Shadian’s Muslim communities and trans-local connectivities: observations from the field

Hyoju (Jae-Jin) JOG

I REACHED SHADIAN TOWN after a three hour drive from Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province, China. As I stepped out of the car in the chill of a late November night, the site of Shadian’s magnificent Grand Mosque and the call to night prayers reminded me that I was in a zone quite different from Kunming.

Shadian has ten mosques, with the Grand Mosque - modelled after the Al-Masjid al-Nabawi mosque in Medina - completed in 2009 - as its symbol. Almost ninety percent of Shadian’s fifteen thousand residents are Muslims, belonging to the Han, Uyghur, and other ethnic minorities. However, Shadian is also known for the so-called Shadian Incident of 1975, in which villagers forcibly opened closed-down mosques during the last years of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). The ‘incident’ left 1,600 people dead at the hands of the People’s Liberation Army. “The old Islamic schools in Shadian used to have various religious issues, but everything has been burned,” lamented my informant, Mr. Ma. Across the Mosque was the Islamic Culture and Arts Center that exhibits and sells Islamic artworks. Within a few blocks of the Grand Mosque, one senses a mix of forward-looking aspirations and painful memories, reflecting a continuous history of repres- sion and resilience of Islam in China.

Shadian’s trans-local networks in history
Islam in Yunnan expanded during the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), when Abul Daoud from Bukhara (current Uzbekistan) was appointed as the provincial governor, promoting both Islamic and Confucian institutions. According to Mr. Ma, “he also built aqueducts, without him you would not see present-day Yunnan.” Following waves of Muslim settlement into the town since the thirteenth century, Shadian became a part of caravan trade routes between Yunnan and Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar and India. During the 19th and early 20th centuries, trade became so important that, just before the Chinese communist victory in 1949, around 700 out of Shadian’s 980 families, had two to three horses conducting commerce across northern Thailand and Myanmar.

In the first half of the 20th century, Shadian also emerged as a significant center for Islamic learning. For example, of the thirty-three students from China who studied in Cairo’s al-Azhar University in the 1930s and 1940s, five came from Shadian alone. They were heavily sponsored by Bai Liangcheng (白亮程, 1893–1966). A scholar and an official, Bai Liangcheng founded the Yufeng Elementary School in 1914, one Islamic Cirlk School, and several Islamic periodicals. The old Yufeng Elementary School now displays an exhibition on Bai Liangcheng and Shadian’s notable Muslims. Here I learned that Bai also initiated industrialized tea commerce based in Yunnan’s tea production. He employed imported technology and machineries from Japan and India, he constructed a large-scale tea factory, creating new networks domestically and across the borders of Thailand and Myanmar. These connections would later provide permanent homes for Shadian diaspora, who migrated to Thailand and Myanmar in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and formed Sino-Islamic enclaves. In November 1948, Bai Liangcheng and fifty others left Shadian, most of them, good Muslims, left their hometown and went to the west, and they all dreamed deeply about Shadian. It’s embarrassing to say you’re escaping,” said Mr. Ma. “So you say you’re going on the pilgrimage.”

Return to Kunming
Back in Kunming, I told my Chinese host family about my experiences in Shadian, but was met with somewhat perplexed and worried expressions flashing across their faces. Later in the evening, my host forwarded me an article on Zhifen Ribao, a Chinese online platform where articles are posted anonymously. The article drew parallels between the Shadian Incident and the contemporary Islamic State in the Middle East – “both groups being violent, self-celebrating and terrorists in essence” – echoing the dominant and official narrative in China. The rich histories that I observed in Shadian, rooted in southern Yunnan with its critical ties outwards that have shaped the province’s many landscapes, are apparently not making its inroads to the audience who needs them the most.

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1. Ma Weilang, Yunnan Huizu Lihe yi Wenhua Yanjiu (Kunming: Yunnan Daxue Chubanshe, 1999), 241.

CHINA IS HOME to a large Muslim population. According to the Islamic Association of China, the country has over 25 million Muslims, 40,000 mosques and more than 50,000 Muslim organizations. The three pillars of the Islamic network in China are attached to the Islamic Association of China, the country has over 25 million Muslims, 40,000 mosques and more than 50,000 Muslim organizations. The three pillars of the Islamic network in China

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- Secondly, the madrasa (grammar school, or primary level) and madrassa (Islamic college or high level) provides the Chinese Muslim community with education, as well as spiritual guidance. These institutions play a crucial role in the Chinese Muslim community. Besides its religious function as a place for ritual prayer, mosques in China also have social, economic, and cultural functions, such as administrative management, festive celebration, social mobilization, economic enterprises, cultural education, or even daily life affairs. Hence, the mosque is a stronghold that binds its local community, while stretching out its external relations with communities in other areas in order to establish the umma (Muslim nation) in the context of an uneven environment.

- Firstly, the mosque plays a central role in the Chinese Muslim community. Besides its religious function as a place for ritual prayer, mosques in China also have social, economic, and cultural functions, such as administrative management, festive celebration, social mobilization, economic enterprises, cultural education, or even daily life affairs. Hence, the mosque is a stronghold that binds its local community, while stretching out its external relations with communities in other areas in order to establish the umma (Muslim nation) in the context of an uneven environment.

