

# **The Sound of Faith: Chinese Women's Mosques, Islamic Resurgence and Religious Agency**

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## **Preface**

What amounts to a meaningful contribution to the Festschrift for Peggy Morgan? It is a contribution written for a friend and mentor, and for a colleague who provided me with opportunities to share work-in-progress with members of the seminars Peggy convened for so many years during her years of teaching at Oxford. These seminars offered an intellectual focus and discursive space for many of us, irrespective of our topic and disciplinary approach to religion and religious studies. Under her guardianship, space was created for informed knowledge of religious traditions, whether global in reach and organization or localized in origin, constitution and impact, to shine light on the multiplicity of meanings concealed in the term 'religion'. And I remember well the sense of home-coming when arriving in Peggy's seminar, the smile with which we were greeted when entering the seminar room and, at the same time, the sense of anticipation that came with speakers' explorations of a vast spectrum of meanings of 'religion' in its manifold and varied expressions, functions and institutional roles, its universal significance and its local translations. Theological disputes over scriptural readings featured side by side with anthropological investigation of locally embedded faiths as they relate to, and intersect with, state politics and policies, ethnicity, class, geography, and importantly with gender. It is the factor of gender, in its imbrication of marginalized ethno-religious identities, that structures my own research and writing and which I was invited to bring into seminar discussions, chaired so often and memorably by Peggy Morgan. And Peggy never failed to enliven debates with her receptive intellect and sympathetic, informed questioning.

It is this connection with my work, so generously supported by Peggy, that made me decide to bring a brief extract from current writing to the Festschrift, as an

acknowledgement of her facilitation of my on-going research into gender, Islam and localization of religion in modern and contemporary Chinese society.<sup>1</sup> When Ursula King (2005) talks about the quite recent transformative impact of women's and gender studies on the study of the world's religions, overturning, or at least de-legitimizing, the gender-blindness to which mainstream scholarship had been prone, this transformation found a hearing in Peggy's seminars; something for which I, among many others, will always be profoundly grateful. Adding to my intellectual kinship with Peggy has been our shared conviction that 'ordinary life' matters and that in close and sympathetic interpretation it reveals itself not to be quite so ordinary. This principled stance has colored Peggy's values, life-choices and purposeful application of her knowledge, and it is something that also for me shapes preferences for research topics and methodologies of the kind contributed to the *Festschrift*.

This is the background to the choice of a contribution which explores aspects of the lives of Chinese women in early 20<sup>th</sup> century rural China, illiterate, steered from cradle to grave by paradigmatic, womb-centered life-cycles encoded by Neo-Confucian family morality and Islamic principles, ignorant of the world beyond village boundaries – references which distil and seemingly define the very essence of 'ordinariness' which prove so elusive to the researcher's gaze, searching for that which qualifies as outstanding or unique and thus significant. Discovering in the very process of engagement with so-called 'ordinariness' the stories of life extraordinary has been a part of my journey as an ethnographer of (Islamic) religious life of women. These discoveries have been made possible by collaboration with women from various women's mosque congregations in central China's Hui Muslim communities when we, together, recovered, recorded and transcribed chants of worship and celebration, transmitted orally from generation to generation of believing women. One such chant, the center-piece of my contribution, forms the basis here for an exploration that included long conversations with the chanter, the listeners, the community of women realizing a collective purpose, that is, to make Chinese Muslim women's extraordinary histories visible. In their wake, they not only made apparent the ideological underpinning of what counts as 'the ordinary', they supported the researcher in helping to problematize related tropes of feminine gullibility, religious belief, and stunted agency.

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<sup>1</sup> See for further contextualization: Durneika 2018; Erie 2016; Gladney 2004; Ha 2017; Jin 2017.

## Lamenting Life, Speaking Across Time

I have chosen a *jingge* (经歌 Islamic chant) from the Republican era (1912-1949), an era in Chinese modern history marked by reformist and radical impulses and movements when the aspired modernization of the nation inspired initiatives for reforms in all spheres of society, importantly so in education. Islamic education, then in the main the responsibility of mosque-based *ahong* (阿訇 imams, in the Chinese Hui Muslim usage in central China a title equivalent to that of male *ahong* and teachers), was no exception (Jaschok and Shui 2000, 2005). Women's mosque teaching of the languages of the scriptures, of rudimentary knowledge of Muslim rituals and practices, depended on largely oral traditions and forms of transmission. Crucial to the success of motivating and inspiring girls and women without previous educational experience to sustain a discipline of learning, was the creative instruction by female *ahong* who applied well-tried learning tools, involving collective repetitive chanting, to help illiterate women retain in their memory fundamental guidelines for guarding and preserving Muslim family life. Collaboration between male Hui Muslim educational reformers, importantly the role of 李复真 Li Fuzhen *Ahong* (late Qing) and 望纯理 Wang Chunli *Ahong* (Republican era) and between scholars and educational reformers in general, working closely with influential female *ahong*, led to an unprecedented enrichment of women mosques' repertoire of *jingge* (Jaschok 2018; Jaschok and Shui 2005; Zhongyuan Muslim Funü Editorial Committee, afterwards ZMFEC 2017).

