

**“We are Believers”:
Contemporary Hui mobility in transnational Islamic space – A Malaysian
case study¹**

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Abstract

Studies of Chinese migration have been framed largely in terms of geography (*qiaoxiang* migration) or class (coolie vs student/trader/professional/entrepreneurial migration). An unstated and unquestioned assumption of these studies is that Chinese migrants are Han, and that minorities are contained, and hence immobilized, in remote border regions. This paper draws attention to the importance of ethnicity and religion in the study of contemporary Chinese international migration. It argues that China's Muslim minorities have enjoyed a disproportionately high level of international mobility since 1978, both in the form of cross-border movements, especially for Muslim ethnic minorities such as the Uyghur and the Kazakhs, as well as long-distance transnational mobility, particularly marked for the Hui ethno-religious minority. It presents data on recent Hui mobility to Malaysia which highlights the close relationship between transnational Muslim mobility and education and trade within the Muslim world. In particular, it draws attention to the critical role of religion in the mobility decisions and patterns of Hui Muslims navigating their minority lives through the spaces of the Chinese nation-state and the transnational Islamic world.

I. Introduction

Current academic research into contemporary global Chinese migration has drawn attention to the differences between a so-called New Chinese Migration and the “old”. Whereas the bulk of the “old” migration headed in the direction of the Nanyang (between 1786 and 1957, an estimated 15 million Chinese travelled to Malaya alone),² the “new” migration is focused on the developed Western countries. Similarly, whereas the old migration originated from “*qiaoxiang*” villages in the three southeastern coastal provinces of Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang, the new migration is much more dispersed in origin, especially in the inclusion of urban centres, resulting in talk of new types of “urban *qiaoxiang*”. There is also a broader spectrum of types of migrants, with a new prominence assumed by student, professional and entrepreneurial migration.

Notwithstanding this now familiar distinction between the New Chinese Migration and the Old Chinese Migration (if the term may be so introduced here) in terms of destination, type and geographical origin, studies of both share an unstated and unquestioned assumption: that Chinese migrants are Han, and that minorities are contained, and hence immobilized, in remote border regions. Underlying these studies of Chinese migration, both “old” and “new”, has been the primacy accorded to geography and class. This paper draws attention to the importance of ethnicity and religion in the study of contemporary Chinese international migration, indeed of contemporary global migration as a whole. It points to an important gap in overseas Chinese migration studies, namely the lack of attention being paid to the mobility of Chinese minority nationalities, especially Muslim minorities.

Based on on-going research into recent Hui mobility to Malaysia, the paper argues that China's Muslim minorities have enjoyed a disproportionately high level of international mobility since 1978, both in the form of cross-border movements, especially for Muslim ethnic minorities such as

¹ An earlier Chinese-language version of this paper was published in *Overseas Chinese History Studies*, 2013 (2): 13-28. 《華僑華人歷史研究》2013年第2期(總第102期) under the title “穆斯林的流動與中國新移民-馬來西亞回族流動個案研究”.

² Philip D. Curtin, “Migration in the Tropical World”, in *Immigration Reconsidered*, ed. Virginia Yans-McLaughlin. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, 32.

the Uyghur and the Kazakhs, as well as long-distance transnational mobility, particularly marked for the Hui ethno-religious minority. These Muslim mobilities rely on the existence of transnational Muslim networks based on education and trade. Focusing on the recent Hui student mobility to Malaysia, the paper draws attention to the critical role of religion in the mobility decisions and patterns of Hui Muslims navigating their minority lives through the spaces of the Chinese nation-state, the global economy, and the transnational Islamic world.

II. Outline of a History

*"You must know, 600 years ago, Zheng He came to Southeast Asia and left behind a glorious memory."*³

The early Ming and Qing dispersals

Contemporary Muslim narratives of the Chinese Muslim presence in Malaysia begin invariably with the exploits of one man, the great Admiral Zheng He, the famous Ming emissary whose voyages of discovery to maritime Southeast Asia preceded those of the Western powers, and whose identity as an eunuch has been given far more attention in mainstream accounts than his identity as a Muslim. Upon Zheng He's arrival in Southeast Asia, he discovered, to his surprise, the existence of scattered Chinese Muslim trading communities with ties to the local power elites. His own brand of Ming trade and political diplomacy strengthened the position of these localized Chinese Muslims, both economically and demographically, as many of the men on his capacious junks were Muslims, or became so, when they remained behind in Southeast Asia.⁴ The court annals of the Islamized Malacca sultanate, whose emergence to independence from the heavy hand of Siamese sovereignty and subsequent rise to trading supremacy in the Malay world owed much to the protection of the Chinese Muslim admiral Zheng He, has it that a Chinese princess with an entourage of 400 ladies in waiting were brought to the sultan and his court in one of the junks.

One of our informants traced the Chinese Muslim presence even further back in time, to the Guangzhou massacre in AD 879, when, according to Muslim sources, over 100,000 foreign traders, mostly Muslim Arabs and Persians, were killed during the Huang Chao rebellion. Many survivors, according to him, then found their way back to Southeast Asia.⁵ Be that as it may, this narrative of a long-standing Chinese Muslim presence in Southeast Asia, increasingly cultivated by members of a new Chinese Muslim diaspora in the region,⁶ makes a case for a significant, and hitherto generally overlooked,⁷ Chinese Muslim demographic component in the long history of China-Southeast Asian economic, cultural and political relations.

The "invisibility" of a long-standing Muslim presence from China in the Malay world of Southeast Asia is due in part to the record-keeping practices of the Chinese imperial courts and Western-trained historians; it is due in no small measure as well to actual historical practices of ethno-religious identity formation in the region. Given the pre-colonial world of "cosmopolitan pluralism" in which collective identities had porous boundaries, Chinese Muslims (whether Hui, themselves of mixed Sino-Arab/Persian ancestry, or Chinese converts) when localized, were

³ Informant A, interview by author, Kuala Lumpur, November 2, 2011.

⁴ See Tan Ta Sen, *Cheng Ho and Islam in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009.

⁵ Informant B, interview by author, Kuala Lumpur, February 14, 2012.

⁶ See also the writings on Zheng He by Yusuf Liu Baojun, a Hui Muslim who has since settled in Malaysia, including *Admiral Zheng He (1371-1433): The Great Muslim Envoy of China*. Institut Kajian Sejarah dan Patriotisme Malaysia, 2004.

⁷ An outstanding exception is the work of Claudine Salmon, whose work however generally refers to Chinese migrants who converted to Islam while in Southeast Asia. See Denys Lombard and Claude Salmon, "Islam and Chineseness" in *The Propagation of Islam in the Indonesian-Malay Archipelago*, edited by Alijah Gordon (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 2001): 181-208. In her unpublished dissertation, Rosey Ma also discusses the Chinese Muslim presence in maritime Southeast Asia and references the writers who have drawn attention to their presence. See Rosey Ma, *Negotiating Identities: The Hui, Chinese Muslims*, unpublished PhD, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2009.

invariably absorbed into existing Muslim society.⁸ When Chinese labour migration took off in large numbers in the 18th and 19th centuries, absorption could go the other way.⁹ As noted by Rosey Ma, “Hui who came and settled here in the course of history are not visible anymore as Chinese and Muslim, having forsaken, for survival purpose, either the inherited religion, or the original ethnic characters” (Ma 2009: 135). The result was that no clearly-bounded, localized Sino-Muslim collective identity and society emerged throughout the long history of Chinese Muslim presence in the Nanyang, as it did in Mainland China itself. Indeed, in the ethnically-segmented “plural society” of colonial Southeast Asia, and in particular in post-colonial Malaysia, where religion has been equated with race (Islam having been constitutionally identified with Malay ethnicity), the terms “Chinese” and “Muslim” came to assume a self-evidential radical bipolarity.

The late Qing dispersal

The Muslim uprisings in the late Qing led to the first forced collective Hui migrations through which a Chinese Hui minority identity was maintained in the diaspora.¹⁰ Fleeing from the Qing policy of brutal suppression, a number of Hui soldiers and villagers from China’s Northeast crossed the border into Central Asia and are known today as the Dungan people. From the southern province of Yunnan, a mass exodus of Chinese Muslims to Burma also occurred in the wake of the Qing backlash against the failed Panthay sultanate, reinforcing the early (since the 13th century) itinerant presence of Hui merchants in Burma, and resulting in the establishment of distinctive Hui settlements in the country. The same story accounts for the Hui presence in northern Thailand. This pattern of a distinctive Hui minority migration and settlement, similar to that within China itself, which took shape in the late 19th century in China’s central Asian and southwestern borderlands, stood in stark contrast to that seen in maritime Southeast Asia.

