The lifestyle transformation of Hui Muslim women in China: a comparison of modern and Islamic education

Atsuko Shimbo

School of Education, Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan

ABSTRACT
The goal of this article is to study how modernization and globalization after the 1980s changed the career options, life course, and lifestyle of Hui Muslim women. I discuss Hui Muslim women who graduated from modern schools and became teachers, and compare them with graduates of Arabic schools who work in Yiwu as interpreters. The results suggest that the fate of Hui women teachers has changed drastically as a result of education. They are living in a secular world that is mostly unrelated to religious practices. There is a need to investigate how their identities will change in the future as marriages to the Han Chinese increase. Several Arabic schools were established after the 1980s in Ningxia. There are many students in Arabic schools who are not able to go on to public high school due to economic constraints. After graduating from Arabic school, many Hui women work as Arabic interpreters in Yiwu. Studying at Arabic schools expands the opportunities of young Muslim women and they are satisfied with both family life and work. They demand a sense of fulfillment from religion and their spirituality is high. Today, in an era of globalization, alternative education with new opportunities is developing through Arabic schools in China.

KEYWORDS
Hui Muslim women; teacher; modern school education; madrasa; Muslim; Islamic education; China

1. Introduction

China has experienced dramatic changes throughout the last 40 years. Economic development has deeply affected the lifestyle of China’s Muslims. There are 10 Muslim ethnic nationalities in China and the Hui are one of the representative Muslim minorities. Their ancestors were Arabs, Persians, or Turks who migrated from the Middle East and Central Asia to China during the Tang and Yuan Dynasties, and even though the Hui Muslim native language is Chinese, they are distinguished from the Han in terms of ethnic origin and religious identity. Many Hui people live on the Huangtu Plateau in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, which is a relatively undeveloped district in northwest China. The Hui are marginalized both as a religious minority in secular communist China and as an economically disadvantaged people.

After the 1980s, the economy in China changed from a planned socialist economy to a market economy. The surging wave of modernization even reached Ningxia, and the
Hui people are inevitably entwined in the spread of globalization. Chairman Xi Jinping advocated “One Belt, One Road” as a national strategic policy in 2014. The Hui people, who are representative of Chinese Muslims, are key in connecting China, the Islamic world, and Europe.

The social and economic status of Hui women was traditionally low in the Ningxia Hui community. Girls’ education has lagged far behind that of boys because girls are not regarded as worthy of education in the dominant patriarchal culture. However, Hui women have experienced changes since the 1980s. With the compulsory education law enacted in 1986, a great number of Hui girls gained access to a school education.

On the other hand, many mosques were rebuilt in Ningxia after the end of the cultural revolution. Increasing contact with Muslim countries brought about a new ethno-religious awareness, and several Islamic schools (madrasas in China are Islamic schools generally known as Arabic schools) attached to mosques were built in Ningxia in 1980s. Among them, there are madrasas for women, which are called “nuxue,” and they are used to educate young Hui Muslim women. After graduating from Arabic schools, many Hui move to Yiwu or Guanzhou to work as Arabic interpreters or managers of trading companies because the number of Arab merchants is also increasing in these areas.

The goal of this article is to study how modernization and globalization after the 1980s changed the career options, life course, and lifestyle of Hui Muslim women. I discuss Hui Muslim women who graduated from modern schools and compare them to graduates of Arabic schools. I explore the differences in career options, life course, identity, and self-worth between young Hui Muslim women from modern schools and Islamic schools.

First, I examine how the spread of modern school education has influenced the transformation of the lifestyle and marriage patterns of Hui female teachers who are considered to embody modern school education. (What transformation, then, has modern school education brought to the lifestyle of Hui girls/young women who have been living in a traditional Muslim society? Moreover, what is married life like for Muslim women who have adopted modern lifestyles?)

Second, regarding Islamic education, I will explore “nuxue,” Arabic schools for women, and examine their role in improving the lives of young Hui women. I will also investigate Hui women who come from inland China, such as Ningxia, and work at Guangzhou in Guangdong or Yiwu in Zhejinag. In prior research, Masumi Matsumoto studied Islamic education for women in China. Maria Jashock and Shui Jingjun studied women’s mosques in China. However, I will explore differences between the lifestyles of women who graduated from secular modern schools and those who graduated from Islamic schools.

The analytic method used in this article is a quantitative investigation and a qualitative investigation at a micro-level. Particularly, this case study was conducted through

---

2 Ningxia nutong jiaoyu yanjiu keti zu, “Ningxia pinkun diqu Huizu nutong de yanju baogao,” 56–95.
3 Ma, “Wo yu Huizu nutong jiaoyu,” 18–32.
4 Matsumoto, Islam eno kaiki.
5 Jaschok and Shui, The History of Women’s Mosques.
interviews. The quantitative investigation concerning Hui women teachers is primarily based on research from 2009. The results of the life story interviews of female teachers in the southern region of Ningxia in April 2013 will be also discussed. The life story approach is an effective tool to analyze interviewees; thus, I use this approach herein. In the research regarding Islamic education as reported in this article, an investigation was conducted through fieldwork in 2005, 2007, 2008, and 2016.

2. Hui Muslim women schoolteachers

This survey was conducted in the summer of 2009, targeting more than 30 primary and secondary schools in eight major counties in the mountainous areas of southern Ningxia. Survey questionnaires were sent to 300 Hui female teachers and 253 valid responses were received. Among those, 229 responses were from married teachers and they are the focus of this analysis.

Of these married Hui female teachers, the target group of the survey, 90% or more are college graduates (including junior college graduates). The rest are graduates from Chinese normal schools (equivalent to secondary education institutions). Many teachers earned college degrees after graduating from a normal school through alternative means such as distance learning. A significant number of girls in Ningxia were not in school. In the early 1990s, there were approximately 20,000 out-of-school children, primarily girls. In addition, in some farming areas, the illiteracy rate was estimated to be approximately 60%. In view of these circumstances, the surveyed Hui female teachers received a considerably higher level of education by the standards of the Ningxia Hui women.

