

CONVERSION TO ISLAM IN CHINA PREVIOUS FIELDWORK RESEARCH AND NEW OBSERVATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores an emerging social phenomenon of how non-Muslims convert to Islam in current China and suggests seven categories of determinants enforced that conversion. Following up the social life of newly converted Muslims in terms of acquiring Islamic knowledge and conducting religious rituals, in particular, it closely examines the transformation of cultural consciousness and religious practices when transferred from original social groups to the Muslim community. Compared to a conventional understanding that conversion may happen in the traditional Muslim concentrated locations, instead, it happens frequently in coastal cities and metropolises where less ethnic imprint and stereotype existed. The inclusive, pluralistic and modern urban culture gives the converts free choice and opportunities to practice Islamic culture. The different contexts from which the converts accept and acculturate Islam will also make sense to their ethnic identity, factional adherence, and cultural inclination.

Keywords: Conversion Islam, Hui; Han, cultural transformation, Identity

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Academic focus embarked on the phenomenon of conversion to Islam is undertaken mostly by scholars in Europe and the United States. Ma Qiang (2011) makes a detailed summary and review on this. In China, Shi Wei'an (2001), a Muslim convert initiates an investigation since the new millennium, followed by Li Weijian's (2006) discussion of the phenomenon of convert Muslim groups through his findings. Ma Qiang (2006) among other scholars employs one chapter to discuss the issues of Han Muslims from the perspective of Anthropology when working on diversified Muslim communities in Guangzhou. He Xiulin (2008) approaches such religious conversion as a historical phenomenon, analyzing the features of this phenomenon and summarizing the ways of Islam spread among the Han ethnicity.

Han Muslim convert Song Qiyuan (2009) interviews 14 informants, focusing on how cultural background intertwined normally with Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism has shaped Han's ideology during the pre-conversion period. He ascribes the reason of converting Islam to the impact of socio-cultural background, to the individual pursuit of religious affiliation, and to the interethnic marriage. Song vividly portrays the features of this group with reference to the analysis of religious practice, familial relationship, social interaction and cultural cognition of his informants. Similarly, as a Han Muslim, Zhang Zaili (2010) publishes one reflexive collection with content ranging from the process of conversion, individual thinking and personal religious reflection. Stories of such conversion are also sporadic in journals sponsored by China's Islamic Association and magazines processed by Muslim communities, and in several Muslim online communities as well.

Among all contributions to this field, Ma Qiang particularly worked with Muslim converts since his Ph. D. period in Sun Yat-sen University in 2002. Of 71 Muslim converts were interviewed from 2004 to 2009, and regarding those interviews, Ma published two volumes of exploratory monographs in 2013. The vol. 1 explores theoretical aspects of conversion Islam in China; vol. 2 documents field data collected between the years mentioned above (Ma, 2013). With the development of globalization and modernization and its subsequent influence on transnational mobility, the technological innovation of media as well as cultural exchange, the discourses of conversion to Islam become more pluralistic which is deserved to be concerned. The global spread of Islamophobia tends to change the political and religious context of conversion in China, which in turn makes the phenomenon of conversion to Islam more controversial. This paper is based

on the existing investigation of Muslim converts decades ago, including the continuous concerns of their life afterwards, the supplement works of in what way new converts interact with the authors, and of new materials presented the overall framework of contemporary conversion Islam in China.

In many years of my (Ma Qiang's) research career, the vast majority of informants willingly participates in the interview and even do not mind being disclosed their personal information. Yet also some Muslim converts refuses my interview with the reasons as follows: 1. Because of the sensitivity of ethnic and religious issues in China, disclosing their religious identity would cause inconvenience in their daily life, for instance, civil servants in government departments and college students prefer not to be discussed by others about their beliefs. 2. Individuals who actually are 'contextualized' by love affairs, marriages, and employment; affiliation to Islam would be more convenient in daily life, nevertheless the lack of Islamic knowledge and religious practices make them merely the 'nominal' Muslims. 3. People who do not understand the significance of my research would also be reluctant to participate in the interview. 4. Some of the converts who I knew very well made the interview and the conversation could not be conducted from an 'outsider' perspective.

The Information of Interviewees

	Number	
Gender	male	32
	female	39
Nationality	Han majority	64
	Ethnic minority	7 in all, including 2 Manchus, 1 Zhuang, 1 Dong, 1 Li, 1 Bai, and 1 She nationalities.
Date of Birth	1 was born in the 1940s, 1 was born in the 1950s, 3 were born in the 1960s, 25 were born in the 1970s, 37 were born in the 1980s, 3 were born in the 1990s, and 1 remained Unknown.	
Convert Date	2 converted in the 1980s, 12 converted in the 1990s, 56 converted in the 2000s, and 1 remained unknown.	
Occupations	18 are students, 18 are company (unit) staffs, 10 are independent traders, 8 are company (restaurant) owners, 6 are housewives, 2 are teachers, each one is of Imam, day labor, decorator, retirees, research personnel, house-keeping service personnel, restaurant staff, communication technician, and farmer.	