The mid-20th century Kuomintang dispersal

A tentative new beginning in Hui migration to maritime Southeast Asia took root in the mid-20th century. Ibrahim Ma Tian Ying, from an old Beijing (originally Shandong) Hui family, first went to Malaya in 1939 as a member of the official Chinese Muslim Goodwill Delegation to the Southeast Asian region.¹¹ He returned again in 1948 as Consul-General in Ipoh representing the Kuomintang government. When China fell to Communist rule in 1949, he decided against joining the Kuomintang government in Taiwan and remained in Malaya. Indeed, cognizant of the plight of the 100,000 Kuomintang Hui Muslim forces who were then in retreat in Hong Kong, he tried in 1950 to get permission for them to be resettled in Malaya. This appeal was rejected by the UMNO executive committee.¹²

Ibrahim Ma stood out from the millions of other Chinese migrants who had decided to make Malaya their home in the newly-independent Malaya of the 1950s. Not only was he a Muslim from the elite circles of northern China, his stature as a high-level diplomat and man of culture earned him entry into the highest Malay political circles, as well as respect among the local non-Muslim Chinese. Perfectly positioned to be a bridge between the two, Ibrahim Ma was called upon in 1971 by the first Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tunku Abdul Rahman, to help form and helm PERKIM (Pertubuhan Kebajikan Islam Malaysia), a welfare association for Muslim converts. In this capacity, he, his friends (Chinese Muslims similarly stranded in, and recruited from Taiwan, Libya, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries) and his family made a singular contribution, in the words of his daughter-in-law, to the “conversion to Islam by hundreds or even thousands of Malaysian Chinese over the

⁸ See the case of the Orang Yunnan in Trengganu, in Tan Chee Beng, “A Note on the Orang Yunnan in Trengganu,” *Archipel*, 1991, Vol. 42, No. 1: 93 – 120.

⁹ As with the Koay Clan in Penang. See Ma, op cit, p. 140.

¹⁰ Ma, *ibid.*

¹¹ Rosey Ma, *Chinese Muslims in Malaysia, History and Development* <http://www.islamhk.com/en/?p=12&a=view&r=43>, accessed 7.7.2012

¹² Informant A, Interview with author, op cit.

years."¹³ His exceptional role in the history of Chinese Muslim society in Malaysia was recognized in a recent exhibition (2011) of his life and work by the Centre for Malaysian Studies in Kuala Lumpur.¹⁴

The late 20th century PRC (People's Republic of China) dispersal

Ibrahim Ma's formative influence on a newly-emerging community of localized Chinese Muslim converts was profound. With the rejection of his proposal to allow in the thousands of Chinese Muslims from the Kuomintang side then seeking re-settlement in Hong Kong however, his settlement in Malaya as a Hui migrant remained unique to him and his immediate family. No chain migration appeared in its wake.

Today, in the second decade of the 21st century, there are signs of a new Hui presence in Malaysia. Unlike the sailors and traders of the Ming period, or the diplomats and soldiers of the defeated Kuomintang, the new Hui migrants have come as students from a Communist country, and remained as businessmen and professionals. There are currently an estimated 40–50 Mainland Chinese Muslim families living in Malaysia, mostly engaged in business. Most would have first come as students; and almost everyone would then have brought friends and relatives to further their study in Malaysia.¹⁵ Of the estimated 10,000 Chinese students in Malaysia today, an estimated 15% are Hui Muslims.¹⁶ This compares to their 2.5% share of the total population of China, amounting to an official figure of 20 million.¹⁷

III. Hui mobility to Malaysia, 1990 – 2014

Much has been made of the geographical selectivity of China's reform opening since the 1980s, and the disproportionate gains made by the southern coastal provinces. Research done in Malaysia suggests that the Hui Chinese Muslims from the remote frontier provinces of the Northwest, an ethno-religious minority with a tradition of trading and mobility within China, and the potential for religious ties to the Muslim world, have also been a key beneficiary of China's recent explosive economic growth.

The contemporary Hui presence in Malaysia began with the new student mobility that has become a key feature of the New Chinese Migration. In 2010, China was the largest source country of international students in the world, with 284,700 new Chinese students enrolling in 103 countries. Of these, 4,000 (a mere 1.4 per cent) went to study in Malaysia.¹⁸ With a total enrolment of 10,214 however, PRC students nonetheless constituted the second-largest contingent of international students in the country. In a recent survey of 888 Mainland Chinese students in Malaysia conducted in 2011 by the author, 118 or 13.9 % were found to be Hui.¹⁹ Significant differences between the backgrounds of Han and Hui students were also found. Fifty percent of the Hui students surveyed came from the Northwest region, compared to 12.8 % of the Han; 42% of Hui students came from small business families, compared to 25.3% of the Han. And strikingly, a mere 4.1% of the Hui claimed to have no religion, as against 73.9% of Han students who claimed to be atheists.

¹³ Ma, op cit.

¹⁴ "Exhibits of Haji Ibrahim T.Y. Ma's Manuscripts and Documents", Centre for Malaysian Chinese Studies, 29.04.2011 – 21.05.2011, Kuala Lumpur.

¹⁵ Informant E, interview by author, Kuala Lumpur, January 6, 2012.

¹⁶ Informant F, interview with author, Kuala Lumpur, November 23, 2011.

¹⁷ It should be noted however, that the figure of 20 million is disputed by some of our informants. Informant C, interviewed by author, Kuala Lumpur November 21, 2011. She speaks of 30 million. Informant D, interviewed by author, Penang, April 14, 2011, speaks of 80 million.

¹⁸ Education Malaysia, Beijing. 2012. Focus on China's mass market. <http://slideplayer.com/slide/4170030/> (accessed March 2012).

¹⁹ See Diana Wong and Ooi Pei Wen, The Globalization of Tertiary Education and Intra-Asian Student Mobility: Mainland Chinese Mobility to Malaysia, *Asia-Pacific Migration Journal* 22, no.1 (2013): 55-76.

The longitudinal picture that emerged through intensive interviews with circa 50 Hui and Han students, some of whom have since settled in Malaysia, revealed a striking contrast between the patterns of Hui and Han student mobility to Malaysia. Han student mobility was essentially broker-mediated and transient and disparate in nature, leaving no footprints behind them as they left for a third country destination, or to return to China. Hui student mobility to Malaysia on the other hand exhibits a much higher level of social interaction and continuity between student generations, with the formation of effective alumni networks within and across Malaysia and China, as well as signs of community formation in Malaysia itself. While inter-ethnic marriages with local Malay and other foreign Muslims are an on-going occurrence, they do not seem to have undermined the on-going maintenance of a collective and distinctive Chinese Hui identity. Out of an initial unlikely stream of student mobility, there is now a new Hui diaspora in the making.

How did students from China's remote Northwest find their way to Malaysia? Indeed, how did the first few students arrive even before the establishment of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic and Malaysia? In recounting the history of contemporary student mobility between China and Malaysia, pride of place must be given to the dense transnational Muslim networks, encompassing both state and non-state institutions, which made these improbable journeys possible. Two distinctive sets of interlocking networks within the Islamic world which came together in the 1990s can be identified: firstly, a global network of Islamic organizations which provided the structure of opportunity for educational mobility to backward regions of China; secondly, Islamic networks of information within China, which provided individuals with access to these new opportunities.

The beginnings of Hui student mobility: Islamic education and transnational Muslim networks

*"Actually, I don't think it at all strange. Arabic is used in IIUM.
In China, our faith is based on Arabic. So coming here to study Arabic was
the most natural thing to do".²⁰*

The first PRC Chinese Muslim students who went to Malaysia in 1989/1990, even before official diplomatic relations had been established between Malaysia and the PRC, originated, without exception, in the traditional Hui Muslim belt of the Greater Northwest, mostly in the province of Gansu, a region which had had no previous ties whatsoever to the maritime world of Southeast Asia, or the Sino-Malay world of Malaysia. The emergence of this totally new migration stream was due entirely to the existence of global Muslim networks, largely financed by Saudi Arabia, but stretching all the way to Malaysia and Hong Kong.