Hui women teachers move several times according to where they receive their school education. Ms W was born in the mountainous X Village in Ningxia, and she studied at the village elementary school from first through fourth grade. She lived near the center of the county while attending fifth and sixth grade at an elementary school near the center. She then moved to town and went to junior high school. After graduating from junior high school, she moved to G City and studied at a normal school. After graduation from normal school, she worked in a small mountain village very far from her birthplace. She married a teacher and had a child. Her husband works in another small village, so she is raising the child by herself.

Ms L was born in the mountainous Y Village in Ningxia and studied at a village elementary school from first through fourth grade. As was the case with Ms W, Ms L also lived near the center of the county while attending fifth and sixth grade at an elementary school near the center and moved to town and went to junior high school. After graduating junior high school, she moved to G City and studied at a normal school. After graduation from normal school, she also worked in small mountain village very far from her birthplace. There, she became friends with a Hui male teacher and

---

6Wu’s 2009 survey in Ningxia, in the south mountain area. Wu, “Tyugoku neika kaizoku Josei Konin Katei Genjou no Chousa to Kenkyu,” 276–82.
7Survey in Ningxia (2013). Shimbo, Fading Identity.
8Survey in Ningxia (2005, 2016), Guangzhou (2007), and Yiwu (2005, 2007).
9Guojia bawu zhexue shehui kexue zhongdian keti<Nongcun nutong jiaoyu xianzhu wenti ji duice yanjiu>keti zu, 134–40.
10Survey in Ningxia (1995, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2013).
they married. They have one child and bought an apartment in G City so that their child could go to a good school. Their child lives with Ms L’s parents and she and her husband live apart from the child.

Through receiving an education, the social status of Hui women teacher has risen. However, as one can see from the examples above, sometimes they must leave their parents and husbands, are separated from their children, and are isolated.

3. Marriage

3.1 Types of marriages

A survey regarding the marriages of female teachers shows that 122 women (53.3%) had arranged marriages through matchmakers and 94 women (41.0%) had love marriages. These two types of marriages account for more than 94% of all survey respondents. In particular, love marriages reach nearly half. Meanwhile, there are only 13 women (5.7%) whose marriages were decided by their parents. The marriages of Hui female teachers have transformed greatly.

Historically, Hui marriages have been influenced by both Islam and the Chinese traditions. In accordance with Muslim scripture, the “Qur’an,” Hui in China are opposed to celibacy and consider marriage to be a duty. At Hui weddings, in addition to the announcement of the “marriage certificate” sanctioned by the law of the country, the ahong, who is a religious leader, also attends and reads the “Nikah,” words from the “Qur’an.” By performing these two ceremonies, a marriage is recognized.

In traditional Hui families, parents arranged the marriages of their children such that they “followed the introduction by the matchmakers” and marriages based on independent choice and love were not accepted. The marriages of Hui women were decided by their parents, and thus, women themselves had no right to make such decisions.

Additionally, the Hui people considered matchmaking to have considerable merit and to be a virtuous and honorable act comparable to building a mosque. Consequently, many people were eager to be matchmakers, thus promoting early marriages. A 23-year-old Hui woman (with two children) from a mountainous southern region said that her parents had asked a matchmaker to introduce her to a man to be her husband when she was 18 years old. She was told that “the man was in the transportation industry and would have no trouble making a living.” She got married a month later after having only one arranged meeting with him. According to her, most Hui women in mountain villages have arranged marriage meetings following their parents’ decisions and get married in less than two weeks. There were no love marriages in the past.

Compared to this situation, more than 90% of married Hui female teachers in the survey got married based on their own decisions, including arranged marriages through matchmakers and love marriages. Less than 10% got married based on their parents’ decisions. This indicates that education has greatly changed the fate of Hui women. For example, it is common for female teachers to marry their teaching internship partners.

11Wu’s survey (summer 2009).
One of the surveyed Hui female teachers is from the mountainous southern region. She graduated from a normal school. Based on love and self-choice, she married a local Hui government employee whom she met while she was working as a teacher for an elementary school in a village. They have a three-year-old daughter who is in kindergarten. The family of three looks very happy. She says that “[i]n the case of Hui women, parents make marriage decisions for their daughters. When it comes to a teacher, however, her fate is completely different.” She said, “I received an education, became an intellectual, and got a respected job. Now, I am taken seriously by my family, respected by people in my community, and have the freedom to find my marriage partner.”

Nowadays, parents rarely make marriage decisions for Hui female teachers in Ningxia, China. It has become mainstream for Hui female teachers to get married voluntarily by finding marriage partners themselves, primarily after being introduced to potential marriage partners by friends or matchmakers. This trend is strengthened by the perception of female teachers as highly popular and desirable marriage partners due to their steady income and the expectation that they will be experts in educating children. The power of “education” has enabled young Hui women to make decisions for their own destiny.

However, I know another Hui women teacher who entered into a romantic relationship with her boyfriend in hopes of marrying him, but her parents did not agree. Thus, she said goodbye to her boyfriend and married another man of whom her parents approved. Although there are many love marriages, there still many cases of parents deciding marriage partners without the consent of their daughters.

### 3.2 Age at the time of a first marriage

In Ningxia, early marriage was widespread because the prevalent traditional value that “the earlier a son is born, the earlier he starts to help the parents.” In particular, in the southern mountain areas with high Hui concentrations, it was not unheard of for engagements and marriages to be made in childhood. Even today, Ningxia Hui Muslim women get married at younger ages than Han women do. Furthermore, Muslim women from around the world generally get married early.

Following the founding of the People's Republic of China, the “Marriage Law” was enacted in 1949. Although the law stipulates that “the minimum age to marry is 22 years old for men and 20 years old for women,” the tradition of early marriage persisted in Ningxia. Thus, a supplemental policy for the “People's Republic of China Marriage Law” was enacted in 1981 in Ningxia requiring that a Hui male must be at least 20 years old to marry and a Hui female must be at least 18 years old. Thereafter, early marriages among the Hui people began to gradually be reduced. In urban areas in China, while it is still common to marry, early marriages are not as common and late marriages are increasing.

