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Centre

# BEING CHINESE MUSLIMS IN DUBAI

RELIGION AND  
NATIONALISM IN A  
TRANSNATIONAL SPACE

Yuting Wang

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# Being Chinese Muslims in Dubai: Religion and Nationalism in a Transnational Space

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## About the Author

**Yuting Wang** is Associate Professor of Sociology in the Department of International Studies at the American University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. She is the author of *Between Islam and the American Dream: An Immigrant Muslim Community in Post-9/11 America* (Routledge, 2014). Her current research examines the increasing influence of China in the Arabian Gulf by focusing on the experiences of Chinese expats in Dubai. Her writings reflect on the implications of Belt and Road Initiative on ethnic and religious minorities, such as the Chinese Muslims. Her new book titled *Chinese in Dubai: Money, Pride, and Soul-Searching* is forthcoming from Brill in September 2020.

## Abstract

Chinese Muslims, or the Hui people, an ethno-religious minority that straddles two civilisations, have drawn much attention from the media and academia as China strengthens its ties with Muslim-majority countries in the last two decades. Possessing unique cultural capital, Chinese Muslims are often seen as the ‘good’ Muslims of China, distinguished from the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs who are suspected of separatist motives and inclination towards religious extremism. However, the Chinese government’s intensifying campaign to curb ‘Islamisation’ and promote further Sinicisation of Chinese Muslims in the last few years has caused much concern. This paper considers the social forces that produce and sustain the transnational Chinese Muslim community in Dubai, a strategic location on the map of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. It examines the experiences of Chinese Muslims in Dubai’s dynamic and transient urban space and seeks to understand their complex emotions towards China. It suggests that the social context of Dubai may be inductive to the reinforcement of ‘Chinese Muslim’ identity due to the UAE’s policies on foreign populations and attitudes towards cultural diversity, the increasing influence of the Chinese state apparatus among overseas Chinese communities, as well as heightened patriotism and nationalism as the result of China’s rise.

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## Introduction

Islam arrived in China more than 1,400 years ago with traders and merchants from the Arabian Peninsula and Central Asia. Throughout the millennium, the strictly monotheistic tradition managed to put down its roots in Chinese soil and grew into one of the major religions in China. While the relationship between Muslim minorities and non-Muslim majority in China has been punctuated by conflict and episodes of persecution, Muslims have not only survived, but also remained resilient in a largely Confucian society. A distinctive Chinese Islamic culture, the product of mutual influences between Confucian and Islamic civilisations throughout the millennia, is often celebrated as a testament of the universality of Islam and the elasticity of Confucianism.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike other religious minorities, the religious affiliation of Muslims in contemporary China is largely manifested in the form of ethnicity. The Chinese Communist Party's nationality/*minzu* (民族) policy instils a system that deploys ethnicity as the primary identity marker, while religion is downplayed and reduced to, at most, a secondary characteristic.<sup>2</sup> Among the ten ethnic groups<sup>3</sup> that identify as Muslim in the People's Republic, the Hui people, otherwise known as the Chinese Muslims, have drawn much scholarly attention given their cultural and genetic proximity to the Han majority. The CCP's shifting attitudes towards religions, especially its uncertainty towards monotheistic traditions, combined with Chinese nationalist discourses, have strongly shaped the experiences of Chinese Muslims. After the Cultural Revolution, the CCP relaxed its control over religion and turned to focus on economic development in order to restore people's confidence in the Party. As a result, all religions went through a period of revitalisation in the 1990s and this trend continued into the Hu-Wen era, although the Chinese state's softening stance towards religion served primarily economic purposes, emphasising the role of religion in fostering cultural exchanges and boosting social trust.<sup>4</sup> The Western Region Development Plan, announced in 1999, placed Chinese Muslims under the spotlight. For a period of time, astute observers have suggested that CCP may benefit greatly from playing the 'Muslim card'. It has been argued that the valuable cultural and social capital Chinese Muslims possess has the potential to enable China to establish more meaningful ties and strategic partnerships with Muslim-majority countries.<sup>5</sup>

Since the inception of the Belt-and-Road Initiative in 2013, China has committed significant capital and human resources in Muslim-majority countries across Central Asia, the Middle East and North Africa. China is not only among the leading trade partners and

<sup>1</sup> This paper is largely limited to the case of the Hui people, who are Chinese-speaking Muslims. The case of the Turkic-speaking Uyghur Muslims is more complex and beyond the scope of this study.

<sup>2</sup> For more on the ethnogenesis of Chinese Muslims, see Dru Gladney, *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991, 1996).

<sup>3</sup> The ten ethnic groups include the Hui, Uyghur, Dongxiang, Salar, Kazak, Uzbek, Kirgiz, Tajik, Bao'an, and Tartar peoples. The Hui and Uyghur are the largest in terms of population.