Two traditions evolved in this oral culture; *zanzhu zansheng* (赞主赞圣, Chants in Praise of Allah and Prophet) passed down the generations in Farsi and Arabic, whereas *jingge* were transmitted in Arabic, Farsi and, in greatest numbers, in Chinese.<sup>2</sup> *Jingge* appear in a diversity of genres and are expressive of cultural life of Muslims, with tunes both from mainstream non-Muslim tradition and from locally popular musical forms. On the whole, mostly Chinese language *jingge* were adapted for use by female religious practitioners during a time that chants largely ceased to feature in worship and education in men's mosques. In subsequent years, as the performance of all chants, in particular of *jingge*, came to be rejected by male *ahong* as no longer in keeping with a more austere reformist Islam, learning through guided repetitive chanting then marked the *jingge* tradition as a clearly gendered tool of pedagogy for the instruction of illiterate women. This turned *jingge* into a unique and much-loved feature associated with women's

<sup>2</sup> The terms of *zanzhu zansheng* and *jingge* are often used interchangeably, the term *jingge* is used commonly to refer to all genres which constitute the chanting traditions associated with the mosque culture in central China (see below).

religious culture. Women were able, guided by their *ahong*, to learn correct pronunciation of the scriptural languages, but these chants also served as expressions of faith that made them somehow a part of the global community of worshippers beyond local mosque walls. *Jingge* are chanted to this day. The confluence of Confucian ritual culture, richness of Arabic and Farsi thought and imagery that resonate in the chants of Islamic worship and social ethics evolved into a unique Islamic ritual tradition which 'entered the very souls of central China's Muslims' (preface, ZMFEC 2017: 4).

Whilst the number of *jingge* available for instruction in women's mosque education increased over time, the content of *jingge* continued to benefit from contemporary currents of ideas and movements. *Jingge* reflect women's aspirations in evocative and poignant images, revealing subjectivities that could not be simply confined to performing as exemplary Muslim mothers and wives, although these roles were ever dominant. *Jingge* give expression to challenges and conditions under which women were able to make their aspirations and beliefs heard in a cacophony of voices which have articulated, to this day, the Chinese nation's drive for modernity and national regeneration.

Important themes of chants from the Republican era revolve around nurturing of patriotism and contributions made by Muslims to the great project of national reinvigoration, showing up the presence of a reformist and educated Muslim population. An important thread of these chants is the responsibility carried by women to contribute to the nation and to Islam in newly significant roles that undergirded a social expansion of traditional functions as wives and mothers beyond home and mosque. By facilitating, as primary educators of their children, the strengthening of Islamic faith and orderly practice of Muslim life, women were serving, by implication, a society in transition and at its most needful; that is, communities as needful of maternal guidance and care. Other *jingge* reflect on women's difficult balancing act of being good Muslim wives at home whilst ensuring salvation of their souls in afterlife with a daily discipline of prayer, often relying on the guidance from their female *ahong*. Complexities of family life, precarious kinship ties, worldly preoccupations, but also sadness and grief in the face of illness, loss of loved ones, an overwhelming sense of the transitoriness of life as well as social and political turmoil and material hardship feature in these *jingge* (Jaschok and Shui 2005).

The *jingge* chosen for this article comes from such a historical teaching tradition of China's women's mosques. The origins of many *jingge* are uncertain, some accounts by members of the older generations of women and men link the earliest chants to the origin of the first Islamic cultural movement (early 17<sup>th</sup> century when the Ming dynasty gave way to a more hostile environment under Qing imperial rule, 1644-1912). It was a movement that sought to stem the diminishing force of Islamic faith, and Chinese Muslims' knowledge of their faith, by devising major translations of seminal scriptures and

facilitating expansion of education for all. In the gender-segregated educational system of *zhongyuan* (中原)<sup>3</sup> Muslim culture, regional women's mosques, more than was the case with women's mosques anywhere else in the country, came to enjoy considerable religious and administrative autonomy under the guidance of female *ahong*. Although these *jingge* did not form part of the mandatory prayer, their characteristic emotional evocation of belief, faith, and yearning for salvation in afterlife contrasts so starkly with the strong ties binding human beings to what are women's preoccupations with the mundane clutter of daily domestic life; and they resonate to this day. *Jingge* and other genres of chants have changed over time, with tunes and content influenced and shaped by an *ahong's* linguistic abilities, educational capacities and creative spirit. But many of the core themes have remained intact, their relevance undiminished by time.