Saudi ties to Chinese Islam stem from the time King Faisal of Saudi Arabia assumed the role of spiritual head and protector of the Chinese Muslims in Taiwan after the remnants of the Kuomintang, with its strong Hui contingent, fled to Taiwan in 1949.²¹ At the same time, since the 1950s, the PRC has cultivated friendly relations with the Muslim world, in particular the Middle Eastern Arab states (especially Egypt, Syria and Libya, which were ruled by friendly "socialist" regimes) and Pakistan (with whom China had a shared hostile neighbour, India). This diplomacy brought dividends when travel and cultural exchange became possible with the 1978 Reform policy and the opening of China. In 1979, Chinese were allowed to go on the Haj again; in 1981, the first Muslim delegation visited China under the auspices of the World Muslim League. Non-governmental ties with the Muslim world mushroomed, mediated through the official China Islamic Association. In its wake came a steady stream of high-level foreign Muslim visitors keen to discover the hitherto isolated world of Islam in China.²² It was through these visitors that scholarships to study in the Islamic institutes of the Middle East and Pakistan were first provided to the Chinese Muslim world.

²⁰ Informant G, interview by author, Kuala Lumpur, May 5, 2012.

²¹ See Barbara L.K. Pillsbury, *Cohesion and cleavage in a Chinese Muslim minority*. Columbia University, 1973.

²² By 1990, 40 official Islamic delegations and over 1000 foreign guests had visited China since the first visit by Sheikh Zabara, the General Mufti of the Yemeni Republic, in 1978. China Islamic Association, <http://english.ts.cn>, accessed 05 May 2012.

They were met by a young post-Cultural Revolution generation dying to get out of China. As Informant G notes, "Everyone knows that in the 1980s there was China's Reform Policy. Every Chinese wanted to go abroad. Before that, China was closed, cut off from the outside world, we were not allowed to go out. After 1980, everyone wanted to go."²³

The Chinese government began sending out top students from its elite schools and universities for study abroad. For Chinese Muslim students from the "backward" provinces, where educational standards did not match the national ones, however, the opportunity to be sent abroad came through the Islamic world. According to the China Islamic Association, by 1990, over 300 Chinese Muslim students and in-service imams had been sent through official scholarships to Egypt, Libya and Pakistan.²⁴ But, as G added, "Who were the ones who could go? They were mostly from Beijing, Shanghai, and the southern coastal cities. We in the Northeast were more sealed off, nobody came out. That's why in the ten years from 1980 to 1990, very few came out."²⁵

For that first generation of young Chinese Muslims from the Northwest to clinch a scholarship, they had first to make their way to Shanghai or Beijing; the southern coastal cities of Guangdong or Shenzhen were at that time simply too far away. In Shanghai or Beijing, one had to be located at a Muslim institution – mosque, independent Arabic school or a college or university – in order to *personally* acquire the contacts that could lead to an offer of a scholarship.

Toward the end of the 1980s, news of an International Islamic University in Malaysia began to circulate. G, from the small border town of Lintan in Gansu, had graduated in Chinese studies at the Northwest Normal University in Lanzhou. He belonged to the handful of Hui youth of his generation from the Northwest who had managed to make it through the state education system at a time when only 15-20 percent of their entire age cohort managed to enter university. Today the figure is 70%.²⁶ In his final two years at the state university in Lanzhou, he simultaneously attended night classes at the private Arabic-language school. Upon graduation, he moved to an Arabic-language school in Beijing, where the chances of meeting foreign visitors from Arab countries would be higher. It was through these visitors that he learned of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) in Kuala Lumpur, and the opportunity to study there.

Six months after G's arrival in Malaysia, another young man from Lintan turned up at the university. B however, had come through a totally different educational trajectory. He had dropped out of the state elementary school after his 5th grade, and continued his education in the mosque school in his hometown. From there, following the traditional pattern of peripatetic Islamic education, he moved to another school, first in Ningxia, then Qinghai, then Yunnan, and eventually in Shandong. Upon graduating from Shandong aged 20, he was offered a position as an imam in a mosque in Shanghai. In the third mosque in which he served as imam in Shanghai, he met a VIP couple on a visit from Malaysia, from whom he learnt of the existence of an Islamic university in Malaysia where he could pursue his studies. He had made many Middle Eastern friends in Shanghai, and had been considering Sudan and Yemen. One of his Middle Eastern friends then established the link to IIUM. G and B were distant relatives from the same village, but had embarked on quite different educational trajectories. Neither had been aware of each other's progress, nor had they known that they would both end up in Malaysia.

Two further stories may help illustrate the contingent and disparate character of the individual pathways and multiple channels with which this new Chinese Muslim migration stream to Malaysia was initiated. With the arrival in Malaysia of Informant E in 1992, and Informant H in 1993, we see the net cast outside of the province of Gansu, although still within the Northwest. E is a native of

²³ Informant G, op cit.

²⁴ China Islamic Association, op cit.

²⁵ Informant G, op cit.

²⁶ Informant G, op cit.

Qinghai and completed his schooling there. He then did a degree in Arabic studies at the Beijing Second Foreign Language University, where he met his wife, a fellow student at the university from Henan. While in Beijing, he was awarded a scholarship to the International Islamic University in Islamabad while she received a scholarship for IIUM. In Kuala Lumpur, in transit to Pakistan while sending his wife to IIUM, he applied directly for admission to IIUM as well, and was accepted on compassionate grounds.²⁷ H, a native of Ningxia, did his first degree in forestry at the Beijing Forestry University and was sent to Qinghai as a lecturer.²⁸ He later decided to quit the state education system and became a lecturer at the newly-founded Islamic College in Xian. When Jaafar Mah, a Chinese Muslim from Singapore, visited this college and learned of his desire to pursue Islamic studies abroad, he helped him obtain an IIUM scholarship.

These IIUM scholarships for foreign Muslims, tenable for study at IIUM in Malaysia, were funded by the Organization of Islamic Conference, behind which stood the financial might of Saudi Arabia. Unlike Al-Azhar and other Islamic institutions of higher learning in the Arab world however, IIUM was conceived as a centre of Islamic knowledge in which professional courses in the sciences and the social sciences were also taught. Hence, in addition to studies in Islamic law and civilization, subjects like economics, business management and psychology were also available. In fact, the majority of the first generation of Hui students who came to IIUM were already graduates of the Chinese state education system (B was an exception), and enrolled for these professional degrees. Of importance was the fact that they could acquire a professional degree outside of the highly competitive university entrance system in China itself. However, knowledge of Arabic and English was a requirement for admission to IIUM. The students who came thus needed to have come from Muslim localities with an Arabic school. This favoured the Northwest, where private Arabic-language religious schools were more likely to be found.

In the wake of the destruction wrought on religious institutions and values by the Cultural Revolution however, there was also a crying need for the re-establishment of Islamic education in China, and hence for the religious training of a new generation of Chinese imams. A second Malaysian Islamic educational institution came to play a role in this respect, and, together with IIUM, facilitated the initial Hui student migration to Malaysia, albeit in a more organized fashion. This was the Sultan Zainal Abidin Islamic College (known as KUSZA), which offered a Diploma in Islamic Studies (Syariah). In 1991, Dr Ahmad Shukri Ibrahim was appointed the new Director of KUSZA.²⁹ Prior to this appointment, he had been teaching at the King Abdul Aziz University in Saudi Arabia. Dr Ahmad Shukri was also a former Malaysian ambassador to Taiwan. With his close ties to Saudi Arabia and to China, he established a program at KUSZA for the intake of circa 30 students from China for each cohort. Two cohorts finished the program before its withdrawal. The program was financed by Saudi Arabia through funds funneled through the Hong Kong Islamic Union and disbursed by a Malaysian-based regional Islamic organization known as the Regional Islamic Da'wah Council Southeast Asia and the Pacific (RISEAP). Ahmad Noordin, a former Malaysian diplomat close to Dr Ahmad Shukri, was then the Secretary of the Asia-Pacific section of RISEAP and together with his deputy, Ali Wong, a Hui exile from the Northeast, channelled students to the program. X from Xinjiang recounts how he made it to KUSZA in 1993 from a mosque school in Henan, via a family friend who had gone on the Haj together with Ali Wong.³⁰ After graduating from KUSZA, he could have gone on to Al-Azhar, as did two of his friends, but decided to enroll himself in IIUM instead, where he did a degree in Business Administration.