<sup>4</sup> For an in-depth analysis of China's religious policies since 1949, see Fenggang Yang, *Religion in China: Survival and Revival under Communist Rule* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Wai Yip Ho, 'Mobilizing the Muslim Minority for China's Development: Hui Muslims, Ethnic Relations and Sino-Arab connections', *Journal of Comparative Asian Development* 12/1 (2012), pp. 84–112.

investors in the region, but also potentially an alternative global power in maintaining regional stability. While the notorious ‘Re-education Camps’ in Xinjiang and the country’s widespread Islamophobia do not bode well for China’s strategic development plan in Muslim-majority Central Asia and the MENA region, the general public in the Middle East continue to view China in a positive light.<sup>6</sup> In some cases, overseas Chinese Muslims (海外華人穆斯林)<sup>7</sup> employ their unique religious and cultural capital to build bridges, assuming the role of ‘cultural ambassadors’.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, the recent reports in the Western media on the de-Islamisation campaigns<sup>9</sup> across China suggest that Chinese Muslims are facing greater restraints as the CCP tightens up its grip over religions following two decades of relative liberalisation. It is thus timely to examine the impact of the CCP’s changing domestic policies and the shifting global geopolitical conditions on the identity of Chinese Muslims, who have historically endured both cultural assimilation and political persecution.

This paper will examine the experiences of Chinese Muslim expatriates – both the Hui and the Han converts – in Dubai, one of the Middle East’s foremost ‘global cities’. I assess the social forces that produce and sustain the transnational Chinese Muslim community within Dubai’s political, economic, social and cultural contexts. I examine the complex emotions among Chinese Muslims towards China – both as a state and a civilisational zone – and their sojourns in the Arabian Peninsula. My research suggests that the hyphenated identity of ‘Chinese Muslim’ is reproduced and strengthened in a transnational space. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) government’s approaches to governing a highly diverse society, the growing reach of the Chinese state apparatus overseas, the heightened patriotism and nationalism in overseas Chinese communities, and the increasingly polarised perceptions of China globally are key factors contributing to this phenomenon.

<sup>6</sup> Guy Burton, ‘Public Opinion in the Middle East toward China’, *Middle East Institute*, 11 December 2018. Available at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/public-opinion-middle-east-toward-china> (accessed 20 February 2019).

<sup>7</sup> In this paper, I use the term ‘overseas Chinese’ loosely to refer to those who of Chinese descent living more or less permanently outside China, regardless of their citizenships/passport issuance countries. The term ‘overseas Chinese Muslims’ refers to the Chinese-speaking Muslims, mostly Hui and Han converts, unless otherwise noted. The official discourses of CCP have used ‘overseas Chinese Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds’ (*ge minzu de musulin qiaomin* 各民族的穆斯林僑民) to include the non-Chinese speaking Muslim minorities.

<sup>8</sup> Yuting Wang, ‘The Making of China’s “Good Muslims”: From Middleman Minority to Cultural Entrepreneurs’, *The China Review* 18/4 (2018), pp. 131–54.

<sup>9</sup> An increasing number of reports on China’s anti-Muslim or anti-Islam campaigns have appeared in major Western media outlets in the last five years, including *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *Reuters*, *CNN*, *Foreign Affairs*, and elsewhere. A recent report shows the deteriorating situation: Steven Lee Myers, ‘A Crackdown on Islam is Spreading Across China’, *The New York Times*, 21 September 2019. Available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/21/world/asia/china-islam-crackdown.html> (accessed 28 April 2020).

## Chinese Muslims in the Arabian Gulf: Locating an Ethno-religious Minority in a Transnational Space

The exchanges between China and the Middle East date back to 300 BCE. Trade and commerce flourished during the Tang Dynasty in the sixth and seventh centuries CE, which coincided with the advent of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula. The ancient Silk Road, stretching some 4,000 miles over the vast region of Central Asia from the Tang capital of Xi'an, brought the first Arab and Muslim traders, merchants and officials to the Middle Kingdom. During the Song and Yuan Dynasties, more Arab merchants reached China via the maritime route in handcrafted wooden dhows and settled in China's port cities on the southeast coast. A large number of demobilised Muslim soldiers who fought in the Mongolian army were relocated to central China and eventually settled into sedentary farming communities. Even during the turmoil of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, there have been continuous exchanges between Chinese Muslims and the global Muslim *ummah*, albeit on a small scale.

However, there is little historical record on Chinese who settled in the Arabian Peninsula – a barren land until its unprecedented rise and rampant urban development in the last four decades, largely due to the discovery of oil. In fact, the Hui people – the Chinese-speaking Muslims – may be the first Chinese to have put down their roots in the region. For centuries, Arabia has been the imagined homeland for Sinophone Muslims. During the first half of the twentieth century, a small number of Chinese pilgrims managed to settle near Mecca and Medina and eventually assimilated into the Saudi society.<sup>10</sup> The coastal area on the northeastern corner of the peninsula, the modern-day UAE, however, had no traces of Chinese immigration until the early 1950s.