According to the survey results, of the 229 married Hui female teachers, 224 (97.8%) got married for the first time between 20 and 28 years, which conforms to the law of the country. Additionally, five (2.2%) teachers first got married at 19 years. However, those Hui women who got married at age 19 are approximately 40 years old and their marriages occurred about 20 years ago. According to the survey, 86% of Hui female
teachers first got married at age 22 or older, and only 32 (14%) got married for the first time at ages 19, 20, or 21. Furthermore, half or more of surveyed teachers first got married at ages between 23 and 25. We understand that the gap in the average age for a first marriage has been reduced between Hui female teachers and women in rural areas outside of Ningxia.

Our current survey shows that the age at the time of the first marriage among Hui female teachers is approaching the national average. Receiving higher education is a significant reason for this change. In general, people do not get married while in school. Thus, higher education for women pushes back their age at the time of their first marriage, in general. Moreover, decisions made by women who have received higher education are respected, thus avoiding early marriages.

4. Spouses

4.1 Ethnicity, occupation, and education attainment of spouses

The status of spouses, such as their occupations and educational backgrounds, is related to how satisfied women are with their marriages. It also affects their workplace performance and future accomplishments. The following describes the status of the spouses of the Hui female teachers.

First of all, with regard to ethnicity, 99% of the spouses of the 229 Hui female teachers are Hui and only two are Han. This demonstrates the marriage characteristics among Ningxia Hui Muslims. In other words, the Hui, Hui women in particular, do not typically marry people from different ethnic groups. Most of them are married to people of the same ethnic group. Their parents also wish for them to marry a Hui (and there are many Hui people in Ningxia).

The Hui population is small in other parts of China. Thus, it is sometimes difficult to find a Hui spouse, resulting in marriages across different ethnic groups. However, in such marriages, the non-Hui spouse, regardless of whether the spouse is the husband or the wife, has to change his/her past lifestyle and adopt the lifestyle of his/her Hui spouse. For example, the spouse cannot consume pork, must follow Muslim doctrines, and so on.

Secondly, in terms of occupation, 79 (34.5%) of the spouses of the 299 married Hui female teachers are also teachers, 56 (24.5%) are civil servants, eight (3.5%) are doctors, 20 are police or military personnel (8.7%), 7 (3.1%) are bank employees, 41 (17.9%) are laborers, and 18 (7.9%) are farmers or are unemployed. In other words, more than 90% of the spouses of these Hui female teachers have stable professions with relatively high incomes.

There are many cases where couples meet as colleagues in the same workplace and thus there are many marriages between teachers. In addition, a civil servant is a preferred occupation in China and is considered an ideal marriage partner. One reason why so many female teachers marry civil servants is because female teachers themselves have high standing as marriage partners and thus they can choose civil servants as their spouses.

Thirdly, the spouses’ educational backgrounds are as follows: 142 college graduates (62%), 79 junior college graduates (34.5%), and 8 high school graduates (3.5%). In other
words, highly educated people make up more than 90% of the spouses of the Hui female teachers. According to the statistics from 2010, graduates of college or higher accounted for less than 10% of the population in China. Most of the spouses of the Hui female teachers are college graduates. This seems to be related to the fact that Hui female teachers themselves have high educational backgrounds and have steady incomes. Of the 299 Hui female teachers, 90% or more are college graduates and others are graduates of vocational schools such as normal schools. Therefore, it is possible for them to marry highly educated intellectuals.

4.2 Relationships with spouses

First, in terms of the level of spousal support of wives’ professional careers, 116 (50.7%) of the 229 spouses reported 100% support, 64 (27.9%) reported 90% support, 28 (12.2%) reported 60% support, and 21 (9.2%) reported 50% or less support. From the investigation, it is clear that the Hui female teachers receive approximately 80% of spousal support for their professional careers. This is associated with the educational background of the spouses. Because the spouses themselves received a higher education, they respect their wives’ professional work.

In addition, it should be noted that Muslim women in China have achieved a higher rate of social participation compared to women of other Islamic nations throughout the world. This is due to the significant influence of gender equality that is legally mandated as a Chinese principle. Compared to countries such as Saudi Arabia, social participation of women is far more advanced in China.

Secondly, in terms of housework sharing, 53 (23.1%) of the 299 married respondents report that their husbands share 90% or more of household chores, 74 (32.3%) reported husbands sharing about 50% of household chores, and 102 (44.4%) reported husbands sharing 50% or less of household chores. This survey provides evidence that over half of the husbands share in half or more of the household chores.

Historically, “male chauvinism” was deeply rooted in Ningxia, a remote area. It was taken for granted that “men work outside and women work at home.” Both Han and Hui men rarely took part in housework at home. Rather, men who did household chores were laughed at by people in the community. Even now, it is still a reality that in the case where both the husband and the wife in a Hui family in Ningxia have jobs, the housework is assumed by the women. This is certainly the case in rural areas but is also often the case in urban areas. This is consistent with the present author’s study of Ningxia, which reports cases where female teachers live apart from their husbands or move to their assigned workplaces with their children, leaving their husbands behind. The study shows that, in such cases, household chores and childcare duties fall entirely on the wives. Further, even if they live with their husbands, household chores are typically done by women in many cases.

Therefore, although this survey shows that more than 50% of men share in more than half of household chores among the households of the Hui female teachers, this number seems to be quite high. However, in the interviews conducted by the present author, there were also cases where the husbands were very understanding and cooked most of the family meals. It is a proven fact that husbands who fully support their wives’
careers and who share in the burden of housework can be found in Hui households as well.

4.3 Degree of satisfaction with marriage

Regarding the degree of satisfaction with marriage, 137 respondents (59.8%) answered that they are “satisfied and happy,” 78 respondents (34.1%) answered “mostly satisfied,” and 14 respondents (6.1%) answered that they are “dissatisfied.” In other words, about 94% of the Hui female teachers are satisfied or are mostly satisfied with their marriages. It can be said that many of them have a happy family life because they got married based on their own decisions. As described above, many Hui female teachers in Ningxia, China, determined their own marriages, limited the number of their children to one or two to consider a balance between work and child bearing and rearing, and led a new way of life. It can be said that this is a result of modern school education.

