

Leading Their Sisters in Faith

—China's Women Imams and Women's Mosques

中国的女阿訇和清真女寺

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In a prayer hall, a female ahong (wearing pink scarf, facing the audience), guides her sisters in prayer
女阿訇正在带领姐妹们进行礼拜

In many ways, Islam in China has its own characteristics. China's old mosques, which are a fantastic blend of traditional Chinese architecture and Arabic elements, symbolize, in a magnificent way, the indigenization of religion, the interaction of a foreign faith with the local Chinese culture. But one original aspect of this "Islam with Chinese characteristics" can also be seen in a unique tradition: The existence of mosques built for women and led by women imams, a role traditionally devoted to men throughout the rest of the Muslim world.

经过长期与中国本土文化的结合,伊斯兰教在中国的发展在很多方面具有了中国特色。那些传统中国建筑风格与阿拉伯风格完美结合的清真古寺就是很好的例证。另一个极具中国特色的现象是:由女阿訇主持的清真女寺的出现——而阿訇这个角色在世界其它地方通常是由男性所承担的。



She is a celebrity, a pillar, a rock. Imam Du Shuzhen, who is 80 years old and 1.5 meters tall, is the soul of the community at Zhengzhou's Beidajie Women's Mosque. Her strong character, deep knowledge of the Koran, and more than half a century of experience as an imam have made Du a renowned figure in the local Muslim community. She began studying Islamic scriptures when she was eight. Married at 15 and widowed at 18, she decided—against her parents' wishes—not to remarry. She wanted to devote herself to religion. After eight years of studies, she decided to lead her "sisters" in faith; she decided to become an *ahong*.

Ahong is the Chinese word for "imam," or Muslim leader.



Unlike other parts of the world, where imams are usually men, central China has a unique tradition: The existence of mosques dedicated to women, and led by women. Elsewhere in the Muslim world, women pray either at home or in a small section of men's mosques. During her 55 years of service, Du has been in charge of the women's mosque, which gives women their own religious space. She has guided her "sisters" in their prayers, taught them about the Koran, trained several *ahongs*, received government officials, visited Mecca four times and raised money to restore and enlarge Beidajie Women's Mosque.

The Origins of Women's Mosques 清真女寺的起源

It is almost impossible to say with any certainty when the first mosque for women was built, because there is a lack of written information on the subject. A few scholars have traced the origins of women's mosques to the 16th century. It is hard, however, to know what these mosques (*nūsi*) were like, whether they existed as an identifiable institution for women, or if they were led by women. A stele in a mosque located in Wangjia Hutong, Kaifeng, indicates the mosque existed in the 19th century. A monograph of Xinxiang District, which is in Henan Province, also mentions the construction of a women's mosque during Qianlong's reign (1736-1795). The mosque was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and it was rebuilt in the 1980s. Numerous *nusi* which existed prior to 1949, reopened and flourished in China in the post-Mao era.

Determining why women's mosques, led by women, exist in China is not an easy task. The few scholars who have studied the issue do not agree on the main reason for the mosques' creation. Chinese sociologist Shui Jingjun suggests the apparition is linked to the development of religious schools for girls. In their book, Maria Jaschok, a German research scholar in religious issues, and Shui explain: "Women's schools in the early Qing Dynasty were founded and run by men



and, initially, teachers in these schools were men. Gradually, they became more permanent in nature, and were led by female *ahong*."

The authors suggest it is difficult to say when women teachers attained the status of *ahong*, but, they add, "as they took over a male *ahong*'s responsibilities (such as teaching Islamic knowledge and managing religious affairs), they were called *nū ahong* (female *ahong*) by Muslims in the Central Plain region not later than the Emperor Jiaqing's reign (1796-1820)."

Elisabeth Alles, a French scholar, favors another factor, also mentioned by Jaschok and Shui, as an explanation for the development of women's mosques: The existence of women communities in Buddhism and Daoism, which could have inspired Muslim women to set up their own institutions.