In September 1949, after losing their last battle with the People's Liberation Army, Ma Bufang and Ma Hongkui, two warlords of the Ma clique of Gansu – a powerful Hui Muslim militia in northwestern China – retreated to Taiwan. Ma Hongkui later moved to Los Angeles and spent the rest of his life there, while Ma Bufang sought refuge in the Middle East and eventually died in Saudi Arabia.<sup>11</sup> While the elites went into exile overseas, the Hui soldiers in their armies struggled for survival. A small group of Chinese Muslims from Ma Hongkui's infantry begged their way out of China through the Himalayas. They worked as coolies in India and eventually reached Saudi Arabia as pilgrims. The internal conflict within the Ma clique remained divisive in the diaspora. Ma Bufang's clan, who had already settled in Saudi Arabia and had established amiable relations with the Saudi king, rejected these men. It is said that, in the early 1960s, then King Saud IV stepped in and requested that the Emir of Sharjah accept these Muslim refugees from China. In this way the first Chinese Muslims – in fact, the first Chinese of any religion – reached the land that two

<sup>10</sup> See Hyeju Jeong, *A Song of the Red Sea: Communities and Networks of Chinese Muslims in the Hijaz* (Riyadh: King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, 2016), and Mohammad Al-Sudairi, *The Communist Party of China's United Front Work in the Gulf: The 'Ethnic Minority Overseas Chinese' of Saudi Arabia as a Case Study* (Riyadh: King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> Élisabeth, Allès, Leïla Chérif-Chebbi, and Constance-Hélène Halfon, 'Chinese Islam: Unity and Fragmentation', *Religion, State & Society* 31/1 (2003), pp. 7–35.

decades later would become the UAE. These Chinese Muslim men took on manual work at the ports and peddled in the streets. Most of them married Indian women and lost touch with China completely. Their children and grandchildren have been fully assimilated into *khaleeji* society: they hold UAE passports and do not speak a single word of Chinese.<sup>12</sup> Some crucial parts are still missing from this account of the early history of the Chinese presence in the UAE. Nevertheless, these stories are widely circulated and suggest that the Chinese Muslims were indeed the first Chinese to move to what became the UAE.

The discovery of oil in 1966 in the UAE triggered unprecedented changes on the desert landscape. The establishment of a representative body of the Republic of China (Taiwan) in Dubai in the early 1970s brought a tiny number of diplomats and businesspeople from Taiwan,<sup>13</sup> but the Chinese presence was virtually negligible. When mainland China reopened its doors to the outside world in the early 1980s, few looked for opportunities in the Middle East, let alone the Gulf. The establishment of ambassadorial relations between China and the UAE in 1984 paved the way for Chinese companies to enter the Emirati market, soon to be connected with the rest of the world by the founding of Emirates Airlines in 1985. But the key hub of trade and commerce remained in Kuwait City. It would take several more years, until the turmoil of the First Gulf War, for more Chinese entrepreneurs to relocate to Dubai.

There were no more than 2,000 Chinese expatriates working and living in the UAE by the early 1990s – mostly embassy and consulate staff and employees of large state-owned companies.<sup>14</sup> The rapid increase of the Chinese population in the region during the past two decades has taken many by surprise. It is estimated that there are now about 270,000 Chinese working and living in the UAE, mostly concentrated in the city of Dubai.<sup>15</sup> The exact number is difficult to ascertain due to frequent cross-border population movement. Nevertheless, it is evident that the number of Chinese expatriates is large enough to influence the decision-making of local businesses, from retailing, real estate, hospitality and entertainment to health care and education.

Chinese Muslims amount to between 5 and 10 percent of the total number of Chinese expatriates in the UAE. The community is primarily of Hui descent, with a sizable Han convert population of diverse provincial origins. While some came to Dubai in the early 1990s, most arrived after the year 2000. While they remain numerically small, their religious affiliation and Arabic skills enabled them to establish a rapport with local elites – their businesses were to flourish as Dubai's economy took off. More importantly, through brokering business deals, mediating business disputes, mitigating cultural misunderstandings and conflict, and providing policy and legal consultation services, Chinese Muslims have helped to fill in the gap between local authorities and Chinese diplomatic missions. As the

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Mr. Liu Zhende, a long-term UAE resident of Chinese Muslim background.

<sup>13</sup> Mao Yiming and Li Huafei, *Dubai Huaren Jianshi 迪拜華人簡史 (A Brief History of the Chinese in Dubai)*, 2018. Available at <http://www.dubairen.com/44679.html> (accessed 28 April 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Wu Xiaoming, former vice-consul, Chinese Consulate General in Dubai.

<sup>15</sup> Li Lingbing, Chinese Consul-General in Dubai, cited this number in her final public speech delivered at the Chinese National Day banquet on 23 September 2018 before the end of her term in Dubai.

