L.M. Glennon 1983, quoted in Clair 1998, 5). Moreover, with the theorization of silence by critical, postmodern, and feminist scholarship, a sharper focus has been gained on ideological perspectives on silence and its instrumentalization in marginalizing certain peoples (Clair 1998; Daly 1973; Olsen 1989; Tannen and Saville-Troike 1985).[15] This has laid bare the powerful dimensions of oppressive factors as well as the promise of resistance and challenge by women from within 'the same shared space, the origin of silence' (Clair 1998, xiv). Yet, exploration of the hierarchical structures of power as an exploration of the relational construction of discourse and silence, the oppressive nature of their co-existing and acting upon each other, enables the possibility of

15 See Clair (1998, 6) for a threefold categorization of silence: (1) literal, 'as the space between words'; (2) epistemological, knowing without the means of articulation; and (3) ontological, 'the silence of Being or Life itself'.

their undoing. Thus, Clair returns to the words of Audre Lorde to suggest that the struggle for women from marginalized communities is therefore not confined to emerging from silence into speech; rather, it lies in changing 'the nature and direction of our speech. To make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard' (Audre Lorde 1984, quoted in Clair 1998, 33).

Citing the influence of Michel Foucault's work (e.g., Foucault 1979) on the subtle dimensions of power that dominate the construction of the disciplined subject, Clair's exposition of silence enables us to focus on the problematic relationship between language and silence that conceals the elusive subjectivity of the historical subject. If, as Clair (1998) suggests, relationality undergirds the dynamic between the oppression and tension that sustains silence, it is arguably in the historical transformation of Muslim women's 'shared same space' that the elusiveness of the 'forgetful' historical subject has been challenged into the audibility of voice, enabling us to listen, through women's (collective) remembering, to the sonic riches of their past. And it is this which is the subject of the next chapter, the story of how Hui Muslim women came to take ownership of their tradition of chanting.

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7 Remembering Chants of Commitment

Truth Lies With Father and Mother

The previous chapter concluded with reflections on the complex intersections of speech, agency, silence, and structural inequalities. Here we continue to explore the multifaceted sociality of silence, bringing the significance of reawakened memories of chants into conversations between leading transmitters and elderly women – as they remembered the place of chants in their lives, past and present; when daughters were taught that their 'truth lies with father and mother', in the words of the pre-Republican *jingge* quoted in the title (see below in this chapter). When interlocutors recalled the times when faith was central to the daily rhythms of family life and other times when it became necessary to 'forget' or conceal what had been at the core of their innermost emotional life and social identity.

Although the origins of individual chants and their place in the corpus of chants available to individual teachers are in most cases unknown, the number of *jingge* used for instruction and celebration in women's mosques increased steadily over time, with the content of *jingge* continuing to absorb contemporary flows of ideas and topical issues. Thus, it can be said that *jingge* came to reflect women's aspirations through evocative and poignant images, revealing subjectivities that were not confined to performing the functions of exemplary Muslim mothers and wives, even if these roles remained dominant. *Jingge* can be seen to give expression to changing socio-political challenges and conditions that allowed women to make their aspirations and beliefs heard in a polyphony of voices – outside gender-segregated spaces – and to participate in public discourses over the directions and future of national regeneration and a Chinese-anchored modernity.

Important themes of chants from the Republican era (1912–1949) revolve around nurturing patriotism and Muslims' contributions to the great project of national reinvigoration, highlighting the presence of a reformist and educated Muslim population. An important theme in these chants is women's responsibility to contribute to the nation and to Islam through newly significant roles that undergird a social expansion of their traditional functions as wives and mothers, beyond home and mosque. By facilitating, as primary educators of their children, the strengthening of Islamic faith and orderly practice of Muslim life, these *jingge* suggested that women were serving a society in transition and at its most needful of maternal guidance and care. Other *jingge* reflect women's difficult balancing act of being good Muslim wives at home while ensuring the salvation of their souls in the Afterlife through a daily discipline

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of prayer sustained by guidance from their female *ahong*. Themes on complexities of family life, precarious kinship ties, worldly preoccupations, but also sadness and grief in the face of illness and loss of loved ones, focus attention on an overwhelming sense of the transitory nature of life, of social and political turmoil, and of material hardship (Jaschok and Shui 2005).

Among Chinese language *jingge*, the chant featured below, dating from around the late-Qing/early Republican era, has retained much popularity with women. Like so many *jingge* of this period, its preoccupation is with human frailty, with believers being castigated because of their forgetfulness of their duties to God, ready to make plentiful promises only when falling ill. Illness is a recurrent metaphor suggestive of the vagaries of human existence, of the frailty of life. Beset by many vicissitudes, Muslims are reminded of the inescapable fact of mortality. Yet, as this *jingge*, like other contemporary chants, suggests, even those afflicted by serious disease who are made fearful of the prospect of imminent death tend to err from the righteous Muslim path, resorting all too readily to practices that are non-Islamic and abhorrent to true believers.

Such a reference appears in the *jingge* titled *Shi ke tan* (十可叹 Ten Things to Sigh About), in the third item in a long list of itemized exasperations: 'in life Muslims do whatever comes easy, [but] when illness strikes a witch is called for, believing in evil spirits to cure illness, Muslims not walking the Muslim path, walk in this world in vain' (ZMFEC 2017, 73–4).[1] This is a fascinating allusion to the many pitfalls that might lure believers away from the righteous path mapped out for Muslims. It is also a reminder of the complex processes through which universal values are vernacularized, playing out in local contexts of competing and intermingling belief systems (Levitt and Merrit 2009). However, as evident in the *jingge* below, there is an acknowledgment of the harsh realities that shape human beings' frailty and vulnerability in the face of material hardship, of taxing, ceaseless labor to ensure a family is fed and housed. Particularly acute were fears of the ever-present threat of illness, the danger to life such illness posed where medical remedies were few and resources scarce, and the continual threat to the survival of dependents without a breadwinner.

Such fears are evoked in graphic images in the following *jingge.* Good resolutions are aplenty and come easy, the *jingge* informs the wayward believer, until life hangs in the balance. This chant was transmitted by an elderly woman to her granddaughter, both of *ahong* status. The grandmother, the late Li XY *Lao Ahong* (1893–1983), was instructed when she was a child and never forgot the chant. She left this *jingge* as a legacy to her granddaughter Hai WZ *Ahong*, who shared this gift with subsequent generations when she responded to our call for contributions to the women's SongBook (ZMFEC 2017, 73).

1 生为回回随便干，家有病人请巫婆，信邪涉鬼吧病看，回回不走回回路，枉在世上走一遍 (ZMFEC 2017, 73–4).

Yishi bing zai shen 一时病在身 ***On Having Fallen Ill***

一时病在身， 举意发善心。好了我的病，礼拜散金银.

When ill, one resolves once more for compassion and charity. When health returns, show gratitude by worship and generous offerings, scatter gold and silver.

一时灾难退，退在九霄云 。前言将不配，昼夜费心勒.

When disaster disappears, and (illness) retreats to the clouds beyond. Did you forget your words? Day and night, putting forth much effort.

为女打首饰，为儿定新亲。昼夜胡盘算，忘了举意心.

For the daughter fine jewelry, for the son a wife. Day and night thinking and calculating, forgetting the promise to be charitable and kind-hearted.

天仙来拿命，吊在凉水盆。殡理荒郊外，团住坟坑门.

The Angel arrives to take your life, letting you fall into a pool of icy water. Burial in the deserted outskirts [of human settlements], all congregate at the threshold of the grave.

蝎蛰虫来咬，蛇吃蟒来吞。有心再悔过，难免渡青春.

Scorpions will sting and worms infest, snakes and pythons will gulp you down. Have a heart and repent, difficult to move on from youth.

崔你心事好，孬好无根草.[2]

Persuading you to have a good heart, if not, you'll be like grass without roots.

主的皇言真是贵，难劝无知人.

Allah’s words are indeed precious, hard to persuade those without knowledge.

人在世上千点好，真主不亏人.

Where humanity gathers merits in this world, Allah does not forsake you.

Why did the late Li *Lao Ahong* choose this *jingge* to be shared with her granddaughter? The chant expresses the central concern of a deeply pious grandmother

2 崔 (*cui*) is most likely a typographical error, intended to be read as 催 (*cui*). With 催 there is a sense of 催促 (*cuicu*), thus the intention is both to persuade 劝 (*quan*) and to ‘rush’. Grateful acknowledgment is due to my colleague Ha Guangtian and his partner Phyllis for their additional and most enlightening comment: ‘This couplet seems to suggest that one should lighten up and move on, whether things are good or bad, after all humans are just like rootless grass. 无根草 seems to refer to love-vine, but given the latter's rather negative representation in the botanic world – a parasitic plant that sucks the life out of the host – it is probably better to leave it as rootless grass. 孬好 seems to be a colloquial expression as in 孬好都行 “Either way, good or bad, it will do”’.

nearing the end of her life, worrying about the future – and importantly, the Afterlife – of her young granddaughter. The chant is full of insights into human nature and provides vivid and disturbing evocations of the fate of souls in dangerous limbo. It is frank in its assessment of human frailty, ever inclined to make ready promises when in ill health, and indeed when faced with any challenge to the ordinary rhythms of life and its presumed certainties. The chant reminds the listener that as health returns, promises to be good give way to materialistic preoccupations and all too quickly, worldly concerns over children and their marriage prospects take over. The warning of dire consequences is brought into sharp focus in the chant's dark middle section. It speaks of surrendering one's life to the divine messenger at the threshold of death, a place remote from the warm and happy places of this world's home life. In this place, creature comforts give way to frozen solitude, and predators wait for unsuspecting victims, worms burrowing themselves into flesh, and pythons and snakes lying in wait to swallow whatever is in their way.

This evocation of a nightmarish scene of death and helpless anguish is strong and intense, even overwhelming. But it is quickly tempered by the reminder of Allah's justice, ultimately leaving no good deed unrewarded. However – and this is the important, central message – merciful justice is predicated on humanity's effort to do good, even if seemingly always at the mercy of the malevolent winds of fate threatening to harm the souls of error-prone believers. So, the chant exhorts listeners toward the ceaseless endeavor to learn, to acquire education in the knowledge of Islam, and to test one's commitment to Islamic commandments in daily life. Only thus can the words of Allah be understood and realized.

It is in familial relationships – whether a child or an adolescent, a spouse, or a parent – within close or extended kinship relations that human beings are most severely, and daily, tried and tested. Here, the core values of a faith-based life are enacted in relationships that undergird women's life cycles, filling days with joy as well as suffering.

The large number of chants of exhortation demonstrates their importance in the educational repertoire of religious leaders, who understand too well the multiple burdens carried by wives, daughters-in-law, mothers, by women at different stages in their life cycles – which affect their relative standing within the family – and most importantly, by women anxiously concerned about the impact of busy domestic lives on their devotion to religious duties.

Fu muqin 父母亲 ***Father and Mother***[3]

我给你讲一讲父母的恩，父母养你费了 心，父母的恩情比海深。

Let me tell you of the kindness of father and mother; father and mother brought you up with much care, the love and affection of father and mother are beyond the depth of the sea.

3 This early pre-Republican era Chinese language *jingge* was collected in July 2016 by Ding QY *Ahong* (ZMFEC 2017, 92–3).

哎，青年人要听话，父母的恩情比山大，眼泪一把屎一把，把你们一个个都拉.

Take note, young people, and be obedient, the loving kindness of father and mother soars high above the mountain, shedding tears as the baby poops all over once more, one by one you are raised to adulthood.

哎，老父老母是人生，父亲母亲造成功，　娘怀九月心担惊，担惊受怕养儿孙.

Take note, aging father and mother are life, father and mother achieved a life of success; *Niang* was pregnant for nine months with an apprehensive heart, feeling evermore anxious raising the child.

哎，婴儿落地叫三声，穆民浩比风里的灯，父亲的恩情比山大，母亲的恩情比海深.

Take note, with wailing sounds at birth, the baby comes into the world, Muslim people worry that wind extinguishes the light [of life]; the loving care of father and mother soars high above the mountain, father and mother have love and affection beyond the depth of the sea.

哎, 生下女儿一场空, 岁岁惊恐长成人, 十七八上离娘 身, 嫁出门外当亲戚.

Take note, giving birth to a daughter is all in vain, forever in dread of reaching maturity; when reaching seventeen, eighteen, she leaves her mother's side, marrying out to enter another family.

哎，生下儿子满房红，一岁一岁长成人，左边尿湿放右边，右边尿湿放前边.

Take note, giving birth to a son, marking Name Day with auspicious celebration, growing by the year, when he wets the left side of the cot, I place him onto the right, and when he wets the right side of the cot, I put him at the front.

哎，水有源来树有根，父母的恩情要记清，活着送他吃穿用，死后搭救会走坟.

Take note, water has its origins, trees have their roots, father's and mother's love and affection are never to be forgotten, when among the living, provide for their food and clothing, after their passing, visit the grave to pay tribute.

哎，青年人心想开, 老人的坟头你常来, 不会念索认主拜, 你把教门送上来.

Take note, Young Ones, open your hearts, come often to the graves of those who have departed; if you cannot chant the scripture, worship Allah, let your faith ascend.

This is a touching lament by the older generation, by parents who – in somewhat accusatory language of hurt but also in a voice of reprimand – remind their children that only untold parental sacrifice brought them safely into adulthood. The *jingge*

serves as a reminder of the daily grind of adult responsibility, of parents' anxiety about their children's survival in an unforgiving, austere environment,[4] and of their hope for reciprocal support when it is the parents who must turn to their adult children for help. The *jingge*'s anonymous author does not shy away from describing the daily toil of looking after incontinent, fretful babies, demanding from a parent – here the description is of childcare duties typically falling on mothers – ceaseless attention and 'affection beyond the depth of the sea'. And it is so that a daughter must be married off and become attached to her husband's family, while a son's care during the parents' lifetime and after their passing cannot be taken for granted. Worldly preoccupations may make for adult children's forgetfulness, and the graves of deceased parents are left unattended. It is a chant that both reprimands and laments, which reminds but also expresses fear that words may have little impact on the next generation. Yet the concluding line – 'If you cannot chant the scripture, worship Allah, let your faith ascend' – may also be read as a wistful expression of hope despite all the odds, a hope that future generations might remain steadfast in their commitment to the faith of their ancestors.

Motherhood, Daughters, Muslimhood

As noted previously, the trope of the all-pervasive, all-important maternal presence is an important thematic thread within the corpus of Islamic chants. At the heart of a most intimate nexus of relations, the mother is anchored in ties of affection and loyalty – a deeply felt loyalty held sacred because it ties the maternal axis of emotional belonging to a wider relational axis of belonging to a shared faith. Critical dissection of the historical centrality of motherhood in women's self-image and the social affirmation women derive from motherhood is a contested subject matter central to western-centric feminist discourse. It has been castigated by cross-cultural, intersectional, and postcolonial scholarship for a reductionist ethnocentric theorizing that bypasses the complex, dynamic interplay of agency and structural and historical contingencies shaping women's lives in a heterogeneous global world (Beyer 2019; Rye *et al.* 2017). As a powerful ideological and symbolic undergirding of both neo-Confucian and Islamic meaning systems, the centrality of motherhood in Chinese kinship was most strikingly conceptualized by the feminist anthropologist of traditional Chinese family relations, Margery Wolf (1972), as the core of a 'uterine family' sustained by powerful sentiments of affection – a woman's source of potent social power in a patriarchal, patrilocal, and patrilineal kinship society.

When in reformist discourses of Republican-era intellectuals, the modernization of women's roles in society and its link with the nation's modernization became a subject of heated controversy, the imaginary of motherhood was vital in justifying resistance by conservative male Muslim intellectuals against women's entry into

4 I thank Mabel Lee for alerting me to the reference to parents' anxiety over the all-too-common child mortality, signified by an opaque phrase in the chant: 穆民浩比风里的灯, here translated as 'Muslim people worry that wind extinguishes the light [of life]'.

public roles. Passionate and intense, such debates – conducted in literary salons, public media outlets, privately printed pamphlets, and religious venues – highlighted the shared aspirations among Muslim and non-Muslim intellectuals for the necessary modernization and strengthening of the Chinese nation. Yet these debates also marked delineations of ideological divergence over the inclusion of women in agendas for national reform. For Muslim scholars and practitioners, the potency of sacred motherhood arguably became a central pillar of a separate Islamic identity, reflecting the intensity of debates, within both Muslim and non-Muslim circles, between traditionalist and progressive voices over the scope of reforms required in the nation's drive for modernity and national regeneration. Embedded in this debate was the role to be played by women in the country's future (Jaschok and Shui 2005; Li Gang 2022).

The widely performed *Ummi* counts among the foremost, much-loved chants eulogizing motherhood. Immensely popular, it is chanted with passion and emotion, evoking and celebrating a mother's devotion and love. A visible measure of the sonic effect of the chant's multiple repetitions of exclamations of love (for the mother and ultimately, Allah) – which render this *jingge* so mesmerizing – is the subtle, rhythmic swaying of the chanters' bodies and the tears that, inevitably, stream down the cheeks of performers and audience alike.

Wode muqin 我的母***, known as Ummi, My Mother***[5]

我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！

Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother!

我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！

Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother!

我以悠扬顿挫的歌声在每时每刻的重复赞美她、铭记.

I praise her, remember her at every moment with this, my melodious song.

我以悠扬顿挫的歌声在每时每刻的重复赞美她、铭记她。

I praise her, remember her at every moment with this my melodious song.

我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！

Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother!

我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！

Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother!

5 Ge *Ahong* translated this chant from Arabic into Chinese. Transmitted from Malaysia, the chant in its Chinese language-translated form is performed frequently and with much enthusiasm by women's mosque choirs. Considered a recent addition to the *jingge* repertoire, it was not included in the Song-Book (ZMFEC 2017).

我的灵魂啊！我的生命啊！我的内心喜悦的人啊！我被呼唤的人啊！

Ah, my soul! Ah, my life! Ah, the One who is my inner-most Joy! The One who always calls me!

现在和将来你都是我最亲近的人.

Now and in future you are the one closest to me.

我的灵魂啊！我的生命啊！我的内心喜悦的人啊！我被呼唤的人啊！

Ah, my soul! Ah, my life! Ah, the One who is my inner-most Joy! The One who always calls me!

现在和将来你都是我最亲近的人.

Now and in future you are the one closest to me.

我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！

Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother!

我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！

Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother!

真主暗示或公开的命令我，必须孝敬您、善待.

Allah commands me, unseen or in the public gaze, I must honor you, cherish you.

真主暗示或公开的命令我，必须孝敬您、善待您.

Allah commands me, unseen or in the public gaze, I must honor you, cherish you.

我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！

Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother!

我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！

Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother!

您的名字刻骨铭心，您的爱诱导着我的人生，我为你祈祷：愿主保护你、呵护.

Your name remains deep in my heart, your love propels my life, and I pray for you: May the Lord protect you and care for you.

我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！

Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother!

我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！我的母亲啊！

Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother! Oh, my Mother!

The *jingge* intones: 'Allah commands me, unseen or in the public gaze, I must honor you, cherish you'. According to Ge *Ahong*[6], the command to honor and cherish is so significant because a command issued directly by Allah grants women the most irrefutable respect and status. Such a conferral of distinction, she asserts, entails duties as well as rights for women. How such confident assertions over women's obligations and rights are complicated and informed by convention and traditions, by the power of gender norms and normalized gender expectations, is brought out plainly in the following *jingge*.

The late Shan GL *Ahong* speculates that the chant featured below comes from around the late Qing/early Republican era. She was taught this chant in her local women's mosque when she was a little girl, and she was uncertain about its origin. The *jingge* dwells on the proper raising of daughters in preparation for their duties as wives, daughters-in-law, and mothers.

Jiaoxun nü'er 教训女儿 ***On the Instruction of Daughters***[7]

教训女儿， 理在爷娘，在家知礼，出门贤良.

Instructing your daughters, truth lies with father and mother; as daughter knowing propriety, as wife practicing virtue.

留头以后，少去门上，每日学活，切莫风长.

Having reached maturity, rarely cross the threshold; day after day learning from life, take note of the passing of time.

脚手齐整，清静安详，一动一静，五打五光.

Orderliness of person, quiet and serene; one step at a time, tempering yourself through goodness.

三从四德，总要长讲， 七岁封斋，更不可忘.

Three Obediences, Four Virtues, for Elders to talk at leisure; at the age of seven prepare for Ramadan, of this be ever mindful.

羞羞惭惭，归何其像，老老诚诚，别学猴样.

Bashful and timid, returning to which likeness; be simple and honest, don't be as wayward as a monkey.

说话留心，焉能胡讲，出得门去，自然装光.

Be careful of speech, how one can speak nonsense, going out of the door, be simply and honorably attired.

6 Conversation with Ge *Ahong* took place during the summer 2016 in Henan province.

7 This pre-Republican era *jingge* is the legacy of the late Shan GL *Ahong,* handed by her son Yang SL to Bai HM *Ahong* in June 2016 for inclusion in the SongBook (ZMFEC 2017, 122).

勤勤立家，争气傲强，孝敬公婆，尊敬长上.

Solicitously setting up home, prove yourself worthy, proud, and strong; be filial to your parents-in-law, respectful of elders.

和和妯娌，爱护侄郎，同去做饭，早下厨房.

Living in harmony with your sister-in-law, be protective of your nephew; go together to prepare food, be early in the kitchen.

受苦受 劳，莫愿爷娘[8]，一品名誉，儿品上场.

Enduring suffering and never-ending work, it is what father and mother hope for.

修下洪福, 谁不夸奖.

Achieving great blessings, who would not give praise.

公婆嘴碎，顺风耳旁.

If parents-in-law speak spitefully, let it go.

凡事忍耐, 草要口强;[9] 三言无话, 别放心上.

Patience in everything, grass growing needs strength; use words sparingly, do not take this to heart.

丈夫有错, 暗里劝讲; 温从 说话, 不使高腔.

When the husband is in the wrong, give counsel with discretion; choose your words with warmth, don't raise your voice.

言语柔和，中听顺当，思有 点样，何必假装.

Where words are gentle, a voice of moderation finds a ready listener; thinking this way, why pretend.

只要贤德，丑俊无妨，贤良教训女儿啊，无事不到大街上.

Needing only goodness and virtue, hideous or charming whatever it may be; ah, a daughter instructed in goodness and virtue, a well-instructed daughter, ah, if without reason, she must not venture outside.

8 I am grateful to Mabel Lee for suggesting it is possible that, in keeping with the general tone of exhortation, the chant's original wording might allude to blame, as signified by the homophone 怨 *yuan*, which would render the translation as: 'Do not blame father and mother' 莫怨 (*yua*n) 爷娘. Here I keep to the wording of the text that appears in the SongBook: 莫愿 (*yua*n) 爷娘.

9 I translated 草要口强 here as a metaphor, but I gratefully acknowledge Mabel Lee's suggestion that the wording might instead have been 莫要口强 'do not argue'. Faulty copying of a character could easily have led to substituting 草 for 莫.

This *jingge*'s tone of voice is didactic and severe, conjuring up the paragon of a filial daughter who excels in all the virtues enshrined in the moral codes of Islamic and Neo-Confucian gender prescriptions.

In conversation with Ge *Ahong* when Bai YF[10] was 80 years old, Bai describes her experience of passing from childhood to adulthood during a transitional period of social instability and political changes. Her words offer a rare window into how revolutionary political reforms of women's lives played out in an intimate relationship between an unbending father and a helpless daughter. Bai's father's rigid enforcement of an orthodox Islamic familial morality, untouchable by worldly conventions, further added to her sense of existing in a world apart. Here is an extract from their conversation.

Conversations Among Muslim Women: A Daughter Remembers

Ge CX *Ahong* asks: *Who told you that the Qur'an forbids women to have contact with men?*

Bai YF: I can't remember. I simply knew as a little girl that men's mosques and women's mosques must stay separate. I have never visited a men's mosque and have never been in contact with a man inside a mosque. Yes, men stay in their men's mosque, and women stay in their women's mosque. This is very clear and reasonable. For example, when we invited an *ahong* to our home, women and girls were not allowed to approach him. My mother cooked the meal, and then my father brought it to the *ahong*. My father's religious discipline was strict, and he also held the view that men and women must not speak with each other.

Also, my father arranged my marriage by himself. He never told me before he did this, and he never asked for my opinion either. I was not happy and disagreed with him on this marriage. My mother also disagreed. She was so angry that she fell seriously ill. Because my husband's family has good *jiaomen*, my older brother always asked my [would-be] husband and my [would-be] husband's brother to worship together with him. And also on *Zhuma* [Prayer Day], he always made sure that they were attending worship together at the mosque. They never missed prayers. My father satisfied himself on these matters and arranged for this marriage. Without even consulting with my mother. At that time, I was just seventeen years old. Now I have spent my whole life almost like a numb person. And I am not satisfied, I am not at all satisfied with my life.

