

## Confessional Peculiarity of Chinese Islam

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### ABSTRACT

This paper considers features of Islam among Muslim peoples in China. Along with the traditional religions of China - Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam influenced noticeable impact on the formation of Chinese civilization. The followers of Islam have a significant impact on ethno-religious, political, economic and cultural relations of the Chinese society. Ethno-cultural heterogeneity of Chinese Islam has defined its confessional identity. The peculiarity of Chinese Islam is determined, firstly, with its religious heterogeneity. In China there all three main branches of Islam: Sunnism, Shiism, and Sufism. Secondly, the unique nature of Chinese Islam is defined by close relationship with the traditional religions of China (Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism) and Chinese population folk beliefs. Chinese Islam has incorporated many specific features of the traditional religious culture of China, which heavily influenced on the religious consciousness and religious activities of Chinese Muslims.

### KEYWORDS

Chinese Muslims, history of Islam, confessional heterogeneity, Islamic branches, religions of China

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## Introduction

Political and ethno-cultural processes taking place in contemporary Chinese society lead us to a deeper study of the religious history of China (Ho et al., 2014). Along with the traditional religions of China - Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, Islam influenced noticeable impact on the formation of Chinese civilization (Tsin, 2009; Erie & Carlson, 2014; Gulfiia, Parfilova & Karimova, 2016). The Muslim community has existed in China for over 1,300 years, and currently it is one of the largest in the world. The number of Chinese Muslims more than 27 million people (Wain, 2016). In some areas of China (Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous region, Ningxia Hui Autonomous region) there is Islam is the dominant religious tradition. Muslims represent one of the most socially-active groups of the Chinese population (Kafarov, 1887; Rossabi, 2013).

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Followers of Islam are integrated in the system of state administration bodies, trade union, educational and political organizations.

In China there are significant numbers of Muslim religious, social-cultural associations and unions, print and electronic media (Wu & Cheng, 2013). Chinese Muslims take the big initiative in the economic sphere. The country has numerous trade, economic and industrial enterprises, and financial organization of Chinese Muslims (Yuxiu & Feng, 2013).

Thus, the followers of Islam have a significant impact on ethno-religious, political, economic and cultural relations of the Chinese society (Dillon, 2005; Erie, 2016). Therefore, the study of the history and current state of Islam in

China is relevant for the solution of modern national, religious, socio-economic and political problems of contemporary Chinese society, and to develop a strategy for the further sustainable development of the Chinese state.

Currently the relevance and practical significance acquire the study of Islam in certain regions of China. It is particularly important to study the history of Islam in North-East China because, on the one hand, the followers of this religion have made a significant contribution to economic and cultural development of the North-Eastern provinces of China (Hueyun, 1993; Kafarov, 1996). On the other hand, today the Islam is one of the fastest growing religious denominations in the Heilongjiang, Jilin and Liaoning provinces (The religious life of Chinese Muslims, 1956; Walikhanov, 1984).

It must be emphasized that the study of identities of Chinese Islam affects a number of relevant philosophy, contemporary religious problems such as the adaptive mechanisms of culture, the interaction of autochthonous and allochthonous religions, role of religious institutions in socio-economic and political development of the society, social functions of religious organizations in public life, the influence of religion on the ethnogenesis, ethnic consolidation processes etc.

Ethno-cultural heterogeneity of Chinese Islam has defined its confessional identity (Sushanlo, 1971). As mentioned earlier, Islam was penetrated to China not only from the Arab missionaries, also was spread by Persians, Turks, Indians and it included the borrowing of Persian, Indian, Turkish origin from the beginning. In the era of Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties in the process of ethno-religious interaction of Muslims with the Han population the powerful Chinese stratum was added to these borrowings. As a result, Islam has acquired a distinct national character in China, which distinguishes it from all the "classical examples" and determines its uniqueness (Ching, 1993; Tsin, 2009).

### **Aim of the Study**

Consideration of main Islamic branches in China.

### **Research questions**

What are the features of Islam in China?

How did Chinese traditions influence Islam?

### **Method**

Metaphysical and dialectical methods of cognition are the methodological basis of the study. These methods help to reveal the subject of study in its



entirety and in a continuing state of development, to discover its axiological and praxeological aspects. Answers to the raised in the work questions are carried out based on the structural and functional approach, using methods of analysis and synthesis, which have enhanced the understanding of spirituality and religion to human and nation development.

