



The Islamic Revival and Muslim-to-State Relations in Modern and Contemporary China

Speakers: Noriko Unno and Leila Chérif-Chebbi

Chair: Debasish Chaudhari

Date: 04 July 2018

ICS Seminar Room

The Chair, Debasish Chaudhari, began the session by talking about his own experience of working on Chinese Muslims and how he had to convince people that it is important to find out more about them. He then introduced the two speakers for the session, Noriko Unno and Leila Chérif-Chebbi.

Noriko Unno's research focussed on Islamic Revivalism China from a historical perspective. She examined the status of Chinese Muslims during the Qing dynasty and the Republican government and compared it to the policy adopted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) towards them. During the reign of Qing dynasty, very few restrictions were placed on Muslim intellectual activities. In the 19th century, Ma Wanfu travelled to Mecca and was influenced by the Salafi movement for Islamic revival. On his return to China, he formed the Yihewani group and encouraged Muslims to go back to authentic Islam. The relations of Chinese Muslims with Muslims from other places continued with the inauguration of schools by the Ottomans and with the arrival of Muslims from Russia and India to Northwest China.

During the Republican period, Muslim periodicals and books were published in China and many Chinese Muslims went to the Middle Eastern countries to study. Dr. Unno pointed out that Chinese Muslim students of this time were also influenced by the radical movement at Aligarh Muslim University. Inspired by their counterparts in India, they voiced the need to impart modern education to Muslims to improve their status in China.

Noriko Unno emphasised on a few similarities between the Qing dynasty and Republican government in their treatment of Chinese Muslims. The lack of a consistent policy regarding Islam by both the governments was in stark contrast with the systematic policy pursued by them towards Buddhism and Christianity. The Muslims during both these periods were given the status of a religious group. The CCP government, on the other hand, recognised Chinese Muslims as a separate ethnic group in order to win their support, which gave them some level of autonomy in their affairs.

Noriko Unno concluded the session by stating that the Chinese Muslims had greater freedom during the Qing and Republican periods due to the influence of Muslims from other countries. While the CCP recognised them as a separate ethnic group, the lack of a policy towards the Muslims during the Qing and Republican periods allowed them to conduct their religious affairs without interference.

The second speaker for the session, Leila Chérif-Chebbi, presented the Islamic Revival movement in contemporary China. In the 1990s, private Sino-Arabic schools for transmitting knowledge in Arabic and Persian were opened in China. These schools, referred to as *dawa*, aimed to nurture a generation of Muslims who accepted religious knowledge and were willing to transmit it. The Islamic revival movement further expanded through private publications, and many works of Muslim thinkers were translated and printed in simplified characters. These translated works were widely read by the Chinese Muslim population and they advocated a return to orthodox Islam as laid down by the Quran.

Alongside the efforts of private individuals and organisations, the Islamic Association of China (IAC) was also influenced by the revival movement of the 20th century. Their role as the mediator between the government and Chinese Muslims meant that they were obligated to ban activities which were restricted by the government. Since only non-religious activities are allowed in China under CCP, the IAC had to negotiate the law to retain some freedom for dissemination of Islamic values. It was agreed that Islamic teaching content will not be restricted as long as it did not go against the Party.

The Hong Kong Muslims acted as the connecting link between the Chinese Muslims and other Islamic countries, and they even funded activities to make the Muslim brotherhood more

prominent. In the 1990s, many began to go to countries like Saudi Arabia, Thailand, Libya and Iran for an Islamic education, later to become imams or interpreters. Many of these imams began to teach in private schools and universities, and scholars fluent in both Chinese and Arabic participated in conferences to form a nationwide network of “authentic Muslims”. While women played an important role in the revival and there were a few schools for women, they did not gain prominence as scholars.

Leila Chérif-Chebba asserted that the 2000s have been a time of diffidence for the Chinese Muslims, after the tipping point of Islamic revival activism in the 1990s. Those who believed in the values of the Salafi movement and Wahhabism were accused of radicalism. When some Han people were attacked and killed in 2009, racism gripped the country. With the rise of world-wide Islamophobia, the IAC initiated the sinicization of Islam by enforcing politically correct interpretations of Islamic texts. Muslim teaching content was no longer allowed. Most Islamic schools and private publication houses were closed and Muslim websites were shut down on the charge of extremism.