Bai YF's years of formative childhood and early adulthood, in the late 1930s and 1940s, coincided with a volatile moment in China's history. Civil war, sporadic military conflict, unstable living conditions, and multifarious uncertainties characterized life during the transition toward the Communist Party's consolidation of

10 Interview with the 80-year-old Bai YF (born in 1936) took place in the summer of 2016.

governmental authority over the country. When the 80-year-old Bai YF reflected on her long life and the vicissitudes endured during years of national turmoil preceding and following the CCP victory in 1949, at the forefront of her remembering was family life. Her upbringing was ruled by the uncompromising regime of a strict father. He was a man known, and locally respected, so she said, for his unswerving faith, his *jiaomen*. Such was his faith, according to Bai, that (male) *ahong* from local mosques would seek out his company, visiting their home frequently to discuss doctrinal matters as well as matters of importance to the local Muslim community.

Pertinent to Bai YF's identity as a Muslim and female – moreover as the daughter of a redoubtable opponent of change in both orthodox Islamic practice and specifically the role of women in Islam – her most searing adolescent memory is of her authoritarian father's obstruction of women's rights granted by a revolutionary state. The potential opportunity this offered to Bai – for example, supporting her legal right, with the 1950 Marriage Law, to choose whom to marry – came too late for her. This was notwithstanding resounding, nation-wide Communist Party rhetoric on women's equality with men and the government drive, initially at least, for radical marriage and family reforms to give women the rights to free marriage, to divorce, and to work outside the home. We are given a glimpse of the impact of a father's unilateral action on a young girl when Bai refers to her life as lived so 'numbed' (糊涂麻叶 *hutu maye*) that it left her deeply troubled. Ironically, what had led her pious father to arrange the marriage in strict observance of Islamic injunctions resulted in his daughter's diminished formal religious observance, as upholding her primary roles as wife and mother subsumed her identity as a faithful Muslim.

This situation could be said to reflect the Communist Party's uneven government control over the nation during its early years of political transition. It allowed for a relative degree of flexibility in the local implementation of new legislation and policies, particularly those impacting familial relations and the position of women. This stood in marked contrast to the treatment and persecution of popular religions, which already marked the early phase of state consolidation (Cohen 1992; Jaschok and Shui 2005; MacInnes 1972, 1989).[11] A tightening of restrictions on all religious traditions took place within a few years, with continuous state-sponsored campaigns and movements (among these, felt most directly by our Muslim interlocutors, were the Anti-Rightist Movement in 1957–1959 and the

11 Islam, Daoism, Buddhism, Protestantism, and Catholicism are recognized in China as legal religions. They thus fall within the framework of Article 36 of the Chinese Constitution of 1982, which grants freedom of religious belief. These religions are administered by the Bureau of Religious Affairs, present at all levels of religious organization. Those labeled as superstitious cults, harmful sects, or underground churches are illegal and come within the surveillance and punitive discipline of the public or state security apparatus. For a recent issuance of 'China's Policies and Practices on Protecting Freedom of Religious Belief', see The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China report (2018).

Cultural Revolution in 1966–1976),[12] and a direct targeting of the gendered legacies of a pre-revolutionary Communist past.

It is thus perhaps not surprising that Bai YF most often recalls the words of *Tan ren sheng*[13] (Lamenting Life), a *jingge* popular during her childhood. And in this, she is not alone. Its stirring evocation of women's religious imaginary, steeped in the joys and anxieties of women's patriarchally embedded life cycles – a chant of hope and trepidation – gives women like Bai YF the language to express deeply felt but otherwise unuttered emotion: 'Life, like the shuttle [of a loom], day and night no rest, we lament how short our life'. The evocation of a traditional female-gendered soundscape associated with the sphere of women, the shuttle of a loom, becomes an association steeped in both sorrow and catharsis. Chanted in unison with others in the ambience of women's mosques, it is a sound of shared ambivalence, anchored in the domestic space where the care for husband and children and the extended family shapes a woman's daily routine and consequently, limits the scope of her religious discipline. But this sound, collectively rendered by members of the mosque congregation, also lifts their spirits, becoming a sound of transformation as women collectively retell their lives and nurture a shared pride in women's stories of strength and resilience.

Recalling this *jingge*'s origins in male tradition, the metaphorical and sociological references – from safeguarding the patriline to responsibilities for the family's safety and material support and the tools of literacy, brush, ink, and vellum – seem to exclude women's experiences, responsibilities, and capacities. But this is a chant that did not stay within the tradition cultivated by men. Indeed, when educational reforms marginalized the role of chanting in men's mosques, reflecting the trend for a more austere Islam during the Republican era, women became almost the sole heirs to the *jingge* tradition and its creative transmitters. More than that, women filled these chants with their aspirations, meanings, and gendered experiences.

Chants, Patriarchal Inscriptions, and Pride in Gender Complementarity

Crucial to successfully motivating and inspiring uneducated girls and women to sustain a discipline of learning was the female *ahong*'s creative instruction and application of well-tried learning tools. This involved collective repetitive chanting to help illiterate women retain in their memory fundamental guidelines to guard and preserve Muslim family life. Nevertheless, it was the collaboration between male Hui Muslim educational reformers – importantly here Li Fuzhen *Ahong* (late Qing dynasty) and Wang Chunli *Ahong* (Republican era) – and between scholars

12 The Cultural Revolution's (1966–1976) core campaigns targeted the Four Olds: *jiu sixiang* (旧思想 old ideas), *jiu wenhua* (旧文化 old culture), *jiu fengsu* (旧风俗 old habits), and *jiu xiguan* (旧习惯 old customs).

13 See Chapter One for the full text of the chant.

and educational reformers in general, working closely with influential female *ahong,* which led to an unprecedented enrichment of women mosques' repertoire of *jingge* (Jaschok 2008; Jaschok and Shui 2005; ZMFEC 2017; see also Chapters Two and Six). This oft-cited historical fact has become a cornerstone of *zhongyuan* Hui Muslim identity. As previously discussed, during a time when *jingge* largely ceased to feature in male worship and education – rejected by male *ahong* as no longer in keeping with the more austere reformist Islam that came to influence Islamic practice in central China's men's mosques – female religious practitioners marked the *jingge* tradition as a convenient tool of instruction for illiterate women. They turned *jingge* into a unique and much-loved feature closely associated with women's religious culture. Guided by their *ahong*, women were able to learn correct pronunciation of the scriptural languages, with *jingge* also becoming expressions of faith, making women feel part of the global community of worshipers beyond local mosque walls.

In the gender-segregated educational system of *zhongyuan* Hui Muslim culture, women's mosques mostly in townships and cities – more so than women's mosques anywhere else in the country – came to enjoy considerable religious and administrative autonomy under the guidance of female *ahong.* But when women *ahong* became the keepers and transmitters of chants sidelined in the reformist culture of men's mosques, they also became the keepers of a patriarchal legacy of moral inscriptions, embedding seeds of tension between prescription, women's emerging aspirations, and the reality of familial duties and pressures. Although these *jingge* did not form part of mandatory prayer, their characteristically emotional evocation of belief, faith, and yearning for salvation in the Afterlife appears in stark contrast to women's inescapable preoccupations with the clutter of daily domestic life. This dissonance between aspiration and quotidian submission resonates to this day. *Jingge* and other genres of chants have changed over time and with the times, with their tunes and content influenced and shaped by an *ahong*'s talent for adaptability, creative spirit, and linguistic and educational abilities. But many of the core themes have remained intact, a poignant reminder of the fate of those remiss of their religious duties pressing on the minds of many women. Over time, both women and men have influenced a multitude of genres and traditions, but women have inscribed *jingge* with a highly gendered experience of faith, hope, trepidation, and often fear, making the chants a precious record of religiously informed interior worlds.

Where an individual *ahong* possessed the literary ability, she helped to keep chants alive by faithfully transmitting inherited and newly added songs, bequeathing these rare records as a precious legacy to her successors. Following the suppression of all religions, including Islam, during the late 1950s until after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966 to the late 1970s), the relatively more liberal government treatment of religious worship during the 1980s permitted a (somewhat) tentative resumption of beloved traditions, such as the collective chanting of *jingge* after *Zhuma* (Prayer Day) worship. *Jingge* were initially dismissed, particularly by younger women, as unhappy, even humiliating, reminders of the history of female ignorance, deficient spirituality, and passivity, held back by patriarchal authority. But subsequent decades have brought about an incipient change in women's

thinking about the historical place of *jingge* in the current Islamic revival, and about their understanding of the more patriarchal exhortations addressing female Muslims. This has been helped by systematic research into the history of a richly diverse oral tradition of women's mosques.

The SongBook's community of recorders/transcribers gathered many current Chinese language *jingge* of which many of the earliest transmitters, as well as sources, remain obscure (ZMFEC 2017, 7–10). Many factors contribute to this partial knowledge, such as women's general illiteracy and their near-complete reliance on their female *ahong* to use her knowledge and erudition to make a written record of the *jingge*. As such, the faithful transmission of a *jingge*'s content, melody, and presentation was dependent on the religious authority in charge. In most situations, such a level of education could not be presumed, and thus the process of vernacularization entailed in transmission meant a given *jingge* was open to a teacher's interpretation and adaptation to changing local circumstances and external events. It is this absorption of local influences – whether involving other religious traditions and folk beliefs (民间 *minjian*) or local impacts of wider social and political changes (Dong 2002) – that makes these chants such a rich archival treasure trove. And it is in the language employed and the themes and topics made relevant to Muslim women that we derive a sense of the times, however partial, which shaped the chants, in turn enabling a cautious interpretation of their significance.

It is here, in the cultural space of *minjian* tradition, that leading *ahong* place the Chinese language *jingge* of the *kuhua* (哭花 lamentation, lit. weeping flowers) genre. These are the chants that reach most directly into women's remembering of the most bitter aspects of female lives. These are also the chants least likely to be performed. Only one such *kuhua* was entered into the SongBook (ZMFEC 2017) because, as the Kaifeng-based Zheng XR *Ahong* put it to me, 'already too many tears have been shed by women'.[14]

In the summer of 2016, on a day so hot that the streets were nearly empty of people, I had traveled to Kaifeng city to visit Zheng XR *Ahong*, resident *ahong* of a historical women's mosque. Our conversation covered many topics explored in previous discussions held over the many years of our long acquaintance. She reckoned it was time to celebrate the positive changes, now that women are much more educated, enjoying a much more equal standing with men, and capable of leading with acknowledged authority. These times, so Zheng *Ahong* felt, demand a different voice, a different tune for women to express themselves than can be conveyed in the largely unrecorded and diminishing archive of old laments from a bygone era. But Zheng XR *Ahong* admitted, if anyone takes an interest in the history of ordinary Muslim women, they should listen to the *kuhua* chants. Beware, however, she added, as the performance of *kuhua* will make listeners weep to hear how women were fated to suffer disappointments and loss in their lives, to yearn in vain for more comfort and contentment and appreciation of their ceaseless labor, dreams of a better life to come which rarely materialized. And such sadness is reinforced

14 Conversation with Zheng *Ahong* took place in August 2016, Kaifeng city, Henan Province.

by an evocation of nature that speaks to the elusiveness of human happiness in this world. She then recited these lines from the *kuhua* chant: 'I thought when the roses bloom, we will be together, the roses are blooming, but we are apart, I thought when the peony unfolds its petals, your studies are done, but…only loneliness and sadness abound…I thought that when the phoenix descends on the parasol tree, skipping from branch to branch, happiness would fill us; I did not know that you'd give me prickly branches on which the phoenix caught, lacerating the heart'.[15]

Nature, with its seasonal flowers and plants, wildlife, and familiar landscapes, supplies the expressive language through which love, faith, sorrow, and loss are evoked. The *kuhua* tells us of women forced to wait at home in anticipation and dread for their beloved. Consolation comes from their belief in an Afterlife of redemption and restorative justice, but the mournful tone also reveals that this belief is hard-won, ever in need of nurturing and (collectively performed) reiteration.

As narrated in a previous publication (Jaschok and Shui 2005, 262), the chanter Li Xiangrong, already then of advanced age, had to be repeatedly begged by the women who had congregated in the women's mosque to listen to her, to share the *kuhua* she said she had not sung for many decades. The story of love, separation, and love lost and forever lamented caused many in our circle of listeners – members of the local women's mosque and researchers – to weep profusely. Such was the emotional impact of the story, so Li Xiangrong remembered, that unlike current times, neither unmarried nor newly married women were then allowed to listen. Only those of experience and advanced age were considered sufficiently mature to bear the sadness that comes upon listeners when *kuhua* chants remind them of the sacrifices borne by women.

The chants of greatest emotional resonance for women tend to be most frequently those which respond to deep-seated fears about reconciling women's domestic duties and their multiple roles as wives, mothers, and daughters-in-law with their duties as believers. As faithful Muslims, they live in dread about the consequences of not sufficiently observing the daily prayer duties required for their admission to paradise (Jaschok and Shui 2000). The theme of many a *jingge* revolves around the tensions of reconciling the obligations incumbent upon a faithful Muslim and the incessant demands on women's daily discharge of responsibilities. In addition, these demands are locked into social expectations that women carry out their responsibilities in selfless service to husbands, children, and the wider family, as well as to their neighborhood and community.

Tensions over worldly and other-worldly preoccupations abound in many a *jingge*, sharpening awareness of women's quandaries: How would their souls fare in *houshi* (Afterlife)? Would the fires of hell await their compromised souls when even the most conscientious wife and mother might fall short of exemplary Muslim conduct? These were the agonizing issues older women we interviewed over the

15 For a full translation of the *kuhua*, see Jaschok 2008 (extract included here with the permission of the publisher, The Japan Society for the Study of Adult and Community Education). *Kuhua* chants circulate in various versions, their local variations reflecting a given teacher or *ahong*'s input. Although once popular, they are rarely chanted today. See also Chapter Two.

years would raise in conversations with us. In imagining the fate awaiting them – the visual rendering of the cruelty inflicted on lost souls depicted in the wall paintings of neighboring Buddhist temples – colors many of our interlocutors' anxious laments (Jaschok and Shui 2000).

And yet, even the sobering lyrics of the *jingge* 'Lamenting Life' (*Tan ren sheng*) are a much-loved chant. As the *ahong* of a prominent women's mosque in central China put it, women's positive sentiment arises with the sound of collective voices led by an *ahong* who, because of her learning, is trusted with safeguarding the salvation of their souls.[16] In this shared experience of the intensity of faith, the prospect of salvation creates exuberance. The atmosphere in the prayer hall of women's mosques, undisturbed by accusations of violating Islamic injunctions, engenders confidence that all can be well, domestic and religious duties can be balanced, and their souls will be saved. In becoming the chanters of songs telling of the conundrums besetting female-gendered life cycles, fears are calmed which might otherwise darken their spirits. The women are afforded a glimpse of paradise as their deserved reward, as women insisting that their right to spiritual equality commands respect for their own history both within and outside gendered spaces of worship and domestic life (Jaschok 2021).

Conversations Among Muslim Women:[17]'Everything has Changed'

Ge CX *Ahong* asks[18]: *When did you start to study Islamic knowledge? That is, when did you go to the mosque to learn?*

Mai BL: I am…in those early times, this was really on and off. I really began to go to worship when I was twenty years old. But that was also not very regular. When I was 53 years old, I really seriously began to enter study. Right at the age of 53 years. From then on, I have been very steadfast with going to the mosque to worship and with attending study classes at the mosque.

How much of the Qur'an have you learned since you started?

Mai BL: The Qur'an, hmm, perhaps not too much, but I have really learned a lot with my study. This way, I have applied what I learned much more. Through studying the Qur'an, I have come to understand much more. I think I have become more broad-minded, ah [rec.: exhaling at length], and I don't haggle anymore over everything the way I used to. Everything has changed.'

16 Interview in Zhengzhou, Henan, with the late, revered Du *Lao Ahong,* whose support and detailed responses to our research questions contributed to the first study of women's mosques in China (Jaschok and Shui 2000).

17 Interview with the 61-year-old Mai BL took place in the summer of 2016 in a small township in Henan province. See Chapter Six for a conversation with her on 'family tradition'.

18 Ge CX's questions are henceforth given in *italics* without attribution.

What has changed for Mai BL is what many a *jingge* evokes in graphic images: when looking back, in old age, at a life dominated by preoccupation with daily family life's manifold tasks and conventions, deep anxieties surface over the fate that awaits a negligent Muslim in Afterlife. 'Everything I used to' was re-evaluated and led to a heightened awareness of the duties incumbent upon believers to prepare for Afterlife, with greater steadfast regard for the limited timespan of human life. As the *jingge* 'Lamenting Life' (see Chapter One) exhorts so insistently: 'In this world, time is like lightning, embrace faith and do not treat it lightly. Children and wealth are worldly belongings, only good deeds become the foundation of Afterlife'. To have become more 'broad-minded', as Mai describes, was to understand the transitoriness or impermanence of the things that were previously so important that she would 'haggle' over them. Things which for her now pale in comparison with faithful adherence to Islamic principles and conduct in daily life. As many of our conversations indicated, such personal change requires an often-arduous process of religious learning that cannot be envisaged without the support of a trusted and learned *ahong*.

The role of an educated *ahong*, as the 80-year-old Bai YF[19] explains, was fundamental to girls and women being able to seize the educational opportunities that emerged during the 1950s.[20] In Bai's parents' view, what counted most was the opportunity for her religious education. When very young, Bai was sent by her parents to take classes in the adjacent women's mosque. Ge *Ahong* and Bai engage in further conversation in the extract below.

Conversations Among Muslim Women: 'Did the *Ahong* Teach All of You?'

Ge CX *Ahong* asks[21]: *Did the* Ahong *teach all of you?*

Bai YF: Yes, she taught us by herself. Except for her, there was no one else to teach us. Sometimes, older students tutored some younger students.

Did you ever hear the ahong *preach a sermon*?

Bai YF: Yes, I listened to her sermons.

19 Interview conducted with Bai YF, 80 years old when interviewed, in the summer 2016 in a provincial township in Henan province.

20 The years prior to the Compulsory Education Law of the PRC (adopted in 1986, amended in 2006) showed a consistent, relatively low percentage of female students at all educational levels. As Li Yuhui (2000, 36) states, 'when social and economic conditions are bad, women suffer more than men'. In the socially complex and materially disadvantaged environments of rural Muslim communities in particular, mosque-based religious instruction offered – and still offers – an important source of schooling for girls, which even the strictest families and patriarchal parents would support (see Matsumoto and Shimbo 2011; Rosati 2021).

21 Ge CX's questions are henceforth given in *italics* without attribution.

She also chanted Taobai, *and so on. So, what you had learned in the past has not been that different from what we are learning at present. Is this right?*

Bai YF: Yes, no difference. What I chanted, I learned from her. Now I can chant the Qur'an in its entirety. She taught lots of students, so many students could easily fill a big house.

When did you learn to chant zanzhu zansheng*?*

Bai YF: You taught me when I came here [the time when she joined the mosque presided over by Ge *Ahong*].

So, you did not begin to learn such chants when you [first] *came here?*

Bai YF: No doubt at all, you taught me [in the 1990s]! I came here first and then you arrived here [invited to become the mosque's presiding *ahong*] several days later. Was this not over ten years ago?'

The 80-year-old Bai YF describes in stark terms the impact that not tending to her faith had on her physical and mental health. Her late father – the source of strict discipline and the unchallenged arbiter of key decisions that shaped her life – appeared to her in dreams. Her nightmares, she recalls, ended only when she returned to constancy of prayer and collective worship:

Bai YF: When I retired, I fell ill with gallstones. So, I did not worship. One day, I dreamt that my [late] father blamed me, asking 'Why don't you attend prayer' [做礼拜 *zuo libai*]?' Oh, that really frightened me to death, and I thought, what I do when I die? I begged 'Oh, My Allah, I do *libai*, I do *libai*'. So, from then on, I insisted on doing always *libai* in a mosque, never forgetting [*libai*], whatever it takes.

In a visit I paid to Zheng *Ahong*,[22] we again discussed how *jingge* can recall the history of women's suffering in ways that evoke emotions never far from the surface when women converse amongst themselves. She reiterated how far women had come in their journey toward dignity and recognition. In her view, the SongBook (then still being prepared) was an indication of women's arrival in the public sphere; it was an unprecedented women's initiative and the making of their own history. Perhaps, Zheng *Ahong* concluded, it also meant these chants have much to teach. The history of women, even when painful, is relevant to everyone: '*Jingge*, that is our history, women's history; after all, there is still "weeping" [也"哭"还存在 *ye "ku" hai cunzai*]. Regardless of which country, women suffer all kinds of hardship'.

22 Conversation with Zheng *Ahong,* in her late 50s, took place in August 2016, in Kaifeng City, Henan.

Bound up in the turbulent dialectic of women's liberation (as defining a core pillar of the Chinese Communist Party state's legitimacy) and oppression (as indicative of religious, and backward, dependent subject status), Hui Muslim women, arguably more so than women from other religious traditions, have borne the consequences of an enduring official and popular binary discourse on their incomplete progression toward a socialist modernity. As secularization became a driving force in revolutionizing the relationship of the Communist Party with the people and with women specifically, Communist Party state rhetoric has placed Muslim women at the unstable intersection of state power, sanctioned identity, and exclusionary policy, uneasily tied to ethno-religious minority status as boundary subjects of a space of existential and political in-betweenness, a flawed subject status and counterfoil to the liberated 'new women' of a Communist Party imprint.

Some of these tensions appear in the life histories of women in the following chapter, women whose personal milestones and key moments played out during a time of great political turmoil. In-depth conversations we recorded among women from women's mosque congregations in Henan's provincial capital, townships, and villages grant us a glimpse of the challenges faced by diverse women of Islamic faith in a society which relegated, and still relegates, religious belief to a 'dark age' of unenlightened gender illiteracy. The conversations, however, also tell of relationships of trust and confidence professed by participants in conversations with the leadership of the younger, more reformist-minded *ahong.* As teachers and ethical counselors of considerable influence, this generation of leaders use their standing as trusted spiritual guides to touch upon sensitive emotional family matters, to carefully probe matters of belief, and to navigate the challenges of a secularist mainstream society on family life. Moreover, these conversations convey receptivity and responsiveness as women disclosed their most personal memories of being Muslim in an era of political uncertainty.

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8 Sustaining Faith During Times of Scarcity and Silence

To Live Through Such Times

When Ge *Ahong* engaged the 73-year-old retired factory worker Li XY in conversation, remembering the personal challenges of past decades which confronted Hui Muslim women, Li used words as plain as they are resonant when she recalled, 'to live through such times' (see below for more on this conversation). We were frequently told by our interlocutors, during the early years of our research, that *kuhua* chants as laments of hardship suffered by women in 'dark times' are 'difficult to recall' or 'best forgotten'. That is, until one day, in 2002, an elderly woman in a women's mosque started chanting, and the tears rolled down the cheeks of the listening women, remembering (Jaschok and Shui 2005). Perhaps remembering becomes harder because many of the underlying causes of hardship associated with women's past lives are still present today, and intrinsic to women's reminiscences in this chapter.

Modernization and the strengthening of the nation were predicated importantly on the release of productive capacities of women, finally liberated from the fetters of feudal and religious dependencies that are still referenced in popular and political discourses as characteristic of the time 'before Liberation' (解放以前 *jiefang yiqian*), i.e., before the coming into power of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949. This has thrown into relief the role of believing women as the default marker of an unredeemed, flawed identity, the counterfoil to 'the new woman' (新女性 *xin nüxing*) beholden to the Communist Party state-sanctioned, mythologized liberation of women from the fetters of patriarchal and feudal privileges (Croll 1978; Johnson 1983; Li, Liang, and Wang 1986; Stacey 1983; Strauss 2002; Wolf 1985; see also Chapter Five for Li Xiaojiang's critique of liberation bestowed). Over the decades of Communist rule, with its unpredictable twists and turns – from relatively flexible treatment of religious groups to outright persecution and suppression – the conditions under which religious organizations and communities continued to sustain their presence required adaptation, accommodation, and during the direst times, a commitment to faith under conditions of secrecy. There were times when collective worship was confined to family and underground gatherings. Whilst we have considerably more scholarship concerning the fate of religious organizations, their leadership, state legislation, and the regimentation of sites of worship, accounts given by the main storytellers in this chapter – women of faith in their 80s – reveal what is all-too-often unheard. They tell of how hardship could not have been endured if not for resilience and courage during times of

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silence, sustained through solidarity with other Muslim women and ultimately by an unbroken, if often tested, faith.

Stories of a religious life, recalled in empathetic interaction with a receptive listener, tell of the minutiae of daily life among girls and women in tradition-bound, patriarchal familial culture during unpredictable times of political and cultural transition. Largely confined to their family homes, and thus somewhat sheltered from the worst excesses of state-sponsored political campaigns, the impact of a mandated paradigm of socialist/secularized womanhood nevertheless filtered into the most insulated Muslim families, destabilizing certainties and a patriarch's authority. The very continuity of the female life-cycle as governed by Islamic injunctions and the moral encoding of proper female conduct – at the core of Muslim family-centered culture and sociality – became increasingly at odds with representations of the 'new woman' as an effective and liberated member of the new China. The individual stories, continued here from the previous chapter, offer further insights: even after Communist Party rule was established in 1949, the slow pace at which patriarchal family dynamics changed reflected to some extent the more relaxed political space of the early 1950s (Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Jaschok 2003; Jaschok and Shui 2005).

