



ISLAMIC PRESCHOOL EDUCATION IN SHA DIAN,  
YUNNAN - CHINA AND KUALA LUMPUR,  
MALAYSIA: A QUALITATIVE COMPARATIVE CASE  
STUDY

BY

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## **ABSTRACT**

Educating children with both religious and culture values in China has been a daunting task for many Muslim educators; and that too in instilling those values at a tender age. This dissertation has embarked on an arduous task of simply doing that by tracing the historical root of Chinese Muslims and their struggle in education within the various phases of changing loyalties and proffering a suitable program that meets the demands of both the religion and nation. Being a qualitative cross-case study the dissertation collates data through semi-structured and unstructured interviews that captured the views and aspirations of selected Islamic preschools in Sha Dian and Kuala Lumpur. By critically reviewing the programs, curriculum, pedagogy, the researcher has identified through comparative SWOT analyses the missing areas in the Islamic preschool program in China. In studying the Islamic preschool program the researcher has tried to understand the core Chinese values in the light of those that are found common in Islam and suggested useful changes to the curriculum to reflect the common values of Islam and China.

## ملخص البحث

إن تعليم وتثقيف الأطفال بالقيم الدينية والثقافية في الصين مهمة شاقة للكثير من المعلمين المسلمين. ولا سيما غرس تلك القيم في السن المبكر. وقد شرعت هذه الرسالة في مهمة شاقة تتمثل في القيام بذلك ببساطة عن طريق تتبع الجذور التاريخية للمسلمين الصينيين وكفاحهم في التعليم ضمن تغيير الولاءات المراحل المختلفة وتقديم برنامج مناسب يلبي مطالب كل من الدين والأمة. ومن خلال دراسة نوعية حول الحالة، جمعت الرسالة البيانات من خلال المقابلات شبه المنظمة وغير المنظمة التي استحوذت على وجهات نظر وتطلعات الحضانات الإسلامية المختارة في شا ديان وكوالالمبور. ومن خلال مراجعة نقدية للبرامج والمناهج الدراسية وطرق التدريس، حددت الباحثة المناطق المفقودة في برنامج الحضانة الإسلامية في الصين من خلال تحليل القوة والضعف والفرص والتهديد (SWOT). لدراسة برنامج الحضانة الإسلامية حاولت الباحثة أن تفهم القيم الصينية الأساسية في ضوء القيم المشتركة في الإسلام واقترحت تغييرات مفيدة في المنهج لتعكس القيم المشتركة للإسلام والصين.

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## DECLARATION

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*This dissertation is dedicated to my beloved parents, whose boundless love, great hope, ceaseless encouragement and persistent moral and material supports were the crucial factors in the completion of this work.*

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Islamic preschool in China cannot be studied in isolation nor can it be disassociated from the general Chinese Muslim history. As such any discourse on Islamic preschool study must be preceded by a discussion or rather a brief description of important events in the Chinese Muslim history that stand as milestones in the annals of Muslim / Islamic education in China including the rise and flourishing of Islamic preschools.

As early as the middle of the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Islam was introduced into China. Having spread and developed for 1300 years, going through the various dynasties of Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming, and Qing followed by the Republic Period, Muslim in China today have swelled to more than 23 million followers (Muslims) as per the 2010 Sixth Census of China, which is 1.7% of the Chinese population (2010 NPC). Non-governmental statistics tend to estimate the number of Muslims between 50 to 100 million.

A more conservative estimate of Muslim population should be somewhere in between that of India and Indonesia. For this figure of 20 or even 30 million Muslims has been the fixed number since the Cultural Revolution. The only plausible explanation for this stagnation in population of Muslims must be that of stricter restriction on Muslims in China which is not the case as Muslims are given special rights allowing them to have two children, as opposed to the rest of the Chinese communities. Thus given this privilege Muslims ought to have increased in number. The researcher is of the view that a candid and thorough, but, independent census must be commissioned to determine the demographic make-up of China. However, according to the 2010 NPC Muslims consist of 10 prominent Muslim communities as mentioned in Table 1.1.