The present survey shows a high level of satisfaction with respect to marriage. However, according to interviews with rural female teachers conducted by the present author over a span of more than 15 years since the mid-1990s, it is clear that there are female teachers who face problems such as emotional discord in marriages that were determined by parents, serious rifts between wives and mothers-in-law, separation from husbands and children due to assignments in rural elementary schools, conflicts between work and family life, and isolation associated with separation from the local communities where they grew up. However, as an overall trend, the number of Hui female teachers who were satisfied with their marriages has certainly been increasing due to freedom of choice in marriage. It is true that they felt remarkably more fulfilled than their sisters who could not even attend elementary school and had to live only as farmers for their entire lives.

5. Case studies of Hui female teachers

5.1 Ms A

Now, I would like introduce a Hui female teacher, Ms A. She is a female teacher from a rural household. She was economically disadvantaged and had many siblings. Thus, she received a scholarship from a Japanese nongovernmental organization (NGO) while she was studying at a normal school. After graduation, she was assigned to teach in a rural elementary school and has been a teacher ever since. Her husband (a Hui) is also an elementary schoolteacher. When she was a new teacher, she had a hard time because her students did not follow her instructions. However, on one Teacher Appreciation Day, she received a note saying “[t]eacher, thank you” from her students, and that gave her a sense of professionalism. Additionally, she had a hard time when her own children were young and she had to live apart from them due to a busy work schedule in a remote area where commuting was inconvenient. She now works at an

---

12Shimbo and Wu’s Interview in Ningxia, April 2013.
13Wu, Ningxia Huizu Nujiaoshi koushu shilu.
14Shimbo, International Symposium on the Empowerment of Ethnic Minority Women, 389.
Ms A’s brother graduated from a famous university in Shanghai and is well-off as he runs a company. He is married to a Han woman. In general, most Hui marry Hui. A marriage partner must also be a Muslim according to Islamic precepts. However, among the Hui who live in large cities (they graduate from universities in large cities, then settle down there), marriages to Han people are increasing due to the small number of potential Hui marriage partners. In the case of Ms A’s brother, the parents were strongly opposed to his marriage. However, they had to recognize the marriage in the end. The brother bought a condominium and a car for his parents. In addition, he invited the family on a trip to Suzhou, to which Ms A joined and enjoyed.

The members of Ms A’s family were farmers in a mountainous region in Ningxia. Although her parents received little education, they sent their children to college. As stated above, one of the children graduated from a prestigious university in Shanghai and is a successful entrepreneur. Because of this, the economic condition of the family changed tremendously for the better. From a consumer perspective, the family now lives an affluent life. This could serve as a concrete example that education leads to dramatic changes. Ms A said she hoped to learn a musical instrument as a hobby in the future. She did not have the chance in the past but now she has spare time, energy, and money to consider the possibility. One of Ms A’s classmates from her normal school also became a teacher. Her husband runs a restaurant and is doing well. Thus, it is not only Ms A whose social status has improved through education.

5.2 Other Hui Muslim teachers

Through a connection with the education assistance work of an NGO, the present author herself has been witnessing a change over the last 20 years from the time when these women were enrolled in normal schools in the mid-1990s. In other words, the present author has had a glimpse of the development of inland China through these women. Individual situations vary; some women are enjoying a good life and others are still in unfortunate situations in rural areas. As a whole, however, the fact is that their lives have been getting better. Female Hui normal school students who had difficulty paying even school tuition and living expenses are now commuting in their own cars. In the past, such changes were beyond even the boldest imagination. Moreover, they have found their own marriage partners. They have husbands who are compassionate toward their work and share in the housework. They are highly satisfied with their married lives. In many cases, their family relationships, values, and behavioral patterns are almost identical with those of the Han people.

At the schools where Hui Muslim women teachers are working, the number of children who are mixed race of Hui and Han is increasing. It is still possible to find a Hui spouse in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. In spite of that, there is an increasing number of marriages between Hui and Han. In addition, Hui Muslim women teachers mentioned that children of mixed race were very intelligent. This may suggest that Hui people themselves are becoming less resistant to marriages with the Han people.
In this region, it has been customary for women to wear hats as a substitute for a veil after getting married. However, these days, they do not even wear hats. When asked, they respond that “it is not stylish.” However, one female teacher carries a hat in her bag and puts it on whenever her mother-in-law is around. This shows that while they are bound by the wife and mother-in-law relationship, they enjoy fashion and stick to their lifestyle, regardless.

In spite of being a Hui, who adheres to Islam, these women seldom talk about religious topics. Instead, most of their conversations are secular, such as “someone has a bigger car” or “someone’s husband earns more money and is better than my husband.” This may be because they are surrounded by wealthier people even though they themselves are much wealthier than before. It can be said that they have also been tainted by the greed of China as a whole. In addition, when asked about the sect of Islam of their family, they quickly give an answer such as “Jafuriya” or “Katariya.” They know the sect to which they belong. However, it seems that they are living in a secular world that is mostly unrelated to religious practices, saying something like, “[a]lthough my father attends a mosque and my parents participate in religious activities in some form, it has nothing to do with me.”

It is possible that they avoided talking about religion because the present author is not a Muslim or because they typically avoid discussing such issues with foreigners. However, the young women the present author met at an Arabic language school affiliated with a mosque were very keen to participate in discussions on religion despite their young age. It is true that if someone starts a conversation with half-baked knowledge, he or she will cringe at sharp questions. On the other hand, these female teachers who are not interested in religion may return to Islam as they get older. In fact, older women also attend Arabic language schools that have opened at mosques in Ningxia and Gansu, and the schools have become comfortable places for them. In this sense, it can be said Hui people with roots in a religion such as Islam have a spiritual home to go back to.

Living in the reality of a secular society, they fit themselves into the Han way of life throughout their school age period, adolescence, youth, and middle age periods, and then return to their own religious world when they are older. While going back and forth between the secular world and the religious world, the Hui people have maintained their identity as a group and have formed a network. This may be the wisdom of the Hui, who have survived over thousands of years in China alongside the dominant Han group and may be their strategy as an ethnic minority.

6. Arabic women’s school: the “nuxue”

An Arabic school is a religious school born of Islamic reconstruction. Currently, there are many Arabic schools that are known as foreign language schools or vocational technical schools and many are attached to mosques in Ningxia. Arabic schools are private-sector educational facilities where young Muslim students study and learn Islam

---

15 Ibid.
16 Survey in Ningxia and Gansu (2005).
and Arabic. These Arabic schools are informal educational organizations that teach religion and language. There are male schools and female schools. The women’s school is called the “nuxue.” Islamic schools for women are institutions that teach young Muslim women Arabic and Islamic scriptures. Moreover, some of the Arabic schools offer lodging. There are many students who graduated from junior high school. Some of the students are unable to go to public high school because of their families’ economic situations. Arabic schools play an important role in providing a safety net that gives young women a second chance.