There was one further complication. In the early 1990s, getting a PRC passport was a difficult affair. X arrived in Malaysia in 1993 via Hong Kong, Bangkok and Phuket.³¹ The first generation got

²⁷ Informant E, *op cit*.

²⁸ Informant H, interview by author, Kuala Lumpur, March 16, 2012.

²⁹ Author unknown, "Ahmad Shukri is new director of Kusza", *New Straits Times*, April 4, 1991.

³⁰ Informant X, interview by author, Xian, March 28, 2013.

³¹ Today, it is no longer a problem.

their passports with the help of the Hong Kong Muslim Association. Presumably, the passport was issued for travel to Hong Kong. The importance of Hong Kong as the relay centre for ties to the wider Sino-Muslim world, and in particular Malaysia and Singapore, can be seen from the fact that after the OIC scholarships were suspended in 1998, the Hong Kong Muslim Association set up a scholarship fund for study at IIUM for Chinese Muslim youth in 2000.

These stories reveal the string of transnational connections which related Islamic state, para-state and NGO organizations to the Islamic educational institutions in Malaysia, providing an invaluable structure of opportunity for free educational mobility to an economically and educationally marginalized region and community in China. Access to these scholarships made available by Muslim organizations in the non-Chinese Islamic world completely side-stepped formal Chinese state control over the distribution of educational mobility. Informal networks of information in the Hui Chinese Muslim world, centered on mosques, Arabic schools, Hui academic networks, regional branches of the China Islamic Association, Haj cohorts and family acquaintances (some KMT exiles, such as Ali Wong, still had ties to the Northeast, which had been the KMT Muslim heartland) were what counted. It was the coming together of these two different sets of religious networks, within and without China, which initiated this new Hui diaspora.

Commercialized education and the changing character of Hui student mobility to Malaysia

Although all of the educational "pioneers" came from closely-knit Muslim communities in the Northeast, each had arrived in Malaysia within the short space of 5 years (1990 – 1995) via largely unrelated, individual trajectories. Almost immediately however, the process of "bringing over" began. H for example, who arrived in Malaysia in 1993, brought his wife to the country half a year later. She in turn sent the application forms over to K, then based at an Islamic institute in Henan, who had already received offer letters from Iran and Syria. K arrived in Malaysia in 1995. She in turn brought her sister out in 2000, with the help of a Hong Kong scholarship.³² The year 2000 marked in fact the resumption of the recruitment of Chinese students at IIUM, after a hiatus of 2 years.³³ By general consent, this hiatus marks the end of the first phase of Muslim student migration to Malaysia.

The second phase would begin with students who came between 2000 and 2005, the third until 2010; we are today into the fourth stage. This "periodization" is based to some extent on the assumption that the minimum length of stay would be 5 years, 2 years for English and Arabic classes and another 3 for the degree. It also corresponds to changing patterns of student mobility, and to specific characteristics of each student "generation".

"We were", said E, "the best generation". The first "generation" of students, those who came in the early 1990s and most of whom would have graduated by 1998, came with some years of tertiary education, and some knowledge of Arabic, behind them. They were thus older, in their early or mid-twenties, when they arrived.³⁴ "Generation" refers as well to a particular age cohort. They would have been born between 1967 and 1975, to pious Muslim families from humble backgrounds, often with fathers (as in the case with H), or grandfathers (as is the case with E), as imams, and were often the first in their family to have acquired further education in China, whether secular or religious. H was the first youth to leave his village, and the first to speak English. G came from a peasant family in Lintan, and was the first in the family to acquire a university education. E was able to complete a degree in Arabic studies in Beijing because his entire family, including siblings, made sacrifices on his behalf.

³² Informant K, interview by author, March 1, 2012.

³³ The OIC scholarships were withdrawn in 1998, the year of the Asian financial crisis.

³⁴ G was 23.

When they left China, their families, and their country, were still poor. Although they left with the intention to return,³⁵ it was characteristic of this generation, as compared to those which followed, that a substantial number -- an estimated half -- remained in Malaysia.³⁶ Those who left returned either to teaching positions or to family businesses in their hometowns. Of those who remained, some entered academia and teaching. The majority however, established businesses in Malaysia. Interestingly, a number of those who became successful in business did Islamic studies and are fluent in Arabic. These men have since become wealthy businessmen and community leaders and nodal points for other incoming Chinese Muslim students in Malaysia (see III.3).

Given the bridgehead established by the first generation of students, the mobility of the second generation was no longer dependent on chance meetings with foreign dignitaries in Beijing or Shanghai. They would now come straight from their hometowns in China's Northwest to Malaysia. In Lanzhou, F learned of the existence of IIUM when she was in Senior High School from some of her "seniors" who were there. Instead of seeking admission to a university in China, she went to IIUM in late 1997.³⁷ Lanzhou, the site of a new private Arabic school since 1995,³⁸ and a small private Chinese Muslim private library, the only one in the country, was one of the first key centres of information and recruitment. C went by chance into this library when she was back in Lanzhou as an English teacher in 2001, and was asked by the manager there whether she wanted to study in Malaysia.³⁹

But even for many of this second generation of students, studying abroad would only have been possible with the aid of a scholarship. "At that time, I never thought of studying abroad, because it's too far for me. Because as a teacher, I don't have money...my parents are simple, just workers. My father at that time was doing a small business and my mum was retired...In the beginning, my father disagreed, but my mum supported me...So I used my own money, I got my offer letter. Both of them were very happy, my parents, they supported me, they gave me money and of course I came here. In the beginning, actually another temptation was that my friend told me, if you study here in IIUM, it's free."⁴⁰

These highly specific localized networks of chain migration to IIUM were soon augmented however, by the establishment in 1998 of a professional student agency directed at a more affluent Chinese Muslim market in the Northwest for study at private colleges in Malaysia.⁴¹ This marked the arrival of self-financed young students from more affluent families who went for undergraduate study at secular, non-Islamic institutions of higher learning, leading to a self-sustaining flow of student mobility which has persisted till today. While those who went to Malaysia via the network established by the first generation still tended to come from modest backgrounds (C's mother was a worker, as

³⁵ Informant B, op cit.

³⁶ Informant L, interview by author, April 28, 2011.

³⁷ Informant F, op cit.

³⁸ Informant F, ibid.

³⁹ Informant C, interview by author, Kuala Lumpur, January 3, 2012.

⁴⁰ Informant C, ibid.

⁴¹ For this commercialized mediation of Hui student mobility to occur however, the initial flow had to be embedded in an Islamic social context of trust and affinity. The agency was set up by a Hui woman by the name of Aisha An Fei Fei who had herself gone to Malaysia to study marketing at a private college in Malaysia in 1995. She targeted recruitment at Muslim families from more remote areas in the North and Northeast, as it was difficult to get students from big cities. According to an informant, 10-20 percent of her students were Chinese Muslim, many of them women, and all called her Sister Aisha. The agency had an office in Petaling Jaya. Aisha provided pastoral care to her Muslim students, all of whom had her handphone number. She guided them through the first three weeks of their stay in Malaysia and also brought them on holiday tours. She was also in contact with Islamic organizations in Kuala Lumpur, such as WAMY (World Association of Muslim Youth) and MACMA (Malaysian Chinese Muslim Association) with which she linked up her students. Without this close supervision, according to the informant, the Muslim families in China would not have sent their young daughters abroad. Aisha returned to Guangzhou in 2007 and the agency is now run as a typical recruitment agency, without this "keeper" service, by another Hui, Musa Li Yan Long, who comes originally from Xinjiang. Interview with Mohd. Noor, November 2, 2012.

were both parents of F), M's parents were university teachers in Xinjiang,⁴² and I's father was a wealthy entrepreneur in the Northeastern province of Heilongjiang.⁴³

Parallel to this new inflow of broker-mediated self-financed students to secular colleges for business studies and other professional degrees, was a new inflow of self-financed students to a third Islamic educational institution in Malaysia, KUIN or Kolej Universiti INSANIAH, a state-run Islamic college founded in 1994 which offered courses in Arabic and Islamic studies in conjunction with Al-Azhar University. Many of those who went to INSANIAH would have gone through the system of Islamic education in so-called Arabic schools in China itself, such as Y, who came from a rural area in Anhui which, due to its proximity to the South, had seen a rise in prosperity and concomitant development of Islamic schools in the area.⁴⁴ From an Arabic school in his home village, he made his way through the Islamic educational system to Henan and Shanxi and from there to Malaysia in 2006. When he enrolled in INSANIAH, he already belonged to the third batch of Hui students studying in the college. By the time of his interview in 2012, there were circa 200 self-paying students from China at INSANIAH. Fees as well as admission requirements are far lower than at IIUM. All students however, would also have come through commercial agents.