Belt and Road Initiative pushes forward, Chinese Muslims have gained greater visibility and influence within the larger overseas Chinese community, underpinning their traditional ‘middlemen’ role.<sup>16</sup>

Chinese Muslims take great pride in a hadith that states, ‘Seek knowledge even as far as China’. Although the authenticity of this hadith is debatable, Chinese Muslims are convinced that their ancestors were among those adventurous knowledge seekers who, heeding the call of the Prophet, traversed thousands of miles of treacherous terrain to reach the Middle Kingdom more than a thousand years ago. Centuries later, some of them would return to the Arabian Peninsula to fulfil their destiny – acting as a bridge between China and the Muslim world. The hyphenated identity of Chinese Muslims – a complex construct – enables them to transcend their double minority status into unique cultural capital.

### Chinese State and Muslim ‘*Qiaomin*’ in Dubai

Some argue that China is better understood as a civilisation or an empire, rather than a conventional Westphalian nation-state.<sup>17</sup> The huge diversity within the country, be it regional, linguistic, ethnic or religious, has presented an enormous governance challenge. The implementation of the nationality directive (or *minzu* policy, 民族政策) since the 1950s is one of the tools to deal with China’s domestic ‘others’, address the issue of uneven development, and ultimately create a cohesive and integrated multiethnic nation-state. In addition, unlike many Western countries where state and religion largely exist in two separate domains, Chinese states – both historically and at present – have closely governed religious affairs and monitored the activities of religious organisations and individuals. The relationship between the atheist Communist Party and monotheism has been tense over the past decade. While there have been greater concerns over the rapid growth of Christianity given its alliances with Western powers, Islam has also been subjected to heavy regulation in the name of anti-terrorist/extremist/separatist campaigns.<sup>18</sup> Since 2016 especially, the deteriorating situation in Xinjiang has caused a ripple effect within the Chinese Muslim communities across the country.<sup>19</sup>

Economic liberalisation and privatisation, which have led to the loosening of the household registration system and greater population mobility, have further complicated the CCP’s policies towards ethno-religious minorities. With the growth of the post-1980 Chinese immigrant communities around the world, the Chinese state has become more

<sup>16</sup> Wang, ‘The Making of China’s “Good Muslims”’.

<sup>17</sup> Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World* (London: Allen Lane, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> Wei Shan and Ryan Ho, ‘Islam in China: Current Conditions and State Policies’, *East Asian Policy*, 10/4 (2018), pp. 103–15.

<sup>19</sup> Gerry Shih, “‘Boiling Us Like Frogs’: China’s Clampdown on Muslims Creeps into the Heartland, Finds New Targets”, *The Washington Post*, 21 September 2019. Available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/boiling-us-like-frogs-chinas-clampdown-on-muslims-creeps-into-the-heartland-finds-new-targets/2019/09/20/25c8bbo8-ba94-11e9-aeb2-a101a1fb27a7\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/boiling-us-like-frogs-chinas-clampdown-on-muslims-creeps-into-the-heartland-finds-new-targets/2019/09/20/25c8bbo8-ba94-11e9-aeb2-a101a1fb27a7_story.html) (accessed 22 September 2019).

proactive in exerting its influence beyond its national borders. Overseas Chinese communities are seen as a valuable asset for China's great rejuvenation project, while at the same time suspected of being a potential threat to national security and unity.<sup>20</sup> China's domestic policies and the extension of the Chinese state apparatus abroad have a profound impact on Chinese Muslims, given the intersection of religion and ethnicity in this case. The experiences of Chinese Muslims in the diasporic community present a unique case to examine the CCP's approaches to ethnic minorities and religious affairs among overseas Chinese. This section provides a brief discussion on how Chinese state governs the affairs of *minzu* (民族, nationality) and *zongjiao* (宗教, religion) within the Chinese expatriate community in Dubai.

In the study of Chinese emigrants around the world, two terms – *qiaomin* (僑民) and *huaqiao* (華僑) – are often used, without differentiating between those who still maintain Chinese nationality and those who have adopted foreign nationalities.<sup>21</sup> Commonly translated into English as 'Overseas Chinese' or 'Chinese Overseas', these terms suggest the existence of 'a single community with a considerable solidarity' regardless of the spatial and temporal distance created as the result of migration.<sup>22</sup> Such usage has important political, economic, social and cultural connotations in the context of a rising China. Historically, Chinese people in the diaspora have largely internalised the view of overseas Chinese as forever sojourners, rather than immigrants. Their embryonic connections with China are carved into their DNA and are passed down from generation to generation. The enduring connections between Chinese emigrants and 'home', whether imagined or real, produce a sense of belonging. Recently, this solidarity has been tied to the Chinese state, making the management of overseas Chinese affairs a critical task of the CCP.<sup>23</sup> To bring together the scattered Chinese in the diaspora, the Overseas Chinese Affairs Office of the State Council was established. A number of other state-level government agencies, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security and the State Administration of Foreign Experts Affairs, also handle different aspects of overseas Chinese affairs. This administrative management system is tasked with protecting the legitimate rights and interests of overseas Chinese, whether they retain Chinese nationality or not.