Women and men have influenced a multitude of genres and traditions, but women have inscribed *jingge* with a highly gendered experience of faith, hope and trepidation, often fear, making the chants a precious record of religiously informed interior worlds. And where the literary capacity of an individual *ahong* allowed for this, she helped to keep chants alive with faithful transmission of inherited and newly added songs, bequeathing these rare records as a precious legacy to her successors. Following the suppression of all religions, including Islam, during the late 1950s right until after the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966 to late 1970s), a relatively more liberal treatment of religious worship during the 1980s permitted a somewhat tentative resumption of beloved traditions, such as collective chanting of *jingge* after *zhuma* (主麻Friday) prayer. Initially dismissed by particularly younger women as unhappy, even humiliating reminder of the past history of female ignorance, deficient spirituality and passivity in the face of patriarchal authority, subsequent decades have brought about an incipient change in women's thinking about the place of their history in the current Islamic revival. This has been helped by systematic research into the history of a richly diverse oral tradition of women's mosques. The long process of research gave rise to new networks and associations of researchers, *ahong* and Muslim women, an impactful collaboration which culminated in the first record of their history of faith, of spiritual and worldly aspirations (referred to hereafter as SongBook, ZMFEC 2017).

The nearly three-hundred chants recovered through collective rituals of remembering by older generations of believers – indeed, too many chants have entirely vanished from memory – have given rise to unprecedented acknowledgement of their

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<sup>3</sup> The *zhongyuan* region, central China, may refer to Henan province only but it carries also a wider meaning, including thus the provinces of Henan, Shanxi, Hebei, and Shandong. Unless indicated otherwise, the term as used in this article highlights the unique cultural significance which Henan occupies in the gendered history of Islam in China (Jaschok and Shui 2000).

intrinsic value and the revelations of religious spirituality, moral values, shared belonging but also to the importance of gendered spheres in which ritual and informal expressions of professions of faith would take place. Such oral traditions have also enlivened the immersion of women *hailifan* (海里凡 *khalifah*)<sup>4</sup> into a faith that had not been a part of their upbringing during long years of repressive treatment of religion by an aggressively secularist government, during times of political regimentation and suppression of worship outside officially approved religious venues.

However, faith and Muslim life expressed in colloquial language and evocative images, set to appealing popular tunes, have proven effective pathways to connecting with past generations of faithful believers, with history once more present as a precious source of pride and belonging. This resurgent expressive culture has furthermore led to the writing and composition of new chants, informed by both aspirations and the challenging perplexities of being Muslim in a highly nationalistic country where religious commitment must be reconciled with protestations of patriotic loyalty. New *musilin gequ* (穆斯林歌曲 Muslim Songs) can be heard in classes, in mosques attended by men and women, teaching the fundamentals of Islam and intensifying collective exuberance over belonging to the true faith. Formerly the prerogative of men only, women nowadays predominate when it comes to a resurgent expressive culture of faith. And this resurgence has brought into circulation Farsi *zansheng*, connecting with a language that was once the defining characteristic of women's mosque teaching, before educational reform during the late 1990s made opportunities for learning Arabic an educational feature also of women's mosques. Moreover, closer connections with Muslim majority countries in the Middle East but also with SEAsia, whether through pilgrimages, educational visits or commercial trade, have expanded the repertoire of chants further. The extraordinary history of several hundred years of transmitted oral culture generated by Muslim women's own mosques, comes out of a shared faith which has inspired a sense of collective belonging that transcends gender and status but which is also the product of an intermingling of Islamic and mainstream cultures, of local and global traditions of Islamic expressive culture. These newer arrivals, in the main Arabic language *zansheng*, can be heard in China's mosques and in provincial *zanzhu zansheng* contests. This is the case, for example, with songs from the *nasyid* genre popular in Southeast Asia. *Nasyid* feature in many *zansheng* contests (among these the frequently performed and highly emotive *nasyid*, Ummi 母亲赞, Ode to Mother).

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<sup>4</sup> Students of Islamic knowledge, often candidates for Imamate, preparing themselves for religious life.