At the same time, women chose to align themselves with the new political realities in varied ways. There was individual defiance on the part of some women who adopted religious dress even even when pressure mounted against them, as was the case during the late 1950s when space for ideological dissent became ever more restrictive and conformity to secular-oriented appearance was more widely enforced. As conversations with women of older generations confirm, how Muslim women perceived the national campaign for equality between men and women (男女平等 *nan-nü pingdeng*) provides a gendered perspective on the nature of accommodating a mainstream culture that made new women's rights a cornerstone of CCP-state legitimacy. Legislative reforms initiated in the seminal 1950 Marriage Law enshrined into law women's right to resist marriage without consent and to participate in familial milestones, undergirding a new consciousness that women have an equal part to play in shaping societal development. This consciousness of new rights would become in subsequent years a foundation for advocating Hui Muslim women's rights (see also Jaschok and Shui 2000; Shui and Jaschok 2002). This point resonates across many conversations on the establishment of women's mosques and the institution of female *ahong* unique to the Muslim world. It is couched most frequently in a language that fuses Communist gender rhetoric with reference to the progressive roots of Islam and famous Islamic role models from the time of the Prophet (Jaschok and Shui 2000).

The narratives here are carried by the core notion of *jiaomen* (教门). In this context, *jiaomen* is faith as an individual marker of Muslim life which is sustained by a community of religious knowledge, centered on the women's mosque, and guided by the *ahong*. The *ahong* occupies a central role as transmitter, interpreter, conduit, and savior of women's faith, and is thus a guarantor of women's chance for Afterlife (see Chapter Four). I was frequently told – as during a conversation

in 2016 with Mu YF,[1] a woman in her late 80s – how often the older women think back to their early lives, to their formative years at the women's mosque spent in the company of other girls and women, instructed, guided, and counseled by a beloved *ahong*. In the case of Mu YF, the *ahong* was her own mother, from a family with generations of women *ahong* active in her home village. The mosque had been her mother's home.

As we will learn from some of the conversations in this chapter, faith could quickly diminish during times of the most severe political suppression of religious life. But as soon as more liberal policies took over, women returned to their mosques as their lifeline. In Mu YF's view, everything women needed for life, for the recovery of *jiaomen*, for family life – all could be found in their women's mosques.

Conversations Among Muslim Women: '…Everyone Would Look at You in a Very Unfriendly Way'[2]

Ge CX *Ahong* asks[3]: *How old are you?*

Bai YF: I am 80 years old.

Where is your parents' home?

Bai YF: One hour by train from Zhengzhou city.

Did you know anything about jiaomen[have any scriptural knowledge] *when you were young?*

Bai YF: Yes. I did, I began to learn reciting theQur'an when I was five or six years old.

Who helped you to learn how to recite the Qur'an?

Bai YF: My father and my grandmother had real *jiaomen* [piety]. My grandmother was a *shetou* [社头 in charge of the mosque management committee], and she always stayed inside the mosque. My grandmother, my uncle, my two sisters

1 Mu YF sat beside me as we listened to *jingge* performances at a friendly gathering from various neighboring women's mosques who were sharing newly learned *jingge* for the sheer joy of singing. As Mu described it, the power of sound generated by the singers was a power beyond words (August 2016, Henan province).

2 Interview between Ge CX and with Bai YF took place in summer 2016, in a township in Henan province. Bai remembered how during the 1950s Muslim women wearing religious garments were treated unsympathetically, even with suspicion; see other conversation extracts with Bai in this chapter.

3 Ge CX's questions are henceforth given in *italics* without attribution.

and my cousins, they all did the *hajj*.[4] All of them are good Muslims, they studied well, and their *jiaomen* has always been good.

Your grandmother was a shetou. *How many books of the Qur'an could she recite?*

Bai YF: She could do *libai* [rec.: she knew all the prayers recited during worship]. At that time, I didn't ask her such questions, I didn't know. When did she learn… How do you mean?

Who taught her?

Bai YF: I don't know! She did *libai* when I was young. She collected money for the mosque and looked after the mosque. She was always busy with various affairs.

Among women in the older generations of your family, who did libai*?*

Bai YF: From among the older generations, my mother seldom did *libai*, but she never missed Ramadan. She insisted on this until she was eighty-five years old. In the past, she had to take care of several kids, and she was too tired to do *libai*. My father insisted on doing *libai* since I can remember, and he kept doing *libai* until he passed away. He said prayer is never-ending, always praying, praying, and every day he prayed as soon as he got off work. My father treated everything seriously. When he encountered some new [Arabic] words which he didn't know, he would look them up in the dictionary. He studied very well and treated *ahong* very well. The *ahong* treated him well too.

What did you learn in the mosque when you were six years old?

Bai YF: *Ailifu* [艾力夫], *bie* [别], *tie* [贴], *xie* [谢].[5] *Ailifujiebaiai* [艾力夫节百艾][6], I have learned these all. I also learned the eighteen *sūrahs* when I was asked to study the *Haiting*.[7]

What did you learn in addition to the eighteen sūrahs*?*

4 Going on pilgrimage (*hajj*) is one of the five essential duties required of Muslims.

5 Letters from the Arabic alphabet.

6 Pronunciation of the Arabic alphabet.

7 *Haiting* (亥听 or 亥帖, Khatm al-Qur'an) is a generic term used for selected readings from the Qur'an that apply to Muslims' daily life. Particularly popular between the 18th and 20th centuries, the content of a given *Haiting* reflects a local *ahong*'s choice, thus creating locally distinct selections from the Qur'an. One distinction, for example, is made between 大亥听 and 小亥听, large and little versions of *Haiting*. Qur'anic texts in *Haiting* find ready application at weddings and funerals and in adult Islamic education.

Bai YF: I learned the *Zaxue* [杂学].[8] How can I forget this!

You studied very well. You can remember what you learned when you were six years old.

Bai YF: Yes…I chant very well. My father forbade me to go to school and only allowed me to learn reciting the Qur'an. He even had an idea about how best to learn reciting the Qur'an, but society was so chaotic, and when Liberation came [i.e. 1949 and the coming into power of the Chinese Communist Party], he had to give up this idea.

How long did you learn for?

Bai YF: I learned for at least two or three years. I went to the mosque every day. The *ahong* taught very well.

Did the woman ahong *teach you?*

Bai YF: If there is a *nüsi* [女寺 women's mosque], then there is a *nü ahong* [女阿訇 woman *ahong*]. That is how it is. The women's mosque exists up to this day. Ye *Ahong* was very kind and treated me very well. Now I *qiu shurao* [求恕饶 pray to Allah for forgiveness for her soul]; I do it every day.

Did Ye Ahong *teach you other things apart from the things you just mentioned, such as* zanzhu zansheng *chants?*

Bai YF: At that time, I didn't learn those chants.

Were there many students at that time?

Bai YF: In those days, students were divided into a big class and a small class. The older girls who had beautiful long braids belonged to the big class. I belonged to a small class. That is how it was; we were divided up into these different classes.

…

After you had given up study of the Qur'an, when did you start again to go to prayer?

Bai YF: When? When I came to the city, that was before Liberation [1949]. We then lived in the mosque. I went to prayer and fasted during Ramadan. [If I didn't conduct myself in this way] do you think my father will have allowed me to

8 *Zaxue* Islamic knowledge is conveyed in easily accessible ways, with *Zaxue* primers printed by mosques to facilitate women's learning.

neglect my duties? After all, the whole family insisted on *bazhai* [把斋following the path of Islam].

That means you have been going to pray five times every day since you began to study Islam.

Bai YF: Yes, I insist on praying five times every day. When I began to work and had kids, I was busy and had no time to pray. When I lived in our Women's Mosque, I insisted on praying. My father required me to wear *gaitou* [盖头 headscarf or fitted headdress covering hair and neck],[9] and he forbade me to go outside, and I had to stay at home.

Did you wear gaitou *at that time?*

Bai YF: Ah…talking about *gaitou*, it was made so well in those times. My mother sewed it for me specially. [I remember] it was white and sewn to suit the shape of my face, so different from the kind of *gaitou* we wear nowadays.

Did you wear it during libai *or did you also wear it when you went out?*

Bai YF: My father treated *jiaomen* [Islamic faith] very strictly and very seriously. He had been looking forward to moving to Lanzhou city and Xining city with us, because *jiaomen* in these regions is very strict,[10] but my mother disagreed. My father required me to wear *gaitou* when outside. I didn't want to wear it because no one wore *gaitou* during those times [1950s]. At present, lots of women wear *gaitou*, but very few wore it in the past. If you did not wear *gaitou,* no one would look at you, but if you wore it everyone would look at you in a very unfriendly way [撵着看 *nianzhekan*]. So, we did not dare to wear *gaitou.* Too few of us wore *gaitou* at that time. Opposite my house, there is an old woman; she lives close to us. Her name is Ma YD. She herself was born a Han person,[11] but her husband is a Hui. When she does her *libai*, she always wears a long, black *gaitou* which covers both her shoulders. That kind of *jiaomen* is truly good.

9 盖头 *gaitou* is the most ubiquitous version of hijab among Chinese Hui Muslim women, concealing hair and neck. Material, design, color, and length vary in accordance with local Islamic practices, marital status, age, status, and other factors (Jaschok and Man 2016). See the chant in this chapter extolling the virtue and beauty of *gaitou*.

10 In conversation with us, *zhongyuan* Chinese Hui Muslim interviewees would frequently put forward their ideal of the purest, highest religious standards, usually in contrast with the perceived weakness of their own conduct because of being too open to accommodating secular mainstream society. Superior Muslim practices of a more authentic Islam were usually associated with the austere practices to be found in northwest China's Muslim communities.

11 Han Chinese constitute about 92% of the population in China. Han ethnic identity is closely tied to the identity of the ruling Chinese Communist Party and thus to the identity of the state itself (Shih 2002).

Oh, you are saying that women should be wearing the gaitou *if they are outdoors?*

Bai YF: My mother didn't wear it then. She simply used a towel to wind around her head, just like this. She just put it over her hair and tucked the ends under, you see, at the back [rec: much gesticulating]. My aunt always covered her head. She never went out without covering her head. At that time, you did not wear a *gaitou* at home. Everyone wore a white cap [礼拜帽 *libai mao*, a round-shaped cap made of white cotton] for worship. At other times, everyone just used a towel to cover their hair, even on a very hot day.

How many years ago?

Bai YF: How many years? I came here at the end of 1947.

Chanting in Praise of the *Gaitou* and Claiming Identity

The language of Islamic dress codes carries multi-layered expressions, signifying traditions associated with specific Islamic schools and sects, age, occupation, marital status – and always and foremost, gender. In China, women's choice of religious dress reflects multiple identities, with the degree of concealment and modesty varying between observing religious dress only during worship in a mosque (when hair and neck are concealed by a *gaitou*) and the wearing of full burqa (concealing the body from head to feet), as observed by women from Muslim communities particularly, but not exclusively, in the border regions of northwest and western China. This diversity in women's religious dress is indicative of the heterogeneity of China's large Muslim community, spread across the country and manifesting in their settlement patterns and social interactions a considerable range of geographical, economic, and cultural contexts. Political developments in the wake of Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy after 1978 also encouraged a greater degree of openness in cultural and religious spheres, and arguably a more lenient treatment of public display of identities markedly different from mainstream society, noteworthy in the increasing number of young girls and women manifesting their Muslim status in more or less subtle display of religious dress.[12] Fuller religious dress and observation of stricter hijab were most evident amongst women in predominantly Muslim settlements and counties (Ha 2017; Jaschok and Man 2016).

The *zhongyuan* Hui Muslim culture, on the other hand, is a culture comprised of multiple influences: from varied accommodation with the modernizing host society's history of women's liberation as the flagship of Communist legitimation, as much as from the quest for a modernity driven by an expansive market economy. This has given rise in urban areas in *zhongyuan* China to a more neoliberal pursuit of individual freedom of choice in determining personal and career-related preferences. Whereas a growing number of older women have come to wear *gaitou* as

12 From observations in my research diary, which I kept during the early 1990s when in Henan province.

part of their daily dress, inspired by those women whose families were able to raise money for mothers and grandmothers to go on *hajj* and who returned from Mecca with renewed religious fervor (Jaschok and Shui 2015), younger Muslim women display a greater spectrum of diverging opinions and trends. Some make the *gaitou* an affirmation of a newly asserted identity which might combine Islamic membership with a concession to fashionable influences (particularly from Southeast Asian countries), or might feature more austere religious dress. Others forego the *gaitou* except when taking part in worship, rejecting the notion that inner piety can be authenticated only by outer wear (Yang 2021).

The following *jingge* is of recent origin and concerns the most iconic, distinguishing mark of Muslim women's identity anywhere in the world: the hijab. In the context of Hui Muslim culture in central China, the hijab is represented by variations of the *gaitou,*ranging from a voluminous headscarf and round white cotton cap to a more fitted headdress made of silk, cotton, or linen, colorful or plain, expressive of individual and collective manifestations of complex, multi-layered identities.

Meili Gaitou 美丽盖头 ***Beautiful Headscarf***[13]

美丽盖头随风飘, 轻轻飘到我的脸上.

The beautiful gaitou flutters in the breeze, and gently floats against my face.

美丽盖头我们爱你，你的风采却是无比的圣洁.

Beautiful *gaitou,* we love you; your style has an incomparable spiritual quality.

夕阳缓缓 坠西方，美丽盖头依然飘扬.

As the sunset, little by little, subsides, the beautiful *gaitou* still flutters in the wind.

美丽盖头终日相伴，守着千年风霜变换的云烟.

Beautiful *gaitou,* all day long a companion, as I watch thousand years of wind and frost become clouds and mist.

13 ZMFEC 2017, 275–6. The SongBook tells us that Hai JW *Ahong*, from a modest mosque in Kaifeng, in Henan, recalls the original title of the chant as *baise gaitou* (白色盖头 'White *Gaitou*') but the title was later changed to the more auspicious 'Beautiful *Gaitou*' to avoid associations with more melancholic reflections on mortality and death as signified by the color white. To further reinforce the *jingge*'s positive message, the tune of 'Pearl of the Orient' (东方之珠 *Dongfangzhi zhu*), a staple of the Chinese Communist Party-sanctioned musical repertoire, furnishes the chant's lively melody. Ge CX *Ahong* and Ding LY *Ahong* recorded and transcribed this chant.

让微风轻抚着你的脸，纯洁的容颜仿佛在诉说你的尊严.

Let the breeze gently caress your face, purity of demeanor tells of your dignity.

让春花 伴我来点缀你，请不要忘记明晨点燃新的祝愿.

Let the spring flowers be your companions and adorn you; and do not forget to kindle a new wish once more with the coming of dawn.

月儿弯弯挂树梢，美丽盖头随风轻飘.

The moon meanders over treetops, the beautiful *gaitou* flutters in the gentle wind.

纯洁之心拥抱着我，美丽盖头放射真理的光忙.

A sensation of purity is overpowering me, light-rays of truth radiate from the beautiful *gaitou*.

让微风轻抚着你的 脸，纯洁的容颜仿佛在诉说你的尊严.

Let the breeze gently caress your face, purity of demeanor tells of your dignity.

让春花 伴我来点缀你, 请不要忘记明晨点燃新的祝愿.

Let the spring flowers be your companions and adorn you, and do not forget to kindle a new wish once more with the coming of dawn.

This *jingge* evokes the image of a hijab that does not confine the wearer but instead allows movement and lets the wind to play with the seemingly soft material that 'caresses' the face. The *gaitou* floats gently against the wearer's cheeks to create a sensory, even seductive imagery of beauty heightened by a ravishing landscape bathed in the light of sunset and watched over by 'a meandering' moon. This is not an image commonly associated with the restrictive hijab, let alone the burqa worn by women in more austere Islamic legal and cultural contexts (Jaschok and Man 2016). The burqa is, in any case, rarely seen nor much favored by women of all generations in central China's Hui Muslim communities. Indeed, conversations held in preparation for our documentary on 'Muslim Women and Religious Dress in China'[14] made clear how strongly women feel about their right to observe an Islamic dress code they consider suitable to their individual circumstances and to their identity as citizens of the modern Chinese non-Muslim state.[15] Regardless

14 Conversations among women are taken from preparations made for a 2008 documentary film 戴盖头的穆斯林妇女们 （ 'Muslim Women and Religious Dress in China'), overseen by Shui Jingjun and Maria Jaschok. We worked in collaboration with influential women's mosques in Henan to produce the documentary, an outcome of a project conducted by the China Research Component team, *Women's Empowerment in Muslim Contexts RPC*, funded by the UK Department of International Development (2006-11).

15 See a recent publication by Li Gang (2022) on early Republican-era reformist discourses and tensions resulting from a Han Chinese nation's modernizing priorities and the insistence by Muslim

of the spiritual attributes ascribed to the wearer of *gaitou* in the *jingge*, to which the women could readily relate, a considerable part of our documentary additionally captured conversations about changing fashion trends, the influences from Malaysia and Indonesia seen as innovative and yet proper, as well as the influence of returned hajjis who advocated a more austere style.

Whilst the women acknowledged the difference in style and austerity of dress favored – as proper and indicative of the wearer's personality – all agreed that women's choice of clothing indicative of their Islamic identity was a badge of honor, demonstrating their sincerity of devotion and, just as importantly, their equal standing with the spirituality claimed by Muslim men. *Ahong* and many ordinary women were concerned that anything less than a meticulous observance of proper dress might be perceived by patronizing male fellow believers as evidence of irredeemable spiritual deficiencies in women (Jaschok 2014, 76). The choice to wear hijab has become a modern Muslim woman's claim to rights over her own body, a contrast perceived most strikingly when compared to the experiences of previous generations.

Conversations Among Muslim Women: 'It Was Forbidden in the Past'[16]

The following conversation extract between the 80-year-old Bai YF (whom we met in Chapter Seven and earlier in this chapter) and her much-admired Ge *Ahong* throws an interesting historical perspective on the significance of women's mosques in shaping the female life cycle and individual coming-to-voice. But these religious sites underwent their own transformation, affected by societal changes beyond the intimate sphere of Muslim daily life. During Bai's early years, the women's mosque in her experience was a space dedicated to transmitting female-tailored instruction on paradigmatic Muslim womanhood, overseen by a female *ahong* who confined her activities to the inner world of the mosque. Following the reopening of religious sites in the 1980s, this mosque evolved into a space of transformation and affirmation of women's religious rights and spiritual needs (Jaschok and Shui 2011). In this transformation, as women recover and re-evaluate their past together with elderly women as holders of their collective memory, the historical role of chants in teaching illiterate women is not forgotten. Helped by the *ahong*'s use of *jingge* as a pedagogical tool, Bai acquired sufficient linguistic proficiency that not only served her in her role as Muslim wife and mother. This degree of learning, however modest, also brought her closer to the language and revelations of the Islamic scriptures. Bai's narration describes how the religious learning she received – through the

intellectuals and religious leaders on their right to a voice in the project of nation-re/making. Moreover, differences within the highly diverse Muslim community also came to the fore over issues of national identity, modernity, and Islamic essence, symbolized by the strength of debates and arguments pertaining to the cutting of Muslim women's hair.

16 Interview with Bai YF took place in the summer of 2016, in Henan. The quotation comes from the following conversation excerpt when the 80-year-old Bai YF describes how mixed-gender gatherings would not have been permitted when she was young.

Figure 8.1 Chanting in praise of Allah to mark Arabic language class graduation, HRPC, 2016 (author's photo)

collective chanting of a rich repertoire of scriptural knowledge, idioms of faith, and the reaffirmation of committed belief – nurtured her faith and facilitated a palpable pride in being a member of a global community of faith.

Today, as the conversation extract below highlights, the preservation and reproduction of traditional values, as well as the ways in which chants might signify women's rights and claims of equal access to spiritual consolation and salvation, are frequent topics amongst women. Bai YF considers it remarkable for women to hold a conversation of this nature; this would have been unthinkable in her youth. And so, whilst she greets such innovation somewhat warily, she admits that she too is swept along by the collective wave of enthusiasm for reform and by the considerable authority of the current *ahong* who initiated a more expressive women's mosque culture. Bai is mindful of, and receptive to, local change that facilitates rather than obstructs – as was the case during her early life – women's desire to be governed by religious devotion.

Ge CX *Ahong* asks[17]: *In earlier times, according to ideas of the older generation, women were forbidden to go outside. What about your mother?*

Bai YF: They never went outside. When my mother wanted to buy something, she let me do it. At that time, I was young and barely in my teens. Even so, my father still complained that 'the girls can't be allowed to go outside, they are grown up now and must not be allowed to go outside'. My mother always told him that 'You go to work and have no time to buy anything. I take care of the kids, and I have bound feet and walk slowly. Who will buy the groceries if I don't let her buy them?'. So, I had to buy things like sauce, vinegar, and other daily necessities.

Do you feel it is good or bad to perform zanzhu zansheng*? Why?*

17 Ge CX's questions are henceforth given in *italics* without attribution.

Bai YF: Of course, chanting together is good. Why? On the one hand, you learn these songs and clearly understand their meaning from your heart; on the other hand, you think them over and this process is very good for your mind. So, this is good from every point of view.

But when you see men and women attend this activity together, do you think this is then violating traditions that were observed during past times?

Bai YF: This was most definitely forbidden when I was young. For example, we invited an *ahong* to perform Laylah al-bara'ah [白拉提 *Bailati*] at home.[18] My grandmother preferred to invite *ahong* to do such things. When the [male] *ahong* came, all the women left, and only the men stayed in the room.

Do you feel it is suitable or unsuitable that men and women attend activities together as done at present?

Bai YF: How to say this? I've gotten used to it now [rec: laughing]. In the past, who dared to speak to a man? We were taught strictly and forbidden to go outside. When we lived in the old mosque, my cousin who is of my age was always eager to go outside for some fresh air. But every time she saw my father at the threshold, she turned round and went into the house immediately.

Last time we attended the zansheng *event, it was in a men's mosque. There were so many people involved, men and women. How did you feel about this?*

Bai YF: I don't feel afraid even if there are so many people. When someone chants very well, we forget everything and applaud warmly. You can ask Teacher Ma YP. Several old women chanted very loudly, using loudspeakers. They chanted very well. So, I felt very good and clapped my hands warmly. Honestly speaking, when it comes to *zansheng*, whoever can win [at the *zansheng* competition], I think that is alright. *Ahong* [addressing her interviewer], your achievement is based on your strict teaching. [Teacher] Ma YP's achievement also depends on her daily teaching.

That's right, she is the monitor of our class. Her achievement cannot be forgotten [thus reminded of the fact that not all contributing women are necessarily of the status of *ahong*!].

Bai YF: All of you can be proud of your achievements; she also relies on hard study. Yes, I felt really good [about the mixed-gender event]. I have never

18 *Bailati* 白拉提 is also written as 白拉特 (Laylah al-bara'ah, 'The Night of Forgiveness') and falls on the 15th day of the eighth month in the Islamic calendar.

attended such an activity before. Standing on the stage, chanting right into the loudspeaker, the old women lifted our spirits and performed wonderfully.

But this activity involved men and women, do you think it is good or bad?

Bai YF: I feel that society has improved in this regard. In the past, we could not imagine that male *ahong* and female *ahong* would sit side by side. It was forbidden in the past. We never saw such things happen in the past [rec: laughing].

You mentioned that society has improved in this way. But do you think this violates the rules of religion?

Bai YF: Strictly speaking, yes, this does violate the rules. Why do I say that? Women are forbidden to have contact with men according to the Qur'an. [But] men and women are allowed to stand together to perform worship when making the pilgrimage. At such times, the rules are not enforced strictly.

.....

What I mean is that in the past, your marriage was arranged by your father and women were forbidden to have contact with men; but at present, both men and women perform zansheng zanzhu[in public]. *So, facing this situation, do you feel it is suitable or unsuitable?*

Bai YF: Suitable. Because I have accustomed myself to this situation which never existed before. Times have changed.

Bai provided us with one of the more detailed descriptions of a Muslim woman's life and milestones during a volatile and rapidly changing period in the country's history.[19] She was born around 1936, into a strictly observant family dominated by a father whom we heard earlier from her account was a most severe enforcer of what he considered essential Islamic injunctions.