This second generation of self-paying students, whether at IIUM, the private colleges or INSANIAH, would have graduated around 2005. While some remained behind to take up jobs in Malaysia, most returned to China. While those of the first generation tended to return to their hometowns in the north of China however, those of the second generation tended to "return" to the coastal cities in China's south, such as Guangzhou or Shenzhen, or to Beijing and Shanghai. When M graduated from IIUM in 2005 in computer science, he was one of three Hui, all of whom were keen to remain in Malaysia in a professional capacity. None was able to find a job in Malaysia, and all three returned to China. Two have had highly successful professional careers in multinational companies in China. M has become a highly successful businessman in Guangzhou.

The third phase begun after 2005, with patterns of entry that were much more diversified. An increasing number of Hui students entered at post-graduate level into the Malaysian public universities. They belong to a post-Cultural Revolution generation of Hui youth which has managed to make its way into the better state universities in China, and are now pursuing post-graduate studies abroad. There was also a geographical expansion of recruitment beyond the Northwest into other parts of the Chinese Muslim world: N, from Henan, who went to Malaysia in 2009, only learned of IIUM from O at a conference in Xian; P from Guangzhou learned of USM, where she now teaches Mandarin, through a conference in Hong Kong.⁴⁵ Thirdly, the opening of undergraduate degree courses to international students at several Malaysian public universities has resulted in a larger influx, brought in through professional education agents, of younger Chinese Muslim students from all over China, many of whom have no prior ties with the earlier two generations of IIUM students.

In speaking of the third and fourth generations, our informants refer to the young students who come through family ties or agents just after leaving high school, and indeed, even before. For this later generation however, the gap between China and Malaysia has closed – to China's advantage. The majority who study in Malaysia today do not intend to – and do not – remain in Malaysia.⁴⁶ Those who have stayed on, such as Q, are no longer entering into business, as did the first generation, but into professional jobs. The first and second generations, whether they remained or returned, have generally done well, some extremely well. Those who have returned to China are located in the southern coastal cities, such as Shenzhen and Guangzhou. Those who have remained

⁴² Informant M, interviewed by author, Kuala Lumpur, January 4, 2012.

⁴³ Informant I, interviewed by author, Kuala Lumpur, January 4, 2012.

⁴⁴ Informant Y, interviewed by author, Kuala Lumpur, January 15 2012.

⁴⁵ Informant P, interviewed by author, Penang, July 3, 2011.

⁴⁶ P estimates that about 10% would either remain in Malaysia or continue with their studies abroad, while 90% would return to China. Informant P, *ibid*.

in Malaysia stay in close touch with their circle of kin and friends who have returned to China, some of whose children are now being sent to Malaysia for their secondary or even elementary education.

F, a member of the second generation, can be said to represent this latest phase in the history of Chinese Muslim student mobility to Malaysia. She returned to Malaysia from Guangzhou when her son reached school-going age in order that her two young children would be able to get an education (in Chinese and English) in a Muslim-environment.⁴⁷ The demand is so great that plans are currently afoot by a number of Chinese businessmen to establish a school for Hui children in Malaysia (see III.3).

In this regard, there is a clear transition between the first two generations of students, and the succeeding ones. Whereas the first two generations of students came of their own accord, in pursuit of a future that was to be of their own making, the third generation that began arriving from the mid-2000s onwards comprised persons who were born in the second half of the 1980s. They were sent to Malaysia by their parents in order to acquire a university education. Whereas those in the first two generations were often married, either prior to their departure from China, or to fellow students in Malaysia, and came of their own volition, the later generations of self-financed students were mostly sent by their parents. One could argue that whereas the first was a personal mobility project, the latter was a family-generated educational project. The commercialization of international education marked the shift to student mobility as a middle-class educational project in pursuit of social and cultural capital.⁴⁸

Beyond student mobility: business settlement and new flows of Hui business mobility

Even with scholarships, the first generation of Hui students had to augment their income with part-time jobs, often tutoring in Mandarin, and/or engaging in small-scale trading whenever they travelled to and from China. When they graduated with their first degrees in the 1990s, they were little in their hometowns in the remote Northwest of China to return to. Continuing with a Masters in Malaysia, often at a public university, meant having to pay their own way, as their families were not able to help, and they were no longer on scholarship. This extended the length of time they needed for post-graduate study – and often facilitated their decision to enter into full-time business.

These persons were actually preceded by others who had pioneered Hui business enterprise in Malaysia from their positions as undergraduate students. Informants would often remark that many students were not serious about their studies at all, but more interested in seeking out business opportunities in Malaysia.⁴⁹ According to X, one of the earliest Hui business enterprises in Malaysia was founded in 1996 by a student from IIUM who had been on the lookout for employment and business opportunities from the very beginning of his arrival in Malaysia.⁵⁰ While on a visit, his father-in-law, a businessman from Xian, toured the Mesjid Jamek area and surroundings, a wholesale center for imported textiles in the heart of Kuala Lumpur dominated by South Asian and Indonesian textile traders. Sensing a business opportunity, he sent a container laden with scarves over upon his return to Xian. At that time, the exchange rate was 3 RMB to 1RM, and the scarves, sold at the price of 35 ringgit each, enabled a profit of RM 330,000 on that one container alone. Another early business pioneer was a graduate of KUSZA from Lanzhou with a very good command of Malay who started his business career by importing textiles from China for a Cambodian businesswoman with

⁴⁷ Informant F, op cit.

⁴⁸ Biao Xiang and Wei Shen, "International student migration and social stratification in China," *International Journal of Educational Development*, 29, no 5 (2009): 513-522.

⁴⁹ Informant N, interviewed by author, Kuala Lumpur. April 9, 2012.

⁵⁰ Informant X, op cit.

Malaysian citizenship who had her shop in the same Mesjid Jamek area (in Batu Road). Today, several Hui wholesale businesses are located in this area.⁵¹

E and H are two members of the first generation of IIUM students who have since established successful businesses in Malaysia. Together with a handful of academics and professionals (such as Chinese medical practitioners), they belong to the estimated 50 or so Hui business families of those who remained behind in Malaysia after the end of their studies. It should be noted that the term "settlement" used in the subheading may well be a misnomer. The Malaysian state has been extremely reluctant to grant permanent residence status to Chinese nationals, including those of Hui origin. Only a handful of Hui students who have remained in Malaysia have been granted permanent residence status. Most reside in Malaysia on the basis of renewable social visit passes.

Currently, the numbers of those deciding to stay in Malaysia are being augmented by two further flows: former students like F, who are returning with their young children, and established business families from China who are coming to Malaysia under the *Malaysia My Second Home* program, which provides for 10 years of residence in the country. H has brought over some of his friends, many of them imams from his Henan days, who have bought apartments in the Wangsa Maju area, where H is based. E, one of the established businessmen, who had already helped bring in 70-80 students, has brought over, from his kin and old school network, more than 10 such families. Six families have now bought homes in a middle-class neighbourhood in Gombak. "We already have a little circle there. In the evenings, when we have nothing to do, we all come together to drink tea and make idle conversation."⁵²

In 2013 and 2014, the numbers of Hui businessmen from China buying property in Malaysia increased significantly. "Recently there are more business people coming, Chinese and Muslims. I don't know about non-Muslims. Because as Chinese Muslims, we all have some kind of relationship. If someone comes, they will trace, trace, trace, and then you will know he's a friend or relative to somebody. Surprisingly they are all very rich. Just from last year to now, already I think, the ones I know, approximately like 10 of them came here and bought houses to send the kids for education."⁵³

Another informant mentioned a figure of "several hundred properties, maybe up to a thousand" having been purchased recently in Kuala Lumpur by Hui from China.⁵⁴ The scale of the movement suggests that it goes well beyond the practice of chain migration "bringing over" suggested by the above examples. Although it may have begun with these close network ties, linking particular pasts and particular locations, a new mobility stream has been set in train, comprised of the wealthy who can afford to reside in another country, and who then seek, within the existing Hui diaspora, the connections they need. Given the nature of the Hui diaspora, these connections they will find.