Finally, there has been a remarkable change in the kinds of spaces where so-called *nüxing zansheng* (女性赞圣 women's songs of praise) can be legitimately performed. Formerly confined to the seclusion of women-only sites of prayer and gatherings, starting in 2005, these chants, as pointed out above, have become the staple of song contests among mosques, both male and female. The events are organized by representatives of local *Yisilanjiao Xiehui* (伊斯兰教协会 Islamic Association) and *ahong* from influential mosques and are held in the larger and prestigious mosque compounds in front of large, appreciative audiences. Women's chants have moved outside the mosque and into the community. Mosque choirs are in popular demand, particularly if considered of requisite spiritual performance, of a certain musical standard and, always appreciated, featuring attractive hijab – mostly long modest dresses in distinctive monochrome color and matching *gaitou* (盖头, a headdress which conceals hair and neck but exposes the face). Their performances are seen as heightening the intensity of significant occasions, whether these occasions be weddings, name-giving ceremonies or any other milestones of significance to family or the wider community. There is widespread appreciation of mixed repertoires of religiously informed *zansheng*, older *jingge* or current popular, tuneful chants that reflect local cultural influences. Nevertheless, a certain trend can be noted, that is, a marked development from a historically dominant culture of *jingge* (with its spectrum embracing a diversity of worldly and religious, often gendered, topics and themes) to the greater spiritual intensity of *zansheng*, reflecting the resurgence of Islam noted by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists of Islam in China (Harris, Ha and Jaschok 2021 forthcoming). It is a resurgence also in central China's Hui Muslim communities of the importance of women's mosques led by charismatic *ahong* that has enabled a reinvigorated religious education and revival of collective practices of prayer by which ordinary women sustain their sense of worth and notable pride in what is a uniquely gendered history of Islam. In a context of strengthened Chinese state authority over all spheres of society, the solidarity and sense of belonging engendered by expressive communal rituals brings also a vindication of enduring commitment to being Muslim in a non-Muslim society.

### Being Women of Faith in a Transitory World

When a highly respected woman *ahong*, presiding over an influential women's mosque in central China, explained the overwhelming necessity for revival of *jingge* during a time of resurgence of Islam in many parts of China, she made reference to intensification of sensations as women chant *jingge* in the safety of their own space, in the prayer halls of

women's mosques, and in more public Islamic gatherings, during times of competitions organized usually by local branches of the Islamic Association.<sup>5</sup> Whereas the successful performance of a mosque choir, particularly when taking place in a friendly but competitive atmosphere in front of large gatherings is always a matter of pride and a cause for much celebration, the intensity of feeling engendered by collective chanting is associated with women's own spaces of worship and prayer. That which is frowned upon in public, often gender-mixed gatherings – the physical demonstration of emotion evoked by a chant, movement of heads and arms or swaying of bodies to underline the power of words – is permissible wherever no external gaze can misconstrue meanings and impose injunctions.

Here the role of the teacher and *ahong* as serving to enable and legitimate innovation, is crucial, deserving closest attention by the researcher. The most authoritative religious leader of the mosque congregation, an *ahong* occupies multiple roles. The nature of her responsibilities varies depending on the size, income and independent status of the mosque, with her influence growing exponentially as she is acknowledged to perform her role with informed moral authority; moreover, what comes to matter are her reputation for integrity and learning, but also her ability to balance interests of her congregation with government-issued legal, administrative and regulatory constraints on approved religious venues (Jaschok 2012). In a demanding, daily enacted balancing act, she represents her mosque in relation to the adjacent male mosque, to the wider Muslim community, and to the various ministries and departments which the Chinese state has entrusted with responsibility for monitoring internal activities and external relations of religious venues. An *ahong's* political acumen guides the development of a mosque's internal culture in the same way that her marshalling of political and economic resources and nurturing of useful allies from within the political sphere, from whom to gain support when needed, shape the transformative capacities of a mosque. An *ahong's* talents as political intermediary can also lead to competitive advantages over other religious institutions. Yet all her worldly accomplishments and social networks are as nothing if the *ahong* does not enjoy respect from members of her congregation for religious learning, wise counsel, unblemished moral incorruptibility, teaching skills and an empathic personality. Moreover, legitimacy comes from her principled and respectful treatment of members of her congregation, regardless of their level of education, family background and prospects.