Bai's childhood and adolescence were shaped by momentous key events in the nation's history during years of civil war, which overshadowed much of the Republican era under the Guomindang Party (the GMD ruled during 1912–1949). This period came to an end only with the GMD's defeat and subsequent withdrawal to Taiwan, enabling the formal establishment of the Central People's Government, headed by the CCP, on 1 October 1949. This was followed by volatile years of the Communist Party's strategic consolidation of power, pursuing as a matter of political priority the strengthening of centralized governance over a vast and ethnically as well as religiously diverse continent. The urgency assigned to political unification was reflected in the relentless roll-out of comprehensive ideological and social

19 See Chapter Seven for the first part of Bai YF's account.

campaigns during the early 1950s against the legacies of feudalism, capitalism, religion, and patriarchy (Hershatter 2007; Hong 2007; Strauss 2002; Wang Ban 2011). These political movements (政治运动 *zhengzhi yundong*) functioned as the state's 'primary vehicles' to achieve control over a large, unwieldy bureaucracy, to crush political opposition, and unify the diverse social groups and nationalities (Strauss 2002).

To remind readers of the mid-20th century historical context and the social and political upheavals which directly impacted religious communities and their members, including Bai YF's family, the state's policy approach toward religion and the treatment of religious minorities, as previously stated (Chapter Seven), changed drastically over time. Volatile and unpredictable changes included severe crackdowns on religious institutions and practices during the Mao Zedong era (1949–1976) but also saw, eventually, a gradual loosening of the ideological grip over society that characterized Deng Xiaoping's reform era (the opening of China's economy internationally was initiated in 1979). A somewhat greater tolerance of sanctioned religions, including Islam, saw policy shifts from outright persecution to regimentation and surveillance of collective worship. Contemporary trends under Xi Jinping's government, most specifically since 2016, show a marked, steadily intensifying pace of control over religious organizations, spelled out most clearly under the banner of sinicization (Dickson 2021; Earley 2022; Goossaert 2011; MacInnis 1972; Wickeri and Tam 2011).

The elderly Bai YF described the local reverberations of wider societal transformations through their varied impact on key members of her immediate family. Her parents clung to Islamic strictures even as a Communist Party state-steered socialist morality and stricter surveillance mechanisms and enforcement policies engulfed the family. Her father continued to enforce a strict gender regime at home, restricting his daughter's mobility but also obstructing what was by then a rapidly growing pressure to enforce all-female secular education. Her mother kept to religious dress even when others around her adjusted to fit in, seeking to become invisible. Underlying tensions came to the fore when Bai, at the age of 17 – around 1953 – was forced to marry a man unknown to her, chosen by her father for his demonstrable piety (see Chapter Seven), bypassing the 1950 Marriage Law which gave women, including women from religious and ethnic groups, the right to make their own marriage choice (Diamant 2014; Hershatter 2007; Wang Zheng 2017). These were rights both Bai and her mother knew about but were powerless to claim for themselves. The young girl's experiences of the post-1949 years, a period marked in the Communist Party's chronicles as the era of *jiefang* (解放 in this context it signified an unfettering of women from the patriarchal injunctions of neo-Confucian gender discrimination), show a life ensconced in strict Islamic restrictions, upheld by her stern father. Permission was granted only for her religious education in a women's mosque, under the tutorship of a woman *ahong*.

Bai's story allows us to understand the significance of female-led women's mosques within the specific contexts and vicissitudes of gendered time and space. The women's mosque – where the young Bai acquired rudimentary proficiency in Arabic and memorized selected readings from the *Haiting* – was an institution

that can be regarded as having undergirded and institutionalized the segregation of society into distinctive spheres of assigned gendered, religious, cultural, productive, and reproductive identities, circumventing an important Islamic injunction against un-Islamic innovation, *bidaerti* (*bid'a*). It allowed the young girl a degree of legitimate physical (and mental) mobility, which her orthodox father would not otherwise have countenanced. Bai's experience here reinforces our awareness of how the intersecting societal, institutional, and personal dimensions of what we call ordinary lives are ever historically contingent.

The structural tension between women's domestic and reproductive duties and their spiritual and existential well-being is a constant theme in older women's reminiscences on the topic of sacrifice, whether enforced or dutifully made. The following conversation took place between Ge *Ahong* and Gu JY, who is close in age to Bai YF. Gu is even more explicit about the hardships of her life and the economic pressures to make ends meet when she found herself widowed at a young age. Like others of a similar age, she also reflects on the urge she felt to reconcile the compromises on religious life and the fears engendered by her approaching mortality, with the primacy of her role as a dutiful wife and mother, which has left her too little time to make up for her deeply felt shortcomings as a Muslim. She lived most of her life in a small township in Henan province and retired in 1986 from work in a local car factory.

Conversations Among Muslim Women: 'The Older Generation had Outdated and Feudal Ideas'[20]

Ge CX *Ahong* asks[21]: *When did you begin to attend regular worship*?

Gu JY: I took up some small business after I retired. This was because my husband passed away, my son hadn't married yet, and I also needed to buy a place to live. My concern was all about money. I had no energy and spirit to think about Islam and *jiaomen*. How did I solve the problems I had been having? The only solution is money. If the girl's family [the family of the prospective daughter-in-law] asks you for marriage betrothal gifts, you must have money to solve this problem. So, I really had no energy to think about *jiaomen*. Later, when I solved my economic problems, and when my situation started to improve, then I had time and energy to learn Arabic letters and [to learn how to perform] *libai*. Other people told me that Ge *Ahong* is a very good teacher, and she let me learn from her. I said yes, and I began to study from then onward.

20 Conversation with the 80-year-old Gu JY took place in summer 2016 in a township in Henan province. According to Gu's words, mindsets when it comes to gender relations do not change quickly.

21 Ge CX's questions are henceforth given in *italics* without attribution.

When did you first think about jiaomen*?*

Gu JY: This came about when I was in my teenage years. There was an *ahong* who came from my aunt's family. She told me, 'Girl, you should go and learn the Qur'an and do *libai*'. But my mother did not agree because of [my] economic problems. I also wanted to learn, but my mother said my family could not afford this, and I must stay at home.

Did your mother have some knowledge of Islam?

Gu JY: My mother never did any *libai*. She made a living from running a small business. My father didn't pray five times a day, but he insisted on doing *libai* on *Zhuma* (Prayer Day). Because my grandfather was a *shetou* of the mosque, my grandfather guided his children to know *jiaomen*. So, they had some basic knowledge of Islam. For me, I know what *jiaomen* means in my heart, but my family situation was not very good at that time, and I had no chance to know about *jiaomen*.

Where are your parents from?

Gu JY: From Kaifeng city. I came to live in this town more than seventy years ago.

Oh, you moved here when you were a child. Did you go to the mosque at that time?

Gu JY: Yes, I did go. I went into the mosque just following other people.

Are you talking about a women's mosque or a men's mosque?

Gu JY: Women's mosque. At that time, the grain supply was scarce, and there was too much coarse grain and so little refined grain. My mother always managed to collect some refined grain well in advance so when Ramadan was near, she could send food for Iftar.[22] Especially for Iftar.

To the women's mosque or a men's mosque?

Gu JY: Girls went to women's mosques, and boys went to men's mosques.

Did you ever see a female ahong *when you entered the women's mosque?*

Gu JY: Yes, I did. I saw a female *ahong*, but I couldn't say *Sailiangmu* [赛俩目][23] at that time. My mother told me, 'If you can't say *Sailiangmu*, you just say "*Ahong*, I bring a meal for Iftar, from family so-and-so." That will do'.

22 *Iftar* is the evening meal consumed after sunset to break the mandatory fast during Ramadan.
23 *Sailiangmu* is a commonly used greeting.

Did you ever hear [women] ahong *interpret and preach on this or that?*

Gu JY: Time was limited. When I went to the mosque, I had no chance to sit there and talk with the *ahong*. This thing never happened to me.

Oh, you left as soon as you put down the things your mother sent.

Gu JY: Yes. The woman *ahong* always said '*Saiwabu* [赛瓦布],[24] Gu`s family is sending food again. What's the meal? Steamed sugar buns, vegetable buns, and meat buns with some meat'. The flour which was needed took [my mother] nearly half a year to save up for. This was so that Iftar meals could be sent to the women's mosque and the men's mosque. We lived close to the mosque. So, I would be taking a basket filled with steamed bread and a pot of porridge, and I went off to the mosque…After I got married, I had a job and couldn't ask for leave. So, I had no time to learn the Qur'an and other religious knowledge.

It must be said that you are a real jiaomen *family. Your sisters are all good at it, aren't they?*

Gu JY: My four sisters and brothers, except my second brother, all have good *jiaomen*. My oldest brother insists on praying five times a day, my sister-in-law is a *haji*. My older sister lives near the mosque, and she is influenced by this environment. No matter what happens, she goes to the mosque to help as soon as she can get off work. My [late] mother-in-law often did *libai* at the mosque.

Your understanding of jiaomen *can be traced back to the foundation that the older generation gave you in your childhood. What impression did this leave you with?*

Gu JY: Yes, this left me with a deep impression. I know it is the guidance that comes from Allah, and I know the importance of *jiaomen*. But in the past, I had not enough time to learn the Qur'an and Islamic knowledge. I had to go to work, take care of kids, cook meals, and wash clothes. Later, after my kids got married, and all was settled, then I went to the mosque to learn about *jiaomen*. So far, I haven't learned much, I want to learn, but my memory is bad.

You are getting on in years, but you are learning pretty well. Did you learn the zanzhu zansheng *chants from me since you came here?*

Gu JY: Ah, yes, yes, yes.

24 *Saiwabu* (*Sawāb* or *Thawāb*): In the context of the Islamic worldview, *ṯhawāb* refers to spiritual merit or reward for an act of kindness.

Could you perform these chants before?

Gu JY: I could not chant anything. They all told me, 'Ge *Ahong* teaches really well, you just go and learn. Go to the mosque and try to learn the [Arabic] letters. Slowly, slowly, you can learn well'. From then on, I began to do *libai* and learn about reciting the Qur'an. These eighteen *sūrahs*, if you ask me to recite them, I can recite them, here and there. But I cannot really chant them, my chanting is not right, even I chant them according to the pronunciation of the letters [of the alphabet].

It is not that bad. You see, they [referring to *zansheng* choirs] *all have their copies with them when they chant the Qur'an. I think they cannot chant without their books.*

Gu JY: I don't take the book, I recite just so, but my pronunciation is not good. I cannot pronounce the long sounds and short sounds properly.

Slowly, slowly you will get better. Just follow me, learn in class, review the Qur'an over and over again, and you will be doing alright.

Gu JY: With the mercy of Allah, I am willing to learn.

Someone said, 'the voice of women is xiuti', *but we study in class and even perform in public. What's your opinion about these things?*

Gu JY: Now is the new era. In the past, I had no chance to go to school. Later, I went to night school. Before I even left the school, my father would wait for me at the front door of the school to take me home. In the past, the older generation had outdated and feudal ideas. At present, women and men are equal. And they can go to school, right?

Is this the influence of society or of our religion?

Gu JY: *Jiaomen* also requires that women should be guarded in every respect [谨慎 *jinshen*].

What`s the meaning of jinshen *you mentioned just now?*

Gu JY: *Jinshen*, that is, not do improper things, do the right thing. That's right, isn't it? That's not only the requirement of *jiaomen*, but also the requirement that comes from the older generations. Frankly speaking, in the past, I didn't understand the rules of *jiaomen*. I just followed the old people's instructions telling me what I can do and what I cannot do.

Do you think that women ought to learn jiaomen*? That they can learn, or it is not…*

Gu JY: In this modern society, women can learn. Women also become leaders; isn't this right? Now is a new era, and all is opening up. But according to the commands of Allah, you cannot do the forbidden things [乱七八糟的事 *luanqibazao de shi*], and you should do the right things. For example: study is study, labor is labor, work is work.

When it comes to study, men and women are studying together. Do you think it is right or wrong?

Gu JY: If we follow the instruction of the Qur'an strictly, a man should go to [Qur'anic] school which is for men, and a woman should go to [Qur'anic] school for women. I heard the older generation say that, but the present situation is different. Men and women clearly don't need to be separated to study.

Not be separated. Do you think it is progress and the requirement of the [modern] *era or is it a step backward?*

Gu JY: I think a woman is a woman, and a man is a man. It is better for them not to interfere with each other [干扰 *ganrao*, disturb another's equanimity]. You can see some children fall in love when they are still at school.

Men and women attend some activities together, just like the zansheng *competition we held in the men's mosque. Do you think such activities are meant to meet the requirements of* jiaomen*, or are they about meeting the demands of our time?*

Gu JY: I think it conforms to the demands of our time. When it comes to the Qur'an, I can't quite make sense of it.

You feel it is not suitable.

Gu JY: It is not suitable! But if you want me to give you a satisfactory explanation, I cannot give you a satisfactory explanation. I just know there is such a reason [rec: the women present broke into laughter].

Among the previous generations of women in your family, who had some basic knowledge of jiaomen*? Who studied* jiaomen*?*

Gu JY: There were few such women in my family's previous generations. My mother's generation, they were forbidden to go outside, and they stayed at home to do housework. But the men [in my family] knew *jiaomen* well.

Did your mother do libai?

Gu JY: My mother didn't do *libai* frequently, but she went to the mosque during Ramadan and on special days. She believed in Allah. If the mosque had something they needed her to do, for example, helping with collecting alms [随捏提 *nieti*, *niyyah*][25] or something else, she would do it without hesitation.

She was really devout. She had good jiaomen.

Gu JY: At that time, my salary was just 37 *yuan*. As an outsider, offering *niyyah* you needed to give 30 *yuan*. Her grandson always said to my mother, '*Nainai*, why don't you give the 30 *yuan* to me? You are always mean when you buy some exercise books for me, but you are so generous when it comes to *niyyah*. It is 30 *yuan, Nainai* [rec: laughing]!'.

What about your aunts or nieces? How about their jiaomen?

Gu JY: I have no such relatives; my family is small.

The conversation continued with Li XY, who had been present throughout, eagerly following Gu's story, which Li was hearing in such detail for the first time. When Gu was called away, Li XY, 73 years old at the time of the conversation, a local Hui Muslim and former factory worker, took her place. Retired in 1998, she finally had, after so many years of back-breaking work, an opportunity to make time to talk about the place of faith in her life and her difficult journey to closer involvement with faith against a background of societal change and personal economic difficulties.

Conversations Among Muslim Women: 'Work has Taken up all my Time'[26]

Li XY: I cannot speak well. I have little knowledge of Islam and in the past, work has taken up all my time.

Ge CX Ahong asks[27]: *Where is your hometown?*

Li XY: Here. I went to school here from when I was a kid, then I went to work in the western suburbs of another city.

Which mosque did your family belong to?

25 *Niyyah* is a significant Islamic concept, relating to the purity of intention in one's heart to do an act for the sake of God.

26 Interview with Li XY took place in June 2016, in a township women's mosque in Henan province.

27 Ge CX's questions are henceforth given in *italics* without attribution.

Li XY: The women's mosque. I left home early.

Oh, you lived there during your childhood. Was your home near the mosque?

Li XY: Near the mosque.

Did you ever enter the mosque when you were a child?

Li XY: Yes, I went there when I was very young.

You went to the women's mosque?

Li XY: Women's mosque, yes.

Do you remember anything about the Ahong?

Li XY: Yes, I do. The *ahong* was very old. I learned a little, like Arabic pronunciation, from her. I remember *bie* [瘪], *tie* [贴], *xie* [些], and *ha* [哈], something like this.

Didn`t women during that time get education at the mosque?

Li XY: No, they went to [state] school, at least I went to school. When I was a kid, I spent several days learning the Qur'an from the *Ahong*.

What did you learn other than the [Arabic] alphabet?

Li XY: Nothing else, I just learned this, I didn't even learn how to write. Later, I went to school and boarded at school in the western suburbs of the big city.

What did the Ahong *teach you except letters? For example, did you hear* Ahong *preach the sermon on* Zhuma*?*

Li XY: I seldom went to the mosque when I was at school. I lived away from home and never returned.

Did the older generation go to the mosque?

Li XY: My mother did *libai* [attended worship] at her local mosque. She died there. She had a low education.

Did she ever do libai *before? Did the older generation in your family have some knowledge of* jiaomen *when you were a child?*

Li XY: When I was small, my mother didn't do *libai*. I had five or six sisters. I was the oldest one. We all stayed home and seldom went to the mosque, only my father went to the mosque often, especially on *Zhuma*.

Did you have any knowledge of jiaomen *when you had to go to work?*

Li XY: I just told you; I know nothing. I feel awkward coming here to see you. I just learned by following others and trying my best to get some knowledge.

Why did you want to learn jiaomen?

Li XY: When I chatted with Li GF [a friend of similar age], I said, 'I have no idea about *jiaomen* and have never had a chance to get such knowledge before. I am becoming old, so I want to learn some *jiaomen*. But I don't know where I can learn the Arabic language?'. She told me that Ge *Ahong* teaches very well. I said then I should learn from an *ahong*. So that is why I came here [rec: a shy smile appeared on her face].

The chance for understanding jiaomen *then was very limited for you.*

Li XY: I boarded a school in the western suburbs when I was a young girl. After leaving school, I went to work and seldom went back home. In the past, working was quite different from present-day life. We were so busy that we had no time to take care of our kids. In the evening, we would still have meetings. Even on Sundays, we had to take part in voluntary labor.

When I went to Hui Nationality Middle School, we still marked Ramadan, and everybody gathered in the evening to share a meal. But during the time between 1957 and 1958, the situation got worse, and our school was closed down. The teacher who had been teaching about farming and livestock was forced to raise pigs from Ukraine. Some *ahong* were suffering from persecution. At that time, everything was about getting rid of superstitions. Some political study classes were set up in our workplace. This was a huge shock for all of us.

Did you spend Ramadan *together when you were at Hui Nationality Middle School?*

Li XY: Yes, we did. Then there was still a special restaurant for Hui people [回民 *Huimin*],[28] but in 1958 there was nothing. We were all caught up in the political movements, the Anti-Rightist Movement[29] and the Great Leap Forward

28 The *Huimin*, Hui (nationality) people, are the largest ethnic group among the 10 ethnic groups comprising the Muslim population in China; the term is popularly used to refer to Muslims in general.

29 Lasting for about two years (1957–1959), alleged 'Rightists' within the CCP were persecuted in a fierce political campaign that extended to targeting suspected rightist elements abroad.

Movement.[30] We were all made to chuck out superstitions. The situation got worse when the Cultural Revolution time came. Everything became feudal superstition, and we must attack the 'Four Olds' [四旧 *sijiu*].[31] Ah, to live through such times.

Were you all persecuted?

Li XY: Yes, we were. So many *ahong* were denounced and persecuted. Ma *Ahong* who lived in our mosque was also persecuted…. So, you know, this is how faith became weak. And those who would not let go of faith, how could they stand such suffering.

How did this influence you?

Li XY: Yes, of course. Who can stand this? And when it comes to the common people, they will not dare...At that time, we could talk little... [rec: lowered her voice]. Such times! If not for this, we could have learned some knowledge and been together in the Hui Nationality Middle School, be together during Ramadan, get education. Nothing. The movements destroyed everything. Now I say [to myself] that I am getting older and must learn about *jiaomen* again. No matter how little I can learn.

Yes, yes, return to jiaomen!

Li XY: This is so.

People in the past, before your time, didn't women also go to school?

Li XY: They were all housewives.

Did women in your family, those of the older generation, did they go to school?

Li XY: No, they didn't. Women were forbidden to go out. Men went out to make a living to support their families.

Your family is quite open-minded. They let you go to school?

30 For the human and socio-economic consequences of Mao's governance during the period known as The Great Leap Forward (1958–1962), estimated to have cost at least 45 million lives, see Frank Dikőtter's (2010) unflinching account.

31 *Sijiu* is a political term associated with the Cultural Revolution (1967–1977). It refers to the state-steered ideological and social campaigns conducted against the perceived 'evils' of old thinking, old culture, old customs, and old habits.

Li XY: All our neighbors' children went to school at that time. All children went to school after Liberation [1949]. I went to school in 1951.

You lived on a street close to the mosque. What were your feelings about the ahong *at that time?*

Li XY: I really respected the *ahong*. I say this from my heart. I had this aunt, and she was appointed as the resident *ahong* of the women's mosque. She died in the mosque. I also had a third aunt who acted as *ahong* of a village women's mosque.

Was she your aunt?

Li XY: My grandpa's brother, yes, his family, that is where she came from.

Did you ever get to know that family?

Li XY: I had contact with my aunt. She had been a concubine in the family, but later she left. Yet after leaving the family, she went to visit my home. She acted as *ahong* for some considerable time. Later, my mother followed her [to the mosque]. That is where she wanted to worship.

How about the ahong *appointed to the village mosque?*

Li XY: That's a long time ago.

Did you say she was there by herself, alone?

Li XY: She had a daughter who was one or two years older than me.

She lived there with her daughter.

Li XY: Right.

What did the women at that time know about jiaomen*?*

Li XY: They knew that they were *Huimin*, and they respected the *ahong*. Actually, they did not have much religious knowledge.

They just knew that they should respect their ahong*. They didn't study* jiaomen *knowledge and had little understanding of* jiaomen*, right?*

Li XY: Yes, there were many people like them.

It seems at that time women ahong *were most often on their own?*

Li XY: Right, at that time, most of the women *ahong* tended to be on their own. They lived in the mosque. I thought that they were all very old.

So ahong *never went outside at that time, right?*

Li XY: It was so.

Now the new generation of ahong*, they often go out to attend some activities. This is not accepted by some people. They say,* 'ahong *in the past seldom went out'.*

Li XY: It is necessary for present-day *ahong* to go out to attend some activities. When it comes to content of traditions, they need replenishing. In the past, old *ahong* always depended on rote learning. But you can introduce some new knowledge into *jiaomen*. What you teach [addressing the *ahong*] is more interesting and colorful. The older generation of *ahong* had their limitations. To give you an example, they knew everything inside out [滚瓜烂熟哩 *gungua lanshuli*], although it was not always correct, I think. But this didn't lessen people's respect for these *ahong*.

Nowadays, as soon as I go out, the women [乡老门 *xianglaomen*, members of the mosque management committee] *all say,* Ahong*, you mustn't go out by yourself, let some of the* xianglao *accompany you. What do you think, how was it then when ahong went out?*

Li XY: Yes. There were these *si shifu* [寺师傅 caretakers] [rec.: women in charge of maintaining the mosque]. Whenever a woman *ahong* went out to collect *nieti* [alms] or whatever, some old women would accompany her. But our society is developing, and expectations are changing. We know much more than before, and our thinking must keep up with the trend. You see, you had proper education, but in the past, *ahong* had barely any [education].

Did you hear then that the voice of a woman is xiuti*? A woman can't raise her voice,* [is only allowed to] *do very little*…

Li XY: It was so.

Now man and woman study together, just like in our class.

Li XY: Yes. This is so in many mosques. In some places, men and women do *libai* together.

Men and women together, how do you think about this?

Li XY: At the beginning, I felt uncomfortable. I think I am quite open-minded for my age, but quite a few old people may not accept this.

Seeing all these changes around you, do you think this is acceptable?

Li XY: Yes, I think this is proper.

Do you think such things violate the rules of jiaomen*?*

Li XY: I think anything that whatever promotes Islam is fine and it isn't violating the rules of *jiaomen*.

It doesn't go against the spirit of the Qur'an?

Li XY: That is right! You cannot judge this according to outdated rules from the past. The situation around us is developing all the time, and we must keep up with these changes. Most important, in my opinion, is not to go against *jiaomen*. That's my opinion.

Your opinion is advanced. You are truly an open-minded old person.

Li XY: Maybe some people hold different views.

In the past, our activities were limited to the women's mosque. Recently the zansheng *chanting competition was held in our capital city. Lots of men and women attended that competition. You didn't attend, do you think such an activity is proper?*

Li XY: I think different places have their different advantages. Talking with each other, coming together…isn't this how we can learn from each other?

The conversation ended on a note which sounded a common thread throughout the narratives as women reflected on lives lived through years of material, religious, and emotional scarcity. Those were years which weakened, and even threatened to undermine entirely, the spiritual lifeline through which to sustain faith and acquire knowledge to perform the essential duties incumbent upon a Muslim. The conversations considered changes in the political governance of the nation as they played into personal experiences and the intimate sphere of family relations. A father's unconditional authority, a mother's deference to patrilineal prerogatives, a daughter's submission to codes of filial obligation, such powerfully entrenched-patriarchal norms are not easily dislodged. As participants in the conversations pondered advances brought by ideological and policy gender reforms, with new, radical governmental policies contending with conflicting traditional injunctions and local conventions, they not only pondered their own fates, but they also gave their opinions on the impact of societal transformations on their mosques. And it appears that how their mosques survived the vicissitudes of the political transition of China into a Communist Party state depended, and still largely depends, on the qualities and standing of their resident *ahong*.

