

Muslim Families in Northwest China*

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This paper studies differences in family behaviors and attitudes between Muslim Chinese and Han Chinese in Northwest China. The study is based on a quantitative analysis of data from a small household survey conducted in 2007 (n=633) and a qualitative analysis of in-depth re-interviews with 49 of the original respondents in 2008. We address the question of whether or not Muslim Chinese are more traditional than Han Chinese in family attitudes and behaviors and, if yes, explore reasons for the observed differences.

The Research Setting

The study site is in Gansu – a province in Northwest China. There are two main Chinese Islamic groups in Gansu: Hui and Dongxiang, two out of ten Muslim nationalities and 55 minority nationalities in China.¹ They respectively represent 0.74% and 0.03% of the national population.² The Han are the majority nationality of China, constituting 91.96% of the national population.³ The Hui speak the Chinese language and have adopted most of the cultural practices of the Han. Although the Dongxiang have their own spoken language, Chinese is their written language; moreover, having a long history of acculturation to the Han, most of them can speak Chinese.⁴ As a result, except for their Islamic religion, Hui and Dongxiang Chinese are both well acculturated into the Han culture and have adopted similar lifestyles.

As the most widely dispersed minority nationality, the Hui are concentrated in Gansu. The Dongxiang are a small minority, and most of them live in Gansu. The Hui constitute 6.29% of Gansu's total population, and the Dongxiang constitute 0.61%. Gansu is relatively poor, remote from coastal cities, and a good research site for comparing Muslim Chinese to Han Chinese in similar social and economic settings.

It has been known that Islamic religion is patriarchal (Morgan et al. 2002) and traditional in family practices (Zang 2006). In our own in-depth interviews in Gansu, both Han and Muslim respondents claimed that Muslims are more traditional and conservative.

Are the Hui and Dongxiang in Gansu significantly different from the Han in family attitudes and behaviors even though they have been well assimilated into the Han culture and live in similar socioeconomic situations? If differences exist, does religion play a role in producing the differences? This paper focuses on these two research questions.

¹ Muslim nationalities in China are divided by language. Turkic-speakers: Uygur, Qazak, Tatar, Uzbek, Salar, and Kirgiz; Mongolic-speakers: Dongxiang and Bonan; Persian-speakers: Tajiks; Chinese-speakers: Hui (Lipman 1997).

² Hui and Dongxiang are large in terms of their absolute population of 8,602,978 and 373,872. Census of Population and Housing, 1990 [China]: 1% Sample, National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1990.

³ Census of Population and Housing, 1990 [China]: 1% Sample, National Bureau of Statistics of China, 1990.

⁴ Encyclopedia of China, Disk09: Religion, Nationality, Sociology, Encyclopedia of China Press, 2006.

First, we examine whether or not Muslim Chinese are more traditional than Han Chinese in family attitudes and behaviors. We define traditionalism in terms of a widely accepted notion – developmental idealism (the belief that development is beneficial to a society) – and the amount of resistance to economic development and the changes in family behaviors associated with modernization, such as late marriage, low fertility, and high divorce rates (Thornton 2001).

Secondly, if there are differences between Muslim Chinese and Han Chinese, we wish to understand the reasons for these differences. Two main competing explanations emerge. The first is socioeconomic status. Although our study is restricted to Muslims and Han Chinese in similar communities, there may still be differences in socioeconomic status between the groups. In particular, our data show that the Han Chinese have more formal education and higher family incomes. We wish to explore whether the observed differences between Muslim Chinese and Han Chinese in family behaviors and attitudes are attributable to their differences in socioeconomic status. The second potential explanation is religion. It is possible that Muslim Chinese, despite their similar lifestyles and socioeconomic status to the Han, remain more traditional in their attitudes as a result of being influenced by their Islamic religion. To explore whether religion is a causal factor, we will study whether or not within the Muslim groups, the more religious are also more conservative than the less religious.

Data

This paper will be based on both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data were collected in the Developmental Idealism China Survey in Gansu, 2007. The dataset includes information from 633 respondents of 213 variables on Demographic Information as well as their understanding and attitudes toward development and family changes. The sample includes 548 Han, 48 Hui, 36 Dongxiang and 1 Tu respondents.⁵ The qualitative data were collected in the follow-up in-depth interviews in Linxia Autonomous Prefecture of Hui in Gansu, 2008. The sample for this dataset was selected as a sub-sample of the 2007 Gansu Survey. In total, the qualitative data include interviews from 49 re-visited respondents in the 2007 Gansu Survey, two local officials and one local imam. The sample includes 25 Han, 16 Hui and 11 Dongxiang respondents. The interviews were conducted on the following topics: the understanding of development; the relationship between development and social inequality, gender inequality, family behaviors, morality and religion; factors influencing one's economic well-being.