Place of Birth	Guangdong (13), Henan (7), Shaanxi (6), Sichuan (5), Gansu (5), Yunnan (4), Zhejiang (3), Shanxi (3), Beijing (2), and each 1 from Liaoning, Guangxi, Xinjiang, Guizhou, Anhui, and Hunan; Hainan, Jilin, Chongqing, Jiangsu, Ningxia, Hubei, Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang, Shandong, Fujian, Hong Kong, and Taiwan.
Place of Converting	mosque (22), company (12), friends' house (10), homes (5), Arabic schools (4), public schools (3), rental houses (3), worship places (2), registration agency (2), on the road (2), relative's house (1), restaurant (1), Zhangjiachuan county(1), unknown (3)
Factors contributed to converting	Social communication and encounters (34), mission work (18), marriage (17), reflection (16), reading (14), studying (10), communicating with others (10), religious interests (2), internet (2), curiosity (1).

I. FACTORS OF THE CONVERTING

With the fieldwork, I find the reasons for converting to Islam are comprehensive and multi-facets that rare people convert Islam because of one single factor. Yet there are priorities and less important factors that foster those conversions. Among 71 interviewees, 34 people converted results from social communication and encounter, 18 are because of religious propaganda, 17 are because of the necessity of marriage, 16 are influenced by self-reflection, 14 are of reading relevant materials, 10 each is of learning and contacting with others, being interested in religion marks 2 people, obtaining information via internet accounts for 2, and 1 does for curiosity.

1. Social Communication and Encounter

The interaction with Muslims is undoubtedly the most important and direct factor of the conversion. The more opportunities one non-Muslim is in contact with Muslims in daily life, the greater the likelihood of this kind of religious conversion. Those college students who are constantly in contact with Muslims, those who work in the company run by Muslims, or the bilateral parties who interact with each other in business activities have gradually been influenced by Islamic teachings and eventually converted to Islam after a certain period. The people converted to Islam via social interaction amount 44, accounting for 62% of the total number of converts.

2. Religious Propaganda

Since the 1980s with the development of newly enacted religious policies, the concepts of coexistence of civilization and cultural diversity provide believers certain space and opportunity to express their beliefs. A tendency that fewer people would take theism and atheism as the antithesis yet likely to prefer an understanding of mutual respect and harmonious symbiosis comes into being. Under this circumstance, the awareness of propagandizing Islam and its associated activities is developed, which enables historical restraints and the conservative ideology of Islam to be loosely stated. With increasingly opening up to an outside world that allows immigrants from foreign countries to live in the metropolis, a cultural exchange enables Muslims to play the role of 'cultural interpreter' in China. Foreign Muslims who participates in business activities in China have interacted with and interpreted their culture to the non-Muslim population enthusiastically. This kind of interpretation might not be for missionary purposes yet is increasingly for cultural communication and bridges the gap between the bilateral business relationships. For instance, manufacturers and customers, exchanging students in universities are willing to spread Islamic culture (dietary taboos, customs and religious practices) in order to facilitate daily interactions. These are often the cases that make people increasingly interested in Islam.

3. Love Affairs and Marriage

Among female converts, love affairs and marriage are two main reasons that led to the conversion. Some state though converting to Islam is mainly because of their husband yet it still remains a personal choice after careful consideration. It is notable that several interviewees lack fundamental knowledge about Islam. Basically, they do not participate in religious practice. Occasionally, some of them remain in a state of suspicion or multiple beliefs. Among the interethnic marriage between the Chinese and foreign Muslims particularly, how much male Muslims has presented their religious devotion would directly affect the attitude of female converts and their study dynamic of religious knowledge. I find that even if a conversion ceremony is held, it remains one situation in which the female converts knows nothing about Islam in Sino-foreign marriage. During my research in Huaisheng Mosque in Guangzhou, I find several women who barely understand Islam that she is rejected by the *Imam* to give the certificate of *Nikah* for their marriage. The degree of the piety of Muslim converts within marriage would be directly related to their Muslim partner's religious faithfulness and expectations. The religious ethics, devotion, morality, and the degree of loyalty to Allah of

their Muslim partner would be exemplars. It will not only affect the religious belief of the converts, but also affect the relationship between the converts and their patriarchal relations, and also social relations such as friends and colleagues.

4. Reading, Learning and Reflecting

Factors of reading, learning and reflecting a total of 40 person-times, indicating more than half of the informants have seriously thought on the path to Islam. Normally they have a deeper understanding of their chosen beliefs throughout reading and learning. Yet before those processes, respondents generally have access to the Muslim population, Islamic classics, social networks or media associated with Islam. People who long studied the Christian faith, Qigong, Yin & Yang (Ba Gua/Eight Diagrams) eventually decide to choose Islam. For example, some purchase a copy of the *Qur'an* during their studies but do not understand many of them after doing some reading. In trying to refute the contents of the *Qur'an* readers embark on the research on this point, yet interestingly, people are eventually conquered are often the case. One of Ma Qiang's familiar informants, Khalid, was one Han convert who now engaged in the Islamic journal after his conversion to Islam. His conversion history dates back to the period when he works in Shanghai. He meets one *Imam* who tells him that the *Qur'an* has always been the truth and Islam, too. Yet he feels not to be convinced so he determines to refute *Imam* via learning. In doing some grounded research on Islam, he travels far northwest China to study Arabic, however, it surprises to find that he eventually converts himself to Islam.