The Mosque, a Living Place 生活的地方

Five times a day, in accordance with the Koran's teachings, women gather at Beixiajie Mosque for prayers. However, the mosque is much more than a place of worship. It is also a living place. Beixiajie is located in Zhengzhou, just a few hundred meters from Du's mosque. It is the home of Mai Nianxiang, a smiling and dynamic

ahong, a cleaning lady and five students, called *halifas*. Every day, women from the neighborhood meet at the mosque for a chat, and children from neighboring schools play in the courtyard. During Ramadan, the holy month of fasting, women cook and share dinner—only after sunset, in accordance with Muslim rites—in a joyful atmosphere.

To them, the mosque is a place for worship, socializing and studying.

Throughout history, *nūsi* have been places of culture and knowledge. In the old society where women's ignorance was traditionally considered a virtue, the *nūsi* provided women with knowledge of the scriptures. But they were more than that. As noted by Jaschok and Shui, the mosques also provided women with basic sexual education at a time when sex-related matters were usually confined to an elite group—usually men. Given the necessity of ablutions to purify one's body—especially after acts considered unclean, such as sex—women required a rudimentary knowledge of anatomy. In these matters, as in other fields of religious and moral education, they were not confined to the same ignorant state as some of their non-Muslim counterparts.

Today, although women have greater access to culture, thanks to compulsory education, mosques continue to provide education. Besides *halifas*, who receive full-time teaching, to become *ahongs*, young girls also receive Arabic lessons during holidays. In some mosques, elderly, illiterate women may receive their first lesson in written Chinese.

Daily Management 日常管理

Unlike in many koranic schools, studying religion at Beixiajie is free. Therefore, the

■ Captions:

1. Evening study in a religious school in Kadangdian 圪当店村一所阿拉伯语学校的晚自习
2. Young girls praying in the mosque 在清真寺里做礼拜的姑娘们
3. Mai Nianxiang (Beixiajie Mosque, Zhengzhou) teaches five students and raises her orphaned nephew 郑州北下街清真寺的买年香带着5个学生的同时还抚养着自己失去双亲的侄女



Choosing an Ahong

阿訇的产生

In addition to the mosque's daily management, the committee is entrusted with an essential mission: Recruiting a new *ahong*. In ancient times, an *ahong* would spend his/her life at one mosque; nowadays, young *ahongs* often move from mosque to mosque. As the *ahong*'s personality has a huge influence on the mosque's spiritual and social life, the committee usually chooses an *ahong* based on recommendations from others. After receiving a recommendation, a delegation visits the prospective *ahong* and, with the agreement of the committee, invites her to lead the mosque.

Women's mosques have various degrees of independence, often determined by whether they were built by women who raised the funds, or whether they were set up by men's mosques. In the latter case, the mosques' management committees are consistent with those at men's mosques. Often, the male members outnumber the women, which means, a majority of men have to approve the recruitment of the new female imam—as well as all expenses.

Although female worshippers usually say the procedures go smoothly, because members work in a spirit of collaboration, *nūsi* that have their own independent committees say they are happy they can manage their own affairs and chose their imams on their own.

In some cases, communities are left without an imam after the departure, death or retirement of an *ahong*. "I used to be *ahong* at Bo'ai's mosque, seven or eight years ago. Today, still, the worshippers keep on inviting me, because the former *ahong* is very old and sick and they have not found

mosque has little income and must depend mainly on donations from worshippers. "As donations sometimes fail to meet all the expenses, we rent rooms to outsiders, as a source of income," Mai explains. Three of her students share one room, on the second floor, and the two others sleep in a big bed in the living room. That makes it possible to rent out seven of the mosque's rooms.

While *ahongs* are responsible for worshippers' spiritual lives, management committees are in charge of the mosques' daily operations. A committee is usually composed of three to 12 people, who are often middle-aged or elderly, and who have such experience. These committees are in charge of managing donations and expenses, such as *ahongs*' salaries. The salaries generally are low. Mai Nianxiang's salary is 600 yuan (US \$74) per month, but in the cases of poor mosques in little villages, the communities sometimes do not have enough money to pay the *ahongs*' salaries. The *ahongs*, in those situations, fulfill their duties "for free."