Arabic schools do not receive any assistance from the government. Their educational environments are poor compared with those of public schools. Equipment and books also run short and students must learn in small classrooms. However, satisfaction among students of Arabic schools is very high. Many students say that they dream of studying overseas in countries such as Pakistan and Malaysia in the near future. Female ahongs, who are Islamic religious leaders in China, teach at the Arabic schools. Although the monthly salaries of female teachers are very low, their zeal is extremely high.

After graduating from an Arabic school, some students become Arabic schoolteachers in places such as Ningxia and Gansu and they fight for education for young Muslim women. These days, the number of Arabic interpreters for Arab merchants is also increasing in places such as Yiwu in Zhejiang Province and Guangzhou in Guangdong. After graduating from Arabic schools, many Hui travel to Yiwu or Guangzhou to work as Arabic interpreters or managers of trading companies.

6.1 Foreign language schools or vocational technical schools?
6.2 A School

Tongxin prefecture is located in southern Ningxia. The population of this prefecture is approximately 320,000, and the Hui people constitute nearly 80% of that total. A School is a school for women that was established by Mr Hong Yang, a famous religious leader. It is an Arabic boarding school for Hui girls. One of the students told me as follows:

I did not necessarily expect to enter this school. I wanted to study at a public senior high school if possible. However, I failed the examination for the senior high school. But I was given a valuable opportunity to learn here, and I was glad.

The custom of child marriages is still prevalent in the Hui area. If girls do not attend school, they are compelled to marry when they are around the age of 15 years. A girl can escape this fate by studying in an Islamic school for girls.

The school consists of 15 staff members and 8 teachers. All the teachers are women and many of them have studied at the Linxia Chinese-Arabic Women’s School of Gansu. Ms B undertook the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca with her husband and they studied in Mecca for six years. I asked young Hui women to describe the difference between public schools and Islamic schools for girls. Their answers provide some clarity on the distinction: “We study Islam here.” “Getting up for school was different from when I was in a public high school. We get up at four-twenty for the Islam women’s

17Shimbo, “Globarizasion no moto deno tyuugoku Muslim josei sidousha,” 1–10.
18Ibid. In 2005 and 2016, I investigated Islamic women’s schools in Ningxia. I conducted my fieldwork in the following schools: A School (Tongxin, 2005), B School (Haiyuan, 2005), and C School (Wuzhong, 2016).
school. Life is ascetic at the Islam school.” I was impressed by the answers of the young Muslim women and perceived that Islamic education gave them confidence and pride.

6.3 B School

Approximately 20 young women attend the afternoon class from 2:00 pm to 6:00 pm. They study the Qur’an, hadith, Arabic (including conversation skills), and morality for Muslims. The education in B School is provided free of charge.

In the 1980s and 1990s, nuxue accepted students who had dropped out of public school. I met a 10-year-old girl who had dropped out of elementary school when I visited there in 2005. She could neither read nor write in the Chinese language. Several students dropped out of the Junior High School for Girls in Haiyuan. The primary reason was economic limitations. Now, elementary and junior high school education is compulsory and students studying in Arabic schools are junior high school graduates.

Ms C, an ahong, is a teacher in this school. Her father is also an ahong. Ms C is the youngest of eight brothers and sisters. She told me that her “three elder sisters were not able to go even to elementary school....Because I was the youngest child, I entered Tongxin Hui Elementary School. I received religious education at A School without entering junior high school.” Ms C said, “My brothers respect me because I am an ahong.” In fact, I interviewed Ms C in the house of a certain hajj; he offered Ms C the only chair in the house with a backrest. I felt that the ahongs were respected.

6.4 C School

C School in Wuzhong was established as a vocational technical school in 2006. Later, in 2014, an Arabic major was established. C School is a boarding school for female students. The principal is an ahong who studied in Syria. The curriculum includes lessons in how to be a good wife and wise mother because the principal believes that educating mothers is very important to being a good Muslim. In the curriculum, there are elective courses such as cooking, housework, cut paper, and so on. Education for self-support is emphasized, because many are cooking for themselves. Some of the students have personal issues and are force to drop out of school. This school in particular also provides a location for female students with such personal issues. The principal told me that “by living a regular life under religious education, their lives have been improved.” According to my investigation, several students aspired to become teachers in Arabic schools or interpreters in coastal areas. Many students hoped to study overseas, especially in Islamic countries.

7. Case study of Ms B: from an Arabic school to Guangzhou

Ms B was born in a small town in Ningxia. She studied at a junior high school but the rate of enrollment of Hui girls in this area is low. People think that education is unnecessary for a girl because it was common to marry at 20 years even if they went to school. On the other hand, divorce rates were high for early marriages. Ms B told me the following:

19 Interview in Guangzhou, 2007.
A girl from a farm village is able to go to school and study because a junior high school was founded several years ago. If there was no school, my parents would let me marry, and I would cook and do housework everyday. One of the NGOs established a junior high school and I was able to learn at school. We would be farmers forever if there was no school. Therefore, I was really lucky. I could study new things by going to school and a new life was possible. I can have a good life now.

Ms B’s mother was the only sister among six brothers. Therefore, she had no chance to go to elementary school. She works as a babysitter and is illiterate. Ms B said, “My mother married very early.” Ms B’s mother wanted her to know about the outside world, so she continuously supported Ms B’s studies. Otherwise, farm women in general had to do housework and take care of children throughout their entire lives.

Ms B was not good at mathematics in junior high school, so she did not get a scholarship. Because she has a younger brother and sisters, Ms B gave up her dream to enter a senior high school. Thus, after graduating from junior high school, if she would have stayed at home, her parents would have let her marry early. Therefore, an uncle, who is an ahong, helped send her to an Arabic School to study Islam.