The main considerations potential converts concerned include where do people come from? Where are you going? Why do people live? Why do Muslim women wear headscarves? Why do you want to worship five times a day, don't eat pork, don't drink alcohol, don't worship Buddha? Why give alms to the poor? Why does the sun rise and set? In short, these questions mainly involve natural phenomena and laws, the nature and meaning of life, and the behavioral norms of Muslims. It is the curiosity and questioning of these questions that give individuals the motivation to learn and think about religion.

In terms of reading contents, respondents mentioned the *Qur'an* the most, followed by the *Riyādh Sālihīn*, *Sahīh Bukhārī*; also enlightening and popular readings such as *Stories from the Qur'an*, *Following Me for Preyer*, *Priority among Muslim Behaviors*, *To People Who Ask Where the God Is*, *Introduction to Islam*, *Muslim Women*, *The Wisdom Teaching of Qur'an*, *Islamic Essence*, *The Qur'an in the Computer*, *How do I believe in Islam*, *Questions and Answers to the Belief*, *Scientific Understanding of Islam* are often welcomed.

5. Conversion and Social Media

The Internet remains another major channel for interviewees to acquire Islamic knowledge, and even often its impact turns out to be more convenient and far-reaching than traditional printed media. Web pages and Muslim virtual communities prevails on the Internet since 2000; missionary and Islamic audiovisual materials could be found on sites such as Baidu (www.baidu.com), Sogou (www.sogou.com), and Wole (www.56.com); E-books, video communities (such as Guagua community), voice classrooms (such as Sina UC Zhongmu classroom), QQ group and community, SMS gain significance in promoting and popularizing Islamic culture. Since 2011 especially WeChat becomes the most popular mobile application that it has provided as a tool without temporal and special limitations to communicate and acquire information. At present, WeChat becomes the most important religious communication media, which to some extent transforms the way in practicing Islam. For example, the Red Packet of WeChat turns out to be one convenient payment method for *Zakat* (alms), donations, patronage, and gifting which also has transcended physical boundaries by smartphone. It paves new paths for potential converts in obtaining religious materials and weaving their religious network simultaneously.

Generally, the Hui people are adeptly applying new media technologies to promote Islamic beliefs. In January 2011, the most influential Chinese website—*China Muslim* (www.2Muslim.com)¹ — has added more than 70 Chinese entries and more than 30 entries of foreign Islamic websites. With the click of a mouse, you can get basic teaching materials, such as worship, ceremony, Qur'an and so on. Some *Imams* also organize religion-related activities such as Website and WeChat lectures, online Islamic knowledge learning and discussion of doctrines. WeChat groups such as 'New Muslim Homeland', 'Han Muslim Group', 'Guangzhou Muslim', 'Muslim Girl', 'Sufi Home', 'Return to Islam' and others, QQ groups and communities play a significant role to integrate Han Muslims and other ethnic Muslims. By the 10th March 2011, the number of registered QQ Groups on the Forum section of *China Muslim* reach 691 entries. All of these groups relate to such keywords as the Hui ethnic group, Islam, Muslim. Local WeChat groups, business groups, different age groups, and interest groups constitute most online communities. According to Little Pony, the super moderator at *China Muslim* by the 10th March 2011, there are around 1000 registered QQ groups via the platform of *China Muslim*.

¹ It was opened on October 1, 2003 by some Muslim university graduates and was shut off on December 10, 2016 allegedly because of Net Management by the government.

From 2011 onwards, with the gradual popularization of smartphones and the widespread use of WeChat, the QQ group's missionary role tends to be reduced. Mobile phones, rather than previous computers, play as a more important role in the phenomenon of conversion.

Paper media consisted of editorial publications mainly are sponsored by local Islamic associations. Magazines and newspapers were often seen as *Chinese Muslim*, *Gansu Muslim*, *Yunnan Muslim*, *Ningxia Muslim*. In addition, *Exploration (Kaituo)*, *Plateau (Gaoyuan)*, *Amin*, *Cultural Stream (Wenhualiu)*, *Focus (Guangzhou)*, *Muslim Digest (Musilin Wenzhai)*, *Reverberation (Huixiang)*, *Muslim Newsletter (Musilim Tongxun)*, *Horizon (Dipingxian)* are other purely private magazines and newspapers, nevertheless, most of which are unfortunately stopped circulation due to religious management. Attention is paid by civic periodicals with an interdisciplinary perspective that also plays a certain missionary role.

