

The Impact of the Spread of Islam on the Formation and Development of the Chinese Hui Ethnic Minority

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Abstract: Based on a brief historic analysis, this article explained how the migration of merchants from central Asian helped the global spread of Islam to ancient China starting from the seventh century and how Islam impacted the formation of Chinese Hui ethnic minority. It is identified that Islam faith played a key role in uniting together the Arab immigrants in China and their descendants in the long history after the Tang Dynasty. This article provided valuable implications and recommendations regarding how to address appropriately the issues of ethnic minority and their religious belief for the policy makers in China.

Key words: Islam in China · Chinese Hui Ethnic Minority · Jiaofang · Silk Road · Chinese Muslim

INTRODUCTION

China is a unified country with many different ethnic minorities and very diverse religions. A close-knit relationship often existed between many ethnic minorities and their religious beliefs. In the formation and growth of some ethnic minorities, religion played even a key role, as is found in the relationship between Hui ethnic minority and Islam.

Hui ethnic minority has a population of about 10 million that are distributed most widely in China among all the ethnic minorities [1]. As the whole population of Hui is Muslims, Islam served as the major link, driving force and spiritual pillar in the formation and development of this ethnic minority group.

The Spread of Islam and the Formation of Hui Ethnic Minority: As a community of people in the history of human development, an ethnic group is formed in two major ways. First, a natural ethnic group was formed as a result of the progressive development of a clan, a tribe, tribal alliances and a nation along with the development of social productive forces. Second, after the formation of an ethnic group, part of this group was separated from its original group due to economic or cultural exchanges, as

well as war or natural disasters. Such separated group merged with the other parts of the same group or different ethnic groups to form a new ethnic group, as is the formation of Hui [2]. Compared with many other ethnic minorities in China, Hui ethnic minority was formed quite late under specific historical conditions by specific populations. The formation of Hui was closely related to the spread of Islam in China and therefore Islam played an important impact on the formation of the Chinese Hui. In the following, we will specifically discuss the process of such formation of Hui people.

After its establishment during the 7th century on the Arabian Peninsula, Islam started to spread to the other parts of the world and eventually reached China during the Tang Dynasty. As the prime period in ancient Chinese history and coinciding with the period of Arab Empire, Tang Dynasty had frequent offshore trade activities with the outside world. Tang Dynasty and the Arab Empire had increasingly frequent economic and cultural exchanges between these two countries, with the east-to-west inland "Silk Road" and offshore "Spice Route" that connected the South China Sea and the Persian Gulf for maritime traffic. Arab envoys continued to be sent to China with a recorded number of 39 times during 651 and 798 (The History of the Early Tang Dynasty) [3].

Accompanying the envoys to China through the offshore trade route were some Muslim Arabs and Persian traders, who were primarily concentrated in those coastal cities such as Guangzhou, Quanzhou, Yangzhou, Hangzhou, Mingzhou (Ningbo), etc. With the arrival of these Islamic Arabs and Persians, Islam was introduced into China [3]. Although the academia debate about the exact time of its introduction into China, it is generally believed that Islam was brought to China during the second year of Yonghui emperor's reign in Tang Dynasty (AD 651). These Arabs and Persians in China were mainly engaged in the trading of spices, ivory, jewelry, herbs and rhino horns with Chinese silk, tea, porcelain and other goods. Playing an important role in promoting the economic development and government's fiscal tax revenue, these business activities were therefore encouraged and protected by Tang government. Such favorable business environment attracted many Arabs and Persians who were then settled down in China. According to the "General Mirror for the Aid of Government" (*Zi Zhi Tong Jian*), some of the businessmen from the Arab countries lived in the capital city of Changan for four decades while many even settled down there, still there were about four thousand such businessmen who bought land and homes in Chin during the Tianbao years of emperor Xuanzong's reign (AD 742-756). Before the Shangyuan years of emperor Suzong's reign (AD 760), there were at least two thousand Arab businessmen living in Yangzhou area. During the Song Dynasty, China's foreign trade business was escalated to a higher level so that an even greater number of Arab and Persians came to China. Although these Muslim businessmen stayed for a long time in China - a foreign land that has a different and exotic culture, they always kept their own religious beliefs and customs, which gained the respect and care of the local community as well as the government. In order to accommodate their customs and habits, the government of the Song Dynasty established specific settlement areas for these people and allowed them to intermarriage with Han Chinese and had descendant, who then became the earliest Hui ethnic minority people [3].