Although scholars have warned that using *qiaomin* or *huaqiao* to refer to all Chinese living abroad is ahistorical and could have dangerous consequences,<sup>24</sup> the terms are

<sup>20</sup> Elena Barabantseva, *Overseas Chinese, Ethnic Minorities and Nationalism: Decentering China* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> According to the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Returned Overseas Chinese and the Family Members of Overseas Chinese, the terms *huaqiao* and *qiaomin* strictly apply to those who still hold Chinese citizenship, while *haiwai hairren* (Overseas Chinese, 海外華人) refers to those who hold foreign citizenship. However, in scholarly studies and in everyday discourses, these terms are not necessarily limited to the legal usage and may be used interchangeably.

<sup>22</sup> Gungwu Wang, *China and the Chinese Overseas* (Singapore: Times Academic Press, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> James To, 'Beijing's Policies for Managing Han and Ethnic-Minority Chinese Communities Abroad', *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 41/4 (2012), pp. 183–221.

<sup>24</sup> The terms connote a strong Chinese nationalism and chauvinistic pride, which could lead to serious

endorsed by the Chinese authorities and have been widely used in public discourses. The existence of Chinese Muslims in the overseas Chinese community, however, presents a challenge to the conceptual framework of *qiaomin* or *huaqiao*, which emphasises the existence of a singular and coherent community with a shared ancestral root that can be traced back to an identifiable place within the natural boundaries of China. While Chinese Muslims have acquired many unmistakable Chinese characteristics, they largely exist on the margins of the Chinese mainstream and do not share any of the genesis stories of the Chinese civilisation. Using *qiaomin* or *huaqiao* to refer to China's Muslim minorities, especially the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs, certainly reveals a strong political intention of the Chinese state.<sup>25</sup> Since the affairs of overseas Chinese are managed through five government agencies and are vital to the missions of China's political apparatus, China's Muslim minorities of various ethnic backgrounds are not only expected to facilitate the realisation of President Xi's 'Chinese dream' wherever they are, but are also closely monitored at various levels.

The heightened importance of religion for migrants tends to accentuate the centrality of faith-based social networks. As a result, Chinese Muslims' commitment to the discourses of Chinese nationalism may be highly questionable. Voices among the Muslim *qiaomin* or *huaqiao* have become increasingly critical, given the growing mobility of Muslim minorities and the international condemnation of the CCP's policies in Xinjiang and elsewhere. Since the implementation of the Great Western Development Plan in 1999, the flow of Muslim minorities from northwest to southeast China has grown significantly. Some of the more resourceful individuals have found ways to Southeast Asia, North America and the Middle East. Cities like Kuala Lumpur, Istanbul, Cairo, Dubai and San Francisco Bay area have attracted sizable Muslim minorities from China – the Chinese-speaking Hui, Dongxiang and Salar, as well as the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs.<sup>26</sup> Like other transnational communities, overseas Chinese Muslims not only have the potential to influence the religious lives of Chinese Muslims back home, but also have considerable impact on China's image.

Over the last decade, the Chinese Consulate General in Dubai has been keen to engage with Chinese Muslim expatriates – including the Uyghurs – through both formal and informal channels. The annual Ramadan Iftar banquet is a key event that demonstrates the importance of Muslim minorities in the state's mission to create a united front (統一戰線) among the overseas Chinese communities in the MENA region. Endorsed by the Chinese Consulate General, the annual event was initiated by the Minzu Zongjiao Shiwu Weiyuanhui (民族宗教事務委員會, Committee of National and Religious Affairs), a voluntary organisation under the umbrella of the UAE's Qiaolian (僑聯), or Federation of Overseas Chinese. The fact that this committee does not exist in any other Qiaolian branch organisations around the world shows the visibility and importance of Muslim

political consequences, especially in Southeast Asia.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Sudairi, *The Communist Party of China's United Front Work in the Gulf*.

<sup>26</sup> Yuting Wang, 'The Construction of Chinese Muslims Identities in Transnational Spaces', *Review of Religion and Chinese Society* 5 (2018), pp. 156–82.

minorities in the UAE's Chinese community. Dr Ma Xuezhong, the key founder of the committee and one of the leaders of the Chinese Muslim community in Dubai, firmly supports the principle of *ai guo ai jiao* (愛國愛教), or 'love our country and love our religion.' He believes that Dubai's Chinese Muslim expatriates hold a unique position in bridging the gap between China and the UAE, and the Arab world at large.<sup>27</sup> However, the Uyghur community in Dubai has generally kept its distance from such state-sponsored activities.