One such group of Hui businessmen, who have neither studied, nor have businesses in Malaysia, has recently bought over 60 apartments and some shophouses in Cyberjaya.⁵⁵ They originate from the Northwest, but now live in Guangzhou, where they are engaged in the Arab trade (there are an estimated 10,000 such Hui businessmen). Conditions in Guangzhou, though conducive to the pursuit of wealth, are not conducive to the practice of Islamic piety. There are only four mosques in the city for a Muslim population that has grown to 200,000. No religious education is

⁵¹ From the very beginning, Hui business was directed at the Malay Muslim market, especially the female clothing market. The bigger businesses have now extended their reach to the Muslim market across the region. These businesses thrive on close ties established with local Malays and it is no coincidence that many of those in business come from an Arabic studies background with a good command of Malay. In the meantime, other type of business have been established, in particular restaurants.

⁵² Interview with E, op cit.

⁵³ Interview with F, op cit.

⁵⁴ Informant N, interviewed by author, Kuala Lumpur, December 18, 2014.

⁵⁵ All information here from the 2014 interview with N, ibid.

allowed for their children, who, in the absence of a Guangzhou *hukou* (residential permit), would have to return to their designated hometown in the Northwest for their secondary education. This group of businessmen had first planned to set up a school for Muslim children in Guangzhou, but this was refused approval by the local authorities. They have now decided to set up the school – with kindergarten, primary and secondary levels – in Cyberjaya, Malaysia. There are already 100 children in China registered for the school.

Apart from Guangzhou, the other main “sending area” is Urumqi in Xinjiang, home also to a large number of wealthy Hui businessmen. One of them is said to have recently bought RM 10 million worth of properties in Malaysia. Xinjiang is wracked by the ethnic conflict with the Uyghur minority, and the state controls the practice of Islam there with a far heavier hand than elsewhere in the country.

The Islam factor in Malaysia as an educational destination

For the first generation of Muslim students who left China in the 1980s, the Middle East and Pakistan were the countries of choice, although, as G noted, “At that time, we just wanted to get out. It didn’t matter to which country.”⁵⁶ Malaysia has since become a favoured destination.

“I guess now they prefer to come to Malaysia rather than other countries. Because as I know, my Muslim friends in my hometown or in my husband’s hometown, if they choose to go to the Middle East, the opportunity to find a job is very small, because they only studied Arabic and some religious subjects. But if they come to Malaysia, now the Malaysian government has opened many colleges and universities, so when they come here, they have many choices. For example, IIUM is a university that has all kinds - you can study law, you can study engineering, anything. Education, economics. So they come here.”⁵⁷

P, who travelled from Guangzhou three years ago to study computer science at USM in Penang, received a scholarship to do postgraduate study in any Islamic country, and chose Malaysia. “I wouldn’t have chosen an Arab country. Firstly, you would have to learn Arabic, and that is a major challenge. Secondly, from the religious point of view, it would be too uncomfortable.”⁵⁸

For Chinese Muslims, Malaysia thus has the combined advantage of offering both a professional education, as well as an Islamic environment for the transmission of their faith, an option not available in the educational system in China itself. As already noted above, many in the first generation, such as B, G, and O, came from deeply religious families, and had gone to Malaysia to pursue Islamic studies. Even for those who eventually took a professional degree, the desire to learn about Islam, something not then available in their Chinese environment, played an important role. J, from the Muslim quarter of Hohhot in Inner Mongolia, and already a teacher in a state school, came with her husband to IIUM in 1996, six years after the trickle from China had begun.

“At that time, we had very little information about IIUM. We thought you could study Islam, maybe the Koran...It was only after coming here that we realized that it was an international university, adopting Islam as an approach to knowledge. And then, English became more important.”⁵⁹

She took a degree in education, but her reason for going to Malaysia was very much a search for religious knowledge. “I was working then. And at that time, in 1994/1995, China was awash with all sorts of ideological currents. It started perhaps in the eighties, when we began to think more

⁵⁶ Informant G, op cit.

⁵⁷ Informant F, op cit.

⁵⁸ Informant P, op cit.

⁵⁹ Informant J, interviewed by author, Kuala Lumpur, January 5, 2012.

deeply. I thought especially about why we ought to believe, why we were Muslims, what was the meaning of life. Without this religion, wouldn't we be better off? Because at that time, we were working in a non-Muslim environment – all this kind of teaching, Darwinism, was part of the curriculum. So I was very confused. At home, the family, my parents, my grandparents, told us Islamic knowledge is the best, but society told us it was all superstition, religion is very backward...So I felt that I had to research this with an open mind, look with my own eyes, hear with my own ears, come out myself to confirm whether religion was true or false. ⁶⁰

In fact, J had intended to give up her career as an English teacher and go to Malaysia to study Arabic and Islam, thinking that that was all that IIUM had to offer. J came from a much more affluent and educated family background in the capital city of Inner Mongolia, just 500 km from Beijing, than those from the remote provinces of the Northwest, and had many non-Muslim friends. In fact, her mother, who had her own business, accompanied her to Malaysia to check out the university, and provided her with financial support. Her parents had both received a secular education, her mother up till college level in business studies, and her father a university degree in mathematics. And yet, as she noted, the family background was a religious one.

For many other students of the second generation who were born in the decade after 1975, and who went to Malaysia just after completion of their high school, the family background was Muslim but less observant, often without even observance of the fast, such as that of F, who comes from a working class family in Lanzhou.

"I grew up in a not very Islamic environment. Because in our time, it wasn't that Islamic, not like in Malaysia. Because it was a communist country...We were just like Chinese. We have a typically Chinese culture. We celebrate Chinese New Year. Everything is Chinese. The only thing is that we don't eat pork. We don't drink alcohol. But we don't pray. We don't fast. We knew nothing". ⁶¹

This generation grew up in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution, and the decline in religious observance may have been a result of that period's vehemently anti-religious stance. Yet in these families, a firm commitment to a Muslim identity remained, and their parents endorsed their desire to study in Malaysia. When a private Arabic school was established in Lanzhou in 1995, and F gave up the opportunity to study at a state university in order to study there, a prelude to education in a Muslim country abroad, her father said to her, "Daughter, being Muslim, Chinese Muslim, is special. I didn't have the chance to study our religion, and now we have this opportunity, so why don't you go and study in the Arabic school?"⁶²

The parents of F's husband's M (they met and married in Malaysia) were both university teachers in Xinjiang, but his maternal great-grandfather had been a famous imam. His mother "sent him out", he said, "not to be an imam, but at least to have a bit of religious knowledge". ⁶³

For the third and fourth generations, whose more affluent parents have an "educational project" for their children, "sending them out" immediately after high school in order to provide them with a "broader horizon" and a better command of the English language,⁶⁴ Malaysia is the country of choice because it is seen to be a Muslim country.⁶⁵ This holds even for those parents who are nominally Muslim living in a non-Muslim environment, such as the parents of R, a 4th-year student pursuing a course in the teaching of English as a second language at one of the state universities. R comes from a small town in Heilongjiang, where "there are many Muslims, but they don't even

⁶⁰ Informant J, *ibid.*

⁶¹ Informant F, *op cit.*

⁶² Informant F, *ibid.*

⁶³ Informant M, *op cit.*

⁶⁴ Informant M, *ibid.*

⁶⁵ See also Informant D, *op cit.*

have a Muslim name, the only thing they know is, I'm a Muslim, I don't eat pig".⁶⁶ His father, an engineer, does not fast (although his mother does, and his maternal grandparents are very devout retirees), and threatened not to send him back to Malaysia when he returned a year later as an Arabized born-again Muslim. But his father had said to him, when he first asked him whether he wanted to go to Malaysia, "It's a Muslim country, and I shall be sure that you will not do anything bad and you can know more about our faith".⁶⁷ For such parents, with an "educational project" for their children, "Malaysia is definitely the best choice among the few countries. This is a civilized country, with English education, and also with religious support. This becomes an entry country for a lot of Muslim students."⁶⁸

As an "educational project", western countries such as the US and Australia are the countries of choice for those who can afford it. But even then, children are often sent to Malaysia. "It is really the reason why, especially for the Muslim students, they want to be here. For some of the Muslim students, the family actually can afford to send them to US or Europe. One of the reasons why they don't want to go is because of religion."⁶⁹

The concern of Chinese Muslim parents to combine the educational project with the religious, is well articulated by F, who left China and returned to Malaysia precisely on account of her children's education. "I started to worry when I had my second child. Should I just go on with this life? I get more and more money, and my children will be educated here, then they will become like normal Chinese here. Can they be like me in the future? That's a big question mark. Because we are a minority, and we don't have any Islamic Muslim schools in Guangzhou. Once you go to school, you have to study the government syllabus, to be educated like a non-Muslim... and then we decided to come back here. Because we are Muslims, and this is the right place to be educated in the Islamic way."⁷⁰

The ability to provide their children with an Islamic education has become, as noted above, a major factor in establishing Malaysia as a destination for a new stream of Hui mobility.