Variables

Independent variable: Han or minority (between-group comparison); whether or not attend religious serviced regularly, whether or not think religion is very important (within-group comparison).

Dependent variable:

Family behaviors: Age at first marriage, number of children ever born (for respondents 35 years old and above), and total family size.

⁵ This observation will be removed from analyses.

Family attitudes: variables are constructed from responses to a battery of attitude questions: whether or not it is better (1) for married children to live with parents, (2) to have gender equality, (3) to have an unmarried mother, (4) to have one child rather than three children, (5) to allow premarital cohabitation, (6) for elderly parents to live with their adult children, (7) to marry at 28 rather than at 22, (8) to choose one's own spouse rather than arranged marriage, (9) to have divorce rather than staying in an unhappy marriage.

Socioeconomic status: Years of education, self-reported total income in 2006, self-assigned social class.

For preliminary results, see Tables 1-3.

Table 1. Average Socioeconomic Status of Han and Muslims in Gansu, 2007

| Ethnicity | Average Years of Education | Average Self-Assigned Social Class | Average Total Income in 2006 |
|----------------|----------------------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Han (Excluded) | 7.50 | 3.61 | 1652.43 |
| Muslim | 6.26 *** | 3.37 | 1480.30 |

Note: Estimated from 2007 Developmental Idealism in China Survey. ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1. Education is coded: 3-Below elementary diploma; 6-Elementary diploma; 9-Junior high diploma; 12-Senior high diploma; 13-Vocational or tech diploma; 15-Associate degree from community college; 17-Bachelor degree or above. Self-assigned social class is coded from 0 (bottom) to 10 (top). Total income in 2006 is coded as: 250, Less than 500 Yuan; 750, 501-1000 Yuan; 1500, 1001-2000 Yuan; 3000, 2001-4000 Yuan; 6000, 4001-8000 Yuan; 11500, 8001-15000 Yuan; 20000, 15001-25000 Yuan; 42000, 25001 Yuan and above. Average total income in 2006 is calculated by regressing ln(income) on minority.

Table 2. Comparison of Family Behaviors between Han and Muslims in Gansu, 2007

| | Han | Muslims | Adjusted Han | Adjusted Muslims |
|---|-------|-----------|--------------|------------------|
| Age at First Marriage | 22.84 | 20.34 *** | 22.88 | 20.44 *** |
| Number of Children for Respondents 35 Years Old/Above | 2.55 | 2.72 | 2.46 | 2.61 |
| Family Size | 2.61 | 3.22 *** | 2.61 | 3.24 *** |

Note: Estimated from 2007 Developmental Idealism in China Survey. ***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1. The adjusted comparisons are conducted by doing regressions controlling for education, self-assigned social class and ln(income). The adjusted results are based on average years of education (7.50 for Han, 6.26 for Muslims), social class (3.61 for Han, 3.37 for Muslims) and income (1652.43 for Han and 1480.30 for Muslims).

Table 3. Comparison of Attitudes toward Changing Family Behaviors between Han and Muslims in Gansu, 2007

| | Han | Muslims | | Adjusted Han | Adjusted Muslims | |
|------------------------------------|------|----------|--|--------------|------------------|--|
| Married Children Living Separately | 0.48 | 0.30 *** | | 0.49 | 0.28 *** | |
| Gender Equality | 0.99 | 0.95 *** | | 0.99 | 0.96 ** | |
| Unmarried Mother | 0.64 | 0.73 | | 0.64 | 0.75 | |
| One Child Rather than Three | 0.80 | 0.70 * | | 0.81 | 0.72 | |
| Premarital Cohabitation | 0.04 | 0.02 | | 0.03 | 0.01 | |
| Elderly Living Alone | 0.22 | 0.06 *** | | 0.21 | 0.06 *** | |
| Marry at 28 Rather than 22 | 0.52 | 0.26 *** | | 0.53 | 0.27 *** | |
| Choose Own Spouse | 0.97 | 0.82 *** | | 0.98 | 0.84 *** | |
| Divorce | 0.58 | 0.55 | | 0.59 | 0.55 | |

Note: Estimated from 2007 Developmental Idealism in China Survey. *** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$

All the shown statistics are the proportions preferring the behaviors listed respectively for Han and Muslims. The adjusted comparisons are conducted by doing regressions controlling for education, self-assigned social class and $\ln(\text{income})$. The adjusted results are based on the average years of education (7.50 for Han, 6.26 for Muslims), social class (3.61 for Han, 3.37 for Muslims) and income (1652.43 for Han and 1480.30 for Muslims).

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