All these qualities give an *ahong* the legitimacy to address critical issues, critique existing injustices or patriarchal legacies in the treatment of female religious practitioners

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<sup>5</sup> Conversation held in Henan, in August of 2016, during preparations for a collective project to record women's most beloved chants.



and, indeed, lead new initiatives for change. These were the characteristics prominent of *ahong* who brought new life to education during the Republican era, and these are characteristics to be found among younger generations of *ahong* leading the resurgence of the traditional expressive culture of women's mosques, at the heart of which are the chants, seemingly long 'forgotten', until recent years brought about a renewed awareness of their importance as conduits of women's collective memory (Jaschok 2012; Jaschok and Shui 2000).

In their historical role as transmitters of *jingge*, *ahong* are known to adapt tunes to enhance the mood and impact of a chant, both more pleasing to women but also easing an unfamiliar task of memorizing unfamiliar language and expressions. *Ahong* would also be likely to adapt words of a chant to reflect current vicissitudes of time and place, with each generation adding words expressive of most subjective and also always of the collective experience of communities of worship, allowing us a glimpse of interior worlds inscribed in generational transmissions of prayer of faith and fear. *Jingge* have thus never been static, fixed, and unmoved by sentiment. These chants have undergone changes because expressive of on-going life experiences. They are collectively created narratives which bring into voice generations of women who together constituted the communities of women that kept faith in gatherings in the prayer halls of their women's mosques. Here we are entering another realm of textual exegesis, the embedding of a text which is evolving in time and place and shaped and inscribed by a multitude of voices and influences, in what Adam Chao calls the 'social heat' (Chao 2008: 488) of collective rituals. Interpretation of chants make audible the voices of instruction, the voices of learners and listeners, the voices of women who would repeat lines of the chant until the words become the collective experience of emotional and spiritual yearning.

In other words, it becomes important to ask what has changed during centuries of evolution of the *jingge* tradition from a tool for the illiterate to a uniquely expressive culture of women's mosques? Who is listened to; whose voices matter in ways that shift thinking sufficiently, so Gaile Pohlhaus, to afford recognition of 'particular knowers as knowers' (Pohlhaus 2017: 13)? What had not counted historically as wisdom, had lacked epistemic authority, is in contemporary times chanted in collective solidarity and with passionate conviction, and is subject to often intense criticism. Dissenting voices within China's Muslim community, critical of continued women's mosque tradition, berate leading female religious practitioners at the forefront of a resurgent expressive culture as *haram* in the encouragement for female voice over long traditions of *xiuti* (羞体 *awrah*, parts of the female-gendered body, including the female voice, considered shameful and in need of concealment). Such renewed criticism comes as a reminder of other practices of denigration of women's epistemic and spiritual status. Indeed, complaints by Islamic

authorities I interviewed in a number of cities where women's mosques have peripheral status or have given way to the status of 'religious activity centres', make reference to the corrosive impact of *nüxinghua* (女性化feminization) on Islam. Weakening of strict observance of an austere, purist (and non-chanting) Islam, so it is said, is a most worrying trend in women *ahong*-led women's mosques in the Hui Muslim communities in central China (Jaschok, Shui with Ge 2021 forthcoming).

From an Islamic faith standpoint, the subject of ethics embodies a living and practiced relation to the divine, requiring a different notion of subject-formation. Countering objections to the sounding of female voices, believing women in *zhongyuan* Muslim communities see cultivation of faith as expression of ethical conduct that is no longer compatible with female gullibility and passivity. Objections are held by leading *ahong*, and women around them, to reflect a bygone era. Instead, so the consensus, modern women of education, with the capacity to debate critically patriarchal interpretations, must oppose with convictions, backed up by textual evidence, unjust and distortive interpretations of female spirituality. Thus, women have begun to place themselves in the forefront of a resurgent, progressive Islam (Jaschok, Shui with Ge 2021 forthcoming).

An old woman *ahong*, who had spent her childhood in the village women's mosque was of the opinion that the origin and manner of on-going adaption of many a popular *jingge* could not but remain obscure. She pointed, however, to the close collaboration of religious professionals across gender and mosque membership as a significant feature of local *zhongyuan* Muslim culture, a historical characteristic which informs the complementarity of gender relations to this day. The fact that most chants are entirely anonymous therefore mirrors an important assertion made by local Muslim women, namely the nature of solidarity between Muslim women and men, and the joint effort made to convey the faith that binds them – when the external environment is all too often hostile – in close ties of belonging. Moreover, a frequently reiterated assertion by informants was the role that male religious practitioners played in providing illiterate rural women with the precious key of an enriched imagination and the opening to a world beyond the domestic threshold.