### Data, Analysis, and Results

The peculiarity of Chinese Islam is determined, firstly, with its religious heterogeneity. In China there all three main branches of Islam: Sunnism, Shiism, and Sufism. Secondly, the unique nature of Chinese Islam is defined by close relationship with the traditional religions of China (Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism) and Chinese population folk beliefs. Chinese Islam has incorporated many specific features of the traditional religious culture of China, which heavily influenced on the religious consciousness and religious activities of Chinese Muslims.

Gedimu School (from Arabic «ancient» is the oldest in Chinese Islam. Its followers believe that it was founded by Muslim Arabs in the Tang era. Other trends took shape much later: during the Ming and Qing dynasties reign. The name of the school Huphaye in Arabic language means "quiet". Probably the name of this school is due to the fact that its followers believed it was necessary to keep an even breath and to pronounce the verses very quietly when reading the Quran. The representatives of this movement had no single center, and constantly traveled in the Muslim villages of China. The emergence of the Gedilinie School is the result of the adaptation of Islam to the China religious traditions. The followers of this sect embraced some Buddhist and Taoist rituals, so sometimes this trend was called "Islamic Taoism". Followers of Ihawani School (brotherhood) played with the idea of Islam reform following the principles embodied in the Quran (Hueyun, 1993).

Relations between adherents of different madhhabs and schools were generally peaceful, but sometimes there were disputes. Most disagreements concerned questions of ritual: bathing before prayer (supporters of Hanafi school insisted on taking douche, not only washing the face and hands), the way of reading the Quran, about the lunar reckoning, about taking off shoes when performing certain prayers and other. In the nineteenth century such disagreements between supporters of the different schools became acute and developed into conflict. So, Archimandrite Palladius (P.I. Kafarov) showed that the broad resonance had disputes among Chinese Muslims on the question of necessary of gestures with the fingers when pronouncing the proclamation "There is no God but Allah". Supporters of one party insisted that with utterance of this phrase the index finger should be lifted, the other insisted that three fingers should be lifted instead of one. Differences have become so acute that the warring groups of Muslims stopped joint visit the Mosque (Kafarov, 1996).

In daily life Chinese Muslims Sunnis adhere strictly to the five main religious obligations: the study of the Quran, performing five times daily prayers, making donations, keeping the fasts and the Hajj.

The study of the Quran is carried out in the mosque under the leadership of Ahun. Daily prayer consists of the following sequential actions: proclamation, right standing, reading the Quran, bowing, prostrating, and ritual seat. Prayer is performed five times a day: the prayer before sunrise, noon prayer, evening

prayer before sunset, the evening prayer after sunset and the night prayer. Besides daily five prayers, Muslims gather in the mosque on Friday's solemn service, during which they perform special prayers "Salat-al-Juma".

Religious fasting was obliged to abide by all adult Muslims. Such adult Muslims are considered to be to 12 years old boys (after the circumcision rite) and girls older than 9 years among Hui people. It is forbidden to fast women during menstruation and childbirth. Fasting occurs in the ninth month of the Muslim calendar. Its end is marked by Eid al-Fitr ("Little Hyde") is also known as the Feast of Fast-Breaking. As a rule, after the holiday completion the head of the family contributes to the Foundation of the Muslim community zakat prescribed by the Sharia tax on property and income of a Muslim. This tax is levied once a year, usually it amounts to 2.5% of the total annual income of the family.

An important religious duty of the Chinese Muslims was considered as the make the pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj). However, due to the fact that the Hajj for the Chinese Muslims was not always possible (due to high material costs or because of the authorities' ban), spiritual leaders of Chinese Muslims formulated the doctrine that the pilgrimage to Mecca can replace regular and diligent attending Friday services (Sushanlo, 1971).

It should be noted that the practice of five important religious duties by Chinese Muslims does not differ from the common practice of Sunni Muslims. There are more substantial differences in the observance of religious holidays. Thus, Chinese Muslims (Hui) celebrate mainly just three holidays among 18 common Muslim holidays: Mawlid al-Nabawi - the birthday of Muhammad, "Little Hyde", "Great Hyde" (The religious life of Chinese Muslims, 1956). Northern Hui celebrate "Little Hyde" (Feast of Fast-Breaking) the final post of Ramadan with the greatest pomp.