- The Public Archaeology Lecture Series promoted public awareness and knowledge of the ever-increasing wealth of archaeological finds. The Public Archaeology Lecture Series invited three important archaeologists, Charles Higham, Lothar von Falkenhausen, and Colin Renfrew, to share their experiences on archaeology with students, and the general public. After the public lectures, the audience was given the opportunity to engage with the archaeologists, discussing archaeological findings, as well as their concerns on the appreciation and protection of cultural diversity and the challenge of vanishing heritage in our globalizing world.

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Sino-Muslim students in Egypt

Shuang WEN

THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA resumed sending Chinese Muslim students to Al-Azhar University in Egypt in 1982. A small number of the students are sent by the Islamic Association of China, headquartered in Beijing, and approved by the Chinese Embassy in Cairo. These students can enjoy the benefits of an education exchange agreement between the PRC and Egypt, i.e., they can live in the international student dorms at Al-Azhar University and receive a modest monthly stipend. Most, however, travel on their own initiative; they are unable to enjoy the benefits of the education exchange agreement and have to fend for themselves. So when the Arab Spring broke out in January 2011, their lives in Egypt suddenly became uncertain. Below are two snapshots of these self-funded Chinese-speaking Sino-Muslim students.

Nabil

Nabil comes from a pious Muslim family in Henan. He went to Egypt in 2008 to study Islamic law at Al-Azhar University, aspiring to become an Ahong (a Chinese term for imam) upon graduation. Because he did not have much prior knowledge of Islamic studies or the Arabic language, he did not receive a fellowship from the Islamic Association in China. However, he was very driven and passionate about his studies. When the uprising in Egypt erupted, his family members wanted him to return. However, just like many of his fellow Muslim students from around the world, he was excited about the revolution. He saw that people who hold prior privileges for personal reasons became supportive of each other, as if they were united by a moment of uncertainty. Feeling inspired, he made a conscientious choice to stay in order to witness the unfolding of a historical event in the Islamic world. He believed that this experience would strengthen his faith and enrich his personal growth in life.

Khalid

Khalid is originally from Henan as well, but his family is not particularly strict with religious practice. Not being able to pass the college entrance exam in China, he went to Al-Azhar University simply out of curiosity for the outside world. Although the tuition and living expenses in Egypt are not beyond the affordability of his family, they are still a financial burden. After a few years of trying, Khalid still could not pass the Arabic language exam, let alone enter a degree program. Feeling ashamed and discouraged, he did not receive a fellowship from the Chinese Association of China, headquartered in Beijing, and approved by the Chinese Embassy in Cairo. This means they cannot enter the Al-Azhar University degree program either. Out of frustration or financial constraints, they drop out of school, but have managed to make the best of their experience in Egypt by finding different jobs to make a living. Some Sino-Muslim students work in marble-making, shoe-making, and plastic recycling factories. Others sell small made-in-China inexpensive products at the Khan al-Khalili market. Some even become door-to-door sales persons or tour guides. For them, Egypt has become a place of survival rather than religious learning.

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1 Sino-Muslim is a term coined by scholar Jonathan Lipman in his book Familiar Strangers (University of Washington Press, 1997). Names of the Sino-Muslim students in this essay are not their real names.

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CONFERENCES IN CHINA

You Must Create?

7-9 April 2016, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong
http://acgs.uva.nl/news-and-events/news/content/2016/04/you-must-create.html

You must create – be less bored, to be more authentic, to be free in the digital world? These questions were the linchpin of a three-day event of conferencing and site visits held early April in Hong Kong and Shenzhen.

The event took place in the historical juncture when creativity has become a catchphrase across different countries. China appears to move from a ‘made in China’ towards a ‘created in China’ country (Kwame, 2011), to transform creativity and culture into a crucial source for innovation and financial growth as well as part of its ‘soft power’ to both the citizenry as well as the outside world.

“**You Must Create?** was jointly organized by the Amsterdam Centre of Globalization Studies, University of Amsterdam and the Department of Humanities and Creativity Writing, Hong Kong Baptist University, as part of the European Research Council funded project “From Made in China to Created in China – A Comparative Study of Creative Practice and Production in Contemporary China”. The five-year project is led by Professor Jeroen de Kloet (UvA).

Explorations during the event will be organized and developed into an open source set of (audio-visual) materials, scheduled to be published by the Amsterdam University Press in the summer of 2017.

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World Forum on China Studies

20-21 November 2015, Shanghai
www.chinastudies.org.cn/english.htm

Sponsored by the State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China and the Shanghai Municipal Government, the World Forum on China Studies is a Shanghai-based biannual academic event jointly organized by the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences and the Shanghai Municipal Information Office. Founded in 2004, the Forum is held every two years in Shanghai and has convened seven times including this one. The Forum has served as a platform for distinguished scholars to communicate with each other and explore the past, present and future of China studies. It is also dedicated to profession and practice on the field of China Studies while fostering an informed mutual understanding between China and the world.

The forum has established its fame internationally in academia, with the attendance of around 1600 scholars, experts and veteran politicians from over 40 countries and regions all over the world. Meanwhile, diplomatic institutions and representatives of the think tanks from more than 50 countries have participated in the Forum, which received extensive coverage by dozens of professional media outlets as well. Academic circles at home and abroad speak highly of the forum.

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