Ms B was very good at foreign languages and was especially good at Arabic. As a result of attending the Arabic school, she passed the examination to attend an Arabic college. The Arabic college gave her a recommendation after graduation and she came to Guangzhou to work as an interpreter. Ms B’s friend says that she is regarded as an ideal marriage partner. Ms B’s sisters and brother were clearly influenced by her as they are also studying in an Arabic school.

It is difficult to enter university from a farm village of Ningxia. Hui women students have vocational training such as knowledge of Arabic they learned while attending an Arabic school. After graduation, they make use of this ability as Arabic interpreters. Many Hui women go abroad to study Arabic. According to an investigation in Guangzhou, the starting salary of university graduates is generally about 1500 yuan. The starting salary of an Arabic interpreter is more than 2500 yuan. Arabic interpreters from Arabic schools have higher incomes than university graduates. The market for English interpreters is saturated but the demand for Arabic interpreters is currently high because relations between the Middle East and China have been strengthened.

Due to the rapid expansion of universities, it is difficult for any graduate to find a job but it is very difficult for minorities, especially woman from rural villages, to find employment. Thus, today, many families let their daughters study at Arabic schools without sending them to public high schools. One Arabic interpreter said that “language study is weapon (foreign language learning is an important tool for a better life).” I heard this phrase more than once throughout my interviews. By using Arabic as a weapon, Hui youth can ride the wave of globalization and empower themselves.

8. Case study: from inland to Yiwu

There are many Muslim women in Yiwu. In this section, I analyze their educational backgrounds, professional and marital lives, and Islamic beliefs.

Survey in Yiwu (2007).
Yiwu is located in the center of southern Zhejiang, approximately 100km from Hangzhou. In the past, it was a poor rural area. However, construction of a wholesale small-goods market began in the 1980s, and today, there are huge wholesale markets such as the globally prominent China Yiwu International Futian Market. In particular, markets selling handicrafts, accessories, and miscellaneous goods occupy 70% or more of the market. The 100-yen stores in Japan purchase many of their goods in Yiwu.

Yiwu has a high immigrant population. Moreover, many merchants from Islamic regions such as the Middle East and Africa reside in Yiwu. Yiwu has many foreign-born Muslim residents from such countries as Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Egypt, Algeria, Sudan, and Pakistan. There is a mosque in town and many Muslims meet every Friday for worship. There are also many halal restaurants where customers can watch Arabic TV programs. The business environment is comfortable for Muslim merchants. With the influx of merchants from Islamic countries, the Hui who can speak Arabic are playing an active role in the business community.

For example, Mr X is a Hui from Ningxia. He studied Arabic at the Arabic school in Yinchuan. After graduating from Arabic school, he worked in Xian. Now, he is managing a trading company and is successful in Egypt. Mr X speaks fluent Arabic, which has contributed to his good relations with the Arab merchants and has greatly helped him in building trust. Thus, in Yiwu, dealings with countries of the Middle and Near East are expanding. The Hui are playing an important role as liaisons. Moreover, the young Hui women who can speak Arabic are needed as interpreters. Therefore, young Hui women who studied in Arabic schools in places such as Ningxia and Kansu work for trading companies as interpreters in Yiwu after graduation.

For example, Ms Y comes from Ningxia. After studying for four years at the Arabic school in Ningxia, she worked for three years as an interpreter at Yiwu. She said that half of her 20 classmates work in Guanzhou and the others work in Yiwu. Ms Y’s present income is approximately 3000 yuan, and she married a Hui man who is also an interpreter. Ms Y’s friend graduated from a public high school and is working in Ningxia; her wages are approximately 1000 yuan per month. Compared with this, Ms Y’s income is quite high. Ms Y hopes to work in Yiwu for several years, save money, and go back to Ningxia.

8.1 Immigration from Ningxia to Yiwu
8.2 Life story of Hui women in Yiwu

In Yiwu, there are 700–800 Arabic interpreters. Among them, more than half were born in Ningxia. Specifically, approximately 200–300 are from Shizuishan in Ningxia. The present author conducted interviews in Yiwu in December 2007. The subjects of the investigation were seven women (A, B, C, D, E, F, and G) aged 20–38 years, with an average age of 28 years. In addition, five women were married, while two were single. Three interviewees were born in Ningxia, while the other four came from Gansu, Yunnan, Shaanxi, and Inner Mongolia. Six are Hui and one is Han, but she converted

21Survey in Yiwu (2005).
22Ibid.
23Survey in Yiwu (2007), half-structured interview. Shimbo, “Shakai hendouka ni okeru tyuugoku Muslim josei madorasa to mosuku ni syouten wo atete,” 71–81.
to Islam through marriage. Regarding work, four are employed in offices of trading companies, two are interpreters, and one teaches Arabic.

8.3 Birthplace, schooling, and educational background

Regarding the schools they attended and educational backgrounds, three interviewees graduated from Arabic-language schools (including those who graduated and those who left school before completion). As such, two interviewees enrolled at an Arabic-language school after graduating from junior high school and one enrolled in an Arabic-language school after graduating from high school. The decision to enroll in an Arabic-language school is usually influenced by relatives such as an aunt or uncle. Among the Hui people in Yiwu, many attended an Arabic-language school. Many Arabic-language schools offer four-year courses but only one interviewee graduated of the three who attended. One left school midway after two years and the other left after one year. Reasons for dropping out include finding employment or marriage, rather than domestic circumstances.

8.4 Reasons for coming to Yiwu

Regarding the reasons why the interviewees came to Yiwu, four women had relatives, such as sisters or cousins, living in the area. Three interviewees came with their husbands. In these cases, two husbands are Arabic interpreters, while one is president of a trading company, although he first worked as an Arabic interpreter. Thus, the primary reason for coming to Yiwu is the influence of relatives or the interviewee’s husband. Thus, the pull factor for immigration is the family network. The number of years interviewees have resided in Yiwu ranges from six months to three and a half years. The average number of years for the seven interviewees is approximately three years. Currently, the development of Yiwu attracts many Hui people to the city.

8.5 Employment

Many of the interviewees are employed as interpreters and office workers at trading companies. They help visitors shopping in the market by acting as Arabic interpreters. Interviewee A told me the following:

We get a sense of accomplishment with our work. Customers include many merchants from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. Because they respect us, I am very happy. However, a factory is sometimes not able to deliver an article. Another problem is that a delivered article sometimes does not sell.