The above-mentioned media break the monopoly account of official radio, television and newspapers on religious discourses opening up new carriers for the propaganda of Islamic culture and giving way to 'potential convertors' or seekers to facilitate access to beliefs. This is one of the main reasons for the phenomenon of conversion in the context of modernization.

6. Psychic Events

For some converts, spiritual events such as dreaming, hearing the voice of the calling for prayer (*Adhān*), feelings from the guidance of Allah in life (*Hidāyah*) are also reasons for their conversion. Someone encounters difficulties in life and get unexpected help; ones who learn how to wear a headscarf in their dreams; mothers (during the hospitalization) who encountered several Muslims who taught them a simple *Dhikr*; people who dream of an older in white; people who constantly heard *Adhān* in their dreams for a few days have converted themselves to Islam, as the Muslim converts thought all these trigger them to think about the spirit of Allah, and to accept Islam.

7. Pursue personal improvement

Some individuals hope to improve their personal morality, cultivate sentiment and souls through religious practice. Once believes Islamic teachings are consistent with their understanding of life, they would willingly convert themselves. Most converts state that with this newly gained faith they feel to be improved with clear soul and goals, holding grateful and happy attitude for their life.

II. RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE AND THE PRACTICE OF THE CONVERTS

1. Acquisition of Religious Knowledge

Similar to Rambo's (1993) notion of 'religious advocator', ordinary Muslims has played a role of enlightening to interpret Islam. With long period interaction with potential converts, advocators can explain basic norms and notions but are lack of deep understanding to resolve complex and in-depth belief issues.

2. Grassroot Missionaries

Missionaries are the most active entity that though they are short of number are equipped professionally. With the increasingly opening up to the outside world, Chinese society absorbs the influence caused by other missionary activities and the *Talbīgh Jamā'at* among the South Asian Muslims. In some parts of China, Muslim missionaries begin to narrate the almighty of Allah, the message of the prophet Muhammad and the life of his disciples, the morality and life of Muslims and the basic religious work for Muslims as well. Such activities also cater for the requirements of the non-Muslim grassroots to be acculturated into Islamic life.

3. The State Authorized *Imams*

For the converts, *Imams* in local mosques are of the most direct expertise resource to get religious exhortation. It is also a religious mission endowed to *Imams* by this new era which nevertheless is different from their conventional responsibility of teaching *Mullah* in the mosque. Unlike the grass-root missionaries, *Imam* is recruited by Muslim communities and authorized by the state, representing themselves as orthodoxy and authority. *Imam* regards the mosque as the home, awaiting the consulting for potential converts. Interestingly and comparatively, people who consulted *Imam* in local mosques are less common than the other channels by which potential converts take to convert themselves. It might be because *Imam* conducted a religious practice in the mosque which remains close to the local non-Muslim community and lacks the opportunity to propaganda Islam to others. The impression that non-Muslims believe Islam does not pay attention to external propaganda might result from the fact that *Imam* represents as the core of religious authority. It leads the impression that Islam appears to be an ethnic-cultural legacy and imprint.

To obtain more systematic religious knowledge, and to learn religious practice and

meritorious work, the free lancers of new Muslim converts have chosen to study in various Arabic schools in China and even in Islamic countries. In doing so, they intend to solve confusion caused by the lack of relevant Islamic and religious knowledge. In addition, WeChat, Internet, books and daily interactions with other Muslims could also be channels to acquire certain knowledge though it might segment the knowledge.

4. Content of Religious Knowledge

The belief seeker usually asks Muslims about their daily habits, for instance, why don't eat pork? Why do you want to worship? By paying attention to customs, they gradually deepen the belief in *Allah* as the only God. In addition, the seeker will gradually understand six pivotal beliefs, the five pillars of Islam, the doctrine of Islam and the Islamic law. Observing and understanding the details of Muslim daily life is the most direct channel for the seeker to acquire religious knowledge. For example, most of the converts learn the fundamental doctrines of Islam by means of media tools such as mobile phones, computers and so forth. Alternatively, using Pinyin, Chinese characters, English letters and the Roman alphabet are also the means to learn Islamic knowledge.

5. Religious Practice

I find that most of the converts abide by the religious practice more seriously than the born Hui Muslims, such as prayer, fasting, and giving alms to the adequate peoples. Compared with the born Muslim, women converts are inclined to wear headscarves and long robes, attach importance to housework and educate their children, and assist their husbands. Most of the converts have experienced the stage of internalization of belief through thinking and learning, and accept a series of the preaching of belief through rationality, thus would pay more attention to religious practice. In my fieldwork, most of the converts are found that no matter what kind of social environment they are immersed in, conditions for practicing Islam and completing the daily compulsory religious duties have always been done. In general, the religious practice of the convert is usually more serious and rigorous than the born Muslim.