Moreover, the women are emphatic that not only educational and social opportunities open to daughters and granddaughters, which had not been within the reach of the older generations, are to be welcomed; a consensus emerged that the expanded scope of duties and rights associated with the leadership of the current generation of female *ahong* are overall proper and in tune with modern times. Nevertheless, such expressions of faith – whether in educational reforms or wider philanthropic engagement as advocated by some of the younger religious women leaders – carry an admixture of reservation, of uncertainty, even of ambivalence. It is this underlying ambivalence which the next chapter explores more comprehensively, allowing for conversations to highlight the ways that individual women *ahong* and their mode of leadership as well as their understanding of their multiple internal and external roles may be perceived as facilitating or complicating the changes noted in the internal culture of beloved women's mosques and of the institutional consequences of internal disagreements and divisions over their future. In addition, how perceptions and tensions are shaped by women's deeply held convictions of the importance of personal loyalty, due deference, and communal allegiance comes through in subtle, often indirect, and unstated ways, undergirding intensely felt ties of belonging to their *ahong* and to their mosque, a site of individual salvation, collective voice, and emphatic pride.

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9 A Space From Which to Speak

Harmonies and Discords

The previous chapter ended on the significance of spatial belonging for women whose manifold marginalization has, in the words of Li XY, made them appreciative of the opportunities for 'Talking with each other, coming together…isn't this how we can learn from each other?'.

The emergence and evolution of women's own cultural – and learning – traditions, as the SongBook (ZMFEC 2017, Preface) reminds us, built on a classical component of Confucian *Weltanschauung* signifying a civilization rich in 'the culture of rituals and music' (礼乐文化 *liyue wenhua*). As the SongBook's (ZMFEC 2017) editors maintain, such a fusion of Confucian and Islamic religious civilizations, whereby morality, nature, courtesy, and orderliness are in harmony, is exemplified by the richly expressive ritual tradition of *zhongyuan* Hui Muslim culture. Critically, this development is inseparable from the evolution of women-centered mosques. When Hui Muslim women touch emotion, evoke sentiment, and inspire devotion to Islamic faith through their nurturing of women's traditions of chant and recital, whether in Arabic, Persian, or Chinese, they enrich a classical 'culture of rituals and music' with a unique Islamic spiritual dimension, having facilitated the evolution of this tradition wherever they were able to take possession of their own sites of worship (ZMFEC 2017, Preface 4).

However, as vividly illustrated by the enduring difficulties over the reception of *jingge* oral traditions and their perceived value in the transmission of the Islamic faith, the contributions of the traditions' leading proponents, the women *ahong,* to an Islamic resurgence in China, which lasted well into the late 2010s, have only ever been at the beginning stage of wider acceptance within local Sunni tradition. And this also applies to *zhongyuan* mosque leaderships where the history of women's mosques can be said to have evolved into its most autonomous form. Throughout, leading women *ahong* have been forced to make their case for equal legitimacy in speaking for, and about, Islam when it comes not only to their male colleagues but also to members of the older generation of women worshiping at their mosques. Arguably, it is akin to what Heather Battaly (2017) defines as epistemic violence, an obstruction of social credibility that diminishes the authoritative impact of a given (always gendered) knower/speaker. Battaly (*ibid*., 223) observes that 'Testimonial injustice is a disposition to fail to see speakers as credible when they are credible, due to the hearer's identity prejudice'. The effects of testimonial injustice are not only related to individuals but, as Battaly points out, also

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reverberate at the institutional level, restricting access to education and limiting contributions to critical inquiry. Testimonial credibility, and the authority that is acknowledged as credible, similarly underscores the legitimacy of the core duties of Islamic scholarship and practice. This is the case at the level of *fiqh* (Islamic legal theory) and thus the authenticity of interpreted text, as it is at the intermediary level of transmission where religious practitioners preach, interpret, teach, and counsel their congregations on matters of Muslim prayer obligations and family morality.

Here the position of female religious practitioners – carrying varying titles such as *ahong*, as *jiaozhang* (教长 a post of religious authority), or *shiniang* (师娘 a generic term for female religious practitioners)[1] – continues to be shrouded in ambivalence, ambiguities, and contestations. Matthew Erie (2016) holds: 'It is clear that the role of female clerics in Hui religious life is not a matter of consensus. Hui generally have limited means to develop their own *fiqh* [Islamic jurisprudence, knowledge, and understanding of the Sharia] due to the fact that state law is controlling in the People's Republic of China'. Nevertheless, as demonstrated in previous chapters, among *zhongyuan* Hui Muslim communities, younger women *ahong* have put forward unprecedentedly robust claims, insisting on their right to testimonial justice. Debates and discussions have been so fiery because, in the absence of formal and authoritative *fiqh* statements, it is in the informal spheres of interaction that orthodoxy *and* innovation, convention *and* reformist zeal, operate. They simultaneously reveal the gendered contributions made by women leaders – hence, recognizing the female-led impetus for change – *and* engender denial and resistance to these changes by men and some women. It is thus the case that for numerous women *ahong*, practicing meaningful women-centered scriptural interpretation means learning from purposefully and piously lived lives, as exemplified by the Prophet's daughter Fatimah and wife, Ayesha, whose conduct was anchored in Islamic root notions of justice, thus opening a pathway to reasoned advocacy of *hao bidaerti* (好比德儿替 commendable innovation) (Jaschok 2012).

A Space for Testifying the Sound of Faith

The rural women's mosque in a remote part of Henan province I visited in the summer of 2016 is of modest size. Its decaying façade bears the marks of countless seasons of inclement weather, with the impoverishment of the inhabitants of this small Muslim village only too visible. Yet this same village supports two local mosques. The spacious, skillfully ornamented men's mosque, built in the traditional Chinese architectural style of a Confucian lineage hall, obstructs the view of the humble, small mosque situated behind the men's mosque. This small mosque serves the religious and educational needs of the women. Demonstrating

1 *Shiniang* is the title commonly given to a male *ahong*'s wife; unlike a woman *ahong*, a *shiniang*'s mosque-related duties are far less circumscribed and more fluid. A *shiniang* may or may not guide women in prayer or instruct them in religious knowledge.

how gender shapes the availability of material resources, this example is not unlike many other rural women's mosques. Nevertheless, as many concerned observers in the wider Muslim community note, an aura of neglect attaches to many rural mosque regardless of the gender of its congregation. In too many cases, poorly educated, poorly paid *ahong*, with limited ability, capacity, or motivation, engage in little more than the basic performance of core duties. It is not uncommon to find mosques mostly empty, mostly unused, in which the emptiness is exacerbated by echoes of the voices of the few visitors who drop by when an opportunity arises to perform an individual act of prayer rather than participate in a collective rite. In these places, Muslims make do without even the most rudimentary guidance.[2] But it is gender that remains the most visible marker of a disparate landscape of worship.

The small women's mosque in Henan I visited, however, felt altogether different. Despite the immediate impression of a dispiriting, shabby appearance, this proved too superficial an appraisal. During the visit, I became conscious of an intangible, strangely intense spirituality which inscribed the very materiality of the small mosque's outer and interior spaces. It offered a stark contrast to the hollowed-out spaces of many other rural sites of worship. Its humble exterior, I discovered, gives shelter to the sonic riches of *zhongyuan* (central China) Hui Muslims' gendered culture of devotion, prayer, and praise. This expressive culture is safeguarded and maintained by one of its most gifted curators, a transmitter and performer of formidable charisma; in fact, the women's mosque is known beyond county borders for its remarkably erudite *ahong.*

Yao BL *Ahong*[3] is educated in Chinese, Arabic, and Persian, making her familiar with Arabic educational reforms and teaching and connected with the traditional pedagogical culture of women's mosques based on Persian scriptures.[4] She is admired for her mesmerizing sermons and inspiring teaching; she presides over monthly classes at a larger neighboring village mosque to accommodate the large congregation of women, with many coming from afar to listen to her. Yao *Ahong*'s guidance on religious issues and interpretations (*fiqh*) is sought by many. She

2 This information comes from Wu *Laoshi* (anonymized) who retired a few years ago from his occupation as a middle-ranking cadre at a city branch of the China Islamic Association (中国伊斯兰教协会 *Zhongguo yisilanjiao xiehui*). Based on his vast knowledge of the Islamic landscape in China's central provinces, he provided illuminating accounts of the state of religious buildings, particularly in rural areas. He described mosques – funded by those who commendably wished to contribute to the presence of Islamic sites – where buildings had dilapidated facades, remained empty, and fallen into disuse. With no demand for such sites or no *ahong* to lead a mosque, their state of disrepair and neglect is a perennial cause of sorrow to Wu *Laoshi*, a pious but critical observer of the state of Islamic religiosity. Interviews with Wu Laoshi took place in August 2015 and August 2016 in Henan.

3 Conversation with Yao BL *Ahong* took place in August 2016 in Henan province.

4 As discussed in previous chapters (see Chapters Two and Four in particular), the Islamic cultural renaissance and educational projects of the 16th and 17th centuries shaped the beginnings and subsequent development of female Islamic education. Until recent times, this women's mosque-based tradition rested mainly on Persian language scriptural texts. For more details, see Jaschok and Shui (2000) and Shui and Jaschok (2002).

is respected by many Muslims, women and men, for her devotion and spiritual strength and for being a persuasive chanter of words of true faith. Unsurprisingly, this makes her a controversial figure among members of the more orthodox local Sunni circles. She arouses suspicion particularly among senior political and administrative leaders concerned about her mass appeal and for attracting large congregations. Accused of illegal missionizing and violating religious policies, close surveillance of her activities is thus a common part of Yao *Ahong*'s daily life. Yet it is this same set of qualities – her independence of mind and her strength of conviction that Islam offers a unique template of justice and compassion for believers – which her disciples and admirers regard as contributing to, and accounting for, the local resurgence of *jiaomen* among women.

Interestingly, it is Yao *Ahong*'s rendering of both traditional *jingge* and more contemporary *zansheng* that has attracted the most praise, and the most intense disapprobation. Having witnessed the *Ahong*'s chanting myself, and the responses of the women present, it is no exaggeration to speak of the overwhelming emotions that held all who were present spellbound. Many women told me of Yao *Ahong*'s impact on their lives: by hearing someone, they said, who 'understands the words' (whatever its linguistic source or borrowing) of the chants. Yao *Ahong* moreover expresses this understanding with a moving intensity which the women hold testifies to the presence of a true leader of the faith. In addition, she possesses the beauty of voice and the ability to transfix her listeners with an emotionality rarely heard in local mosques, a laying bare of both the subtleties of complex subjective experiences as well as the shattering affect aroused during participation in rituals which, if performed outside the women's mosque, might be considered close to heterodoxy. The impact is such that the women who are among her regular listeners – whom Yao *Ahong* often encourages to join in the chanting, turning the event into a collective act that never fails to heighten the intensity of collective emotion – habitually conclude their accounts of her with the exclamation: 'Who cannot believe [cannot have 伊玛尼 *yimani*] after experiencing such powerful demonstration of faith!'.

One evening, I witnessed Yao *Ahong*'s enactment of a particularly spell-binding chant that demonstrated so well why she commands a large following. Interestingly, it also suggested why she might discomfort many local *ahong,* both male and female. Yao *Ahong* is undoubtedly drawing away worshipers from adjacent mosques competing for souls and for income, which largely depend on contributions from members of the mosque congregation. In addition, it is also what both admirers and detractors alike describe as the 'Sufi-like' physical enactment of a particular chant's emotion that is judged by many an *ahong* as moving her close to heterodoxy. The Persian language *zansheng* which stood out to me that evening tells of Fatimah's grieving for her late father;[5] as Yao BL *Ahong* confided later, it is also a song of mourning over all beloved parents whose lives have come

5 See Chapter Two for the full text of 'Fatimah's Lament'. This *zansheng* is widely performed, with versions showing similarity in content but diverging in the extent of a transmitter's additions to the

to an end. In her performance of the *zansheng*, her voice broke into weeping lamentation, transforming it into a heart-wrenching rendering of grief. Initially sitting self-consciously as they watched her swaying body, the women listeners ended up swaying with her. Yao *Ahong* treasures the expressive impact of *jingge*, their healing power able to bring forth, deepen, and give voice to collective emotions that speak, she says, of truth of the most fundamental kind. She adds that this then becomes a testimony to a genealogy of faith which can only be witnessed through the collective, participatory ritual of women who form this sonic circle – a circle of resonant, reverberating, and mutually reinforcing claims to equality here and in the Afterlife.

This *Ahong*'s safety is under constant threat, and so is the survival of her mosque – as her activities are viewed as being outside the bounds of permitted guidelines on religious activities. Harassment is constant, but she bears this as a privilege, a testing of an ardent believer's soul. Her sacrifices include much of what constitutes conventional family life. According to Yao *Ahong*, a woman *ahong*'s pay is modest and only a tiny fraction of that paid to men. She is paid once a year, her annual income equaling a schoolteacher's average monthly wage; in 2016, this was about 3,000 *renminbi*. This salary cannot sustain an individual, however modest her needs, let alone a family. A woman *ahong*'s complete dedication to a religious calling, therefore, entails a near-total dependency on her family or husband. This is the compromise that has enabled someone of Yao *Ahong*'s caliber to pursue her calling in a poor community. As pointed out in an earlier chapter, the material circumstances of a mosque depend on the commonly modest *nietie* (alms) given by women to their mosque's upkeep as a family's income usually flows into men's pockets and their *nieti* benefits men's mosques. A female *ahong*'s income, however senior, is similarly circumscribed by her relatively lower status when compared to male *ahong* and by her perceived inferior abilities in dispensing her duties as a transmitter of the faith.

It appears that only the most dedicated and idealistic, but also the most religious, women are prepared to take on the ill-paid and often arduous tasks of education – of providing leadership in a segment of society which grants these choices scant respect and their voices only perfunctory hearing. For some of the most assertive religious female voices, this spells all manner of challenges – as evident in Yao *Ahong*'s case. But as Yao *Ahong* states, she is not afraid of anyone or of anything. All her available time is devoted to service to the community and to her mission to deepen the faith of the large Hui Muslim community in her charge. Her life is dedicated to spreading faith, using all the means at her disposal, including social media such as WeChat.

Before and after Yao *Ahong*'s performance, my research partner Shui Jingjun and I engaged in conversation with Yao's disciples and members of her congregation more generally. I asked about their impressions of our oral history project

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text, the nature of the performance, and the name under which the *zansheng* is known. One well-known version (瓦穆随白塔湖 *Wamusuibaitahu*) is featured in the SongBook (ZMFEC 2017, 25–6).

recording women's chants (i.e., the SongBook), which was then being expanded as local Muslims, leaders, scholars, and religious practitioners (including some from mosques in adjacent counties) had been eager to participate in it. I asked whether the recovery of previously unrecorded *jingge* was of interest and of relevance to them. Fifteen women from Yao *Ahong*'s tightly knit local community of supporters, who were present throughout our conversation, were adamant that a better understanding of the chants, which had formed an indispensable source of learning, consolation, and joy, was important. This was not only true for their own formative years of education but also for the generations of women preceding them, and the SongBook would make an essential contribution to the faith. They expressed that being able to refer to a written record of Muslim women's chants of faith would facilitate a better understanding of how much women had contributed to the development of Islam, how women had helped shape the Islamic institutions and cultural practices in central China. Some women alluded to their worry over the import into their region of the more austere *Wahhabi* strain of Islam dominant in Muslim communities in the borderlands of northwest China (西北教门 *xibei jiaomen*). This strain of Islam is introducing stricter injunctions on gender segregation as a foundation of Islamic orthodoxy, with the exclusion of women from public responsibilities and associated rights being a cornerstone of the *Wahhabi* paradigm (Gönül and Rogenhofer 2017).

Such concerns are widely held as impoverished rural mosques, unable to pay sufficient wages to an *ahong* to support his or her family, are increasingly reliant on religious practitioners from northwestern Muslim communities who are more willing to accept often harsh conditions and minimal wages. These *ahong* tend toward the more austere *Wahhabi*-influenced Islam and are known to be hostile toward what they condemn as a contemporary trend in *zhongyuan* Hui Muslim culture where, thus the accusation goes, '[the practice of] Islam has become too feminized' (伊斯兰教太女性化 *yisilanjiao tai nüxinghua*).[6] More than other Muslim communities in the country, central China's Hui Muslim communities are closely associated with the evolution of women's Qur'anic schools and mosques.[7] Some of the women told me they had traveled to other (Muslim) parts of China, taking advantage of opportunities to learn about different Muslim practices and listening to stories of women's exclusion from Islamic institutions and sites of prayer and education. Their stories were couched in words of frustration over what they considered a widespread state of ignorance about the progressive nature of Islam, and what such enlightened understanding can contribute to women's lives and to wider non-Muslim society in, as they saw it, a troubling age of moral uncertainty, precarity, and weakening familial bonds.

6 Conversation with Islamic scholars took place in August 2016, at an informal meeting in Shanghai; see also the Introduction.

7 This information comes from Wu *Laoshi* mentioned earlier in this chapter, who is an enthusiastic supporter of what he considers the great pride of *zhongyuan* Muslims, that is, the culture of women's mosques. Our conversations took place in August 2015 and August 2016 in several locations in Henan province.

Viewed over the course of the development of Islam, from their highly gendered perspectives, these women agreed that the current notable widespread deepening of religiosity, and the part played by women's strengthening spiritual authority, together with the rise of the *jingge* tradition as integral to a vibrant expressive culture, must all be considered part and parcel of the same trend. Progress in women's development and progress in the development of Islam are inseparable, making the role played by leaders such as Yao *Ahong* necessary, even indispensable.

'Inshallah, at Least Nowadays We Are Learning'

The extracts from conversations among Muslim women below reflect upon the nature of the challenges that complicate and question the legitimacy of rightful testimonial authority – an authority claimed by a group of women *ahong* and their mosque congregations as timely and just. The determination by leading women *ahong* to redress this injustice culminated in the Songbook (ZMFEC 2017) as a testimonial to the continued role and impact of women *ahong* who built on their predecessors' legacy of transmitting knowledge in a dedicated space of Islamic faith.

As outlined in previous chapters, the collaborative SongBook project had attracted not only praise but also much critical opposition, which brought into prominence the concept of *xiuti* (羞体 *awrah*), i.e., indecent and shameful exposure of female voices to public (mixed-gender) audiences. It can be argued that the spatial facilities of women's mosques enabled the frequent gathering of women, including the SongBook project participants led by their *ahong*, to explore the implications arising from the (at-times heated) contestations over the emergence of female voices into the public domain. Such exploration of Islamic prohibitions, neo-Confucian gender morality, and personal animosities, more commonly dormant and left unvoiced, was possible only because of the social ease and sense of solidarity afforded by women-only mosques. These spaces facilitated ease of debates through the physical separation of women's spaces from men's mosques and a convivial atmosphere whereby women could deliberate upon and probe the rightfulness of accusations of shameful impropriety. They also allowed for individual expressions of uncertainty and ambivalence, and women's desire for reassurance and guidance in a world of change.

Conversations Among Muslim Women: And an Acknowledgement by a Middle-Aged Woman of Abiding Ambivalence, or 'a Little Feudalism'

The following conversation with Ba QM,[8] a 46-year-old Hui Muslim woman, illustrates how unsettling it can feel when women – taught all their lives to strictly adhere to an 'ordained' exclusion of the female voice in mixed-gender spaces – are now encouraged to acknowledge the injustice of past injunctions and wholeheartedly join in chants of public celebration.

8 Ge CX *Ahong*'s interview with Ba QM took place in 2016, in Henan province.

Ge CX *Ahong* asks[9]: *When did you begin to learn about Islam?*

Ba QM: In our family, thirteen generations have served as *ahong*. I went to our local mosque when I was a little girl. The original mosque was located in a small *hutong* [alley]. And so, whenever I went to the mosque for *Salah* [prayer], I would be walking through these narrow alleys to learn all about praying the proper way. At that time, because I was a little girl, I was really scared when I passed through these narrow alleyways [rec.: laughing]. I was so young and timid at that time. As I was growing older, I went to the mosque more often to get better religious knowledge.

Can you chant zansheng?

Ba QM:I learned some of the chants.

What did you learn, the old type jingge *or the new* zansheng*?*

Ba QM: Ahem, the traditional *jingge*.

How many lines can you chant?

Ba QM: Maybe two or three? [rec.: murmuring to herself]

Your older family members, such as your mother, aunts, or anyone else, how about them? Did they chant jingge*?*

Ba QM: My aunt is an *ahong*, many among my relatives and friends are *ahong* too. And some of my husband's relatives also served as *ahong*. I listened a lot to *jingge* but learned very few.

Have you ever attended performances of zansheng *in public? Just like today.*

Ba QM: Never! Why? Because a woman's voice is *xiuti* [*awrah*, to be concealed].

A woman's voice is xiuti*. Do you hear this from other people, or is this something you feel is so?*

Ba QM: *Ahong* said so.

I see, Ahong *said a woman's voice is* xiuti*. Have you ever seen anything written that said it is so?*

Ba QM: Yes, I have.

9 Ge CX's questions are henceforth given in *italics* without attribution.

Let us suppose that male and female Muslims attend an activity together, just like today. Do you think it is good or bad?

Ba QM: Ah, today's activity was good. It promotes Islam and inspires us to learn more about Islam and get knowledge; anyway, study is not bad.

So why didn't you attend this activity? Is it that you don't like to attend such an event, or no one organized women from your mosque to take part in the activity?

Ba QM: Actually, we made some preparations and organized ourselves, but in the end, no one wanted to take part. This is because our *ahong* said that a woman's voice is *xiuti*. Women shouldn't expose their voices and appear in a public event. Women should try their best to be old-style women [rec.: laughing]. So, sometimes, I should say, I have a little feudalism [in me].

Do you think what your ahong *said, that a woman's voice is* xiuti*, is this right or wrong? Is the voice* [you use] *in your daily life also* xiuti*, or only so when learning the Qur'an or reciting chants of worship?*

Ba QM: In our common daily life… [rec.: she breaks, slowly exhaling]. All things are *xiuti*.

Do you have any evidence … do you have a foundation for saying this?

Ba QM: Yes, I have. There are mosques for women in our region, but not in other regions, just like my aunt was saying when she came back from Xinjiang.[10] There are no mosques [in Xinjiang] built specially for women. There, Muslim women are not permitted to enter mosques, and they must stay at home.

But when organizing for special activities, all the Muslim women will chant zansheng*, mostly together, or sometimes individually. Do you think it is not suitable for men in the audience to listen to women's voices?*

Ba QM: At present what we do is just for improving our learning, I think it's not bad. You are saying that things have been changing [rec.: laughing]. This is different, we all come here to learn, just for learning.

How many zansheng *chants do you know?*

Ba QM: Only three [rec.: smiles shyly].

How much of the Qur'an can you recite?

10 The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is an autonomous region of northwest China. Whilst other nationalities have settled in Xinjiang, it is predominantly the home of the Uyghur Muslim population.

Ba QM: The Qur'an, er… [rec.: exhales deeply]. When it comes to *Haiting*, yes, I can recite all of it. Basically, I should say, I know thirty sūrahs.

A Space for Claiming Heritage and Contesting Xiuti

Applying age-old skills of strategic evasion and selective silence, initiators of the SongBook's intensely felt spiritual and women-centered project succeeded in acquiring a protective mantle of legitimacy. Through self-identifying as a cultural project, as 'intangible culture' (非物质文化资料 *feiwuzhi wenhua ziliao*), a double strategy was played out. First, religious content was concealed through the project claiming a place in China's mainstream heritage industry, a space of multiple and often-subordinate identities, whether religious, ethnic, or female. Second, with the tradition of female *ahong*-led women's mosques being historically marginalized within the culture of a marginalized ethno-religious group, women's claims to a rightful place in society and history challenged 'epistemic injustice' (Kidd *et al*. 2017). Marginalized communities are excluded from discourses and practices of a nation's heritage and its grand historical narrative, with lines of exclusion here drawn from within two patriarchal loci: one that is invested in a secularist mainstream society, and the other in a male-dominated Islamic hierarchy of spiritual authority and educational resources. Pantazatos (2017) points out that dominant groups monopolize interpretations over the meaning of heritage, formulate criteria for its selective preservation, and thus determine the place of the past in the future. Even more critically, 'heritage' shapes the epistemic framework of conversations and interactions, embodying core concepts and meanings by which those who inhabit these spaces derive their identity and define their belonging *(ibid.,* 370).

At stake for Hui Muslim women articulating and emoting a body of marginalized knowledge is the significance of their unique history, coming to life through their narrations of personal experience, of family stories of generations of women before them – stories of formative years passed in female madrassas and women's

Figure 9.1 Women telling their stories – their shared history – to one another; researchers and members of the local community record chants in a small women's mosque, HRPC, 2016 (anonymous photographer)

mosques – and of taking pride in the treasure trove of women's resonant inheritance: *jingge*. The motivation for making the SongBook was to record the women's mosque tradition as an integral part of the history of China's Islamic culture, equal to the legacy of men's faith. But it has also become a significant record worthy of admission into the archives of Chinese mainstream civilization. As Pantazatos (2017) points out, given the principle of sharing is the *raison d'être* underlying institutions of heritage, it matters how, with whom, and importantly, *what* is being shared. The double exclusion of women's unique Islamic culture is therefore challenged here; that is, both from Chinese mainstream heritage *and* from male records of the Islamic presence in Chinese history. Pantazatos (*ibid.,* 370) explains that not taking into consideration participants' perspectives, interpretations, and understanding as sharers of recorded events has consequences such as that 'the significance of what is transited from past to future is distorted'. This is the case made repeatedly by Hui Muslim women in *zhongyuan* China, whether justifying the investment of precious resources for the upkeep of *nüsi* or the continued nurturing of rich oral traditions through opportunities for their performance in a variety of contexts. Taking responsibility for a unique heritage of women's own mosque culture has ever been on the list of priorities which Ge CX *Ahong* takes most seriously.