Many classmates of Interviewee A at the Arabic-language school work as interpreters in Yiwu and Guangzhou. “They were jealous of me. It was better to come to Yiwu. I can learn various things here,” she said. Interviewee A has been learning Arabic for only two years. Consequently, her Arabic is not very good. Therefore, although she has worked as an interpreter for three and a half years, her salary is low at 2500 yuan. Ordinarily, an expected salary for someone with three years of experience is 3000–3500 yuan. However, for those in junior high school and those who graduated from senior
high school, the salary is approximately 1500 yuan. Thus, her salary is higher. Prices in Yiwu are high and this interviewee lives with her friends, as rent for a room for one year is 4500 yuan.

Interviewee B is an English interpreter and former teacher. The present author asked her why she stopped working as a teacher. She did not want to become a teacher because she was not able to wear a veil while working (teachers are not allowed to wear veils). According to Interviewee B, “Working as an interpreter takes patience.” However, the work is close to her heart. She said, “Because customers are Muslims from the Middle East, I can learn about Islam from them. In addition, I am proud of my faith and am friendly. The Muslim people respect us. I can go to places of worship.”

Four interviewees are office workers at trading companies (the presidents of the trading companies are Libyan or Chinese). Interview E stated as follows:

It is competitive in Yiwu as well, and there are many opportunities here. It is a good place. I am very satisfied with work in my present company and am important there. I tend to learn and get educated. I would say that one’s field of vision expands.

The trading company employs many people as office workers. They are satisfied with their work in Yiwu. In addition, there is contact with Muslims concerning work, which also increases their satisfaction. Of the interviewees, one teaches Arabic to a full-time housewife and one interviewee is a teacher at an Arabic-language school.

8.6 Marriage and family

Many Hui people are married to other Hui. Parents expect that their children will marry into another Hui family. However, from a population perspective, there are not many minority residents and it is not necessarily easy to find a marriage partner amongst the Hui people. Thus, Internet chatting is used to meet people.

Interviewee D met her husband through a Muslim chat group. He studied Arabic and English at the Pakistani International Islam University after graduating from an Arabic-language school. He worked as an interpreter in Guangzhou and emigrated to Yiwu. They married six months after meeting. Only Muslim people use this chat site; thus, she did not need to worry about fraud. Meeting through the chat site helped at the time of the wedding as well as friends from the chat room rushed to the celebration. After getting married, Interviewee D came to Yiwu with her husband.

Interviewee B is satisfied with the situation in Yiwu, where there are many Muslims and opportunities for development. She lives with her husband and their primary school-aged child. Her husband’s family takes care of their child. This is common in China, where parents, who are often migrant workers in the city, rely on grandparents to look after their children. It seems that the Hui people are no exception. In addition, according to Interviewee B, “I can have as many as two children, because of the minority group policy.” However, Ms B and her friends have only one child, because they are progressive. Ms B hopes that her child will attend university. The Hui people’s views of childcare and education are similar to that of the Han.
8.7 Sense of Islamic values

Interviewee C has four brothers, of whom the two eldest were not able to go to university. Later, her family’s economic status improved. She is the third-born child and was able to go to university. Her younger brother entered the School of Science and Technology at the elite University of Beijing. Interviewee C comes from a traditional Muslim family. Similar to the beliefs of the Han, traditional Muslim families believe that obtaining education separates one from Muslim traditions. Therefore, Ms C’s uncle was concerned about her and her younger brother attending the university. “He worried that because I would meet various international people, I may leave Islam and marry a non-Muslim. Let me clarify that it does not need to be that way.” Ms C further explains, “I cannot change my thoughts and mind, both of which were ingrained by my own flesh and blood.”

Interviewee D explains, “There were not many Muslim people where I was born. Therefore, I am glad there are many Hui in Yiwu.” Ms D worships in a house as only males can worship in mosques. Interviewee E states, “I earn a salary in Yiwu and receive material rewards. Furthermore, I have friends here.” Initially, she intended to return to her hometown after two years to get married. She felt spiritually empty before:

I closely observed Muslim life after coming to Yiwu and now pursue faith. I hope to deepen my learning of Islam and want to strengthen my faith in the future. I did not have the courage to cover myself with a veil before, but have recently taken the veil. It is respected here. While Arabic is difficult, the Muslim people say that Islam is simple. Muslims use their hearts, saying that it should be faithful to the form of a language. This is a good thing.

Interviewee F is Han. “At university age, I met my husband (who is Hui).” Originally, Ms F was interested in Buddhism, but her husband introduced her to books about religion and Islam. “I learned about the Islamic culture and was able to deepen my interactions. I came to Yiwu with my husband after we got married,” she said. For Interviewee F,

Intellectual pursuits are important. Most people living in the southern regions seem to be intellectually empty. They do not know where to go after 5 pm, so they go to play billiards, to a cafe, or to karaoke. We read books and study on the Internet. Sometimes I visit a teacher for discussions. As material satisfaction is short and vain, I pursue intellectual learning.

8.8 Discussion

Regarding my discussions with Muslims who moved to Yiwu from inland, I highlight the following. First, many went to Arabic-language schools (for middle-school education) and some went on to higher secular education institutions. Second, they came to Yiwu because of family. Third, many work as interpreters or office workers at trading companies and they have high work satisfaction. Working as an interpreter or office worker is sometimes difficult, but they are happy. This extends to their worldview as well. Their salaries are higher than their classmates who graduated from senior high school and work in their hometowns as factory workers. Fourth, regarding marriage, parents strongly expect them to marry other Hui people. Many use Internet chat sites to
meet other Hui people. As such, the traditional sense of values is respected. However, some have left their children in their hometowns and rely on grandparents to look after their children. This is common among Han people as well. In addition, they are satisfied to have only one child, not wanting to have more children. Thus, awareness of family size is similar to that of the Han as well. Finally, many Muslims share a religious connection; thus, there is an intellectual sense of fulfillment. They are satisfied with both family life and work. They demand a sense of fulfillment from religion and their spirituality is high.