IV. The formation of local community and the making of a Hui diaspora

The propensity to seek each other out and to get together, especially during the fasting month, is a common practice for all Muslims, including students studying abroad. The first Hui friend P made in USM was Y, and thereafter, "whenever she had a Muslim friend, she introduced her to me, and whatever friends I had, I introduced to her".⁷¹ These personal networks arise everywhere. Multiple layers of personal networks over time seem to be leading to the emergence of a more substantial community centred in Kuala Lumpur.

Inter-generational bonding through Islam

Student mobility is, in principle and often in practice, an individual and transient affair. This would apply indeed to the pattern of student mobility of Han students in Malaysia.

"For Chinese Han students, they don't have anything to bond them. They basically go through the similar pattern: once they are done, it is done, once they are gone, everything is gone. This would take place with every new batch. They simply don't have anything to bond them."⁷²

⁶⁶ Informant R, interviewed by author, Kuala Lumpur, August 26, 2012.

⁶⁷ Informant R, *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Informant Q, interviewed by author, Kuala Lumpur, 15 April 2012.

⁶⁹ Informant Q, *ibid.*

⁷⁰ Informant F, *op cit.*

⁷¹ Informant P, *op cit.*

⁷² Informant Q, *op cit.*

For Hui students however, there is the glue of religion. As noted above, not all who went to Malaysia came from religiously observant backgrounds. Many however, did, and found in an Islamic university and an Islamic country the space to deepen their faith and to share it with others. They provided an environment into which succeeding generations of new Hui students were inducted. This was particularly strong in IIUM, but study groups were also established in other universities, such as UKM (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia), UM (University Malaya) and UUM (Universiti Utara Malaysia). In 2010, a 3-day national level conference was held by and for Hui students in Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur. About 300 students attended. Speakers were mainly students from the first generation who had remained in Malaysia.

"That's why, through the seniors, even 15 years ago, we were having contact with each other. Very much because of this religion. It is bonding the people. Because even after we have received our education, a lot of us are having common and bigger objectives or life goals. This is why we are unified under this, because we are trying to do something similar. Once people are sharing the same objectives or same goals, automatically people are bonded. They are close."⁷³

Territorial concentration and the development of community institutions

The Malay neighbourhood of Gombak is located close to IIUM. This was where the early students rented rooms when they were still studying, and established their businesses when they started doing so, and bought apartments and houses, when they began to settle in the country. In the classical Hui pattern of settlement, it is now this possession of space which is facilitating the pursuit of "the same objectives or the same goals" and the growth of community.

Some three years ago, I and her husband bought a three-story shop lot in Gombak's commercial centre. In the absence of a mosque, the top floor of this shop lot in Gombak has become the space for the conduct of collective religious and educational life. A study group meets there every Friday night, with lectures on Islam-related topics delivered by guest or "local" lecturers. Arabic classes are provided weekly for children and adults, as well as lessons in classical Chinese for the young children. More recently, a broadcast website, under the name of onenur.net, was set up and has gained an audience even in China.

The impetus for the formation of this group came from the death of one of the first generation.⁷⁴ There was a realization of the need to have some kind of community, a platform for community solidarity.⁷⁵ At the same time, the need to impart Islamic education to the young – children of the second generation, as well as fourth generation youth with little Islamic knowledge – was felt to be a priority.⁷⁶ The educational emphasis is now on a moderate Chinese Islam, to counter the danger of young Chinese Muslims falling prey to extremist views in the diasporic environment.⁷⁷

The consolidation of a collective Hui identity in the Malaysian diaspora will be further encouraged by the new migration of business families from China. As noted above (see III.3), a second territorial concentration of Hui families is occurring in Cyberjaya. The planned establishment of a school there will provide another key collective institution for an expanding localized "community". An indicator of the size of this new community is the existence of around ten Hui restaurants in the Klang Valley.⁷⁸ The leadership of this new community, it is interesting to note, is in the hands of a number of established business families, rather than those who have remained in professional positions in Malaysian institutions such as the universities and PERKIM.

⁷³ Informant Q, *ibid.*

⁷⁴ Informant Z, *op cit.*

⁷⁵ Informant N, *op cit.*

⁷⁶ Informant N, *ibid.*

⁷⁷ Informant E, *op cit.*

⁷⁸ Informant N, *op cit.*

Trans-national bonding through Islamic alumni, kinship and regional ties

Those who have settled in Malaysia maintain close ties with family and friends back home, and in other parts of the new Hui diaspora, which includes the first tier cities of Beijing and Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, and the commercial cities of Yiwu and Hangzhou, as well as cities in the Middle East and the western world. In all of these cities, a wealthy local community of highly mobile Muslim business people and scholars can be found, tightly knit through kin and school networks across the country and indeed, globally. The traffic is dense.

"I sometimes joke that I am their foreign office here. Because when they come, especially during the Chinese New Year break, they bring the whole shebang here. This year during the peak season I was at the airport every day, if not receiving somebody, then sending somebody off."⁷⁹

B keeps in touch with his Ahong (imam) friends who were with him in Shanghai, and are now highly respected senior Ahongs, as does E with his fellow graduates from the Beijing Second Foreign Language University, most of whom went to the Middle East and Pakistan, and have since returned to China. O, who studied in the Middle East, and then graduated from IIUM with two PhDs, is now a professor in Xian, and currently a visiting professor in Malaysia.⁸⁰ Constantly on the move to conferences within China and all over the world, he speaks of the existence of a vibrant transnational reading and writing public in Chinese on Chinese Islam, with Chinese Muslim students encouraged to study abroad.⁸¹

V. The new Hui mobility and an "Islamic Spring" in China

*"Yiwu is the new Quanzhou"*⁸²

During the Song dynasty, Muslim traders made Quanzhou one of the largest trading centres and richest cities in the world. Today, H says, Yiwu is the new Quanzhou. Chinese Muslims, he says, are currently experiencing an "economic spring". "Why can they send their children to study abroad, and buy property abroad? There are hundreds of translators in Guangzhou, Shenzhen, Yiwu...Chinese Muslims don't manufacture, but they sell, they are the bridge to the market, especially in the Muslim world."⁸³

The Muslim market is huge. One of our informants volunteered the information that during the Haj alone, 80% of all goods sold in Mecca are made in China.⁸⁴ Especially since 2001, and the "going out" policy, trade ties with the Middle East have expanded exponentially. The total trade volume between China and the Middle East rose by 87 percent, to \$100 billion, from 2005 to 2009. In the same period, investment flows from China grew tenfold, from \$1 billion in 2005 to \$11 billion.⁸⁵ This new economic relationship between China and the Islamic world has generated a mobility revolution for the "bridge" to this relationship - China's Hui Muslims.

⁷⁹ Informant E, op cit.

⁸⁰ Informant O, interviewed by author, Kuala Lumpur, May 9, 2012.

⁸¹ Informant O, ibid.

⁸² Informant H, op cit.

⁸³ Informant H, ibid.

⁸⁴ Informant L, op cit.

⁸⁵ See James Chen, The Emergence of China in the Middle East, <http://www.ndu.edu/press/lib/pdf/StrForum/SF-271.pdf>, accessed 11 September 2012. Chen also notes the ubiquity of Chinese construction projects in the region, including in Saudi Arabia (the Mecca Monorail), Iran (construction of a railway line from Tehran to the Iraqi border as part of an overall plan to link the Middle East to Central Asia and China through rail) and in Northern Africa, where the Algerian government hired Chinese construction firms to undertake several major projects including an airport, a mall, 60,000 homes, and a 745-mile east-west highway, the longest on the continent.