Having transformed many religious sites into heritage sites – as in the case of Beijing's famous Niujie (Ox Street) Mosque and the adjacent women's mosque, with the latter restored to accommodate international Muslim visitors during the 2008 Olympic Games – the Chinese state also controls their historical and contemporary significance, whether within a local cultural context or, since 1949, within wider political contexts and for multiple purposes (Jaschok 2003, 660). State policy involves a three-pronged strategy of permitting carefully controlled and monitored religious life at legally registered religious sites; integrating more historically significant buildings into a growing tourist industry through compromise and adaptation of religious organization and culture; and supporting a state-sponsored narrative of (religiously infused) 'pastness' and (Han-centric[11]) modernity (Goossaert and Palmer 2011; Zhang Yanchao 2021; Zhao Dong 2017). Architecture, furnishings, artifacts, and religious personnel are gathered as an archival record of the country's accommodation of populations peripheral in a socio-political sense yet central to demonstrating positive characteristics of the government's treatment of its minorities. Absent, however, are what Pantazatos (2017) describes as features of the epistemic injustice of heritage politics: the multiple perspectives of the many central stakeholders who built, supported, worshiped, and in many cases, died for their faith. What is getting lost, as so many religious leaders worry, is heritage of another

11 'Han-centric' here denotes Xi Jingping's government policy of aligning China's diverse populations (officially classified into 56 distinct ethnic groups) to the dominant Han Chinese population's language, societal norms, culture, and ethnic identity. The core notion of 'cultural confidence' (文化自信 *wenhua zixin*) encapsulates Xi's mantra that China can only thrive if the development of socialist culture is informed by the richness of (Han-centered) Chinese 'pastness'; only thus can China take ownership of her sovereign identity. National development and future greatness are predicated on collective confidence in the rightfulness of China's claim to national exceptionalism (Klimeš 2017).

kind: the faith and practices of ordinary people as much as of religious leaders, of those who taught and preached and led the mosque congregations. Thus is lost the connection with reflective voices from the past, creating a lacuna in mainstream society's narration of collective nationhood that overwrites and excludes divergent stories, and indeed predicates a triumphant accomplishment of Han Chinese civilization on their very submergence within a national monolithic mythology.

Women's Contributions to the Development of Islam

Even before the SongBook project commenced in 2015, several *ahong* had made efforts to incorporate *jingge* into their teaching and religious guidance. They initially did this through using cassette tapes, then CDs, and more recently, mobile phones, as they realized the importance of distributing chants widely for educating women's religious sentiment. As news spread of the scale and scope of the ambitious project of our SongBook (ZMFEC 2017), offers of support from all quarters, including scholarly and governmental spheres, were instrumental. They facilitated the challenging work of identifying individuals who remembered these chants, recording and transcribing texts where the meaning is all-too-often obscure and ambiguous, and helping with the taxing task of committing Persian and Arabic language chants to paper.[12] Significantly, participants in these projects not only realized the value of their traditions to their own communities, but they became increasingly aware of what these traditions might mean to Muslims elsewhere, and to all those interested in the voices of women (ZMFEC 2017, Preface 3–10). Here we must note the role of any researcher in her responsibility as a storyteller facilitating local women's awakening of pride in their unique culture. As the SongBook project expanded, becoming more ambitious in scope and purpose, interviewees closest to the project became research participants, and in many instances also transformed into research collaborators. They demanded that they too must put pen to paper as they each had a story to tell, that local women would speak for themselves rather than let others speak for them.

As Ge *Ahong* expresses in the SongBook (ZMFEC 2017, Afterword), contact with Shui and myself[13] (in our identities as researchers) took place in a wider context of expanding opportunities for *hajj*, for online interaction with Muslim leaders and communities across the country, and for educational and cultural exchanges, meaningful learning, and self-discovery. Ge *Ahong* writes: 'The prolonged [opportunity for] learning has opened our eyes, making us realize that as a woman *ahong* it is not only our responsibility to transmit Islam, but also [we carry] the mission of preserving the history and culture of our people' (ZMFEC 2017, Afterword 300).

12 Persian and Arabic chants in the SongBook appear in the original handwriting (as is the case with the *Manshadai*, see Chapter Six) rather than in print, constituting thus a precious record of the learning of women *ahong* (who transcribed the chants) and their mastery of the scriptural languages (Persian is slowly replaced by Arabic as educational reforms have also entered the classrooms of more traditional rural women's mosques).

13 Shui is a Hui Muslim and locally born, whereas I am familiar with Ge *Ahong* through our many years of social interaction, research projects, and joint events.

As a male *ahong* stated in an interview we conducted on the history of women's mosques and their legacy of *jingge*, 'the development of Islam and of women is inseparable'.[14] Continuing on from the conversation with 61-year-old Mai BL in Chapter Six, here Mai sheds light on several generations of her family, their different adherence to the strictures of daily observance of Islamic prayer, and their personal engagement with their faith, which is particularly important as, for women like herself, traditional demands on women's performance of their duties at home combined with long hours of work outside the home to make worship and Islamic learning near impossible.

Conversations Among Muslim Women: 'a Kind of Family Tradition'

Ge CX *Ahong* asks[15]: *Can you recite the* Haiting*?*

Mai BL: Yes, I can.

Generally, that means you can recite much from the Qur'an. How many zansheng *chants have you learned?*

Mai BL: Ah, *zanshen*g, not too much, er, not much.

More of the old-style zansheng *chants or more new-style ones?*

Mai BL: More new-style chants.

Do you mean the Malaysian zansheng [Nasyid]*?*

Mai BL: Yes!

Another question, have you learned Arabic language zansheng *or Chinese language* zansheng*?*

Mai BL: More of the Arabic *zansheng*.

You mean using transliteration?

Mai BL: No, the proper Arabic language.

14 Interview conducted for the 2017 documentary film 经歌与赞圣：中原穆斯林妇女的信仰表达和文化传承 ('*Jingge* and *Zansheng*: Religious Expression and Cultural Legacies of Muslim Women in Central China'), produced by the Henan research team in collaboration with members of the local Muslim population for educational use (Leverhulme Trust Research Grant, 2014–2017).

15 Ge CX's questions are henceforth given in *italics* without attribution.

One more question: Why do you learn zansheng *chants? What do you get out of this?*

Mai BL: Learning *zansheng* is learning about the virtues of the Prophet. Moreover, it's a kind of enjoyment, yes, a joy. Listening to chants, that is so beautiful!

Is it only the sound?

Mai BL: Ah, well, that… [rec.: laughs, and pauses].

If zansheng *is entirely in Arabic, do you understand the meaning?*

Mai BL: [rec.: smiles] I cannot catch that much of the meaning, but I think I get the general gist.

At present, almost every area is holding such zansheng *competitions. Do you think this sort of activity is good or bad?*

Mai BL: Definitely good [rec.: bursting into loud laughter]! Definitely good!

Do you have any suggestions? For example, how to hold this activity in the most suitable way?

Mai BL: What I can suggest, well… [rec.: laughs].

Oh, never mind, let's set this question aside for the moment. Then, how many people are there in your family?

Mai BL: In my family? There are five people at home.

How many of them go to the mosque often? That is, how many go to pray?

Mai BL: Who goes most often to the mosque? Well, I think I go most often. Our family has a little boy, and he goes to the mosque on *Zhuma* [Prayer Day], and then he also goes there, off and on, during Ramadan. The children also attend study classes at the mosque during their vacation.

You said earlier that your mother is also an ahong*? Do you think there were many people learning* zansheng *in her generation?*

Mai BL: It seems that there weren't too many.

Feng QT [who was listening to the conversation, raises her voice]: When I was a kid and at the mosque, learning, I always listened to the chanting of old-style *zansheng*. This wasn't Chinese and not Arabic. It was some sort of transliteration.

Neither Chinese nor Arabic? Was it Persian?

Mai BL and Feng QT [speaking in unison]: Ah, yes, perhaps this is it, Persian. That was the way of the older generation. They chanted that way.

Ah, I think so many important things have to do with members of the older generation and with their circumstances at the time.

The conversation came to a halt when Mai had to attend to duties elsewhere. When she left the mosque, one of the women who had been listening, Cheng XY,[16] offered to continue the conversation in her place. As with other conversations, this conversation took place after *Zhuma* worship; doing so meant we could spare women the inconvenience of making extra time for us whilst ensuring the largest possible numbers of respondents. Cheng XY had stayed on after worship, as did other women, and she was eager to engage in conversation.

Conversations Among Muslim Women (continued)**: 'Nothing Like This at Home'**

Ge CX *Ahong* asks: *How much of the Qur'an have you learned?*

Cheng XY: The Qur'an, talking about how much I have learned … I can recite part of the *Haiting*, and I also learned more, other parts. I have learned them but cannot recite them by memory. I have learned the thirtieth *sūrah* and the twenty-ninth *sūrah*.[17]

Oh, you have learned both already.

Cheng XY: Yes.

Then, how many zansheng *have you learned? Old or new* [zansheng]?

Cheng XY: Maybe, I can recite more than a dozen or two dozen [rec.: murmuring to herself].

One dozen or two dozen?

Cheng XY: Yes, some of the words I can remember clearly, some of them I can chant following other people.

Can you chant the Persian language zansheng *like the pious older generations? They chanted these Persian chants quite often.*

16 Interview with Cheng XY, then 45 years old, took place in 2016 in her hometown, Henan province.

17 These two *sūrah* concern *Ar-Rūm* (sometimes translated as 'The Greeks' or 'The Byzantines') and *Al-'Ankabūt* ('The Spider', alluding to the weakness of beliefs not rooted in faith in Allah).

Cheng XY: I cannot recite the Persian ones.

Feng QT: [Another listener, hearing Cheng's reply, interjected]: A few, a few!

[The most traditional Persian-language] Mansha[18], *the chant that some of you chanted earlier today is an old* zansheng *chant. Can you do it?*

Cheng XY: I can, I also know another old *zanshen*g chant.

Ah, right, I heard from Shui Laoshi *that there is an old* jingge, Kuwugeng [哭五更 'Weeping all Night Long']. *Do you know these* kuhua *chants* [chants of lamentation]*?*[19]

Cheng XY: No, I don't know these *jingge*.

Feng QT interjected: *Kuwugeng*? Oh, I have heard of it.

Cheng XY: *Kuwugeng*? If someone reads me the words of the chant, I should know it. If someone can recite, I should be able to recognize it.

Oh, in this case, there is more knowledge when it comes to the new zansheng *rather than the old-style ones.*

Cheng XY: Yes, definitely, we know the new *zansheng* chants much better.

Other women participants [suddenly, those listening in came into the conversation]: There is a *zansheng* chant named *Shiketan* (十可叹 'Ten Sighs'[20]); all of us know it.

With whom did you learn these zansheng*? By yourself, or did you study them especially? Or did you learn new chants from a cassette tape?*

Cheng XY: I learned them all at the [women's] mosque. At that time, when it was *Zhuma* [Prayer Day], we would go to the mosque; on ordinary days, we

18 See Chapter Six for a popular Persian-language *Mansha* chant.

19 Interestingly, many middle-aged or elderly women either told us that they do not remember *kuhua* chants or confessed to being unwilling to recall, let alone perform, them (see Chapter Two). The consensus was that these lamentations were best put aside as they no longer reflected contemporary social conditions and the improvements in women's personal lives (see Chapter Seven).

20 The chant 'Ten Sighs' itemizes, in doom-laden words, Muslims' many shortcomings and abject failings. It states the terrible price paid in the Afterlife if believers neglect fundamental Islamic principles and are indifferent to applying Islamic teaching in daily life. Too many people, so the *jingge* laments, cling to superstition, swayed by local witch rituals and hollow promises of healing. The seventh sigh targets women specifically. A vision of hell is conjured up for those women who fail to be faithful to their husbands and conduct themselves in public spaces without regard for Islamic strictures on female chastity and moral rectitude (ZMFEC 2017, 73–74).

were praying mostly at home. On *Zhuma* and on such occasions as religious festivals, we would all go to worship at the mosque, and we would be chanting together. Slowly and gradually, we were able to do it. This would happen at the mosque. Of course, sometimes, after our religious study classes, our *ahong* would also teach us some of these chants.

Why do you learn zansheng*?*

Cheng XY: Why do I learn *zansheng*? I think there are many reasons. Because listening, the sound of the chants is so beautiful. Because of the words, among them especially the Chinese language words. For example, today when we sang 'Muslim Sisters' (穆斯林姐妹 *Musilin Jiemei*).[21] You could see how these words held everyone spellbound.

Oh, this is to do with Chinese lyrics.

Cheng XY: Yes, we can catch the meaning immediately.

So, were there zansheng *activities at home, or in your village?*

Cheng XY: Nothing like this at home.

Did you ever attend such a zansheng *chanting contest?*

Cheng XY: No, I have never been to such contests, but I have attended other such joint activities.

Do you mean activities to encourage learning about and performing zansheng*?*

Cheng XY: Oh, no. We learned from each other how to recite the Qur'an. Other activities had to do with how to give talks and give sermons.

Is your family a religious family? Have generations of your family served as ahong?

Cheng XY: My family is not that kind of family [rec.: laughing].

Then, which generation of your family started with the study of religious knowledge?

Cheng XY: My mother was a very ordinary kind of person. Sometimes she did the prayer at home, sometimes she went to the mosque. Oh, I am talking here about my *niangjia* [娘家 home of a woman's parents]. But now I want to tell you

21 In ZMFEC (2017, 285–286); also see Chapter Ten for a full translation of the 'Muslim Sisters' chant.

about the family of my *pojia* [婆家 husband's family]. All our family members are quite devout Muslims. Grandfather was an *ahong*. But after my grandpa passed away, no other member of the family became an *ahong*. Perhaps we have become less pious. At present, there are four of us in our family. I sent my child to study in Egypt. I am attending the women's religious instruction classes, my husband studies at the mosque [rec.: she smiled very proudly], and I also have a daughter. She is already working outside [the home].

Three out of four family members are studying religious knowledge.

Cheng XY: Yes, thank be to Allah! Inshallah, at least we are all learning now.

Can your mother recite the Qur'an and chant zansheng?

Cheng XY: My mother learned everything she knows through listening and repetition. She cannot read, neither Chinese nor Arabic. But she can recite many prayers which she was taught through listening and repetition. In addition, she can recite several *sūrah* from the Qur'an.

So, she can recite the most important prayers?

Cheng XY: Yes, she can.

What do these conversations among women and their *ahong* tell us? They provide insight into how these women recall, reminisce, and acknowledge the part that ordinary Muslims played in upholding the faith even when faced with challenges brought about by changes in the political environment or changes in the varying responsibilities of women's life cycles. They also tell us that the presence of women's own spaces – where they could legitimately go outside their home to worship, learn, congregate with other women, find a refuge, and ask for counsel – was indispensable to sustaining and deepening their faith.

What provided the discursive impulse for such exploratory conversations among the women were undoubtedly their collective work on the SongBook (ZMFEC 2017), a project of pride in their own story of enduring piety. It is the joint work of salvaging their part in history that engendered in them a strong surge of emotion and determination, leading some of the most vocal women to assert their voices with manifest and powerful conviction. This collective project provided the foundation from which to counter orthodox critiques of female voices, from a position of pride in the historical record of women's active contributions to a resurgence of faith, a contribution that would have been difficult to sustain had it not been for a space legitimately their own to invest with words and emotion. At the same time, a generally shared sentiment reiterated by Zheng XR *Ahong* held fast, namely that all of the women's successful dissemination of faith sprang from their gratitude toward the many who had provided them with support and a shared love of Allah.

These sentiments come across very clearly in the SongBook's Foreword written by Li XF *Ahong* from Wuzhi County (ZMFEC 2017, 19). Quoting from the Qur'an (*Sūrah*: 124), she writes: 'If any do deeds of righteousness – be they male or female – and have faith, they will enter Heaven. And not the least injustice will be done to them'. As Li *Ahong* emphasizes, women are equal with men before Allah and society. Moreover, Muslim women play important roles that have religious, cultural, and wider societal significance. Much of this, in her view, is due to the uniqueness of women's own spaces of worship and for socializing. Women's mosques are not only women's religious activity centers, but also social activity centers. Women *ahong* frequently organize *zansheng*, recitations, and lectures for women; they are also actively involved in mobilizing Muslim women as much for charitable causes as for festive gatherings, in the transmission of Islam, and also play an indispensable role in developing and enriching Muslim culture (ZMFEC 2017, 18).

For Li *Ahong,* it was important to state that the SongBook project to recover women's tradition, which moreover highlighted the creative potency of space in contributing to the evolution of women's tradition, had not only become important to local women or to Chinese Hui Muslims more generally but had also acquired significance for the wider world of Islam.

The Mosque as a Space from Which to Speak – 'the Mosque is for Everyone, Everyone Can Go There'

Chinese Hui Muslim women's contribution to the development of Islam would have been unthinkable without the facilitative context offered by the evolution of women-centered spaces. They have facilitated a sense of togetherness, shared devotion, and dedication to the central overriding purpose of improving women's prospects for eternal salvation. They have also continued as safe spaces, allowing women to offer mutual support during times of personal or collective crises. It is from this culture that strong leaders emerged, able to press women's claims for gender equality and religious justice in the face of not uncommonly hostile male resistance within their communities and an indifferent mainstream society.

Intense trust and loyalty commonly bind congregations of women to their female *ahong*, creating bonds of fierce attachment and unreserved respect for the superior religious and spiritual qualities of the religious leader. Arguably, relationships within mosques tend to be characterized, at least from an outsider's perspective, by a culture of harmony based on deference for hierarchy of knowledge and religious status, by consensus and pride in collective achievements. Yet external developments and individual actions may bring about internal disagreements and shatter the accord to which all women's communities aspire, throwing the authority of the mosque and the legitimacy it confers upon its appointed religious leader into unsettling ambiguity. In the conversation which follows, the sole village women's mosque appears in an uncertain light, as a place of exclusion and yet a place in which women excluded aspire to belong. The discord at the core of the long and drawn-out conversation touches upon pronunciation used in scriptural teaching. It is a dispute that, on the one hand, pleads adherence to traditions of teaching practices in women's mosques and, on the other hand, illustrates how the

establishment of study classes away from the mosque has begun to trouble the trust in these same traditions by which words of scriptural authority could be received. Underlying such dissension is an undoubted testing of the authority and credibility of the elderly *ahong* who presides over the women's mosque. It is, after all, her authority as an erudite and thus trustworthy transmitter of the faith which forms the basis of her congregation's confidence in her leadership, that they may, with her guidance and support, look forward to the prospect of eternal life.

The purpose of reproducing this extended conversation, in the first instance with Yuan JX, a teacher of a private women's religious study class in a small township in Henan province, but also involving multiple participants and numerous interruptions by local women listening with intense interest, is to allow for what is a rare insight into the dynamic of relationships within a small community of faith. It allows us to catch opinions voiced in an unguarded moment, hear expressions of strong convictions countered by others' calming of emotional outbursts, and interventions, largely due to Ge *Ahong*'s searching questions, which serve to more closely probe evasive responses. What is often difficult to ascertain for an ethnographer in recording a polyphony of viewpoints, interpretations, and judgments – to read between the lines, fathom the meaning of pauses, and catch transitions from seemingly outright disagreements to sudden amiable unanimity – can be glimpsed in a longer account. In all of the interactions, Ge *Ahong* probes and asks leading questions – and uses her authority to steer the conversation in such a way that all are heard, respected, and potential tensions are dissolved as soon as noted; everyone is made to feel safe. We can catch in this richly textured conversation, led by Ge *Ahong* and supported by occasional interventions from her colleague Ba DM, a hint of the intense arguments generated when the authority of an authoritative transmitter of Islamic knowledge from the local women's mosque collides with new teaching practices offered in a private women's religious study class.

In the sociality of a small Muslim village, expressions of desire for innovation in the way that women are taught at the women's mosque – and thus for greater relevance of female education to modern times – also make transparent the frustration when members of the more innovative private study class are excluded from many of the educational and ritual activities conducted in the mosque. Yet the pride felt by all in the uniqueness of their women-centered mosque is palpable, felt perhaps most searingly by the excluded women, for it is there, after all where the foundation was laid for their claims to religious equality: a mosque in which they learned to speak.

Conversations Among Muslim Women: 'We Get on Quite Well With Each Other'[22]

Ge CX *Ahong* asks[23]: *When did you begin to convene the study class?*

22 Ge CX *Ahong*'s interview with Yuan CX and others took place in August 2016, in a provincial township in Henan.

23 Ge CX's questions are henceforth given in *italics* without attribution.

Yuan JX: From 2003 onwards. So far, it has been more than ten years.

At the beginning, did you run this study class in a [women's] *mosque or immediately elsewhere?*

Yuan JX: From the start, we held the class outside the mosque [rec.: some local women had spontaneously organized their own home teaching].

Did you yourself arrange the teaching curriculum and create the teaching materials? Which teaching materials did you use [in class]?

Yuan JX: At that time, we invited some teachers to help [with the curriculum]. We have a teaching schedule for days when we chant *zansheng*, and when we are studying the recitation of the Qur'an.

Why don't you run such a study class in the mosque?

Yuan JX: Because when we started, there was no opportunity to study the hadiths and the Qur'an in the [women's] mosque.

That means that the education offered by the mosque could not meet your requirements. What about now? Is the mosque offering such activities?

Yuan JX: This doesn't happen very often.

How about the ages of people studying in classes run by the mosque?

Yuan JX: Most of the women are aged between 55 and 70 years.

So, there are more middle-aged and elderly people studying. What about the age of women studying outside the mosque?

Yuan JX: The oldest are well over 70. Quite a few are about 70 years old. But some are quite young, in their mid-20s, early 20s.

Where are there more students? In classes run at the mosque or in private classes outside the mosque?

Yuan JX: Overall, I can say, perhaps there isn't too much difference. Almost the same.

What about teaching content? Do they [students at the women's mosque] *study the same content?*

Yuan JX: At the mosque they have also started teaching the Qur'an, but they don't teach texts from hadiths.

Who is invited to teach the Qur'an? An ahong *or a special teacher?*

Yuan JX: It is always the *ahong* who is doing the teaching.

I didn't say it very clearly just now. I wanted mainly to focus on women's mosques. So, I am not sure that your answer is about the mosque for men or the one for women?

Yuan JX: Ah, the mosque for women. We only talk about the mosque for women.

Ah, the women's mosque then. So, the number of people in the women's mosque study class has almost the same number as your class outside the mosque. What kind of pronunciation do they use? The standard pronunciation or traditional one?

Yuan JX: At the mosque or outside the mosque? The mosque uses traditional pronunciation![24]

The difference between mosque and the outside class is also in the content of the study courses.

Yuan JX: Yes!

You have courses on hadiths, these are not taught at the mosque. What do you think makes some students choose to study in the mosque and others choose to study outside? What's the reason?

Yuan JX: When you study at the mosque, you can follow the course quite easily. And you can follow easily when reciting the Qur'an. Some don't want to bother about the meaning of what they are reciting. It is enough to read loudly [they just imitate whatever the *ahong* is saying]. However, those who choose to study outside the mosque, they are the ones who like to learn, paying attention to the content and meaning of everything. So, they are chanting, but they also try to study the content [of scriptures] and understand the meaning [of what they are reading].

What's the relationship between those who study in your classes and those taking part in mosque classes?

24 The *ahong* at Yuan JX's women's mosque uses in her teaching the traditional informal phonetic script, which relies on Persian and Arabic letters for pronunciation. See below for more discussion on the diversity of pronunciations used by local Muslim women.

Yuan JX: Ah, very harmonious!

Perhaps most harmonious at the beginning? Do you have a situation where some attend a class in the mosque and then go to the other class?

Several other women [present at the interview answer in chorus]: Yes, yes!

Many or few?

Yuan JX: A few, not that many.

Did the people who belong to the mosque attend your activities [instruction and chanting that take place in Yuan's home]?

Yuan JX: No, they don't come.

So, in what sense can you call this 'harmony'?

Yuan JX: We get on quite well with each other.

Are you talking about relationships in daily life?

Some of the women listeners [completing each other's sentences]: Those in our class can attend mosque class to study. And those from the mosque class, they also can join us. That's harmony!

Oh, you are harmonious [among yourselves], *but you don't attend other activities unless they are associated with your home learning.*

All: Yes, yes.

Do you invite women from the mosque when you hold whatever activities there might be?

All [one woman from among the listeners takes the lead, her words are repeated by the others]: No, we don't [rec.: everyone bursts out laughing].