The subordination of Islam to Chinese culture seeks to systematically delegitimise the practice of an Islam which does not have Chinese values. The relations between China and Islamic countries remain unaffected, even as violence towards Chinese Muslims persists, because of the increased dependence of these countries on China. Leila Chérif-Chebba concluded that the persistent racism in the country has compelled the Hui Muslims to maintain a low profile, although defiance is building underground. Diffidence has led to a silencing of Islamic revival, until the times are more favourable.

The session was followed by a round of questions and comments from the audience. One of the members of the audience brought up the possibility of different sections of Muslims in China responding differently to the state measures, which was further expanded by a question on whether ethnic identity can be equated with religious identity. Noriko Unno brought to the fore the significance of language, highlighting that the different dialects are a cause of concern among Chinese Muslims since they cannot claim to have a common language that unites them. In response to a question on the treatment of Uyghur Muslims in China, it was established that theirs is a different case entirely. The Chair stressed that the public suppression of the Uyghurs could be a result of their attempt to establish a separate state. Since they have a history of laying

territorial claim over Xinjiang, which also happens to be a border region, the CCP government feels threatened. In response to another question on why the suppression of Hui Muslims was not covered in the international media, Leila Chérif-Chebbi suggested that the suppression of Uyghurs was publicised widely in order to terrorise them, while there was a silence around the suppression of Hui Muslims.

About the Speakers

Noriko Unno is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Japan Society for the Promotion of Sciences. Her research interests lie primarily in the modern history of East Asia and Muslim minority studies. Her current research focuses on Chinese-speaking Muslims' beliefs and their daily Islamic practices; their debates surrounding ethnicity and religion; and the global networks of Muslim activity that connected China, Central Asia, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire from the 18th to the 20th century. She earned her B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. in Asian Studies from the University of Tokyo. She was a former visiting scholar at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and Harvard Yenching Institute. Her latest work, "Cutting off the Queue for Faith, Preserving the Queue for Face: Chinese Muslims' Queue-Cutting Movements in North China during the Xinhai Revolution Period" was published in *Asian Studies*, Vol. 6 No. 1 (2018).

Leila Chérif-Chebbi (1963) studied Arabic and Chinese at the Paris Political Sciences Institute from 1981-1984. She earned her B.A. in International Relations from the same institution (1989), before going on to complete a post-graduate degree there on the Arab and Muslim world (1991). Working as a public officer since 1991, she has engaged in the research of Chinese Islam and the Hui people as a secondary occupation, participating in a wide-range of conferences both domestically and internationally. She received a fellowship (Michel Seurat) from CNRS in 1995, and conducted fieldwork in China in 1990, 1991, 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2013 respectively. She is an Associate Member of the CETOBaC (CNRS-EHESS) Paris. Her main topics of interests are Chinese Muslim reformisms (Ikhwan, Salafiyya, Jama'a al-Tabligh); the modern history of Chinese Muslims; modern and contemporary Muslim intellectuals; the Arabic language and Arabic calligraphy in China; and Chinese Muslims' engagement with the Internet. Her latest work, "Traditional vs Modernized Ikhwan in Globalized China" was published in *Zhenghe Forum: Connecting China and the Muslim World* (edited by Ma Haiyun, Chai Shaojin, and Ngeow Chow Bing), Kuala Lumpur: Malaya University Press, 2016, pp.157-171.

Report prepared by Ramya Kannan, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies

Disclaimer

The Wednesday Seminar at the ICS is a forum for presentations and discussions on current affairs as well as ongoing research by scholars, experts, diplomats and journalists, among others. This report is a summary produced for purposes of dissemination and for generating wider discussion. All views expressed here should be understood to be those of the speaker(s) and individual participants, and not necessarily of the Institute of Chinese Studies.