In the midst of growing international criticism towards China's crackdown on Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, Li Xuhan, the current Chinese Consul General in Dubai, reiterated Beijing's policies towards ethnic and religious minorities in overseas Chinese communities while addressing more than 400 attendees at the annual Ramadan Iftar Banquet, held in the ballroom of the Grand Hyatt Hotel overlooking Dubai Creek in June 2019. In his speech, Li elaborated on the symbolic meanings of Ramadan, highlighted the importance of celebrating the occasion as a way to show respect to the host society and reinforce solidarity with fellow Muslim brothers and sisters in the overseas Chinese community in Dubai. He also emphasised the indispensable role of overseas Chinese Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds (*ge minzu de musul'in qiaomin* 各民族的穆斯林僑民) in facilitating bilateral relations between China and the UAE. He said,

I hope that all overseas Chinese continue to carry forward the tradition of patriotism and love of the homeland, be a contributor to the development and progress of the motherland, a staunch defender of national sovereignty and unity, a promoter of pragmatic cooperation between the two countries, a communicator of Chinese culture, and make due contributions to the realisation of Two Century Goals and the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.

### Being a Chinese Muslim in Dubai: Conflicting Emotions and Complex Identity

As a religious majority but ethnic minority, Chinese Muslims occupy a unique position in Dubai's overseas Chinese community. The benefits of living in Dubai are evident for Chinese Muslims. Their religious affiliation is in many cases sufficient to obtain interpersonal trust critical for establishing new social networks and enabling them to become better integrated into Emirati society. It helps to distinguish them from 'other Chinese' whose lack of religious faith often leads others to suspect them of being untruthful. From leaders of the Chinese Muslim community to Chinese Muslim traders in Dragon Mart,<sup>28</sup> all my interlocutors admit the undeniable advantage they have enjoyed for being a Muslim in a Muslim-majority society. For example, in Dragon Mart, Hui shopkeepers conclude that their businesses' success relative to their neighbours, who sell similar products, must have something to do with them being Muslim.<sup>29</sup> Han converts to Islam shared similar stories.

<sup>27</sup> See interviews with Dr Ma Xuezhong in Wang, 'The Making of China's "Good Muslims"'.

<sup>28</sup> Dragon Mart is the largest Chinese commodities trading centre outside China.

<sup>29</sup> Published interviews can be found here: Yuting Wang, 'Chinese or Muslim or Both? Modes of Adaptation among Chinese Muslims in the United Arab Emirates', in *Connecting China and the Muslim World* edited by Haiyun Ma, Shaojin Chai, and Chow Bing Ngeow (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 2016), pp. 55–72.

They accredit their success to their newly found faith and believe that their growing wealth is the bounty Allah has awarded them for choosing the correct path.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to economic opportunities, religion is the other important factor pulling Chinese Muslims to Dubai. Although the CCP has generally struck a friendly posture towards Chinese Muslims since the 1980s, rehabilitating damaged mosque properties during the Cultural Revolution, permitting the construction of new mosques, granting access to religious education and encouraging academic studies of Hui and Islam, religious activities remain closely monitored by the authorities and religious freedom is often curtailed in the name of maintaining stability, especially in the northwestern region. A Muslim-majority society is no doubt highly attractive to Chinese Muslims. The ability to perform religious rituals without fear of persecution is liberating and uplifting. The most tangible benefit for many of my interlocutors is the opportunity to raise their children in a Muslim society that subscribes to a moderate approach to Islam.

However, it is important to note that what shapes Chinese Muslims' experiences in Dubai is not simply their religious identity, but their unique background as both Chinese and Muslim. I have documented elsewhere that the unique social and cultural capital Chinese Muslims possess enables them to serve as a new kind of middleman minority as the bilateral ties between China and the UAE have strengthened in recent years.<sup>31</sup> Unlike their counterparts in Southeast Asia, whose experiences are strongly shaped by ethnic tensions between the Chinese and indigenous populations, Chinese Muslims in the UAE are situated in a society wherein diverse ethnic and religious groups largely coexist peacefully under the *kafala* system.<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, the social segregation and transiency produced by the current immigration policies in the UAE make it necessary for Chinese Muslims to maintain close ties with the larger Chinese expatriate community as well as social networks in mainland China. On the other, the 'comprehensive strategic partnership' between China and the UAE, declared following Xi Jinping's state visit in July 2018, paints a more positive image of China in the region and has subsequently bolstered the status of Chinese people in Emirati society, including Chinese Muslims. Therefore, while Chinese Muslims in Dubai have built a closely-knit community centred on a community mosque and an Islamic *da'wah* centre, they are fairly visible in the larger Chinese community through active participation in provincial trade associations and involvement in a wide range of social, cultural and economic events.