When examining the chants of greatest emotional resonance to women, they tend to be most frequently those chants which respond to deep-seated fears over reconciling women's domestic duties and multiple roles as wives and mothers and daughters-in-law with duties as believers, conducive to a culture of dread over consequences of deficient observance of daily prayer duties for admission to paradise (Jaschok and Shui 2000). The theme of many a *jingge* revolves around tensions between reconciling obligations incumbent upon a faithful Muslim and what are in particular for women incessant

demands on their daily discharge of responsibilities, moreover demands which are locked into social expectations that these responsibilities are performed in selfless service to husbands, children and the wider family, but also to neighbourhood and community. The *jingge* selected here illustrates women's deep inner contradictions and fears over the fate of their souls.

***Jingge* (early Republican era 1912-1949), on chanting faith and sadness over transience of human life**

叹人生 *Tan ren sheng* LAMENTING LIFE

日月如梭昼夜忙，替叹人生不久常。Life, like the shuttle [of a loom], day and night no rest, we lament how short our life

古往今来君何在，文宫武将在哪厢？From ancient times to the present, where are the powerful, where are learning and military might?

最多能活百十岁，有钱难买不老方。At best we live to a ripe old age, no riches can buy eternal life

长江后浪推前浪，一辈生来一辈忙。The Yangtze River rolls on, wave after wave, and so generation after generation comes into the world and passes away

曾记当年骑竹马，而今不觉两鬓霜。Remembering riding my bamboo toy horse, I am oblivious to the frosting of my temple hair

生儿只说长不大，长达娶妻忘爷娘。To give birth and take tender care of a child is a time of anxiety, yet when the time comes to take a wife, father and mother are forgotten

看见媳妇怪喜欢，瞧见爷娘恼心肠。Catching sight of daughter-in-law, there is great joy, but the sight of parents brings disharmony

劝君若到中年后，举好捏提行端庄。Be advised when reaching middle age, bring offerings of *nieti* [alms] and conduct yourself with dignity and solemnity

儿孙自有儿孙福，多干善功少奔忙。Children have the blessing of their own offspring, do engage generously in good work and not be overwhelmed by mundane tasks

今世光阴如闪电，抓住教门莫轻放。In this world, time is like lightening, embrace faith and do not treat it lightly

儿女财帛今世伴，唯有善功后世常。Children and wealth are worldly belonging, only good deeds become the foundation of afterlife

有心再想说句话，笔前墨尽纸不长。As the heart wants to open up once more, upon lifting the brush, the ink dries up and the scroll runs out.<sup>6</sup>

What does the popularity of this *jingge* ‘Tan ren sheng’, included in the SongBook of recorded chants, tell us about the participants’ religious imaginary and subjective sentiments? The chant opens with a most domestic metaphor, the shuttle of a loom that is the sound of the female sphere, an evocative and pervasive feminine soundscape. This sound resonates with chanters and listeners, bringing instant association with the busy schedules that constitute a traditional female lifecycle. It is a sound anchored in the domestic space where the care for husband and children and the extended family dominate and shape a woman’s daily routine.

The opening line frames the lamentations with a seemingly unresolvable contradiction for women: their duty encoded in the very moral systems of Islam and Neo-Confucianism, entailed in paradigmatic mother-and wifeness, in tension with duties enshrined in adherence to the five Islamic pillars of faith. Overwhelming this *jingge* is the sense of urgency that needs heeding as life passes by all too quickly and approaching mortality overwhelms with dread and anxiety. Musing on the inescapably fleeting nature of all worldly acquisitions, a fate shared by the powerful, privileged and mighty, it is nature – here the evocation of the majestic Yangtze River and the perpetual motion of the tide – which brings a cruel contrast in its unending motion as humans are subject to a very different law: ‘Generation after generation comes into the world and passes away’, so the *jingge*. Childhood is evoked with a bamboo toy horse, and such is the power of this reminiscence that the nostalgic ride on childhood’s beloved toy ends with an image of old age, the greying of hair, and with it the realization that time granted in which to write a life-story is running out.

Yet a short lifespan is filled with the riches that only close family bonds can bring, the birth of, and care for, precious children and witnessing of the birth of further generations ensuring continuity. But an underlying subtext of anxiety, fear and trepidation darkens the depiction of domestic idyll and of ordinary life. Child mortality, ceaseless worry about a child’s health, the imperative for a daughter-in-law to continue the family line and the rupture of family relations if she brings disharmony and estrangement, all play a part in unease over domestic strife and how quickly attention is deflected from what