Table 1.1 10 Ethnic Muslim Nationalities in China

No	Nationality	Population
1	Hui	10,586,087
2	Uyghur	10,069,346
3	Kazak	1,462,588
4	Dongxiang	621,500
5	Kirgiz	186,708
6	Salar	130,607
7	Tajik	51,069
8	Bonan	20,074
9	Uzbek	10,569
10	Tatar	3,556

Source: 2010 NPC

This research mainly focuses on the Hui Nationality as the biggest Muslim ethnic group that is scattered most widely in the mainland China. As it can be seen in Table 1.2. below that 90% of Muslim population are concentrated in the following 10 provinces with two Muslim autonomous provinces with significant Muslim concentration.

Table 1.2 Top Muslim Concentrated Provinces and Masjids in China

No	Province	No. of Muslims	No. of Masjids
1	Xin Jiang Uyghur Autonomous Region	13,400,000	24000
2	Ning Xia Hui Autonomous Region	2,500,000	4000
3	Gan Su	1,370,000	2500
4	Qing Hai	1,150,000	930
5	Yun Nan	1,090,000	820
6	He Nan	1,020,000	620
7	He Bei	600,000	578
8	Shan Dong	540,000	506
9	An Hui	330,000	121
10	Liao Ning	310,000	110
TOTAL		22,310,000	34,185

Source: 2010 NPC

This is detailed in Figure 1.1. as below:

## Regions in China with Large Number of Muslims

### Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

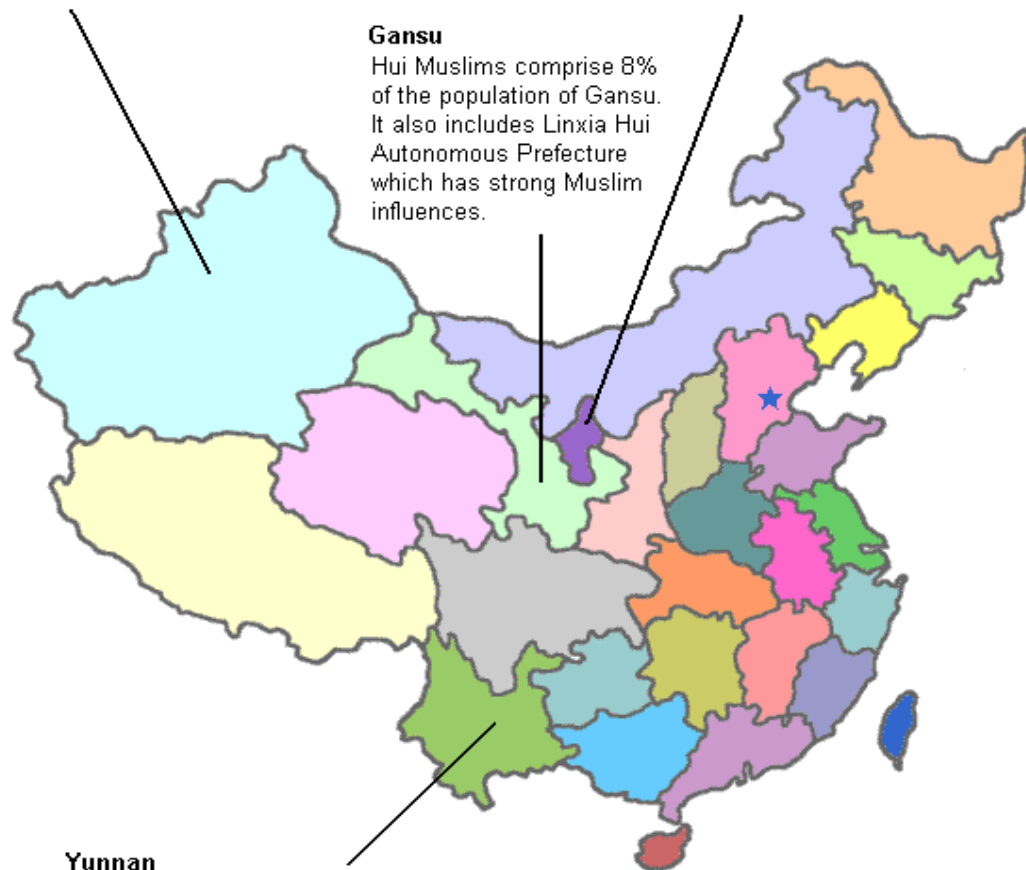
A little over 50% of people in Xinjiang are Muslims and 90% of them belong to the Uyghur ethnic group who are Turkish in origin. Small number of Kazakh, Kirgiz, Dongxiang, Salar and Hui Muslim which account for 5% of the total population.

### Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region

Hui Muslims are the majority group in Ningxia.

### Gansu

Hui Muslims comprise 8% of the population of Gansu. It also includes Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture which has strong Muslim influences.



### Yunnan

Muslims comprise only 2% of the population of Yunnan but historically Yunnan has had major Muslim influences

### Beijing & Shanghai

Hui Muslims are found in all large cities in China. Both Beijing and Shanghai have tens of thousands of Muslims.

Source: Islam in China website <http://islaminchina.info>

Figure 1.1 China Muslim Population Distribution

It remains an open question when Islam was first introduced into China. For a long period of time, many scholars have been searching on this matter, and reached many different conclusions. A popular theory is that advanced by a well-known contemporary historian Chen Yuan (1880-1971) who had access to actual records in “*Jiu Tang Shi - History of Tang*” and “*Ce Fu Yuan Gui - China History: Tang Dynasty*”. In the second year of Yong Hui (651 A.D.) of Emperor Gao Zong (628—683A.D) of Tang, the third Caliph of Islam ‘Uthman (644-656 A.D.) sent a diplomatic envoy to Chang An (the present Xi An ) the capital of Tang Dynasty, to pay an official call to Emperor Gao Zong and introduce him to the Caliphate, their customs and Islam. For historic purpose, most scholars have acknowledged this year as the sign of Islam’s entry into China (Li et al., 1998).

Historical evidences indicate that Islam was introduced into China through two routes: the Land Route or the Sea Route. As for the land routes, it is quite evident that the early Muslim migrants who were sent at the request of the Emperor settled down along the Silk Road - a vast expanse of intercultural trade routes from Eurasia to the Mediterranean all the way to Japan, crossing into India on the way. Textiles, spices and even religions were all exchanged along this Silk Road starting around 1,000 B.C. and continuing for several millenniums. For much of this time, Islam was the dominant religion among Silk Road traders coming from western Eurasia, and they brought with them their belief system and a culture rich in tradition and advancements to millions of people. Today the Hui, a Muslim Chinese minority are widely thought to be the descendants of Muslim merchants who settled down in China at the end of their Silk Road sojourns.

Before the middle of the Tang Dynasty, Chinese and Arab traders mainly undertook business through land, but in the late Tang, the sea business passage starting

from the Persian Gulf and Arab Sea, via the Gulf of Bangladesh, the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea, to Chinese Southeast coastal ports like Guang Zhou, Quan Zhou and Yang Zhou were dominated by Arab and Chinese traders. A great number of Arab and Persian traders came to these places to do business, and some of them settled down there. Thus, Islam was introduced into China by sea as well.

The history of Muslims in China has undergone tremendous changes over the centuries commencing from the Tang to the Qing periods, where Muslims were slowly absorbed into the Chinese society not as foreigners but as indigenous people with strong and deep roots in the Chinese society (see Appendix A). A detail account of this transformation is captured in the historical survey that is recorded in the second chapter.