Particularly, there is significant importance attached to Chinese language education within Dubai's Chinese Muslim community. Indeed, Chinese Muslim families' enthusiasm in teaching their children Mandarin Chinese demonstrate the 'embryonic' ties between Chinese Muslims and China, in a broad sense of the term. There are two Friday schools<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Wang, 'The Making of China's "Good Muslims"'.

<sup>32</sup> The *kafala* system is the sponsorship arrangement implemented in the Gulf Arab countries to monitor temporary foreign guest workers. Under this system, only nationals or corporate entities can obtain legal visas and residency permits for foreign guest workers.

<sup>33</sup> Both Arabic lessons and Islamic education are already mandatory for Muslim children enrolled in

organised by Chinese Muslim volunteers: one is affiliated with the Khalimah Center, a well-known *da'wah* institute in the UAE, while the other is offered by the Chinese Islamic Cultural Center. Both schools provide free Chinese lessons and teach from textbooks widely used in mainland China, and are equipped with well-developed supplementary tutoring materials, exercises and tests. Together, more than 100 children attend these classes regularly every Friday, accompanied by their guardians.

A closer examination of the instructional materials used in Friday Mandarin schools allows us to have a glimpse of the complex attitudes among Chinese Muslims – those who are actively practicing their religion – towards China. In a Grade 6 Mandarin class that meets every Friday morning in Dubai's Al Nahda area, students read essays written by famous Chinese writers, such as Zhu Ziqing, Lao She and Lu Xun. Students are not only required to learn Chinese characters, idioms and phrases, but are also expected to summarise the central ideas conveyed through the writings and deduce the moral of the stories. Students are taught important values in these lessons, aimed at encouraging high moral standards. In other lessons, children also study famous poems from the Tang and Song dynasties by celebrated poets such as Li Bai, Du Fu and Bai Juyi. Among many other themes, there is a strong emphasis on traditional Confucian values, such as filial piety, humanity, honesty and integrity – compatible with what is required of them in Islam. Teachers also encourage parents and students to read Chinese history together to broaden the scope of their knowledge about China. The revived interest in the works of *huiru* (Hui Confucian literati, 回儒) in the last three decades has quietly reinforced a sense of belonging among Chinese Muslims.

Learning a language from the official textbook also exposes students to nationalism and patriotism. For example, a series of essays in a Grade 6 textbook published by the People's Education Press (Renmin Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 人民教育出版社) showcase diverse ethnic groups and rich cultural traditions across China, making references to the CCP's nationality policy. Different ethnic minorities are portrayed as part of a large family led by an enlightened leader – the Party. These lessons help to construct the image of a benevolent Chinese state and instil patriotism in students. In addition, teachers, all of them Chinese Muslims and volunteers, frequently use images of the beautiful natural landscape in China in their PowerPoint slides to motivate students' interest in learning the language. On the occasion of the 70th Chinese National Day, teachers also talked about the great achievements of China and shared with students their pride in being Chinese. Based on my observations, it is unlikely that teachers made these comments under any kind of pressure. Given the complex and often ambivalent attitudes of the CCP towards Hui people who have no separatist motives, it is not difficult to imagine that, despite the tightening control over Muslims in China, those who have been able to benefit from the trickle-down effect of economic development in China continue to perceive the CCP as

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either private or public schools in the UAE. As such, Chinese Muslim *da'wah* organisations offer only Mandarin lessons on Friday mornings to children of different age groups. Arabic and Islamic lessons are provided for adults regardless their religious beliefs. Some Chinese Muslim children also take Qur'an lessons in the Chinese Community Mosque on weekdays.

generally benign, and feel they can detach themselves from the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. The sizeable Han convert population within Dubai's Chinese Muslim community have also clearly embraced such sentiment.

Certainly, conflict over values and beliefs arise from time to time during Mandarin lessons. For example, in one of the lessons that I observed, the teacher, a Hui lady married to a Saudi businessman, while providing a thorough explanation of a poem depicting the rituals conducted during Tomb Sweeping Festival (清明節), reminded students that the practice of tomb-sweeping (掃墓) is *haram* – forbidden by Islamic teaching. She added that, while one should respect Chinese cultural traditions, Muslims are prohibited from engaging in activities that 'destroy the faith'. A similar situation occurred in a lesson on the legend of Nian (年) and the origin of the Chinese Spring Festival. The teacher pointed out the *haram* practices of non-Muslim Chinese people – specifically the Han – while asking students to be respectful towards their culture. Such controversies reflect the deep cultural differences between the Muslim and non-Muslim Chinese. However, teachers always draw on Islamic teachings to emphasise the value of cultural diversity and the importance of tolerance, and stress that 'all the lessons are aimed at cultivating good values in pupils'.

