

A NOTE ON CONTEMPORARY HUI MOSQUE:  
ISLAMIC EDUCATION IN CHINA AND ITS DIFFICULTIES

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With a population of 9,816,805 (according to the latest census of China in 2000), distributed mainly in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region (17.7%), Gansu province (12.7%), Henan province (10.1%), Xingjiang Uigur Autonomous Region (7.9%), Qinghai province (7.4%), etc., the Huis are the third largest minority among 55 minority nationalities and the largest Muslim minority of 10 Muslim minority nationalities in China.

The Huis were not aborigines of China. They originated mainly from the Huihui Muslim immigrants of Central Asia during the Mongol Empire and the Yuan Dynasty, which was mainly of Turkic and other native Central Asian blood lineage, and at the same time, Han, Mongol, and other natives of China. In this regard, especially in assimilating other parts of the population, Islam has played such an important role on the Huis, especially Islamic education.

The Huis nowadays mainly receive two kinds of education, secular education and religious education. In content, it can be divided into three: First, secular education given by schools established specially for the Huis, which teach modern cultural knowledge and train men to meet the secular need of the Hui people; second religious education, i.e., mosque education, which teaches religious knowledge and train men for religion; third, the education given by Islamic colleges and Arabic schools, including some Arabic schools for girls, which has the same goal as religious education, religious by nature, but also provides some secular curricula, such as Chinese, History, Geography, etc.

The Hui mosque Islamic education<sup>31</sup> derived directly from "Preaching-hall Education," can be tracked back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, i.e., in the final years of the Ming dynasty. Historically, it was very early that China came into contact with Arabic and Persian Islamic regions. The famous Silk Road was its testimony. The tradition was taken up by both the Arab and Tang empires, the two great interna-

tional powers at the time when Islam was being preached by Muhammed. Up to the Song dynasty, the descendants of Arabic and Persian Muslim traders, soldiers and diplomats who came into China during the period of Tang, had already stayed in the country for several centuries. They were called "Locally-born Foreign People" and "Five-generation Foreign People" in historical books. During the periods of the Mongolian and Yuan empires, there was a saying that "Huis were all over in the country." During the early years of the Ming dynasty, Muslims heading towards China along the Silk Road could still be seen. As everyone knows, it was very early that Islam established its religious education, and the government of the Song dynasty even provided schools for the children of foreign people including foreign Muslims residing in China, which were called "Foreign Schools" by the Chinese. This is because the dissemination and development of Islam could not take place without education. However, up to the middle years of the Ming dynasty there had been no need for establishing Islamic education because qualified personnel needed for Islam and the social autonomy of Muslims in China could be found from among the Muslims who continuously came into China.

Up to the middle years of the Ming dynasty, the Huis had already grown into an independent ethnic entity, and their consciousness as a nationality that took in "Islam" as a key factor was becoming evident too. However, at the same time China gradually cut off contact with Arabic and Persian regions because of the "Closed-door Policy" adopted by the Ming and Qing governments. In this situation, the Huis had to establish Islamic education in order to uphold their beliefs and promote the development of Islam in China.

Hu Dengzhou (1522-1597), a Hui person from Shanxi province, was the founder of the Hui Mosque Islamic education in China. In doing this, he did not follow the examples of Xingjiang and foreign countries to establish schools, but had imitated the Confucian "old-style private school" methods and accepted the influence of Sufi Islamic education by taking in students (*maulas*, in Chinese) to mosques to teach them Islamic knowledge and train scholars needed by Islam. This was the very famous "Preaching-hall Education" in Hui history.