In addition to the salaries paid to the *ahong* and the cleaning lady, other expenses include coal, electricity and water

fees. These are relatively high, as worshippers must do ablutions (wash their faces, feet, hands, ears, arms and other body parts) prior to saying their prayers. During the month of fasting, when worshippers come to the mosque to share a common meal at night, the purchases of food can be quite expensive.

"During that month, we had about 160 people for dinner every day. We spent 12,000 yuan (US \$ 1,481) on food," said Wang Qingai, a member of the managing committee of the women's mosque in Jiaozuo, a city 50 kilometers northwest of Zhengzhou. Sometimes, renovations of the mosque and purchases of new furniture have to be included in the expenses, and that means the mosque must hold additional fund-raisers.

Financial management is considered a public affair. At the entrance of the mosque, a big black board indicates the names of donors and the amounts of their donations. The board lists donations ranging from 10 yuan to 5,000 yuan (US \$1.23 to US \$617). "If you can give 100 yuan (US \$12.35), you give 100 yuan. But if you do not have money, you don't give anything. That is also fine," Wang explained.



anybody to replace me," Mai Nianxiang, from Beixiajie Mosque, explained. After Du left her mosque in Kaifeng to move to Beixiajie, some worshippers even visited Zhengzhou to try to persuade her to return. They missed her knowledge and experience.

Unlike Du, many old *ahongs* hardly know Arabic, and they can read only a few sections of the Koran. Today, new recruits often have quite a deep understanding of Arabic. But, as they sometimes become imams at the age of 18 or 20, they lack the experience of older *ahongs*. "In the days of old, women would often become an *ahong* after having raised children. They had experience in life. The duration of their stay at a mosque was also longer compared with nowadays, often 20 to 30 years, which allowed them to have a deep understanding of and influence on their community. Today, the 'turnover' is much quicker. Around three to six years," Alles explained.

Giving in to God's Will

由真主的意愿决定

When women's mosques reopened in the 1980s, most *ahongs* were quite old. The need to train new *ahongs* was obvious, so mosques and schools of the Koran accepted students. Kadangdian, a village about four hours from Zhengzhou, is one place where young *ahongs* are trained. About 300 girls study and live there, right next to the men's mosque and a boys' religious school. The buildings are spacious, and they are arranged around a central patio with flowers and plants. The prayer hall, which faces Mecca, is opposite the main gate. On one side of the building are the showers for ablution; on the other side, the dormitories. The classrooms are on the second floor.

The women wake up before sunrise to prepare for the first prayer of the day, which is around 5:30 am. Cleaning of the school—with cleaning tasks allotted on a rotation basis—breakfast and classes follow. The girls study Arabic, the Koran and Muslim history and regulations, in



addition to the usual subjects such as Chinese, mathematics and computer. Some even study abroad, in Malaysia, Pakistan or Saudi Arabia.

However, not all of the women can become *ahongs*. "When people who manage a school believe a girl has special qualities that can allow her to become an *ahong*, they recommend her to us. Then, only if Allah agrees, will she become an *ahong*," Imam Li Qingxian, who is in charge

of the school, explained. "You know, when my mother, who was an *ahong*, passed away, I did not think about doing it myself. I thought I was not able. But other people encouraged me to do so, and Allah gave me the strength." In 2004, Li trained four *ahongs*, who assumed responsibilities in mosques in other regions, including Liaoning Province and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

"It is good that women have their own place to pray and teach other women. Mohammad said that happy heaven is under mothers' feet," she added, as she smiled and looked at the young women, who hoped to become *ahongs*. "Inshallah," if God wants it. ■

■ Captions:

4. A young *halifa* puts on a head scarf in Kaifeng's Wangjia Hutong Women's Mosque, which is one of the oldest in Henan Province
开封王家胡同清真女寺. 河南最古老的清真女寺之一. 寺里的年轻女学生正在戴头巾
5. During prayer, women sit in rows
女性们坐成几排进行礼拜
6. A break between two classes for halifa students in Kadangdian
坑塘店的穆斯林女学生在课间休息
7. Preparing dinner in the courtyard of the mosque in Jiaozuo, a city 50 kilometers northwest of Zhengzhou
郑州西南50公里的焦作市一所清真女寺. 人们在院子里准备晚餐