While pious Chinese Muslims do devote considerable time to their children's Arabic language and religious education, they also – like other Chinese – place great value on the importance of academic achievement. In a Wechat group dedicated to education, Chinese Muslim parents exchange information about schools, curricula design, after-school programs and various activities and events in the city. They tend to view Arab Muslim families as lax towards education, and consider this an important factor that sets the Chinese Muslims apart. When choosing schools, some Chinese Muslim parents place more weight on academic standards than the quality of Arabic language instruction. But at the same time, they also worry about their children being affected by Western culture – often dominant in Dubai's best international schools. Although they are part of Dubai's religious majority, in many ways they continue to experience the predicaments facing minorities.

Educational decisions present an important measure to assess the complex emotions of Chinese Muslims towards China. Although some express discontent and even outrage regarding the current policies of the CCP, many are nostalgic for the golden era of Islam and Muslims in China, when Muslim scientists, intellectuals, businesspeople and generals achieved prominence in Chinese society. In fact, the sentiment is more of frustration than hatred. One interlocutor lamented,

I wish the CCP could see the conspiracy of the West in producing mistrust between China and the Muslim world. The CCP should adopt a positive attitude towards Islam. Instead of seeing Muslims as enemies, take them as allies. In history, Chinese Muslims have made such positive contributions to Chinese civilisation through their knowledge in astrology and business skills, for example. The only way [for China] to fight against the Western imperialists is to join forces with the Muslims.

## Conclusion

The fascination with Chinese Muslims – the product of cross-fertilisation and collisions between Islam and Confucian Chinese culture – has generated a rich body of literature. However, most existing studies focus on Chinese Muslims in mainland China, Taiwan and, to a lesser extent, Malaysia and Indonesia. We know little about the experiences of Chinese Muslims in other locations, especially new convergent points of global flows of trade and people. This paper seeks to fill in the gap by looking at the experiences of Chinese Muslims in Dubai, a rising global city in the Gulf and China's new entrepôt into the Middle East and North Africa region.

The founding of the People's Republic of China had a profound impact on the country's Muslim minorities. Fearing the CCP's atheist ideology, many Hui people associated with the Nationalist Party sought refuge in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia and North America. The wave of Muslim emigrants who left China around 1949 went largely unnoticed by the CCP. The appearance of new overseas Chinese Muslim communities is mostly the result of the post-1980 migration from the mainland. This new generation of overseas Chinese Muslims has a more complex relationship with the Chinese state.

First of all, the clampdown on religions during the Cultural Revolution in the mainland produced a generation of cultural Muslims with little knowledge of Islam. Having received an atheist and nationalist education, this generation of Chinese Muslims largely identify themselves as simply the Chinese subjects of the Chinese state. Secondly, as the result of loosening control over religion since the 1980s, Chinese Muslims have been able to restore religious educational institutions, reengage with the global Muslim *ummah*, and perform Hajj. Chinese Muslim students have also been able to pursue education in Muslim countries including Malaysia, Pakistan, Syria, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia, although opportunities to study abroad have significantly dwindled in recent years due to the escalating tension in Xinjiang province and the tightening control of Chinese-speaking Muslims as the central government pushes the sinicisation of Islam.<sup>34</sup> Thirdly, with the growing investment in the country's northwest, where most of its Muslims are concentrated, since the end of the 1990s, the benefit of rapid economic growth has trickled down to ordinary Chinese Muslims. Many found business opportunities in coastal provinces or abroad. Moreover, with its growing economic prowess, the Chinese state now exerts greater influence in the Chinese diaspora through its diplomatic missions and various overseas Chinese associations, both at the state and grassroots levels. Maintaining certain connections with these organisations has brought tangible benefits to overseas Chinese, including the ethno-religious minorities.

Thus, a study of overseas Chinese Muslims enriches our understanding of the relationship between the Chinese state and religious minorities in the era of globalisation. Enabled by their religious affiliation and cultural heritage, Chinese Muslims in Dubai often function

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<sup>34</sup> David R. Stroup, 'The de-Islamification of Public Space and Sinicization of Ethnic Politics in Xi's China', *Middle East Institute*, 24 September 2019. Available at <https://www.mei.edu/publications/de-is-lamification-public-space-and-sinicization-ethnic-politics-xis-china> (accessed on 30 April 2020).

as informal ‘cultural ambassadors’, serving as the liaison between their Chinese compatriots and fellow Muslims from many different nationalities. Because of their unique position in the Chinese community, Chinese Muslims exhibit complex emotions towards China, both the Communist state and Chinese civilisation. Despite increasing Islamophobia and religious persecution in China, this paper suggests that Chinese Muslims in Dubai continue to demonstrate their ‘Chinese-ness’ through small yet important decisions. It is understandable that, as a minority, overseas Chinese Muslims must navigate visible and latent boundaries – political and religious – in order to fit in the complicated networks weaved together as the Belt and Road Initiative pushes forward. In Xi’s ‘New Era’, demonstrating patriotism and political loyalty is not simply a strategy for economic gain, but also for survival.





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Dubai's Dragon Mart shopping mall, the largest Chinese commodities trading centre outside China.

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