Islam gained further development in China during the Yuan Dynasty. During this period, Mongolian nomads living in the northern part of China gradually became powerful and conquered many Muslim countries and ethnic minorities in Central and West Asia. Along with the expedition of the Mongols, the channel of exchanges between China and the countries of West Asia was also further opened. Groups of all ethnic groups of people in Central Asia, Persians and Arabs were sent as prisoners

of war to China to participate in the Mongolian conquest and unification of China. Additionally, some Arab traders, missionaries, travelers and scholars voluntarily came to China. These people, along with the descendants of Arabs and Persians who settled down in China during the Tang and Song Dynasties, were all Muslims who were called "Semu" or "Hui" people [3]. During Yuan Dynasty, the Hui people living in all parts of China. Their religious beliefs and customs began to come in contact with other people and gained widespread attention. Thus, it was natural by the local community to call Hui people's religious faith, Islam, Hui religion [4].

As a distinctive ethnic minority, Hui ethnic minority group was officially formed during the early years of the Ming Dynasty. Islam played a critical role and important link during the formation and fusion of Hui ethnic minority that included Arabs, Persians and other Muslims of Central Asia who settled in various parts of China, as well as the Mongolian and Han Chinese who believed in Islamic faith. Although these people had different ethnic origins, they shared a common Islamic faith and had a common ideological demand and aspiration to use Chinese in the interpretation of their life and the Islamic faith, which served as a unifying force. In addition, the religious organization "Jiaofang" during the Yuan and Ming dynasties helped to shape Hui ethnic minority. "Jiaofang" was formed with a local mosque as its center and the followers in Muslim Communities of its vicinity. As a basic unit of religious organization system, Jiaofang was further developed and became more mature during the Yuan and Ming dynasties. According to the literature, larger mosques had head priests as well as other priests who assumed various duties such as teaching, Sunday worship assembling, etc. The emergence and development Jiaofang with a local mosque as its center of social activity consolidated the Islamic faith, promoted the economic and daily life of Hui people and improved Muslim unity. This common Islamic faith enhanced their unity and encouraged the formation of a common ethnic identity.

There were more profound historical reasons for the formation of Hui ethnic minority group during this period. After the overthrow of the Yuan dynasty, the Ming Dynasty adopted a nation-wide Han nationalism policy to force the assimilation of different ethnic groups. The first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, requested that the Mongols and Hui people accept the culture and customs of mainstream Han people. He stipulated that "Mongols and Semu (Hui) people should intermarry with the Han Chinese people and should not pursue marriage

within their own ethnic group exclusively. Offenders shall be penalized with stick beating 80 times and be forced into government slaves” [5]. During the Ming Dynasty, the implementation of physiocracy policy, which was undoubtedly a form of discrimination, severely put the Muslims at a disadvantage since the traditional Muslims, especially those living in the urban areas, made their living by doing businesses. During a long period of the early Ming Dynasty, the government prohibited the free killing of cattle in order to protect agricultural development. Volume XVI of the Great Ming Code enacted in 1374 stipulates: “Whoever kills his own horse or cattle will be punished by stick beating one hundred times.” [6]. As beef and mutton had been the main food source of the Hui people and cattle or sheep slaughtering was a traditional business for making a living for about 90% of Hui people (Reference), the banning on cattle and sheep slaughtering severely impacted the diet and economic life of the Muslims. “All were deprived and had no livelihood” [6]. The implementation of these policies greatly influenced the social life of the Hui people in a negative way. However, the external pressure further strengthened the recognition of common religious beliefs, lifestyle and ethnic consciousness, which eventually led to the formation of a unique Hui ethnic minority group in the early Ming Dynasty.

The Impact of Islam on the Hui Ethnic Identity:

During the formation process of the Hui ethnic minority in China, Islam played a very important role since it served as a spiritual bond for the Hui people and it was also an important impetus for the formation of the Hui ethnic minority. To some extent, it can be safely said that if there had been no Islam, there would have never been a Chinese Hui ethnic group in existence. However, Islam not only just impacted the formation of Hui ethnic minority group. More importantly, as a religion, a social system, as well as a way of life, Islam has entered into the political, economic, cultural, educational, ethics and other various fields of Hui people’s social life. Many customs of the Hui people, such as marriage, family, funeral, diet, festivals, rituals and moral behavior, evolved from the relevant provisions of the Koran. Islam also has a very important impact on the ethnic identity of the Hui people.