On the night of the fasting completion faithful Muslims gather in the mosque to worship, continuing from the evening prayer until midnight. Morning Prayer in most cases is performed under the open sky, during which the chief cleric of the mosque proclaims the post resolution. Upon returning home, the Muslims proceed to the ritual of "visiting", continuing three days. At this time the Muslims visit the house of each other. Firstly, boys enter who should be not only treated, but also be given money, then grown men, after the worthy men and the elders. Women visits are separate and can be performed within one month after the post end (Stratonovichi, 1965).

Chinese Muslims comply with all prohibitions required by Islam (ban on the use of alcohol, tobacco, pork, gambling, the usury, etc.) in everyday life. However, in the past these rules were not strictly observed in all Muslim communities of China. For example, Shoqan Walikhanov Kazakh scholar, ethnographer, historian, who studied communities of Chinese Muslims in North-Western region in the nineteenth century, noted that " ...Kashgari did not differ by religious fanaticism: they drank wine openly and there was no feast without women and music. Wine was fermented from mulberry berries, peaches and grapes. At harvest all got drunk and danced till you drop" (Walikhanov, 1984). Other Muslim communities led a more austere lifestyle. So, Nikolay Ostroumov wrote about the Hui of Gansu province as follows: "...by faith they are extremely strict and devout Sunni Muslim. In the mosques they read the text prayers in Arabic, and the explanation was done in Chinese. They cut a mustache as



Muslim, did not drink wine and vodka, did not smoke opium and tobacco..." (Ostroumov, 1879).

Thus, the degree of religious piety of Chinese Sunni Muslims was different. Probably the ritual attitude towards the precepts of Islam was defined by the traditional norms of consumer culture prevailed in a particular ethnic community of Chinese Muslims. Unlike Sunni Islam, Shia Islam has local distribution in the territory of China. Its followers are the small groups of Chinese Muslims – Pamir Tajiks inhabiting the outskirts of the North-Western region of China, and also separate groups of the Hui, living in the South of the country. Majority of Chinese Shia is the Ismaili sect followers (Berger & Bruk, 1972). Despite the fact that Shia has limited extent in China, this trend has a significant impact on the traditions and customs of Chinese Muslims. M. Dillon notes the popularity among Chinese Muslims the personal names associated with the family of Ali Ibn Talib and his descendants. In the opinion of this researcher, liberal status of women (the ability to pray in the mosque with men) typical for some communities of Chinese Muslims, is also a consequence of the Shiism influence (Dillon, 2005).

Sufism was more developed in comparison with Shi'ism in China. The emergence of this trend, according to Julia Ching, took place in the XVII century (Ching, 1993). In the XVIII century Sufi sect based in the North West of China by Ma Min-sin (Ting Xu Hui) became known in China. There is little information about the founder of the sect: he made a pilgrimage to Mecca and he studied in Yemen for some time. Followers of the new sect wore white clothes, and danced, sang, entered trance during the divine service in order to achieve union with Allah. Unlike Chinese Sunni Muslims, Ma Min-sin supporters insisted on the need for external manifestations of emotions and feelings while reading the Quran verses. So, reiterating the Koran, they loudly spoke the words, jumped up and rotated heads (Kafarov, 1996).

The activities of Ma Min-sin caused a mixed reaction among the Muslims of Northwest China and divided them into two camps: supporters of the Sufi leader, who formed "Xin Jiao" (New doctrine) and his opponents, represented the Orthodox version of Islam (Liao Jiao). The relationship between Xin Jiao and Liao Jiao was not good. In 1781 the conflict between the factions interfered with the Manchu authorities, supporting Liao Jiao followers. Ma Min-sin was arrested and executed. This execution caused a rebellion of the Xin Jiao supporters. Its head was disciple of Ma Min-sin Tien U. The center of the uprising was the Gansu province. To fight with the Muslims rebels the authorities chose the best troops, there were Salar and Hui Muslim divisions the Liao Jiao supporters among them. After the uprising the Chinese authorities severely punished the participants. There were executed more than one thousand Ma Min-sin and Tien-U active supporters. More than five thousand Muslims were deported in Ili and Yunnan. Xin Jiao sect was banned; all supporters' mosques of this direction were under demolition. Part of the Muslims after the defeat of the uprising immigrated to Russia.

However, the government failed to stop Xin Jiao activity, the followers of this movement exist in China today.

At the present time Sufism is widespread among Muslims of China. There are the different Sufi orders Qadiriyya, Kubrawiyya, Jahriyya, but the most influential Naqshbandi brotherhood. The relationship between Sufi orders and

Orthodox Islam are mostly of a peaceful nature. Entire Muslim clans often combine membership in the Sufi orders with participation in the Orthodox schools of Islam (Dillon, 2005).