9. Conclusion

The goal of this article was to study how modernization and globalization after the 1980s changed the career options, life course, and lifestyle of Hui Muslim women. I discussed Hui Muslim women who graduated from modern schools as compared to graduates of Arabic schools. This work’s contributions to field are to first clarify that the current lifestyle of Hui female teachers, which includes marriage, are completely different from the traditional Muslim style. Thesecond contribution is the finding that women teachers are becoming estranged from Islam traditions. The third is that women who have studied at Arabic schools seem to maintain a lifestyle emphasizing their values and identity.

This article verifies how the spread of modern school education has influenced the transformation of lifestyle and marriage patterns among Muslim women in China. According to the quantitative survey of married Hui female teachers, love marriages account for nearly half of all marriages. Hui female teachers are highly satisfied with their marriages. This suggests that the fate of Hui women has changed greatly as a result of education.

Most spouses of Hui Female teachers are Hui because Hui families have maintained their identity for thousands of years through marriages to other Hui people. However, it is noteworthy that today there is a recognition that permits marriages to Han Chinese people as well. There is a need to investigate how identities will change in future as the number of marriages to Han Chinese increases.

By receiving a modern school education, these women seemed to live in a secular world that was largely disconnected from religious practice as a Muslim. However, the female teachers who were not interested in religion may return to Islam as they get older. Living in the reality of a secular society, they fit themselves into the Han way of life throughout their school age period, adolescence, youth, and middle age periods, and then return to their own religious world when they are older. This may be the wisdom of the Hui, who have survived thousands of years in China alongside a dominant Han group.

After graduation from Arabic school, many Hui women work as Arabic interpreters of trading companies in Yiwu. Studying at Arabic schools expands the possibilities of young Muslims and contributes greatly to career building. There are many students in Arabic schools who were not able to go on to public high school because of economic difficulties. The Arabic schools give them a chance to live a better life.

They are satisfied with both family life and work. Their awareness of the effects of family size is similar to that of the Han. They demand a mental sense of fulfillment
from religion and their spirituality is high. Today, in this era of globalization, an alternative education, which has created many new opportunities, is developing through Arabic schools in China. I hope to continue this investigation in this future.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on contributor**

*Atsuko Shimbo* is Professor of School of Education, Waseda University. She finished the PhD program at University of Tokyo (Graduate School of Education. She received her PhD degree in 2002 from Waseda University. Before joining Waseda University, she was an assistant professor at Kyoto University (1987–1990). She is a visiting professor at Beijing Normal University (2013–2018) and a visiting scholar at School of African and Asian Studies, London University (2017). Her recent publications are (in Chinese) *My Road to Be a Teacher*, with Manhua Wei and Xinrong Zheng (Educational Science Publishing House, 2014); (in Japanese) *Fading Identities: Changing Patterns of Cultural Transmission within Ethnic Minority Families in China* (Kokusai Shoin Publishers, 2014); and “Islamic Education in China: Triple Discrimination and the Challenge of Hui Women’s Madrasas,” with Masumi Matsumoto, in *The Moral Economy of the Madrasa*, edited by Sakurai Keiko and Fariba Adelkhah (Routledge, 2010).

**References**

Ding, G. *Ningxia Huizu* [Hui people in Ningxia], 269–276. Yinchuan: Ningxia People’s Press, 1993.

Guojia bawu zhexue shehui kexue zhongdian keti<Nongcun nutong jiaoyu xianzhuang wenti ji duice yanjiu>keti zu [The 8th national five-year plan key theme team regarding philosophy and social science: Research on problems and counter measures of girls’ education in rural areas]. Nuzi jiaoyu yanjiu wenxian ciliaoji [Collection of Materials and Documents on Women’s Education], 134–140, 1992.

Jaschok, M., and J. Shui. *The History of Women’s Mosques in Chinese Islam*. London: Routledge, Reprint Edition, 2015.

Ma, X. “Wo yu Huizu nutong jiaoyu” [My education and Hui Girls’ education], In *Chuangzao pingdeng* [Creating equality: An oral history of girls’ education in Northwestern China], edited by Yang Liwen, 18–32. Beijing: Nationalities Publishing House, 1995.

Matsumoto, M. *Islam eno kaiki* [Returning to Islam]. Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppans, 2010.

Ningxia nutong jiaoyu yanjiu keti zu [Project team of research on girls’ education in Ningxia]. “Ningxia pinkun diqu Huizu nutong de yanjiu baogao” [Research report on Hui girls’ education in poor areas of Ningxia]. In *Ningxia nutong jiaoyu yanjiu keti zu* [Project Team for Research on Girls’ Education in Ningxia], Zhongguo xibu nutong jiaoyu xingdong yanjiu [Action research on girls’ education in West China], 56–95. Yinchuan: Ningxia People’s Press, 1995.

Shimbo, A. “Globarizasion no moto deno tyuugoku Muslim josei sidousha: koukyouiku oyobi syuukyou kouyou no hikaku kenntou.” [An examination about female educational leaders of Muslim women in China under globalization: comparison and discussion between public education and religious education] *Gakujutsu Kenkyu. Education*, 55 (2006): 1–10.

Shimbo, A. International Symposium on the Empowerment of Ethnic Minority Women in the Era of Globalization, Tokyo: Chiyoda Cures, 389. 2007.

Shimbo, A. *Fading Identity*. Tokyo: Kokusai Shoin, 2014.
Shimbo, A. “Shakai hendouka ni okeru tyuugoku Muslim josei: madorasa to mosuku ni syoten wo atete [China’s Hui Muslim women under social change: Focusing on Madrasa and Mosque].” Higashi ajia Shakaikyouiku kenkyuu [The East Asian Journal for Adult Education and Community Studies], 20 (2015): 71–81.

Wu, Y. Ningxia Huizu Nujiaoshi koushu shilu [Oral history of women teachers in Ningxia]. Yingchuan: Ningxia People’s Press, 2013.

Wu, Y. “Tyugoku neika kaizoku josei kyoushi kon-in katei genjou no chousa to kenkyu” [Survey and study of the current conditions of marriage and family life among Hui female teachers in Ningxia, China]. In International Symposium on the Empowerment of Ethnic Minority Women in the Era of Globalization, edited by A. Shimbo, 276–282. Tokyo: Chiyoda Cures, 2007.