III. THE SOCIAL COMMUNICATION OF CONVERTS

1. The Social Stratification of Communication among Converts

a. Ethnic Perspective

Two ethnic groups—the Han (or other minorities) and the Hui (or other Muslim ethnic groups in China) are the main groups for the converts to interact with. The Hui group is undoubtedly the largest community as a cultural resource, especially in terms of beliefs and religious ceremonies. The Hui obtains more resources nationwide, therefore remaining the most direct and frequent exchange groups for the Muslim converts.

b. Cultural and Religious Perspective

This situation could be divided into a group of original cultures and religions (mainly Buddha, Taoism, Christianity, folk religions, or multi-faith, atheism), and of the current Islamic culture and belief. Topics about how to integrate the relationship between the two are always favorable.

c. Nationality, Linguistics and Culture Perspective

Globalization has naturally integrated Chinese Muslims into a global *Ummah* system. Individuals who converted to Islam result from contacting with foreign Muslims and associating with interethnic marriages would not only confront original non-believing groups and the Muslim minority groups in domestic but also involve with the foreign Muslim groups. Muslims from different regions and ethnic groups bring the cultures of Arab, South Asian, Indo-Pakistani, Malay, Central Asian and African to the life of converts.

d. Social Space for Interaction

Social space is presented as two main categories: Virtual space—including WeChat groups and moment, QQ groups, the forum section of each Muslim website and geographical communities, friend groups formed by various private blogs, as well as internet-based media platforms—is convenient for converts to acquire and supplement religious knowledge. Physical interactions have been initiated via these virtual spaces, such as netizen gatherings, online community activities, making virtual space a platform for converts to establish physical interactions thus forming their own social networks.

2. The Changes of Social Interactions

Converting to one religion is not only the transformation to one particular faith, but also indicates a series of changes in secular and spiritual life. For instance, one would change his

cultural consciousness, social groups, and personal life standards and so forth. Switching one faith to another, or from non-belief to gain a new one, converts establish new social network connected with Muslim society, and gain the membership in community activities, such as the sacred ceremonies of the Friday and *Eid* prayer as well as *Mawlid Nabi*; *Eid* or online community organized tours, festival celebrations, blind date, physical exercise, donations and bailouts and so on, which all aim at sharing community resources.

To a large extent, the conversion will lead to a change of both social interactions and the degree of intimacy. Most of the converts experience a process of re-constructing their social networks. The occupation, education level and living environment of the interviewees will also affect the degree of the change of social groups. In general, people who converted to Islam would experience a great change in their social networks. Except for the consanguineal relationship which tied people with blood, converts' social relations such as friends, daily contacts, and close partners witness a tendency of change toward Muslims. The level of intimacy with the original non-Muslim friends would become weakened definitely.

3. The Boundaries of Social Interaction

In effect, conversion cause changes in world view, diet, customs, and religious practices and form the new boundary between the converts and their original cultural groups. For instance, ideological concepts, dietary taboos, festival customs, as well as a religious practice—worship and fasting—became the most important communication boundaries, making converts as the “strangers” and “others” of their original cultural groups. The Islamic faith becomes the core value of a social network of converts to live their life. Landmark is also forged to judge behaviors as obligatory or necessary, legal (*Halāl*) or illegal (*Harām*), desirable or non-desirable act in terms of their new-carried belief. According to these criteria, the converts would avoid, stay away, reject and criticize the customs, beliefs and other activities of the original cultural groups. Such behaviors will aggregate divergence and unfamiliar sense between the converts and the consanguineal relation and friends, separating the converts from original cultural belonging and consanguineal identity.

The feelings of sincerity, pragmatism and equality that the converts receive in the faith group are different from the feelings of suspicion, worry, discrimination in his original secular groups. All attitudes, works, behaviors, concepts caused by the conversion will change the interaction circles of converts.

IV. ATTITUDES TO CONVERTS FROM ORIGINAL AND CURRENT CULTURAL GROUPS

1. Original Cultural Group

The original cultural group includes four categories of relationships—relatives, friends, colleagues, and local inhabitants. For members who converted to Islam would arise concern among the familial network as it concerns about familial life and individual destiny, therefore four attitudes—including strong rejection, fear and opposition, approval, neither approval nor opposition would put forward. The converts usually have experiences of worry, concern, discussion, explanation, and even argument with family members. The majority of family members hold the attitude of fear and opposition and neither support nor opposition, less family strongly reject or fully agree with conversion.

Those who have disagreements with family members due to conversion, or who are subject to family opposition, complaints, rejection, and even severance within a certain period of time, generally go through five stages of conflict, detention, mitigation, reconciliation, and integration. It is impossible to sever the family bonds in China, and integration makes the converts more toughed which to some extent could strengthen their gratitude to the new faith. In particular, female converts in interethnic marriage have more or less psychological pressure in the early stage. In particular, those cases that are strongly opposed by family members generally reach reconciliation with consanguineal relatives after having children born. For example, after returning to the natal family, the family will purchase new cookware, *Halāl* cooking materials, and help to care for children and allow them fulfilling religious practices such as worship and fasting at home.

If it were not asked, the converts generally would not expose their conversion to friends or colleagues. The beliefs of converts are often ‘discovered’ by touching the boundaries of daily interactions. Friends and colleagues usually are indifferent to or feel converts strange and bizarre. They believe that faith is self-disciplined and alienate to friends invisibly. Whether converts could handle the relationship with friends and colleagues very well would make an influence on their integration into society.