All of the above mentioned schools and directions acquired in China pronounced national specificities. This fact is the result of a deep adaptation of Islam to the religious traditions of China. The level of perception of Chinese culture elements in different Muslim communities of China was not the same. The Muslim group Hui demonstrated the greatest degree of susceptibility of Chinese tradition.

It has already been mentioned that in the Ming era, the Muslims of China had attempted to interpret the history of Islam in the Confucian and Chinese Buddhist traditions categories. Later, in the Qing period, Islamic theologians sought to justify the existence of common ideological and religious bases of Islam and Confucianism. Chinese Muslim writers of 17-19 centuries persistently carried out the idea that Confucianism fundamentally no differed from Islam in their works. For example, the famous Islamic Theologian Ma Wen Bin (Ma-Ju Syed) wrote in the essay "Xing Zhen Zhi Nan" (1862): "Their literature /i.e. Confucianism/ as trees that could build mosques, each sect takes it for itself... The teaching of Ju /is/ dress. The Mohammed teaching is the food. /If people/ do not take our dresses, but eat our food, and then will be identified" (Kafarov, 1887). Islamic theologian of the nineteenth century Sun Ke An in his treatise "Qin Zhen Jiao Cao" postulated the ideological similarities of Confucianism and Islam: "that which for centuries does not overshadow is the truth; and that, with the continuation of centuries mutually cloud is the mind (thought). Only of the saintly sages have the one thought and identical truth... Holy sages of the Western countries Mohammed came after Confucius... Why /their/ speech is not one and the truths (teachings) completely agree with each other? Such as the thought is one and the same truth. The words of the ancients are fair: thousands of wise men have one thought and all the antiquity one law" (Kafarov, 1887).

In the early eighteenth century Muslim theologian Liu Xselan (Liu Zhi) in the essay "Tien-Fang-sing-li", attempted a philosophical synthesis of the monotheism and neo-Confucian teachings ideas about the individual nature of "sin" and "li" principle.

In order to express the Central principles of Islamic thoughts in understandable for most Chinese style, Muslim theologians borrow the basic categories and Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism concepts. For example, the Muslim writer of the eighteenth century Liu Ji Liang, the author of the treatise "Tian-fan-sin-li", described the structure of the Universe, relied heavily on the concepts of "Tai Ji" (the highest), borrowed from I Ching, the Buddhist terms "Wu Ji" (limitless), "Wu Shi" (beginningless), the Taoist categories Tao, Ying, Yang and others. Such notions as "jenji", "ushi", "shantsy" were widely applied in the writings of the Chinese Islam ideologists (Tsin, 2009). The use of the Chinese religious-philosophical tradition terms often led to the displacement of traditional Islamic concepts from the Muslims language. So, for example Shoqan Walikhanov wrote the Muslims of Northwest China called the God as Foy instead of Allah (Walikhanov, 1984).

Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism had an impact not only on theological terminology of Chinese Islam, but also on its religious side. Chinese Muslims honored not only Arab caliphs Abu Bekr, Omar, Osman, Ali as saints, also



Confucius (Kung shynjyn), Buddha (To shynjyn) (Sushanlo, 1971). The influence of Chinese religions on the ceremonies of Chinese Muslims' life cycle was notable. For example, the wedding ceremony of Chinese Muslims strongly resembled the Confucian ceremony. The influence of the China religious culture reflected in the Chinese Muslims' funeral ceremony: the dead persons were buried in traditional Chinese coffins; there were also used incense burners. Following Chinese tradition, the local Muslims established the braziers with smoking candles in the porch of mosques (Kafarov, 1996).

Chinese folk religion affected on religious beliefs and practices of Hui group Chinese Muslims along with Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. First of all, this fact is reflected in the existence of ancestor worship among Hui people. The Muslims of this community shared the traditional Chinese idea that the souls of deceased ancestors, if they did not show proper respect and attention that could otherwise harm living relatives. The Muslims of this community shared the traditional Chinese idea that the souls of deceased ancestors could harm living relatives, if they had not been honored proper way. In order to avoid harmful influence of dead ancestors, the Hui made a sacrifice.