Sharing a common language is one of the important characteristics of an ethnic group [2]. Among all ethnic minorities in China, Hui ethnic minority group is the only one that uses Chinese as its own language along with Han Chinese. That is to say, Chinese language is the

common language of the Hui people. As we know, Persians and Arabs moved from West Asia to China initially used a different language; the Persians used Persian, the Arabs spoke Arabic. However, they needed a common language in their trading business in China for easy communication. Additionally, as was mentioned above, the common Islamic faith and common habits also required them to have a common language. Since Chinese was a language most widely used in China, it naturally became the primary language choice for Hui people to serve their needs. During the long period of the development of Islam in China, those Persians and Arabs who settled down in China gradually abandoned their mother tongue and adopted Chinese as their common language. Some people think that Arabic was the common language of the Hui people, which is not correct as Arabic was only used in some religious festivals and ethnic rituals [7].

Common geographical location is another important feature, as well as an important condition for the formation, of an ethnic group [2]. As was discussed above, Hui ethnic minority group is the most widely distributed and most scattered ethnic minority group in China. Even in the most concentrated Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, the Muslim population accounted for only 34.77% of the region’s total population, which might indicate that it does not seem to have a whole common geographical region where Hui people live. However, along with this scattered pattern of distribution of Hui people in China, there are many small settlements. With particular Islam religious organizational system, Jiaofang, as a common carrier, these small settlements were thus formed on the basis of the shared Islamic faith and when most Hui members of a Jiaofang used local mosque as the center for their social activities. Such mosque-centered settlement became a special residential area for Hui people and it is the important material foundation for the formation of the Hui ethnic minority group.

Shared psychological identity is a common state of mind expressed in an ethnic group’s culture during the process of an ethnic group’s development [10]. Common psychological identity is an important feature of an ethnic group and it is also an important symbol for the formation of an ethnic group. The common psychological identity of Hui people was formed in the Ming Dynasty. The Ming government adopted mandatory assimilation and physiocracy policy that made the Hui people feel discriminated and oppressed. In this case, the teachings in the Koran that:

- “You shall all adhere to the rope of Allah, do not separate yourselves from it. You shall remember firmly in your mind the grace Allah gives you. Previously, you were enemies and Allah united your heart together. By relying on His grace you become holy brothers; you were on the edge of a pit of fire, Allah pulled you out of that pit.” Koran, 3:103.

Such teachings of the Koran further united the Hui people together, thus unity and mutual assistance among Hui people became the important characteristics of the common psychological identity.

In addition, the customs of the Hui people were also greatly influenced by Islam. The Koran requires its believers "never eat the dead, blood, or pork; never drink alcohol and never eat the body of the animals that are slaughtered but not blessed by Allah, the animals that are strangled, hammered to death, or the leftovers of animals eaten by a beast." Hui people have always piously followed these provisions. In their diet, they did not eat pork, dogs, donkeys, mules, horses, cats and all other fierce beasts, naturally dead livestock or livestock slaughtered by non-Muslims; they refrained from smoking and drinking. Over the time, these Islamic dietary regulations became the common habits of Hui people. In addition, Hui people have also maintained other customs in their wedding and rituals including the burial custom in funeral. An even closer relationship existed between Hui people's festivals and Islam. Many holidays, such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha and maulid al-nabi, were all Islamic holidays and they have become the important festivals in the Muslim Tradition.

CONCLUSION

In summary, in the process of the formation and development of the Hui ethnic minority in China, Islam not only constituted an important part of the ethnic culture, but also shaped a common Hui ethnic identity and served an important force promoting development of this ethnic group. Therefore, it is recommended that an appropriate understanding of the Islamic faith of the Hui people should be gained, their Islamic faith, religious culture and their customs be respected. However, the issue of ethnic minority and the issue of religious belief are different. Specific issues need to be addressed using specific analysis. In China, it is not appropriate to equate the ethnic issues with religious issues. However, ethnic issues and religious issues cannot be separated completely. Dialectical analysis of these issues should be the key approach to address the relationship between the two.

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