2. Current Cultural Group

Great welcome normally will be given to the converts by traditional Muslims. Islam believes that persuading people to embark on the path of conversion is great merit, and believes

that Allah will give special kindness and care to the newly converted individuals. Traditional Muslims highly expect that converts will become devout Muslims as soon as possible. In reality, I find that different ethnic individuals normally would confuse their beliefs and ethnic identity, which made some traditional Muslims believe only those who also change their ethnic identity is a clear declaration of conversion to Islam. On the contrary, in some areas, the traditional Muslim would doubt the motivation and behaviors of the converts if they do not prefer to change their ethnic identity. Sometimes it also will cause frustration and emotional injury of the converts. With the authors' field experience, the attitudes of the current faith groups to the converts either welcome, or acceptance, or wait and see, or expectation.

The attitude of the current belief group towards the converts depends on the local cultural environment in which the group is located, on the individual's understanding of Islam, as well as the overall cultural quality of the local Muslims, for instance, tolerance, religious knowledge and ethics, moral standards, and the behavior of the converts. In general, the current religious community normally will welcome and accept the converts, yet also has paid more attention to the religious practice of the converts.

V. MUSLIMS AND NON-MUSLIMS IN THE VIEW OF CONVERTS

1. The Way Converts View Muslims

The feelings and evaluations of converts to Islam vary greatly depending on factors such as the individual quality, interaction history, and communicative objects. Retrieving the vocabulary mentioned in the interview data includes both positive and negative evaluations. Positive comments such as Muslims are clean, honest, optimistic, easygoing, kind, honest, trustworthy, kind, enthusiastic, equal, advanced, intelligent, hardworking, simple, hospitable and so forth are often mentioned. Negative includes being conservative, closed, not punctual, not creditworthy, unruly, unreasonable, hypocritical, blindly arrogant and so on. The reason negative comments were formulated was that the converts believe that some people are born to be Muslim, yet they do not discipline themselves according to the teachings of Islam in their inner hearts and in real life. For instance, some people mentioned that there were few foreign Muslims who once arrived in China had drunk alcohol, eaten non-*Halāl* foods, disobedience to Islamic doctrine and lived a secular life. Such phenomena and impressions will negatively

affect the social interaction, conversion process and interaction of the converts. Muslims with good characters, dignified behaviors, and abiding by the canon of doctrine could often leave a deep memory and affection to the potential converts in the first impression, which stimulates them to gain an understanding of Islam.

The new converts also evaluate different Muslim ethnic groups with various comments. The behaviors and morals the traditional Muslim observed in daily life affect the views of converts on the whole ethnic groups. It is easy to attribute one particular individual's behavior to the characteristics of the entire religious group. Due to the newly established beliefs, Muslim converts often re-examine current social groups from the perspective of Islamic belief. Compared with traditional Muslims who have high value expectations for converts, the expectations of converts to the born Muslims are equally higher. Yet the secular and negative phenomena in the real life make it easy for converts to draw negative conclusions. For example, in some groups, Muslims who were less educated, illiterate, neglecting prayer, smoking, stealing, wearing improper clothing, less hygienic, speaking loudly and lack public awareness, gambling, drinking, deception, indulging themselves in a nightclub, being unreasonable, gangstering, and bullying will result in a negative evaluation. In this way, the converts will consider them as the 'non-Jiaomen' (without good religious qualities) and 'not a good Muslim'.

The converts usually evaluate traditional Muslims in terms of religious conduct, behavioral habits, and ways of interacting with others as well as speaking manners. In the process of conversion and interaction, Islam provides converts with a set of the inspection system to regulate themselves, as well as to measure other Muslims. Although there is a certain negative evaluation, most of the converts will eventually separate the ethnic identity from religious one after learning, and gaining a good understanding of Islam. The process of obtaining this cross-cultural identity allows converts to swing between Han culture and Islamic culture which was originally seen as the 'other' and moves from stranger to familiar. This cross-cultural experience will undoubtedly inspire the converts to reflect and criticize the narrow nationalism.

2. The way converts view non-Muslim

While affirming the positive aspects of non-Muslims, especially of their original cultural features, the converts often also self-reflected on original culture from the perspective of monotheistic beliefs. They generally considered the 'previous self' was superstitious or had

no faith. Without reflecting and guiding, one could not know the truth of Allah's uniqueness. For example, Buddhism, Taoism and folk religions are generally classified as idolatry from the perspective of Islam. Based on this they became retrospect Islamic belief, and negate the calculation of the odds, the psychic divination, and the astrology. The reflection on Christianity is mainly about the identity of Jesus Christ. They believe that Jesus is not Jehovah, but the prophet before Muhammad who was selected by God and was sent to the world to call on people to believe in God. In terms of how to evaluate non-Muslim groups, the converts mainly focus on the evaluation and reflection of non-Muslims' beliefs, including 'not knowing what they are believing' and 'having no faith' or 'believing in everything'.