Does your class often hold activities?

Yuan JX: Yes.

What kinds of activities? Zansheng *or preaching of sermons?*

Yuan JX: When it comes to our study class, we get together quite regularly.

All[25]: We go out quite a lot. There are all kinds of activities. For example, not long ago we went to a village [nearby] for some activity.

What is better? Holding the class inside the mosque or outside the mosque? Do you think holding the class inside a mosque is mingzheng yanshun [明正言顺 more fitting and proper[26]]*? That it is more suitable in some ways?*

Yuan JX: Of course! The mosque is for everyone. Everyone can go there!

Have you ever thought of a way to take your study class to the mosque? Didn't you talk about hexie [和谐 harmony] *just now?* [rec.: everyone is smiling]. *Is there a way to do this?*

Yuan JX: Honestly, this will be a little bit difficult. A little bit difficult.

That means you do hope to open a class in the mosque.

Yuan JX: Ah, this would be too nice [rec.: Yuan said this in a tone of longing]. This would be too nice [rec.: all the women in the room are laughing].

Those who are studying outside the mosque are worshiping at home, not at the mosque. Is this so?

Yuan JX: We can worship wherever we want to worship. Some do this at home. This is up to us to decide.

What do you think? What is the problem that you can't be part of the mosque?

All: [some listeners start to voice their opinion]: We can come together. We can come together.

All: [some women disagree] Well, some [women's] mosques simply can't accept us.

A listener intervenes: This isn't really it, not really. The key point is when they recite it is not how we *nianfa* [念法 recite]. There is no catching up with each other [rec.: more emphatically]. Theirs is the old way. Ours is, what we call *tezhiweide* [特志维得 standard pronunciation].

Just like my mosque. We have laoli [老里 traditional pronunciation]. *We also have* xinli [新里 new pronunciation]. *And we have pronunciation of the* santai *kind* [三抬 associated with a branch of the Yihewani sect in Hui Islam]*, their kind of pronunciation. All*

25 The recorder distilled what became a clamor of voices into a single response.

26 From *Analects of Confucius* (论语) 名不正则言不顺，言不顺则事不成 ('If names be not correct, language accords not with truth; if language accords not with truth, affairs cannot achieve success'). Although these sayings were popularly attributed to Confucius, they were in fact compiled by subsequent generations of neo-Confucian philosophers.

in one mosque, and we are coming together very well. No one looks down on anyone for their pronunciation. So, you see, when we recite, whatever sound imaginable, we have it [rec.: everyone is laughing].

Yuan JX: The situation here is quite different from your mosque, and that is why I didn't go to the mosque anymore, after I stayed there for a while.

So why were your activities not accepted by the mosque? Only because of the pronunciation?

Yuan JX: Yes, this has to do with pronunciation.

It's really as you mentioned before, you all see each other quite often in daily life. So, the only possible reason [for the separation of the mosque from private instruction] *is that you use a different way of pronunciation when you recite. If the local mosque could accept different pronunciations, this would be just like our situation.*

A listener [unnamed] **asks Ge *Ahong***: Why did your mosque accept [different pronunciations]? Let us suppose that the two of us go to the mosque to recite the Qur'an, then we use this pronunciation, and the others use another pronunciation. This cannot go together.

Another listener [unnamed] joins in: According to the Qur'an, it is always the way that some will recite, and others will listen quietly. With everyone rushing to recite loudly, that is not proper. Reciting is a sacred activity. Listening is Allah's command. Whatever the case, I think we can recite and chant at home or in the mosque.

Visiting *ahong* [from among the listeners suddenly speaks up]: Shui *Laoshi* [my co-researcher] said not long ago, she wanted to know how you are all doing, how you manage your relationships these days [rec.: general laughter]. That is, she asks whether you have become members of the mosque community.

Yuan JX: I think that right now relations are becoming quite harmonious.

I think that maybe you have already taken one step toward improvement [of relations].

Three listeners suddenly take turns to speak: Anyhow, this all has to do with studying. The only difference is pronunciation. Nothing more! Whenever we go to the mosque to worship, women there are really welcoming.

This conversation is revealing not only for what is said by the women, but also for what is left unsaid yet patently understood by all. That is, the women's most careful, even evasive, references to their exclusion from the local women's mosque – the only one in the village – concern the authority of its elderly *ahong*. The mosque, it appears, is after all not a home open to all women in the village. In contrast to Ge *Ahong*, known as a religious leader who steers her congregation toward openness and inclusivity, the local *ahong* draws lines of demarcation that have created a group of outsiders. Members of this study group are thus formally and publicly stigmatized for refusing to follow the elderly *ahong*'s authority,

whose continued appointment furthermore reflects the local support for continuity of orthodox, gender-segregated religious practices.[27]

The significance of such exclusion is evident in several women's responses when asked whether the private class of instruction should be admitted to the mosque, and if the exclusion is a matter of regret. Their use of terminology from popular Confucian idioms reveals a core belief that the imperative of *mingzheng yanshun* (明正言顺 correct naming and truthful statement) in rendering the authentic truths of the scriptures demands unambiguous language – relevant not only to the Qur'an but also to the interpretation of selected hadiths. And these truths must be rendered in Arabic rather than in the older form of communication, *jingtangyu* (经堂语)[28]. Moreover, there must be an understanding of the deeper meanings of the scriptures rather than relying on memorizing words chanted without understanding, words which can thus be carried with confidence into everyday life. And, reading between the lines of protestations, it is after all the mosque which must always be considered the proper, legitimate space of learning.

The attendees of the private class appreciate their teacher's methods of instruction, allowing them to strengthen their faith as thinking participants in the act of learning, and they take pride in their mastery of the language of the Qur'an and in their creative use of *jingge* as a sensory conduit of deepening spirituality. But their sadness over being excluded from the mosque is also apparent. Moreover, as Ge CX *Ahong* indicates emphatically in her questions, an inclusive community of believers, taking in all manner of pronunciation and ways of praying, affirms collective strength in a mosque where all 'imaginable sounds' are made and reconciled in harmony.

This conversation illustrates well the significance of influential *ahong* in adapting and shaping approaches to the transmission and practical application of Islamic knowledge, in the process turning mosques into spaces of enduring relationships and collective agency. The conversation testifies to the powerful position held by many an *ahong,* able to take for granted the loyalty of the women they imbue with the ability and confidence, to speak and live their faith as 'authentic' Muslims. It is a power which, as became apparent in this conversation, can be wielded to exclude those whose commitment to their *ahong*'s accustomed ways of teaching may be perceived as being in doubt. In their battle against what they fear is the diminishing role of faith and a mere shallow knowledge of Islam, and in their zeal to enthuse women for the cause of informed belief, women *ahong* in *zhongyuan* Muslim communities are grasping the opportunity to resurrect old and devise innovative pathways of preserving the Islamic faith and facilitating a progressive, gender-inclusive interpretation.

When women *ahong* are claiming legitimacy in leadership roles, it is, however, also apparent that their relations with the mosque community, founded on fundamental principles of trust, respect, confidence, loyalty, and commonly on sentiments of affection, undergo considerable challenges – whereby a leader's relevance and

27 The identity of those with the most authority in the Muslim village to give support, however, is left unspoken.

28 *Jingtangyu*, also referred to as 'Hui speech', incorporates Islamic Arabic, Persian, and classical terms, and is used in religious but also in everyday contexts.

teaching, as well as her communication abilities, are measured against the manifold pressures of change both internal and external to mosque institutions. Sustaining the core principles and values by which women mark their multifaceted identity as Muslim Chinese citizens in a time of precarity provides the thematic thread for the final chapter. As women reach back into the resonant legacies of silence bestowed by their forebears, allowing memories and reminiscences to re/connect with the lives of past generations of women, *jingge* and *zanzhu zansheng* chants provide the (chanted) words for an ever-more pressing, existential question of 'who we are'.

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10 Sounding Silence and Turmoil of the Soul

Collective Agency and Legitimacy of Voice

During the many months of fieldwork – formal and informal, sought for or brought about by serendipity, engendered through prolonged presence, or randomly approached – we, the researchers and interlocutors–turned–researchers, most importantly Ge *Ahong* and Ba DM, engaged in numerous conversations with members of various women's mosque congregations. We also spoke with women elected by mosque communities for managerial and religious leadership positions. These conversations were always complemented by ongoing explorations of scriptural interpretations, of the stature of local transmitters and interpreters, historical and current, and of the significance of commonly shared interpretations for women's personal lives and meaning. At times, we encountered an outright fending off of questions about women's lived experiences of daily enacted religiosity; interlocutors pleaded ignorance or forgetfulness, lapsed into the occasional prolonged silence, or entirely avoided our questions and changed the subject of conversation. These inflections formed part of the early quest for that most elusive of research endeavors: subjectivity in the everyday making and re-making of lives marked out by membership of a stigmatized sociality and challenged by a wider environment to conceal and suppress the depth of beliefs.

Moje and Luke (2009, 416) suggest that 'Learning from a social and cultural perspective involves people in participation, interaction, relationships, and contexts, all of which have implications for how people make sense of themselves and others, identify, and are identified'. Given the constraints on Hui Muslims, the women with whom we researched progressively in partnership, their freedom of expression and language – habitually employed and as evidenced in our interviews – are frequently strewn with references to loyal citizenship and patriotic conduct, with innermost convictions revealed only in the most tenuous and cautiously worded statements. Our conversations were illuminating in certain respects, providing contextual evidence of historical contingencies of time and place, and how these could play havoc with women's aspirations, hopes, and their most personal longing. Steered but never dictated by questioners, conversations not only sought for women participants to arrive at a deeper understanding of the significance of the collective project of recovering chants for their own spiritual life but also for the place of women's mosques and their expressive tradition in the history of Islam in China, indeed in the history of the Islamic Ummah.

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It became apparent that the languages of *jingge* are not something separate or alien to women but have, once more, with the resurgence of enthusiasm for expressive traditions of women's mosque culture, become a reinvigorated constituent part of women's historical vocabulary, available whenever trials and tribulations of everyday life threatened to overwhelm women. And in this discovery, the presumption of non-agential silence as a dictated and heavily gender-coded silencing of segregated female sites of worship sits uneasily with testimony from women's words and chants, requiring further reflection. The history of *nüxue* (women's Qur'anic schools) and *nüsi* (women's mosques) reveals instead a legacy of chants of faith, consolation, lived piety, ritual, and social knowledge that forms an essential (one might say, speaking) part of the religious and social history of Hui Muslim women.

Reiterating the fundamental query threaded throughout the subtext of the book, I ask once more what kind of silence we might imagine, as far as allowed by our incipient state of knowledge, has given rise to the rich cultural heritage we uncovered, an outcome of our collective work and its contextualization afforded by multiple conversations? The Muslim women's SongBook (ZMFEC 2017), a resource available for pedagogical use in women's mosques, represents its most visible record, with insights garnered from the stories told, chants recalled, transmitters unforgotten, and past gatherings at women's mosques evoked for the benefit of younger generations. An accumulation of knowledge, however limited and partial, has given evidence of richly relational and interactive silences uncovered in their various institutional and societal settings, allowing us to question the assumptions so often associated with women's history.

The conversations became the soundscape – and memory-scape – of women's silences, silences which invoke the exigencies of external constraints but also the intangible constitution of faith for which 'ordinary' daily language seemingly, and for multiple, and gendered reasons, gave scarce room for expression. Speech and silence are instead bound up with each other in a richly textured, multi-sensory repertoire of languages where the fragile reality of inner life finds outward manifestation and is nurtured by a collectively shared sensory experience, enabled in the recurring enactments of chanted emotions offered by *jingge* and *zansheng*.

Here I want to borrow from insights provided by literacy studies scholarship around issues of a so-called 'identity turn' which has led to probing the intimate relationship between literacy and identity as social practices. This concept allows us to construct the formation of identity in its multiple metaphorical imbrications (might these be metaphors of difference, a sense of self/subjectivity, mind or consciousness, narrative, and positionality), over how knowledge is shaped and enabled by granting or withholding rights of access to the written word. In the words of Moje and Luke (2009, 416): '…recognizing literacy practices as social has led many theorists to recognize that people's identities mediate and are mediated by the texts they read, write, and talk about'. Indeed, Hui Muslim women in China's central plain have been embarking on an arduous but also exuberant journey of mediation of their particular identity as the resurgence of Islamic faith intensified. They have done this through emotional and religious engagement with chants from a ruptured expressive tradition – once frowned upon, belittled, dismissed, or

outright vilified during years of religious persecution – engendering a story of rejuvenation, of women's spiritual and social belonging and subjective worth.

This underlying thread can be noted in the following conversation with the 85-year-old Li XL, who had become closely involved in the affairs of her local women's mosque following her retirement from employment with a provincial food company. Because of her managerial experience, within a relatively brief time, she was appointed director of the women's mosque management committee, which she served loyally and with total dedication until two years prior to this conversation. Here, Li XL is in conversation with Ge CX, her own *ahong*, whom she respects, trusts, confides in, and fully supports using all means at her disposal.

Conversations Among Muslim Women:[1] **'All Learning Belongs to Allah'**

Ge CX *Ahong* asks[2]: *Where is your family from?*

Li XL: We are from southern Henan.

When did you start having knowledge of jiaomen?

Li XL: When I was a child, I went to the mosque and learned chanting *Ailifu*[3]… *Ailifu, Bie, Tie, Xie*…I still remember some of the jingles for memorizing the letters of the [Arabic] alphabet. I also remember when my mother gave me a kind of bookmark with a flowery design [指经棍 *zhijinggun*],[4] knotted with red, green, white, black, and blue silk threads. Later, when I grew up, I went to the men's mosque to learn from Jiang *Ahong*.

To which mosque did you belong when you were little?

Li XL: To a men's mosque and a women's mosque, both. When I was young, I went first to the *nüxue* [女学][5] to attend prayer and learn to recite the Qur'an. Later, when I was older, I went to the men's mosque to learn under Jiang *Ahong* [a male *ahong*].

Why did your family allow you to recite the Qur'an?

1 Conversation between Ge *Ahong* and Li XL was conducted in June 2016 at a village mosque in Henan province.
2 Ge CX's questions are henceforth given in *italics* without attribution.
3 *Ailifu* refers to the letters of the Arabic alphabet. *See* Chapter Eight.
4 *Zhijinggun* translates literally as a stick with which to point to a particular passage in the Qur'an. Like a bookmark, *zhijinggun* are made of various, mostly precious, materials fittingly decorated; they are used by readers to point to, or simply not lose track of, a given passage in the Qur'an, thus avoiding possible contamination of the Qur'an through direct human contact.
5 As a reminder: *nüxue* [女学 women's Qur'anic School] is an older term often used interchangeably with *nüsi* [女寺 women's mosque].

Li XL: My father was the kind of person who would always do *libai* [participate in worship] and [cultivate] *jiaomen*. He insisted on praying five times every day, always on time. And he also did much for the mosque, overseeing the accounts.

Ah, you really have a foundation [in *jiaomen*].

Li XL: Ahem. At that time, I stayed at home and had nothing to do, and my father told me to learn to recite the Qur'an, so I went to the *nüxue* to learn reciting the Qur'an. And I did *libai* during Ramadan when I was seven or eight years old. No matter, whether I could do it [properly] or couldn't, I just followed everyone else to do *libai*. When I was in my early teens, my father told me to go to the men's mosque to learn from Jiang *Ahong* [as her local *ahong*]. Later, I learned from Ma *Ahong*. Every week, he preached his sermon, and my mother instructed me to listen carefully to his preaching. From then on, I think, I had some understanding of Islam and *jiaomen* in my mind. As a result, after I married, I insisted on continuing to do *libai*.

As for the previous generation, did your mother do libai?

Li XL: My mother didn't go to worship.

Oh. It was then only your father who took time to pray.

Li XL: Only when my mother retired, then she busied herself with tasks for the Women's School and acted as a *shetou* [member of the management committee]. At that time, Bai *Ahong* was in charge [of teaching]. Then my mother started to do *libai*, and she prepared tasty meals and sent the food to Bai *Ahong,* without any prompting.

She sent prepared meals to Bai Ahong. *When your mother was a* shetou*, she often went to the mosque to do* libai*?*

Li XL: This is right.

Did you learn Arabic pronunciation in the women's mosque?

Li XL: This is right. I learned all the letters and the right pronunciation.

Do you remember what else you learned?

Li XL: Later, I learned reciting the Qur'an from Jiang *Ahong*.

Nah, then you pretty much had it all. Even learned all of the Qur'an. Afterwards, did you forget it all?

Li XL: Yes, I forgot it all. Later, when I grew older, my father forbade me to go outside and made me stay at home.

Why did your father forbid you to go out?

Li XL: Isn't this feudalism?

At that time, the more mature [Muslim] *girls were all forbidden to go outside?*

Li XL: This is right.

Could you tell me a bit more? Who in the older generation was so strict about practicing jiaomen*?*

Li XL: My generation, the previous generation and my grandfather's generation, they were all people who insisted on doing *libai*. We are after all a family known for *jiaomen*. Didn't my family make their living by selling fish at the market? Only after observing *Bangbuda* [帮不大],[6] would we go to the market. When we left the market to return home, we ate lunch in a hurry and then we went to perform *Pieshini* [撇史尼].[7] After *Pieshini*, we went to the market once more to sell fish. Both my cousins and my uncles did *libai* without fail.

You have such faith in Allah, truly so devout.

Li XL: Yes.

Do you remember your impression of the female ahong *at that time?*

Li XL: Some of the women *ahong* have stayed in my mind. But they came later. One of them was the grandmother of Jiang *Ahong* who is teaching now here in the women's mosque.

Do you remember what kinds of activities [活动, *huodong*] *organized by women* ahong *you attended other than the teaching of the Arabic alphabet?*

Li XL: What kinds of activities were happening at the mosque? Well, some [women] would collect stamps for getting money to make steamed *shaomai* [烧麦].[8] Most people depended for their livelihood on selling goods, and they didn't always earn enough money. So, they all did this. First, they would get as many stamps as possible, collect money, and after making *shaomai,* take them

6 *Bangbuda* is the Chinese transliteration of a Persian term referring to Morning Prayer.
7 *Pieshini* is the Chinese transliteration of a Persian term for Noon Prayer.
8 *Shaomai* are steamed dumplings, a traditional Chinese staple food.

to the mosque for steaming. That's a so-called activity. Actually, I don't know, what does activity mean?

Why did you steam shaomai?

Li XL: Providing *shaomai* is good for poor people, it is a good thing, and it was like this. Every day, someone would go round peoples' homes and collect some money. Then whoever collected the money would stamp the folded paper [which listed names of participants in the scheme], just like putting a stamp on a document. The money collected would be used to buy meat, vegetables, green onion, and ginger. Then we made *shaomai* and steamed them [at the mosque]. Depending on how much money you paid, you would then collect [from the mosque] however many *shaomai*.

Oh, that would have helped a lot of people. This was a really good thing to do at that time.

Li XL: We did this every year; the result was good.

Did the ahong *give a sermon on* Zhuma*?*

Li XL: Yes, this is right. She preached on *Zhuma* and during Ramadan.

Did you act as a shetou *after you retired?*

Li XL: After I retired, I moved over to our women's mosque. And later, the women's mosque appointed Du *Ahong* and Jiang *Ahong*. Jiang *Ahong* said that Du *Ahong* is her aunt. She said, 'We come from the same family, so you better invite Du *Ahong*'. And then we went to invite Du *Ahong,* and we brought her back here. I was with her when she came to our women's mosque.

That means when it comes to Du Ahong*'s appointment, you were present when she was invited and when she was brought here to this mosque.*[9]

Li XL: This [rec.: pointing to the roof of her mosque] was then a tile-roofed building with three and a half rooms. When we did some work on our village men's mosque, I went out to collect donations. [rec: Li then described her experience of how she went to Luohe city, Xi'an city, Taiyuan city, Baoji city, and Xianyang city to collect donations for doing work on the men's mosque.] The work on the [women's] mosque wasn't yet finished, but I requested from Mai *Ahong* [who

9 For conventions attached to the appointment of a woman *ahong*, see Jaschok and Shui (2000) and Jaschok (2012). The late Du *Lao Ahong* went on to become one of the most influential and well-respected *ahong* among *ahong,* male and female, in central China's Hui Muslim communities. For Du's biography, see Jaschok and Shui (2003).

presided over the adjacent men's mosque] that he must help with extending the hall of our women's mosque. We wanted to build it on a larger scale. He said that could be done with a flat roof. I said, 'No, this won't do. How can we have a prayer hall without a round ridge roof?'. So, we made the decision to enlarge the hall, and at last we started the building work, and the hall was built larger, and it got a round ridge roof. Because we really wanted a round ridge roof, I donated my salary.

After all the work on our [women's] mosque was finished, we needed to invite an *ahong*. At that time, I was doing *libai* every day. Early on, there was no management committee to support the mosque. So, I helped with doing all sorts of cleaning tasks. And whatever came up in those days, Jiang *Ahong* talked it over with me. Later, the mosque management committee was set up through election. I was chosen to oversee the committee. In the morning, I would attend *Bangbuda* and then go home to have breakfast. After breakfast, I would come back to the mosque to do *Pieshini* and then stay in the mosque until after *Hufutan* [虎夫滩 *Salat al-'Isha*].[10] I did whatever was needed to be done in the mosque: whether cleaning the toilet, washing clothes, airing the quilt, scrubbing prayer mats, and so on. I can deal with any dirt, however tired I am. Then we had no *sishifu* [寺师傅 who performs menial tasks at the mosque], so I acted both as a *shetou* and as a *sishifu*.

You really made the [women's] *mosque your home.*

Li XL: Ah, all my heart belongs to our mosque, to advance *jiaomen*. Wherever a mosque is built, wherever there is need for donation, I give from my own money.

The pious people of your generation gave donations generously, all for the cause of advancing their mosques. Were you a part of the first-generation mosque management committee?

Li XL: Yes, I was first generation.

How many years were you in charge of the management committee?

Li XL: Eighteen years.

What was your most memorable experience during these eighteen years of work?

Li XL: I think when the straw-roof buildings became tile-roofed buildings, and the tile-roofed buildings became high-rise buildings. These are real accomplishments, and they are so thanks to Allah's great mercy.

10 *Hufutan* is the Chinese transliteration from Persian, referring to Evening or Night Prayer.

How much of the Qur'an can you recite?

Li XL: I am illiterate. I only learned a few Chinese words.

Did you learn to chant many zansheng *z*anzhu?

Li XL:I learned them.

How many chants do you remember?

Li XL: I remember what chants I learned, but if you ask me, I can no longer finish the chants. But if you give me some help, just a few words I can look at, then that helps me to remember.

Can you sing the old traditional zansheng *chants*?

Li XL: Ah, I think I remember *Fenkeng Huida,* [坟坑回答 Burial Responses] and another one, something to do with *fen* [坟 a tomb] and with *hei'an* [黑暗 darkness], not sure what it is called.

Who taught you?

Li XL: At that time, I learned at the *nüxue* as it was then called, not *nüsi* as we call it nowadays. I learned the chants from the *ahong* in the *nüxue*.

We hold many zanzhu zansheng *performances in our mosque. What do you think about this?*

Li XL: All learning belongs to Allah. Are these not the words of Allah? Should we not all know this clearly? When we get to the next world, is it not so that we must be ready to answer all questions.

What's your view about the zansheng *contests held recently?*

Li XL: My opinion? This is developing *jiaomen* in present-day society, and it can be called also continuing your learning. But according to my thinking, there should be a difference between men and women. A woman cannot be allowed to be with a man [rec: if he is a stranger]. According to the commandments of the Qur'an, men and women cannot be with each other and talk to each other. Nowadays people come from different districts and gather to exchange experiences. Modern society thinks it is proper, but it is not so according to my old ways of thinking.

Do you think the voice of a woman is xiuti*, or not?*

Li XL: Yes, the voice of a woman is *xiuti*.

Is this your own view, or did you hear this from other people?

Li XL: I heard this from my *ahong*. I also think the voice of a woman is *xiuti*.

Did the older generations of women in your family study jiaomen*?*

Li XL: Yes, Du *Ahong* and my niece acted as *ahong* throughout their lives. Du *Ahong*'s mother's family name is Li, and her family name is Du. They are all members of the big Li lineage [rec.: the informant's family]. The people in my generation all do *libai* without exception. Both men and women do *libai*, and women do *libai* in their home. If they live near a *nüxue*, they will go to worship there. In my second brother's family, his son-in-law is an *ahong;* his grandson is also an *ahong,* and his wife is a *shiniang* [title given to an *ahong*'s wife], and she worships at home.

Did you ever hear them chant zanzhu *z*ansheng*?*

Li XL: I was married when I was seventeen years old, and I had a baby when I was eighteen. From then on, I never again lived at home, and I never again lived with my parents [娘家 *niangjia*].