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<sup>6</sup> This chant came into great popularity during the Republican era (1912-1949). It is to be found in Muslim women’s own SongBook and contributed by 虎长法Hu Changfa *Ahong*阿訇 in April 2015. 葛彩霞阿訇 Ge Caixia *Ahong* from the Fuminli Women’s Mosque in Zhengzhou, Henan 阜民里清真女寺 took responsibility for the collation. Zhongyuan Muslim Funü Zansheng yu Jingge Huibian Editorial Committee 2017: 147. Translation by author.

really matters. And the *jingge* issues a warning, all these apparent crises are after all quite humdrum matters. When fascination with wealth or absorption with family relations take up time, take over life, this leads to neglect of diligent preparation for afterlife. Generosity and charitable conduct steeped in faith and awareness of what constitutes the ultimate meaning of human existence during latter stages of life must replace all else. Metaphors give expression to life passing 'like lightening.' The end catches humans unaware, brutally so. The last line does not spare the listener. Ready to lift the brush to continue with the record of life, instead 'the ink dries up and the scroll runs out'. No more words are forthcoming, no more sound is heard; the scroll as a record of the lifespan apportioned to an individual has come to an end.

Remembering that this particular *jingge* has its origin in male tradition, the metaphorical and sociological references – from safeguarding the patriline to responsibilities for safety and material support of family as well as the tools of literacy, brush, ink and vellum – seem to exclude women's experiences, responsibilities and capacities. But this is a chant which did not stay with the tradition cultivated by men, indeed, when chanting in men's mosques ceased in the course of educational reform for a more austere Islam during the Republican era, women became almost the sole heirs to the *jingge* tradition, and turned into its creative transmitters. More than that, they filled these chants with their meanings and lived experiences, adding to the tension over worldly and other-worldly preoccupations their sharpened awareness of women's conundrum: how would their souls fare in *houshi* (后世 afterlife)? Would the fires of hell await their compromised souls when even the most conscientious wife and mother might fall short of exemplary Muslim conduct? These were the agonizing issues brought up by older women we interviewed over the years. In imagining the fate expecting them, visual rendering of the cruelty inflicted on lost souls which can be seen in wall-paintings of neighbouring Buddhist temples, colours many of our informants' anxious laments (Jaschok and Shui 2000).

And yet, this is a much-loved chant. As the *ahong* of a prominent women's mosque in central China put it, the positive sentiment comes with the sound of collective voices led by an *ahong* who, because of her learning, is trusted with safeguarding the salvation of their souls.<sup>7</sup> And in this shared experience of intensity of faith, the prospect of salvation creates exuberance. The atmosphere in the prayer hall of women's mosques, undisturbed by accusations of practising *xiuti*, engenders confidence that all can be well, domestic and religious duties balanced, and their souls saved. In becoming the chanters of songs

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<sup>7</sup> Interview in Zhengzhou, Henan, with the late, revered Du *Lao Ahong* whose support and detailed responses to the researcher's questions contributed to the first study of women's mosques in China (Jaschok and Shui 2000).

which tell of conundrums besetting female-gendered lives, the fear that otherwise might darken their spirit becomes exorcized, affording a glimpse of paradise as deserved reward for women who insist that their right to spiritual equality commands respect for their history within, and without, gendered spaces of worship and domestic life (Jaschok and Shui 2000).

The SongBook, a compilation of beloved Islamic chants constitutes a powerful testimonial to the strength, courage and belief of women who grew up under a moral system that commanded women to speak with self-abnegating modesty, out of public sight and hearing – but demonstrates that that these same women were indeed not silent, and ultimately, not silenced (ZMFEC 2017). Partitioning curtains and walls that formed the symbolic and socio-spatial borders of women’s assigned spaces for religious learning and worship were never, indeed never could be, hermetically sealed. Thresholds between inner and outer social spheres were crossed by women constantly, throughout the day, fetching, carrying, questioning, leaving, returning. And would it not be the case that women, returned home from their mosques, still resonating with the sound of chanting, were likely to continue humming tunes and try out newly learnt words when going about domestic tasks and caring for children? Not derived from the soundscape of authoritative spaces, their chants were nevertheless not without influence over those of whom they had charge.

It is thus possible to argue that whereas women could not make themselves heard, were not listened to, in the public spheres of male leadership, inside women’s spaces, however, their own traditions evolved, inscribed by their life experiences and spirituality. The voices which for many generations practised pronunciation of foreign tongues and scriptural languages and affirmed belief in the pillars of Islam, which committed to memory essential guidelines for a good Muslim life and Muslim women’s responsibility for family and community, which celebrated the great female role models in the history of Islam, and which lamented loss and bereavement but held on to the promise of afterlife – these voices, loud and clear, come from women who are fashioning, together, a record of their claim to equal worth (ZMFEC 2017: 16-17).