In the 1980s, as a result of the post-Cultural Revolution Reform policy, a new generation of Chinese Muslim youth in the economically backward Northwest began to experience some educational and social mobility within the national educational system, thanks in part to educational policies directed at the minorities. W, G and H are examples of this process. "They were the earliest batch to get a university education, that is, during the Reform period, in the immediate aftermath of the Cultural Revolution."⁸⁶

This first generation took the "Arabic" route to further education abroad, the details of which have been recounted above. It would appear however, that when economic reform was initiated in 1978, it was Chinese Muslim working class families in the urban centres who were the first beneficiaries in terms of mobility opportunities.

"We have to go back to the 1980s. The Chinese government reopened the door, an open door policy to the world. And then it was a good chance for Muslims as well. Then, we had some links with the Middle East countries, and even Malaysia. So they started to learn Arabic. Like my uncle's age, they started to have an Arabic school. Not many, just one. So they went there to study Arabic. And after 1 or 2 years, they were sent by the government to work overseas in Arab countries."⁸⁷

F's uncle went to work in Libya. "There were a lot... Even now, like in Saudi and Dubai, they need Muslim workers, but there are very few Muslim workers."⁸⁸

The students, it would appear, followed the workers, as Libya was one of the first Arab countries that Chinese students went to. And then the trading, and its associated professions, such as translators, began. Knowledge of Arabic and English – and Chinese - by this new middleman class of fellow Muslims hugely facilitated trade with the Muslim world, in the Middle East, Africa and Southeast Asia.

Student mobility went hand-in-hand with business. "We are both", says F.⁸⁹ Business went hand-in-hand with further mobility. Many of the Chinese Muslim students in Malaysia have moved, upon their return to China, from the Muslim heartland in the Northwest to the commercial coastal cities of China, where they are largely engaged in the import-export trade, as entrepreneurs, translators, and intermediaries, or in service industries, such as tourism.

In fact, the internal Muslim mobility within China, as a consequence of mobility abroad, is considerable. Many of those who have left their hometowns in the Northwest as well as other pockets of Hui settlement in North and Central China have moved to other parts of China upon their return from study abroad. D and his friend, two young students from Linxia in their third year of undergraduate studies in Malaysia, expressed their desire not to return to China. No one who has left Lintan, according to S, has returned.

"It's very difficult...in history, because that is the border, they can do trading with Tibetan people, they exchange horses and tea, you know? But in recent times, 100 years, I think it is far less important, it's on the periphery."⁹⁰

The economic transformation of the Chinese Muslim economy began in the so-called "Koran belt" of the Northwest. It was here, in the somewhat isolated world of Chinese Muslim religiosity, that a pool of Arabic speakers was available for language training and recruitment as workers, students

⁸⁶ Informant S, interviewed by author, Kuala Lumpur, 16 April 2012.

⁸⁷ Informant F, op cit.

⁸⁸ Informant F, ibid.

⁸⁹ Informant F, ibid.

⁹⁰ Informant S, op cit.

and business people for the wider Muslim world. With English skills since acquired, international, as against cross-border trade, has become a major source of Hui wealth. Manufacturing for the international market has also taken off. There is a company in Qinghai which is said to produce one-sixth of all Islamic clothing in the world.⁹¹ Another factory in Lanzhou specializes in the production of the Muslim white cap worn by the pious.⁹²

Such an economic landscape was still foreign to the Han-encapsulated Muslim economy in much of the rest of China, especially in provinces such as Henan. Without access to the information networks which linked the Northwest to the wider Muslim world, the Muslim economy in the insular Chinese world remained pretty much petty businesses based on sheep - meat and wool - serving majority Han Chinese demand.⁹³ So too its educational landscape, with most capable Hui students seeking entry into the national universities, rather than to schools abroad. It was in the Northwest, while studying for his Masters in Ningxia that N first learnt of the educational opportunities available in Malaysia, 10 years too late, as he wryly notes.⁹⁴ In the last decades however, the transformation of the Chinese Hui economy has also reached Henan. The wool-processing industry, entirely monopolized by the Hui, has gone global, with wool imported from Australia and consumer products exported to the rest of the world. His friends, N notes, are now buying property in Sydney. An index of this new prosperity is the increasing number of new students from Henan studying in Malaysia.

As the “economic spring” advanced, so did a “new spring” in Hui education and scholarship begin to flower, H adds. Chinese Muslim had been suppressed for almost 100 years, and before that, it had barely managed to survive.

“Our education was very weak, because at that time (at the start of the Reform Policy), there was nothing. We had to build again from scratch. And Hui education has been comparatively weak. And then there was the people’s mentality. When it first started, everyone wanted to immediately earn money...so many dropped out of school to go into business, to Tibet and other such places to earn money.”⁹⁵

Now a new generation of imams and scholars has been trained, located in various cities in China and abroad, but in close touch with each other. Graduates from Lintan, the small town from which W, G and B originate, are prominent among the producers of new scholarship, not necessarily on Islam, but with an Islamic flavour.⁹⁶ Almost 10% of the town’s younger Hui cohorts now have had tertiary education, with 17 masters and almost 20 PhDs.⁹⁷ It should be recalled that in B’s time, Lintan was a remote small Muslim community in which there was even reservation about the learning of Mandarin, the language of the Han majority.⁹⁸ Lintan’s location at the “periphery” however, eventually facilitated the flow to Pakistan. “From my hometown actually quite a lot went, not to Arabia, most of them to Pakistan.”⁹⁹

In China itself, there is an annual national conference on Hui Studies. It was at one of them, the 19th, that N, who, coming from Henan and having no prior contact with Malaysia, met A3, who had just returned to China from being a Visiting Scholar at ISTAC.¹⁰⁰ His intervention brought N to Malaysia in 2010. N notes that, although Henan Muslims were latecomers to prosperity and Islamic

⁹¹ Informant E, op cit.

⁹² Informant D, op cit.

⁹³ Informant N, op cit.

⁹⁴ Informant N, ibid.

⁹⁵ Informant S, op cit.

⁹⁶ Informant S, ibid.

⁹⁷ Informant S, ibid.

⁹⁸ Informant B, op cit.

⁹⁹ Informant S, ibid.

¹⁰⁰ ISTAC is a centre for Islamic studies associated with IIUM.

revival, the Islamic scholarship now being generated in Henan is of a high level thanks to the higher level of Chinese education among Henan Muslims.

The fruits are to be seen in the religious awakening now taking place among Chinese Muslim students in China itself.¹⁰¹ H notes that his niece, now doing her Master's at a university in China, has started to pray regularly, doing so even when she returns to the home village. As has been previously observed for Malaysia, a religious awakening that begins with students abroad generally flows back to the mainland.

VI. Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be pertinent to note the role that this mobility – within and without China – plays in re-shaping Hui social practices and identity itself. Jonathan Lipman¹⁰² has argued that Hui is essentially a local identity, and Hui society a conglomeration of local communities – as also represented in the ethnography of Dru Gladney.¹⁰³ The last two decades have seen the dispersal of Hui students and business people all over China (especially in the commercial cities of the south), and the rest of the world, where they re-congregate as Chinese Muslims from a variety of local communities of origin, and reconstitute new Hui communities closely linked to each other. Clearly, local ties and regional differences continue to play a major role in determining Hui lives in China,¹⁰⁴ but they no longer define the sole horizon of Hui social being. In his groundbreaking cultural history of Muslims in late Imperial China, Benite documents the rise of educational networks which drew together Hui Muslim scholars from different localities in China in the 17th and 18th centuries, during a period of rising economic prosperity.¹⁰⁵ The educational mobility of the Hui in the late 20th century will weave a whole new tapestry of dense trans-local connections, both national and transnational, for Hui communities previously more or less encapsulated within an overwhelmingly Han Chinese universe.

¹⁰¹ Informant H, op cit.

¹⁰² See Jonathan Neaman Lipman, *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China.*, University of Washington Press, 1998.

¹⁰³ See Dru C. Gladney, *Ethnic Identity in China. The Making of a Muslim Minority Nationality*, Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Bruce College Publishers, 1998.

¹⁰⁴ Informant S, op cit.

¹⁰⁵ See Zvi Ben-Dor Benite, *The Dao of Muhammad: a cultural history of Muslims in late Imperial China*, Harvard University Asia Center, 2005.

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