VI. TRANSFORMATION OF THE CONVERTS' LIFE

Firstly, conversion could lead to changes in daily life, mainly in behaviors, ethics, morality, learning and work. The converts with systematically studied religious knowledge generally use *Hadith* as their own emulation, focusing on living with Muslim's behaviors and principles, such as greetings, giving alms, being honest and diligence. For such fields as bank interest, loans, futures, stocks, business, Muslim will judge them by Islamic law and decide whether to involve or not. Working legally and abandoning illegality are the sole principle of Islam. Some converts also suppress personal emotions according to the doctrine, quit smoking and drinking, change bad habits forged before converting, pay attention to hygiene and cleanliness, adhere to the prayer and fulfil fast. When interacting with non-Muslims will they affirm the changes in their living habits and maintain *Halāl* diet to avoid misunderstandings.

In addition, conversion can also lead to changes in professional identities, interests, and hobbies. For example, someone has been working in a non-Muslim company before converting that he might quit working in the Muslim company after converting; some females have given up the work of the bank and helped her husband to take care of their family business; some have given up the work of constructing a relationship between the customers by moving to Muslim areas to do business; some become *Imams* who are respected by Muslims; some have abandoned their former occupations in Hong Kong, but specialize in solving social affairs for Muslims and begin to pursue a master's degree in Islamic studies; also someone quit from a current job because they are not allowed prayer in the company. Those who engage in Islamic law prohibiting industries such as non-*Halāl* foods, or those who have difficulties in obtaining

Halāl diets, generally take the initiative to find suitable job opportunities.

What's more, some newly converted individuals are expecting spiritual experience and hope to gain more spiritual nutrition and higher belief experience through proper religious practices. Therefore, in addition to daily religious work, they also pay more attention to un-compulsory religious work (such as prayer more, do *Dhikr* more) in order to look forward to spiritual guidance and cultivation.

VII. ETHNIC MINORITY CONVERTS

Five of the seven ethnic minority informants have lived long-term in their original ethnic community where many of them are able to speak their own language, emotionally attached with the original group. The other two interviewees have been basically assimilated by the Han majority, and there is not much difference with the Han people. Minority converts have little difference with Han Chinese converts in terms of conversion motivation, psychology, reasoning, religious knowledge and practice, social interaction and so on. Yet unlike the Han converts, they live within original ethnic group since childhood and grow up with a more systematic view of the world and belief. It could say that there is a clear distinction between the original beliefs and Islamic faith with obvious boundaries. Thereby it is very difficult to cross the boundaries of those two faiths. However, in my fieldwork I find that except for minority converts in Yunnan who has a clear understanding of the Hui people that makes them strongly opposed to Islam, the other six informants do not encounter family resistance. The belief does not cause heterogeneity or excessive interference from the original ethnic group.

In analyzing this phenomenon, I believe that the autonomy of the minority converts is higher than that of the Han converts. The personality of the minority converts is more opening and independent that they could made choice of what kind of belief they would select; the minority converts are generally influenced by the Han culture, the national education and the local tradition. As one ethnic minority, Chinese Muslims also have experienced similar psychological and interaction experience in the minority/majority context. Compared to the Han majority, the Hui is easier to understand as an peripheral identified group with minor belief and culture; The cases of one is strongly opposed by the family reflect familiarity and understanding of the traditional Islamic community by the convert's family. In reality thereby people tended to stigmatise the Hui historically and stereotype the ethnic prejudice because of

particular individuals who are lack of morals and ethics. Such prejudice resulted in exclusion of Islamic culture in society.

Minority converts have deep feelings for their original ethnic group. After conversion, they are more likely to integrate into the mainstream faith group, for instance into the Hui community. Unlike Han converts, minority converts hardly formed new Muslim social networks as the Han converts do because of population size. Comparatively, minority converts are more straightforward and insist on their own views and choices. In terms of social interaction, the network expanded from the members of the original ethnic minority to the entire Muslim community. The Hui people and its associated marriage relations became the most connected group in their daily life. Among the 7 minority converts, 5 are married, including one married to the Malay, the other 4 (2 males and 2 females) to the Hui people.

VIII. FEMALE CONVERTS

Female converts outweigh males in number. It might be resulted of women's religious tendencies are higher than men's that they are more likely to be related to religious preaching on the one hand, and in effect, the number of non-Muslim women married to Muslim men in inter-ethnic marriage is much higher than its reversed situation on the other. The same belief marriage prescribed by Islamic law allows women to convert through marriage rather than men. Among 39 female converts, 14 are related to marriage which means more than one-third of the total number is observed. It is much higher than the circumstance that only one male convert was related to marriage was found.