As sacrificial animals a cow and a red rooster was often used. It was believed that the soul of a cow purified the soul of a deceased person, and the soul of the sacrificed rooster protected him/her from evil spirits. In the religious consciousness of Hui there were intricately combined the traditional Islamic concepts of the soul and its destiny with the ideas, developed in the popular religion mainstream. Hui believed that a person had several souls, each of which had its own name and performed certain functions. Overall, this group of Muslims viewed the souls and spirits of natural objects as intermediaries between man and Allah. Despite Islamic monotheism and the prohibition of worshipping other Gods and spirits, Hui worshiped many characters of Chinese folk religion. In particular, the Hui living in the countryside, sought rain from dragon Loon (Lun Wang). Muslim Hui celebrated the day of the patron saints of crafts.

There were spread numerous amulets, performing protective functions, brings good luck, etc among the Hui. One of the most used magic items was flat-lined triangle on which the Qur'an text was inscribed. Elements of folk magic were in the medical practice of Hui ahuns. They treated patients by whispering and reading the Quran, they blew and spat upon the patient in the face, drank water from the cups and saucers with extracts from the Quran (Stratonovichi, 1965; Sushanlo, 1971).

Thus, the analysis of historical documents and materials of scientific literature allows to state that the confessional structure of Chinese Islam was complex and heterogeneous. Along with traditional doctrinal and cultic components the Chinese Islam included, on the one hand, elements of the Confucian worldview, Taoist and Buddhist worship, and on the other hand, embraced a number of customs and beliefs, characteristic of folk culture. The specific features of Chinese Islam were most clearly manifested in the architecture of the device and mosques.

### Discussion and Conclusion

The majority of China's Muslims are Sunni. As is known, Sunni Islam is divided into four madhhab — the Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, and Hanbali. Among

Chinese Muslims, the most widely spread madhhabs are Hanafi and Shafi'i. The followers of the Abu Hanifa teaching dominate; they are among almost all groups of Chinese Muslims (the Hui, Uyghurs, Salars and other). Part of the Muslim communities in the North-West of China (Uyghurs, Salars, Hui and Turkmens) follows Imam Shafi teaching. According to the testimony of Grigorii Stratanovich, Hui North group particularly honors Imam Azam Islamic teachers of the sixteenth century, and his grandson Hajj Apakah (Stratonovich, 1965).

However not all researchers agree with this point of view. So, M. Sushanlo believed that "Imam Azam" (the Great teacher) is the honorary name of Abu Hanifa, the founder of the oldest Sunni madhhab (Sushanlo, 1971).

There are several schools developed under the Hanafi and Shafi'i madhhabs in China. These are Gedimu, Huphaye, Gedilinie and Ihawani schools.

Islam has a long history in China. Communities of Muslims exist here more than 1,300 years. During this time, Islam had undergone a difficult path of historical development, it was able to adapt to the social, political and economic structures of Chinese civilization, to become an integral part of Chinese culture.

The proclamation of People's Republic of China in 1949 had a positive impact on the situation of Chinese Muslims. In the Constitution of the PRC the democratic rights and freedoms were enshrined. The Muslims of China gained their civil and political rights. The creating of the Xinjiang Uygur and Ningxia Hui Autonomous regions which the majority of residents were Muslims in the 50-ies of XX century played important role in the preservation and further development of spiritual culture, national and religious minorities of China. The PRC government in conducting social and economic reforms respected domestic and religious tradition of Chinese Muslims. In China the system of Islamic education was established. Muslims have an opportunity to influence the political and cultural life of the country through their own social organizations and the media; to communicate with their co-religionists from other countries; to perform the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina.

Subsequently the ethnic structure of Chinese Islam was significantly influenced by various factors of political, socio-economic and demographic character. As a result of these historical circumstances, Chinese Islam currently represents a massive multi-ethnic religious phenomenon. In Muslim communities of the North-East of the country Hui group occupy high positions. Analysis of materials on ethnic history and data of the scientific literature leads to the conclusion that the Hui are not a separate ethnic group or nationality; they are a separate ethnic and religious community of Chinese people. The existence of this ethno-confessional group is evidence of deep rooting of Islam in China.

### Implications and Recommendations

Since its introduction in China, the Muslim community was heterogeneous in its ethnic composition. This "primordial" ethnic diversity of China Muslim communities is a consequence of the fact that the Islam was not spread primarily through the missions and activities of the preachers; it was occurred through waves of migration and intermarriage in this country.

Confessional structure of Chinese Islam was complex and heterogeneous. Along with traditional doctrinal and cultic components the Chinese Islam included, on the one hand, elements of the Confucian worldview, Taoist and





Buddhist worship, and, on the other hand, Islam perceived a number of customs and ideas, which are popular to Chinese religious culture.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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