### **Sounding Their History of Silence**

‘Voices come in many manifestations, in the form of speech or of song, loudly rendered or quietly whispered, in spaces that are public or curtained off and walled in. And voices are always gendered. That is, they are marked by the moral codes of historical time and place that assign to women spheres of duties and rights, entitlements and dependencies. The history of women’s mosques is the history of many generations of women who spoke,

wept, and consoled, who preached and chanted, and it is thus a history which embraces all of the many forms of female voice' (preface ZMFEC 2017: 15).

The SongBook is the extraordinary outcome of a collective effort of members of women's mosque communities, religious practitioners, Islamic scholars and researchers to provide a record, their very own testimonial, of a rich, previously un-heard, history of generations of female voices of faith (ZMFEC 2017). Probing the place of faith in modern Chinese society is to take stock of accumulated learning acquired over many generations of leading women teachers and *ahong* who interpreted universal Islamic principles for application to women's everyday practice of faith. Voice (声音 *shengyin*) is therefore not only a declaration of self/belief but may also be understood as affirmation of women's reconnection with their cultural-educational Islamic heritage by which to lay claim to rights and entitlements that reflect wider societal reforms (Battaly 2017). Reaching back into the recent past of women's circumscribed spiritual, intellectual and physical mobility, when her predecessors were confined to limited educational and ceremonial duties inside the mosque compound, an elderly *ahong*, and an influential supporter of the project to record women's chants, holds that she is following in the tradition of reformist female *ahong* from the Republican era when she uses her voice as vital link between past and present.<sup>8</sup> And it is her hope that the living link between a reaffirmed cultural heritage and leading women as vocal transmitters of this heritage thus also sustains and strengthens the institutional standing and influence of female-led traditions and their place in China's Muslim society.<sup>9</sup>

Deeply rooted in the unique Muslim female culture of China's central plains we find expression not only of ordinary women's reception of the teaching of Islam, as instructed by their *ahong*, understanding of their familial roles and duties but also, in a world beyond domestic courtyards, their vision of social responsibility incumbent upon women of faith. Such chants provide us moreover with rare glimpses of an imaginary where a world is at

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<sup>8</sup> In a long account of her educational work among a women's mosque congregation in Zhengzhou, the provincial capital of Henan Province, a middle-aged *ahong* tells me her story from the point of view of a teacher of women's souls. This is how she refers to her role. Conversations with a leading female *ahong* in preparation for the SongBook, Zhengzhou, Henan, August 2016. She wished to remain anonymous.

<sup>9</sup> Whereas the last twenty years have witnessed a burgeoning both of scholarship, and of international interest, in China's unique Islamic institutions, seeing publications on a previously unknown and certainly under-recognized history of women's contributions to Islamic faith and a considerable diversity of Muslim cultures in China, much more needs to be known of the oral culture women's mosques and their key to women's inner life and spirituality within a rapidly changing China. The translation and interpretation of *zansheng* and *jingge* have only recently begun, a challenge which will occupy us for considerable time to come. Comment: I wonder whether this comment here might be better in the text? It shows how "understudied" women's experience are and that there is much need for more research.

peace and in harmony, enabled by and rooted in an idealized gender-based complementarity of responsibilities, duties and rights (ZMFEC 2017:10).

The extraordinary history of several hundred years of transmitted oral culture generated by Muslim women's own mosques, comes out of a shared faith which has inspired a sense of collective belonging that transcends gender and status but which also is the product of an intermingling of Islamic and mainstream cultures, of local and global traditions of Islamic expressive culture. In recovering knowledge of such history, knowledge that could be produced only slowly, collectively – with many pauses and silences – grounded in an evolving collaboration of researchers and local communities of believing women, the ordinary lives of women has come to be revealed for their complex interior beliefs and aspirations. Creative of ways of making sense of seemingly unchanging, ordained female fates have made possible – thus the community of transmitters, interpreters, listeners and chanters also tell us – the sympathetic vernacularization of global, overarching values of justice and salvation for believing women.

What is moreover also revealed, and here I re/connect with many hours of conversation with Peggy Morgan, is the role played by ordinary women in shaping lasting traditions to become conduits of knowledge, the stuff of history, that would otherwise remain unknown. Such chants of prayer, worship and of emotions revelatory of the interior world of believers, are given centre-stage in collective performances of intensified emotion. At the core of a sensory expressive culture of female-gendered religiosity, they elevate ordinariness of life to a heightened sensory experience by which are marshalled significant resources of collective strength and validated agency.

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