The process of women's exposure to Islam compared to males is relatively simple and straightforward. Except for several females who passively accept Islam in order to cater to the faith of their Muslim husbands, most women generally learn about the religious meaning of why females are wearing headscarves and long-sleeved robes, and of why fasting and worshipping. Also, female converts show their sentiments to the stigmatization of Islam in society, such as conservative, strict, cumbersome, discriminating against women, which will lead to their conversion. Those who have internalized their beliefs through learning and reflecting would still abide by their beliefs even after being hit by a broken marriage. But women who do not internalize their beliefs, like men, will have repeated the actions of holding and abandoning their beliefs. So far my fieldwork shows the case that there are both

females and males left their Islamic faith, mainly because of the sloppy attitudes to faith, contextualized or utilitarian reasons of converting, the incomplete understanding of personal Islamic knowledge or stimulation of malicious behaviors from the born Muslims. Females and males experience different obstacles in their religious life. Women face more pressure, greater and more directness difficulties due to the changes in clothing and dress. Most convert women begin wearing headscarves, long trousers or robes that the change in clothing has caused many problems, even discrimination and resignation. Some people are accused by family members of wearing a headscarf. Some are abused by non-Muslim in their residency area. Someone may be told by their parents not to wear a headscarf before returning home because of the stress the parents are confronted with. Influenced by patriarchy and divergences in physical characteristics, most Chinese women are protected and instructed by the family. Therefore, the secret conversion without family permission usually leads to parents' dissatisfaction of this. Some people have concealed or delayed to tell their conversion so that the parents could gradually recognize and accept the fact that their children have converted to Islam, avoiding the emotional conflict in the consanguineal relationship.

Female voluntarily converted is more willing to tell their own beliefs and share their life experiences than men do. They narrate the religious and social experience. Female converts pay more attention to religious rehabilitation and their children's religious education, embarking on family tasks in the role of family educator. Via knowledge and thinking, female converts play the role of the interpreter of Islamic feminism, demonstrating the function of being exemplars and cultural enlightenment for Muslim women. This has been studied in many western female converts in the West.

IX. THE SIGNIFICANT TENDENCY AND REFLECTION

Along with the increasingly improving China's urbanization and globalization, cross-border immigrants have long lived in China and cross-border marriages become often in China (Ma Yan, 2011). If the converts in inter-ethnic marriage or the marriage between two Han Muslims shows the cultural bond embodied the relationship between husband and wife is the combination of the original Han culture and the new Islamic culture, the converts in transnational marriage thereby always show the Han women, regardless of whether they live in China or abroad will face the heterogeneous Islamic culture and ethnical culture of their

husbands. In terms of family integration and cultural adaptation, female converts could hardly make any reference to or imitate the others. It is difficult to form a social group with certain experience which requires social attention. When engaged in field investigations in Pakistan, I find that more than 30 women married to Pakistani males have established WeChat groups in 2018. They study religious knowledge and cultural customs and organize certain realistic interactions in order to exchange emotions and life experiences.

Interestingly, some females in transnational marriages are more familiar with foreign Muslims than Chinese Muslims. For converts, it affects the construction of the structure of their Islamic knowledge. For the people who live with foreign Muslims, the Islamic culture they experienced is different from Islam in China. Although lives in China, they construct an exotic Islamic culture with foreign characteristics. Such a phenomenon is worth exploring. There are of course also entire families who have converted to Islam abroad and fully integrated into local religious communities. For example, I interviewed one Han convert family living in Pakistan, in terms of religious affiliation, they have completely accepted the Pakistani *Barelvi* Islamic teaching and obeyed the *Chishti* order of Sufi tradition.

Chinese Muslims, including 10 ethnic Muslim minorities are concentrated in the northwestern region, yet interestingly it is not the frequent place where the conversion phenomenon happens. Normally, the converts maintain a strong relationship with the city. It is mainly concentrated in coastal cities and metropolises where migrant Muslims are mobilizing. The reason is that Chinese and foreign Muslims living in metropolises have exhibited Islamic culture and belief in different time and space on a daily life basis. The inclusive, pluralistic and modern urban culture gives the converts free choice and opportunities to practice Islamic culture. However, in the northwestern region, especially in the rural areas, Islam is bound to a certain ethnic group. The religious boundary becomes a characteristic of ethnic members, and it does not interweave with the life of non-Muslim groups. Cross-faith in rural areas is often seen as crossing ethnic boundaries. Affiliating to Islam is regarded as being the Hui ethnicity. In the traditional Han patriarchal system where blood bond remains strong, religious converting is considered as the betraying of sacred ancestor and the abandoning of patrilineal relation. In this sense, rare rural people would cross the ethnic boundaries to be the converts.

In addition, the loose degree of religious policy may offer certain social spaces for traditional Muslims in China to present their Islamic belief. But unfortunately, the influence of contemporary global Islamophobia to some radical nationalists in China who have been proposing Islamic threat and Muslim ignorant to agitate hostility and disharmony between

the Han and the Hui, Muslim and non-Muslim, which to some extent will make an impact on individuals' conversion to Islam. The different contexts from which the converts accept and acculturate Islam will also make sense to their ethnic identity, factional adherence, and cultural inclination. Both pragmatic observation and metaphysical generalization are needed to be done in terms of its diversity and particularity.

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