From a background of daily enacted and deeply felt piety, Li provides an account of herself as capable, resolute, unafraid, and able to speak her mind in the presence of those considered her seniors in religious knowledge and status. Her disagreement with the male *ahong* over what type of roof would be suitable, or indeed sufficient, for the architectural style of the women's mosque, illustrates this point. In the end, the women's mosque was duly enlarged, and no architectural compromise was tolerated. To bring this about, Li XL contributed from her own salary. But her readiness to oppose a male *ahong* from the adjacent men's mosque, to insist on equal consideration when it came to equality in the appearance – and thus the symbolic significance – of the women's mosque vis-à-vis the adjacent men's mosque, gives credence to her statement that 'all my heart belongs to our mosque'. Her heart dictated the robustness of her reaction and determination not to be swayed by the male *ahong* to accept what for her would be an inferior outcome for women's claim to equality in all spheres of public and private life, in the name of Allah, and in the eyes of society.

Considering Li XL's assertiveness, it is instructive to consider the contrast between her conduct as dictated by the authority of the 'heart' and her insistence that women must be accepting of traditional Islamic injunctions on strict gender segregation, including, importantly, concealment of women's voices. In contrast to the majority of the women interviewed – who now accept women's right to question received assumptions, accept that their religious leaders should educate themselves in relevant rulings of *fiqh* [教律] alongside their male counterparts, and bring their voices into the public sphere – Li's responses to Ge *Ahong*'s curious, leading questions reveal how steadfast her traditional convictions have remained.

These were shaped by her family and the teaching received in her early formative learning years. Asked to confirm her own views, Li cites the authority of the *ahong* in charge of her early childhood years, an authority to whom she clings in old age. On the other hand, Li also supports the resurgent tradition of *zansheng* chants which has once again become popular within women's mosque culture of learning and celebration.

Agency, as embedded in the particular circumstances of Li XL's life, is a daily enactment of the multiple strands that constitute her intensely felt Hui Muslim identity. Agency is the medium through which the entangled relationships that defined her life trajectory are refracted, relationships which she experienced as defining, nurturing, and supporting, but which she would also, sometimes, defy. Contingent upon their status, learning, gender, or age, as women move from one stage of life to another, traverse symbolic thresholds, enter and exit hallowed and worldly spaces requiring or allowing for differing intensities of subjective and social engagement, the spatial and thus the social complexities that mark the lives of ordinary women are structured and legitimated by diverse sources of authority.

Agency, in Bronwyn Davies' (1991) helpful theorization, is relational and expansive, beyond the self-sufficient logic of privileged discourses and languages. Rather than being obtained from external sources, Davies holds that authority and the possibility of structural change come from the narrator's very act of speaking and close social interactions. When chanting becomes collective storytelling, the often-overwhelming strictures that inscribe women's daily lives – just as they marked the lives of women who came before them – to which they dutifully adhere to the best of their abilities, are transformed into a celebration of lives deserving of hope. Women's stories are anchored in the social fabric of daily life, but in the shared acts of celebratory performances, these stories become journeys of self-discovery and collective self-validation. They unmute and reveal the gendered sociality within which women have sustained faith, lamented domestic burdens and societal restrictions, and yearned for Allah's mercy and justice.

Serving as listener and interviewer during the conversation, the *ahong* enables Li XL to unmute her voice, remember her own voice, and to convey the complex, multi-linear trajectory of a journey of manifold identities and relational contexts. Li's life choices embrace a wide and fluid spectrum – from assertive intervention dictated by her 'heart' to purposefully enacted obedience to a strict code of gender morality. So, the protagonist, as narrator of her own life story, speaks herself into existence not as conditional upon the criteria of dominant patriarchal discourses that exclude women by characterizing them as gullible and superstitious (a frequent accusation in *quan jiaoge*, the chants of exhortations, which warn women to resist their base nature); instead, she is carried by the empowering experience of speaking authority. The collaboration among broad sections of women from diverse women's mosques for the SongBook of piety and passion (ZMFEC 2017) manifested these variegated powers of female emotion and faith. 'Agency is spoken into existence at any one moment', says Bronwyn Davies (1991, 52), as when,

Figure 10.1 Waiting to chant in front of a large gathering in a mosque compound, HRPC, 2016 (author's photo)

in the words of the following *jingge*, women take it upon themselves the right to proclaim, confidently and proudly, 'who we are'.

Musilin Jiemei 穆斯林姐妹 ***Muslim Sisters***[11]

我们都是穆斯林姐妹,负有神圣的使命,世界人类的希望一定还是伊斯兰,

We all are Muslim sisters, ours is a holy mission, the hope of humanity rests on the faith of Islam.

认识伟大安拉的实有, 是知识最高的巅峰, 承认安拉的伟大, 是最理智的表达.

To understand the truth of God Almighty is the pinnacle of knowledge, to admit the greatness of God is to come to our senses.

万物不是主, 唯有清高的安拉.

There is no God but Allah.

参加我们的学习, 跟我们一定念: 俩一 俩海, 印烂拉乎,

Join us in learning, let us together surely recite: There is no God but Allah,

穆罕麦顿来苏伦拉嘿是信仰的基础.

Muhammad is His Messenger, is the foundation of faith.

万物不是主, 唯有请高的安拉.穆罕默德是安拉的仆人, 是安拉的钦差.

There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is His servant, is His messenger.

11 The chant was recorded and transcribed by me in July 2016. The origin of this popular *jingge* remains obscure (ZMFEC 2017, 285–286).

我们都是安拉的仆人，应该履行自己的职责，世界各地的穆民都是我们的姐妹.

We all are Allah's servants, we must shoulder our responsibility, Muslims from all corners of the world are our sisters.

一起遵行安拉的《古兰》 绝不分派裂系， 服从穆圣英明指导， 我们绝不会迷路.

Together we abide by Allah's Qur'an, never break up into warring sects, submitting to Muhammad the wise leader, resolutely not falling into superstition.

万物不是主，唯有清高的安拉.

There is no God but Allah.

参加我们的礼拜跟我们一起做： 大净， 小净， 洗净衣服， 站念， 鞠躬，叩头是礼拜的基础，念，礼，斋，课，胡五大天命，终身履行是我们的职责，是我们的本性.

Joining our prayer, we worship together: large ablution, small ablution, washing our garments, standing in prayer, bending low, bowing our head, these are the fundamentals of worship; *Shahadah* [profession of faith], *Salat* [prayer], *Zakat* [alms], *Sawm* [fasting], *Hajj* [pilgrimage], they are the five pillars of Islam; it is our duty to abide by these for life, this is who we are.

我们都是使者的稳麦，承担复兴的大业，紧随使者道路召唤世人的信主.

We all are the Messenger's Ummah, taking on the great cause of revival, following in the path of the Messenger to summon the faith of people of this world.

圣门弟子是我们的楷模， 终身为主奋斗， 踏着他们的足迹， 向人类传播和平.

The *Shengmen Dizi,* Ashab al-Nabiy [the Prophet's disciples or companions] are our inspiration, for our entire life we are fighting for Allah, following in their footsteps, sharing with humanity the message of peace.

万物不是主唯有清高的安拉。参加我们的行列，跟我们一起走：劝善戒恶，认真拜主，学习，走访，礼拜，是召唤的要素.

There is no God but Allah. Join our ranks, come, walk with us: advocate goodness and shun evil, conscientiously worship God, increase learning, pay courtesy calls on your fellow Muslims, engage in worship, these are the elements of the summon.

六大美德，劝善戒恶是崇高的使命，是我们的特.

[Abiding by the disciples'] six virtues, advocating goodness, and shunning evil, they are a lofty ambition, it is what sets us apart.

Coming to Silence, Understanding Silence: Agency and Legitimacy of Voice

The story of this book's chanters and their chants can be best understood through the lens of women's religious piety: how women's piety grants meaning and coherence to what would otherwise be fragments and ruptures, inscribing lives in a world where women and men have clearly ordained complementary roles and assigned spheres of responsibility and obligation. Such life experience, for someone of Li XL's generation, for instance, neither allows for a life to be denigrated when, as in her case, it is cast within the certainties of moral, religious, and gender norms, and anchored in gender segregation, nor does it prevent her from becoming more receptive to the divergent viewpoints of a younger *ahong*. Personal loyalty and belief in the superior authority of her childhood *ahong* have stayed with Li XL into her old age. This trust in rightful authority also explains her acceptance of the changes that have come about at her mosque, changes represented and spearheaded by her questioner, her current, highly respected woman *ahong*. And there is no contradiction in this position.

As Li points out herself, she is the product of another time, another tradition of learning, keeping faith and pride in her identity as a Chinese Hui Muslim woman. In addition, the *ahong*'*s* respect for the older woman allows for what could have become a tense conversation to dissolve into a more variegated and fluid narrative of historicized agential positions. Change is enabled not by the denial of others' convictions but with a receptivity that grants others the right to hold differing viewpoints and judgments beyond any complacent assumptions about the singularity of authoritative revelation. The following quote from Bronwyn Davies (2008, quoted in Moje and Luke 2009, 417) illuminates this insight when Davies states: 'There are several meanings to identity (singular person, political or well-known person, cultural membership, etc.) that slide in and out of each other because our world is asked to carry so many meanings, meanings moreover that spill into each other in practice'.

Li XL's partner in conversation, Ge CX *Ahong*, an *ahong* of renown, grants to a member of her congregation – someone of a different generation, a different societal background, a different mosque tradition of learning – the legitimacy of

Figure 10.2 On the occasion of a celebration to mark the successful conclusion of a religious study class, women come together to listen, chant, and pray, HRPC, 2016 (author's photo)

voice. It is legitimacy that dissolves the alienating divide which obtains in many ways in other discursive contexts. A commonality may be found through which older women like Li, still clinging to injunctions of old, can discover, together with other women such as her *ahong*, shared truths and purposes. The text from the chant *Musilin Jiemei* above offers a clear expression of this shared purpose: 'There is no God but Allah. Join our ranks, come, walk with us: advocate goodness and shun evil, conscientiously worship God, increase learning, pay courtesy calls on your fellow Muslims, engage in worship, these are the elements of the summon'.

If, as Davies (1991, 52) writes, 'words need to be reworked' to command authoritative discursive interventions, then – it is arguably so in the context of Hui Muslim women's communities – '[t]his capacity does not stem from the essence of the person in question but from the positions available to them within the discourses through which they take up their being'. It is in this community of women, guided by leaders trusted to understand their predicaments and further their aspirations, that new paths of shared, expressive knowledge are forged.

The multiple identities women inhabit as a matter of course, including those leading seemingly ordinary, uneventful lives, create multiple forms of agency and expression. This is evident among Hui Muslim women, as their stories in this book reveal, whose piety – more generally muted or silenced in their busy lives as wives, mothers, and workers – finds an outlet in their spiritual medium of *jingge*. It is a way of accommodating themselves to a modern, secular non-Muslim mainstream society. One might say that the inner/outer dimensions of Muslim identity in China – which Raphael Israeli (1980) notes in relation to architecture (Confucian-style lineage halls concealing Islamic interiors) and to language (the switch from communication, containing Islamic key phrases and greetings, to a shared language when in the presence of non-Muslims) – have a distinctly gendered aspect. It is expressed in the contrast between the inner spiritual life of women afforded by women's mosques or female Qur'anic schools, and women's lives structured by the demands of familial, domestic, and work-related roles.

Noticeable, however, in the conversations accompanying and contextualizing the remarkable collective initiative to take ownership of women's cultural legacy (i.e., the SongBook) is a reconfiguration of the hierarchical relationships of old among women, which in many ways still persist among the men. Of course, not all deference is erased in conversations between the several women *ahong* who have guided (but never dictated) the course of conversations, as deference and dependency on religious guidance are too closely intertwined. Nevertheless, the words spoken by the women during these long conversations have released the power of long-stored and treasured – because jointly chanted – words in the scriptural languages from a silence of 'forgetfulness', recalling women to an awareness of the strength of their shared piety and their shared burden of responsibility in facing forthcoming challenges beyond the gates of the women's mosques. In the words of the *Musilin Jiemei* chant above: 'We all are Allah's servants, we must shoulder our responsibility, Muslims from all corners of the world are our sisters'.

Hui Muslim women's expressive tradition of chanted piety comprises collectively created narratives that quite literally bring to voice generations of women

who kept their faith sustained through gatherings in the prayer halls of the segregated spaces of women's mosques. Textual exegesis of recent years has added to the relational dimension of meaning-making, as the chants' texts evolved across time and place, shaped and inscribed by a multitude of voices and influences, in what Adam Chau (2008, 488) calls the 'social heat' of collective rituals. To interpret the historical and contemporary significance of chants is to make audible the voices of instruction, the voices of learners and listeners, the voices of women who repeated the lines of a chant until the words became shared validation of their emotional and spiritual yearning.

What has changed during the centuries the *jingge* tradition evolved from a tool for the illiterate to a uniquely expressive culture of women's mosques? Whose voices matter in ways that shifted thinking sufficiently to afford a recognition of 'particular knowers as knowers', in Gaile Pohlhaus' (2017, 13) words? What had been discounted traditionally as lacking epistemic authority is, in contemporary times, chanted in collective solidarity and with passionate conviction even while subject to often-intense criticism. Dissenting voices within China's Muslim community, critical of the continuation of women's mosque tradition, berate the female religious practitioners at the forefront of a resurgent expressive culture as *haram* for encouraging female voice defying long traditions of *xiuti* (*awrah*). Such frequent criticism is a reminder of other practices denigrating women's epistemic and spiritual status. Countering objections to the sounding of female voices, women in the *zhongyuan* Muslim communities see the cultivation of faith as an expression of ethical conduct that is no longer compatible with female 'gullibility' and 'passivity', reminiscent of 'the old China' of gender segregation, gender inequality, and female suffering – its most representative and stigmatized trope being women of faith. In contrast, leading progressive *ahong*, and the women around them, hold that modern, educated women, with the capacity to critically debate patriarchal interpretations, must oppose unjust and distortive interpretations of female spirituality with conviction, backed up with textual evidence. They must be ready to place themselves at the forefront of a resurgent, progressive Islam.

Importantly, silence here has proved not only to be the precursor of speech, of the conditions of a life enshrouded by the creative energies of the women's predecessors; instead, silence has also ever been a source of strength from which women create legacies of faith and social engagement worthy of pride. Indeed, *jie* (洁) – the virtue of silenced, chaste femininity – could be morphed into a weapon critiquing those suspected of yielding to worldly temptations. The concept of purity at the core of women's neo-Confucian and Islamic moral codes and traditional self-representation, I would argue, has been re-storied by notable leading women religious to symbolize women's superior integrity of faith (Jaschok 2014). Far from denoting the history of women's mosques as comparatively limited in scope and function, less well endowed, less impactful as sites of religious learning and social congregation than men's mosques, the attributes of self-effacing modesty associated with female-centered institutions have become a powerful assertion

of exemplary women's lives, as living closer than relatively more well-resourced men's mosques to the precepts of Islam (*ibid.,* 64–68).

Thus, traditional gender values encoded in the neo-Confucian paradigm of mandated female modesty have, in adaptive performativity and in the sensitive transmission of words derived from a treasure trove of *jingge* chants, come to resonate with the sound of renewal. It has enabled women's mosques and previously disparaged oral traditions of female learning to emerge from the confinement of circumscribed spirituality and marginal relevance to reveal a history of richly relational silence. It is a silence that has placed on record believing women's subjectivities, their innermost 'turmoil of the soul', as of intrinsic importance to understanding the more recent (public) resurgence of a religious female culture so movingly resonant and continuously creative.

Instead of seeing silence as an agential impasse, a black hole of disenfranchised female passivity and lack of volition, silence appears as embedded within the greater matrix of social relations and communication, illuminating a wider vocabulary of power, gender, and identity, a dialectic of assertion and withdrawal. As Sider (2006) holds, silence marks the permeable cultural boundary delineating institutions of permanency (as, for example of patriarchy) that excludes 'victims on the other side of silence' in a state of chaos and powerlessness (*ibid.,* 152). Gender, however, specifically gender as constructed in Chinese epistemology, complicates such an imagery, instead inviting a metaphor of more entangled intimacy that transcends as it also sustains boundaries of exclusion.

The history of women's mosques arose from dictates of heavily encoded spatial gender segregation to yield, as intimated in our multi-voice narratives, transformative developments when a female-gendered silence could become a space of possibility. In the words of Carillo Rowe and Malhotra (2013, 2), 'Silence is a process that allows one to go within before one has to speak or act'. These words serve to encapsulate the multi-dimensional meanings of silence in the history of marginalized peoples at the same time as it directs attention to the challenges that we, the researchers, with the co-operation of local communities of interlocutors and co-researchers, sought to resolve.

How were we to capture and archive a multitude of silences, in equal measure gendered and pious, elusive and potent, as expressive of mindful resilience and strategic ambiguity? For Chinese Hui Muslim women, this has involved a consequence of historical contingencies, practices of spoken silence — and there is no contradiction in this — predicated on learned guidance through words, recited or chanted, from their dedicated *ahong.* Where 'going within' has entailed dependency based on trusted leadership, undergirded by communal bonds of shared purpose. Where ongoing investment in, and safeguarding of, the survival of their mosques testifies to the religious and social significance of women's own spaces, spaces from which to practice their resonant traditions of silence. And even more so, it reminds those of us engaged with interpreting women's participation in diverse religious traditions of the multitude of potent silences which burrow into intersections of organized religion, patriarchal gender norms, and the transformative power of female-centered, relational piety.

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Epilogue

Contingencies of time shape the sites and conditions of ethnographic research and discovery, as well as when a manuscript emerges into print. As with my other current writing, an unpredictable temporal relationship inscribes itself into the processual methodology of research and publication. It fashions differing interpretive contexts for permutations of silence in the making of knowledge and to its reception. What I am saying elsewhere when writing on being a feminist ethnographer during a challenging time when religious women are falling, once more, into strategic silences, it is my concluding statement here too (Jaschok forthcoming):

> '*What I am describing therefore reflects a time past, but not a time concluded nor irrelevant. For history not to be misrepresented, records must continue to be written, kept, and made public where and when possible. The canon of scholarship when it comes to the modern and contemporary history of Chinese women of religious identity is all too limited, their pertinence to the historical memory is immeasurable*'.

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Glossary

(of frequently recurrent or core terms)

(nü) Ahong 女阿訇 (woman) imam

Anjing 安静 term is used to convey serenity of the heart, a mind at peace

Bidaerti 比德儿替 *(bid'a*, from the Arabic) a core Islamic principle, *bid'a* traditionally is held to signify heterodoxy, an aberration from the unchangeable essence of Islam; see *hao bidaerti*

Bazhai 把斋 following the path of Islam

Chunjie 纯洁 an unblemished state of the soul and purity of heart are essential qualities identified by women as exemplified by the relative modesty of their mosques; also see *jie*

Chuanyi 穿衣 ordination ceremony, ceremonial donning of *ahong*, transforming the female *hailifan* into a fully-fledged *ahong*

Fang 坊 traditional settlement patterns for central China's relatively dispersed Hui Muslim communities reflect preferences for living in local mosque-centered residential settlements; where women's mosques exist, their gendered nature complicates homogeneous conceptions of Muslim sociality

Funü daode 妇女道德 the virtues incumbent upon Muslim women

Funü gongxiu 妇女功修 women's fundamental merits, a gendered version of the Five Merits of Islam of which fulfillment is the duty of all Muslims

Funü shuyu guojia 妇女属于国家 'women belong to the state' as a historical legacy of the Maoist revolution

(*nü***)** *Hailifan* **(**女**)**海里凡 (female) students of Islamic knowledge, often candidates for the Imamate, preparing themselves for a religiously informed life

Haixiu 害羞 meekness, feminine virtue celebrated in both Neo-Confucian and Islamic cultures

Hao bidaerti 好比德儿替 (commendable innovation) occurs frequently in discourse among local Hui Muslim women to counter implications of all innovations as *haram*, as when women refer to their tradition of women's mosques and female imams as good for the development of Islam

Houshi 后世 Afterlife, centering on women's trepidation over uncertainty of their fate in the Afterlife

Jiaofa liyi 教法礼仪 here concerning women's observation of the Sharia, which forms part of the *Nürenjing* (see below)

Jie 洁 women's characterization of their mosques, closed-off sites of learning and worship, expressive in their modesty of ideals of feminine purity, also see *chunjie*

Jingge 经歌 a diversity of Islamic chants which historically served pedagogical, ritual, and social functions in the context of general female illiteracy; passed down the generations in Arabic, Persian, and (mostly) Chinese languages; also used as a generic term for all Islamic chants, including the genre of *zanzhu zansheng*

(nü) Jiaoshi (女）教师 (female) teacher, instructor, counselor

Jingtangyu 经堂语 also referred to by women as Hui speech, incorporates Islamic Arabic, Persian and classical terms, and is used in religious but also in everyday contexts

Jiaomen 教门 the term, used colloquially, and as used by women has many shades of meaning, most prominently: (1) reference may refer to Islamic religion as such (2) and to convey a heightened, aspirational state of religious piety

(nü) Jiaozhang （女）教长 used interchangeably with the term *ahong*, senior female teacher, a post of religious authority

Kuhua 哭花 a song of lamentation (literally, weeping flowers) mourning the hardship of women's lives

*Lingge*灵歌 a term nowadays more commonly used by Chinese Christians

Luan 乱 in the context of this volume, a state of chaos and disturbance of peace brought on by female voices in public, mixed gender contexts

Miaohui jingge 庙会经歌 Buddhist *jingge* performed by women on temple feast-days

Musilin gequ 穆斯林歌曲 new Islamic chants, teaching the fundamentals of Islamic knowledge to men and women

Niangjia 娘家 a married woman's parents

Nürenjing 女人经 scriptural passages and extracts from hadiths edited especially for women, colloquially referred to as the Women's Qur'an

Nüxinghua 女性化 feminization, the term is used by critical voices to denigrate the impact of women *ahong* as undue 'feminization of Islam'

Nüxing zansheng 女性赞圣 women's chants of praise and worship

Pai zhang 拍掌 women's ritual clapping of hands

Pojia 婆家 a husband's family

Sancong 三从 Confucian moral core principles defining the duties of maiden daughter, chaste wife, and dutiful widow

Shengyin 声音 *v*oice, here in conjunction with the female voice, whether as seductive, meek, or provocative (because public)

(nü) Shetou (女)社头 address often used for elected members of a women's mosque management committee respected for competence and integrity

Shige 诗歌 sacred hymns as recorded legacy of (male) Islamic worship

Shifu 师傅 locally common address for female *ahong*

Shiniang 师娘 title commonly given to an *ahong*'s wife; unlike a woman *ahong*, a *shiniang*'s mosque-related duties are far less circumscribed and thus more varied

Side 四德 four Feminine Virtues, pertaining to *fude* (妇德 women's virtue), *fuyan* (妇言 women's speech), *furong* (妇容 women's appearance), and *fugong* (妇工 women's work)

Qingzhen nüsi/nüsi 清真女寺/女寺 women's mosque, see also *Qingzhen nüxue/nüxue*

Qingzhen nüxue/nüxue 清真女学/女学 historically preceded women's mosques, these terms are still in use when referring to 清真女寺/女寺

Quanjiaoge 劝教歌 chants for the moral instruction of Muslim women and girls

Renao 热闹 extrovert and demonstrative (male) loudness which women contrast with the serenity associated with women's mosques, because they are less entangled in societal affairs

Tiaozebu 跳则布 pronunciation exercise of Arabic words in random order used in language teaching in women's mosques

Taobai 讨白 (*Tawbah*) prayer of repentance and commitment to the ways of Allah, recited by women *ahong* on the day of *Laylah al-bara'ah*

Woer'ci 卧尔兹 (*al-Wa'z*) sermon; the woman *ahong* may choose also to conduct a Questions and Answer session, conduct *fiqh*, recite passages from the Qur'an, or chant *zanzhu zansheng;* as with other transliterated terms, pronunciations differ widely from place to place, and there is little standardization in the use of Chinese characters

Xiaoerjing 小儿经 a minor script, used by women *ahong*, which mixes Chinese characters with Arabic or Persian linguistic loans which evolved in the course of the 20th century into a more standardized writing system

Xingbie hezuo 性别合作 idealized principle of gender-based complementarity considered by women interlocutors to be characteristic of *zhongyuan* Hui Muslim culture

Xiuti 羞体 *awrah*, a colloquial term to signify those parts of the female body that must be concealed from the gaze of strangers

Youhuorende shengyin 诱惑人的声音 female voice of seduction to arouse male desire

Zansheng bisai 赞声比赛 a friendly competition between mixed-gender mosque choirs performing *zansheng*

Zanzhu zansheng or *zansheng* 赞主赞圣 or 赞圣 traditional and modern chants of praise and worship, passed down through the generations in Arabic and Persian

Zhongyuan diqu 中原地区 the Central Plain of China, which may refer exclusively to Henan province but the term may also carry a wider connotation, comprising the provinces of Henan, Shanxi, Hebei, and Shandong

Zongjiao gongxiu 宗教功修 religious merits associated with female role models esteemed for their exemplary conduct

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