From the era of the People's Republic of China (1949-present), the government practiced a policy of ethnic equality and religious freedom. Muslims have been divided into 10 minority groups that take Islam as their national faith in China. Nine of them are distributed mainly in the northwest, while the tenth and the largest group, known as the Hui, is spread throughout the entire country. Today, Hui has no longer represents the religious category, but as one of the 56 ethnic groups in China. Chinese sociologists declared that before the Hui existed, there was no such nationality in the world. They emphasized that Hui is a distinct ethnic group (Dru C. Gladney, 2003). Huis can be found in most of the counties and cities throughout the country, especially in the Ning Xia Hui Autonomous Region and Gan Su, Qing Hai, He Nan, He Bei, Shan Dong, Yun Nan and the Xin Jiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, (see Table 1.2 and Figure 1.1. above).

Thus, throughout the history of Islam in China, Chinese Muslims kept their identities distinguished and striking despite having continuous interaction with the larger Chinese society for the past 1,300 years that it can hardly be separated from

Chinese Muslim education. Thousand years legacies of Chinese Muslims transmitting their belief through generations emerged as a significant phenomenon amongst the context of minority Muslim Chinese. To some extent, this kind of coexistence between different beliefs can be regarded as a successful experience from the perspectives of both these two great civilizations. At this juncture the researcher is obligated to provide a concise survey on Muslim education in China as follows:

Table 1.3 Muslim Education Across Chinese Dynasties

Year	Dynasty	Muslim Status	Educational Milestone
<b>618-907</b>	Tang	Fan Ke – Foreigner	Fan Xue – Foreign School
<b>907-960</b>	Wu Dai Shi Guo	Fan Ke – Foreigner	Fan Xue – Foreign School
<b>960-1279</b>	Song	Tu Sheng Fan Ke – Indigenous foreigners	Fan Xue – Foreign School
<b>1279 -1368</b>	Yuan	Hui Hui – Chinese permanent residents	Hui Hui Guo Zi Xue – Government-Based Ethnic School for the Huis
<b>1368-1644</b>	Ming	Hui Hui – Chinese Muslim as citizen of China	Jing Tang Jiao Yu – Masjid-based Education
<b>1644-1911</b>	Qing	Hui Hui – Chinese Muslim as citizen of China.	Jing Tang Jiao Yu – Masjid-based Education
<b>1911-1949</b>	Republic of China	Hui Hui – Chinese Muslim as citizen of China.	Xin Shi Jiao Yu – New Style of Islamic Education
<b>1949- present</b>	People’s Republic of China	Hui Zu – Chinese Muslim citizen as one of the 56 ethnic groups of China	Xian Dai Yi Si Lan Jiao Yu – Modern Islamic Education

As can be seen from the above Table 1.3. that the transition from Tang to Song dynasty had a period of five decades of uncertainty. This period is popularly called as the “Period of Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdom” which saw frequent change in the central authorities due to continuous foreign invasions. Due to this period of uncertainty Chinese Muslims do not consider it as significant, even though as records prove that Muslims during this period of turmoil were economically well-off.

The detailed information of Chinese Muslim educational milestones will be elaborated in Chapter 2. The most significant dilemma of Islamic education in contemporary China is the continued decline in the number of students attending education in Masjid, or, so to speak, education of the religionist. Although there were reformative activities and practices undertaken by the Muslim elites since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, nevertheless, the traditional education in Masjid had still been the main stream in supplying religious scholars till to-date.

In what follows below the present researcher attempts to capture the important moments in Chinese Muslim history from the time of Tang to Qing dynasties depicting the various efforts made by Muslims in China to protect their socio-political identities and religio-cultural peculiarities amidst the changing patterns in dynastic China. Along with these milestones the research also tracks the evolution of religious / Islamic education, as both these, meaning history and education of Muslims in China are essential elements in understanding the Muslim behavior in China.

Table 1.4 Chinese Muslim Historical Achievements and Educational System

Dynasties	Historical Achievement	Stage in Muslim / Islamic Education
<b>Tang</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First Muslim came to China</li> <li>• 37 official envoy sent to China</li> <li>• Little impact on general political and economic life.</li> </ul>	<p>Fan Xue - Foreigner School established:</p> <p>[a] to educate Muslim children in traditional Chinese culture and help them adapt to the larger Chinese society as soon as possible.</p>
<b>Song</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslim became indigenous foreigners</li> <li>• Play important role in import and export activities</li> <li>• 20% taxes paid by Muslims</li> <li>• More participation in the society</li> <li>• Increase in Muslim population</li> <li>• The coming of Islamic missionaries</li> </ul>	<p>[b] to qualify for the imperial examination administered by the court that guaranteed political offices. The curriculum and teaching contents were the same as other ordinary Chinese schools</p>
<b>Yuan</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslims became permanent residents</li> <li>• Muslims were the second class according to the four categories of Yuan political status</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Setting up of Government-based Imperial School for the Hui which belonged to Imperial College of the Hui since 1289.</li> <li>• The two institutions were not only designed to induct Muslim children, even Non Muslim children were also allowed to attend the school. Most of the graduates from these two schools acted as official interpreters working in the government.</li> </ul>
<b>Ming</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chinese Muslims as citizens increase their political and social status</li> <li>• Population increased greatly</li> <li>• Adopted Chinese culture</li> <li>• Scattered widely throughout the country</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jing Tang Jiao Yu - Masjid-based Education or Scripture hall education appeared in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and spread all over the provinces where the Huis form the large population.</li> <li>• Interpretation of Islamic doctrine in the light of Confucianism.</li> <li>• Considered the Golden Age of Islam in china</li> </ul>
<b>Qing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chinese Muslims as citizens decrease their political and social status</li> <li>• Many bloody Hui uprising in Muslim areas</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Masjid-based education declined due to paucity of fund and lack of qualified academics, as there was a general ban on Islamic education.</li> </ul>
<b>Republic of China</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Muslims were taken as one of the five most important races in China that achieved higher political and economic status</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Xin Shi Jiao Yu - the new style of Islamic education was developed rapidly that stood distinguished from the previous traditional religious education.</li> <li>• New educational reform with broader concept to serve the country and the religion.</li> <li>• Numerous Islamic schools were established</li> </ul>
<b>People's Republic of China</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hui as one of the 56 ethnic groups in China enjoying the same equality with all other ethnic groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Modern Islamic Institutes were established with backing from the government.</li> <li>• Islamic studies were offered at established Universities in China</li> <li>• Many private Arabic schools were established.</li> </ul>

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Muslims in China are given the free rein to conduct their affairs in accordance with the law of the country provided the practice of their religion does not undermine the communist character of the country. This vague statement underscores the relationship between Muslims as citizens and China as a state. Even though Muslim-China relationship does not pose any mutual challenge due to the state's approach of treating all its citizen equal, the policy of centralized education system that does not take into consideration the specific needs of the community, particularly its minorities, has certainly exerted greater influence in creating the imbalance in education. Being communist, China as a country, has some difficulty accommodating the religio-spiritual needs of the Muslim community. The presence of many Muslim private institutions that function independently from state involvement has given rise to the idea that the state-sponsored education system did not meet the religious requirement of Muslims in China.

Communism brands religion as opium that blinds the wit of man. As such it took concerted effort to keep people away from religion. In China this idea was well-ingrained in the minds of its policy makers that any attachment to religion must be strongly denied. Thus the education system has factored all aspects of life excluding spiritual needs. This lack of spirituality has a daunting effect on the Muslim community which see the importance of spirituality in their daily life. The schools in which their children study is seen as indoctrination centres that deliberately keep them away from religion. If children are not taught religion at their younger age, the chances of them following any religion as they grow older will be a near impossibility. Thus the Muslim apprehension over the educational limitation in China is understandable. The existing set of schools that are run by the State do not incorporate any elements of religion or spirituality in their academic curricula. Many schools that they were set up by Muslim