



## Dongxiang Muslim women as ‘boundary subjects’: Reflections on gender and identity in the borderland areas of northwest China

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### Abstract

With the highest female illiteracy rate in China (2000 national census), the Dongxiang Muslim community in northwest China shows the most striking male-female gender hierarchy among all Muslim nationalities in northwest China. This paper explains how local Islamic culture – *jiaopai* and *menhuan* -- and the distinction made between Dongxiang (minority) and Han (majority) identity devalue women and restrict their mobility. Specifically, Dongxiang people are divided into different Islamic sects (*jiaopai* and *menhuan* or *jiaomen*), such as Beizhuang, Humen, and Santai. Most of them hold to their own sects and demonstrate negative evaluation of other *jiaomen*, so inter-*jiaomen* marriages are always forbidden. Women are the symbolic carrier of the *jiaomen* to which they belong, as can be seen in the distinctive head scarf (*gaitou*) women wear which signifies a given religious membership. To prevent their women from marrying out of the *jiaomen* and ensure integrity of the *menhuan* population, Dongxiang men constrain their women’s mobility. Gender also marks the ethnic boundary between Han Chinese (majority) and Dongxiang Muslim (minority) relations, legitimized by patriarchal interpretations of the holy scriptures which restrict women in the name of Allah. The paper argues that contemporary gender hierarchies in the Dongxiang community are not primarily moulded by Islam but by the cultural practices of a patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** China, female illiteracy , gender hierarchy, identity, Islam, patriarchal society

### Is Islam responsible for the subjugated status of Dongxiang women?

Certain Chinese researchers argue that Islam is the cause of an unjust gender hierarchy so characteristic of the Dongxiang nationality. Most Dongxiang people also believe their gender rules are based on the Koran and Hadith (the two most important sources of Islamic knowledge). Some western scholars even pointed out:

“Islamic doctrine developed, in part, from prior teachings derived from both Judaism and Christianity. It continues, and in fact intensifies, gender inequality. Subordination of women in Islamic culture is severe. Patriarchal control must be exerted against women in order to mute their sexual desires and counteract dangers to men posed by contamination from women. The custom of *pardah*, or seclusion of women, is *basic* to Islamic practice”.  
(Bonvillain, 1998:231)

Bowie (2000) also maintains that “Islam may have intensified male control of women by further subduing female religious cults”(Bowie, 2000:91) but still others (Dongxiang people for example) argue that gender relations in Dongxiang do not result from Islam but from local

customs. To clarify the relationship between Islam and gender hierarchy, I like to quote locally popular verses of the Koran and Hadith.

Concerning women's use of space and mobility: "The Prophet said, 'If your women ask permission to go to the mosque at night, allow them.'"; "The Prophet said, 'If the wife of any one of you asks permission (to go to the mosque), do not forbid her.'" (Bukhārī, Muḥsin KHān (Vol.I), 1971:456,459). "Narrated by Abu Huraira: The Prophet (p.b.u.h) said, "It is not permissible for a woman who believes in Allah and the Last Day to travel for one day and night except with a Mahram." These holy scriptures make us be sure that Islam does not forbid women to enter mosque and does not prevent them from going out just reminds that women should not travel alone in the night, which is also a reminder to all people for the Prophet says: "no one will walk alone in the night if they know the danger of it."

As far as education is concerned, Islam never discourages females from acquiring knowledge. The Prophet says: "If a master of a woman slave who teaches her good manners and educates her in the best possible way, sets her free and then marries her, then such a man will have double reward." (Refers to Bukhārī, Muḥsin KHān (Vol.I), 1971:78). The Prophet has also remarked: "it is essential for every Muslim man and woman to acquire knowledge"; "Seek knowledge though you may have to go to China for it"; "Some women requested the Prophet to fix a day for them as the men were taking all his time. On that he promised them one day for religious lessons and commandments" (Bukhārī, Muḥsin KHān (Vol.I), 1971:80). All of above show that Islam attaches great importance to education including both religious education and secular one regardless of gender. Moreover, it supports female education and those help women study can be rewarded. So the argument that attributes Dongxiang women's illiteracy to the Koran and Hadith or Islam is not persuasive. The fact that women can approach the Prophet indicates their freedom to go out and to see other non-kin man, which are all taboos for Dongxiang women.

When it comes to wife-husband relationship, we read: "O! Mankind! Be careful of your duty to your Lord Who created you from a single soul and from it created its mate and from them twain hath spread abroad a multitude of men and women." (Q.4:1); "They are raiment for you and ye are raiment for them." (Q.2:187) According to the verses, male and female are same kind, and they should care for each other, which is especially a requirement for males. In Dongxiang, things are different. One of this research female informants had said, "Males are nice to females on TV, but men here are not like those men."

Concerning women's participation into religious activities, the Koran mentions:

Those who surrender themselves to Allah and accept the true faith; who are devout, sincere, patient, humble, charitable, and chaste; who fast and are ever mindful of Allah-on these, both men and women, Allah will bestow forgiveness and a rich reward. (Q.33:35)

Their Lord answers them, saying: 'I shall deny no man or woman among you the reward of their labors. You are the offspring of one another.' (Q.3:195)

In the Hadith, we find the following words: "Allah's Apostle came out to offer the prayer of I d-al-Adḥā or Al-Fiṭr, and passed by the women (in the mosque)..." (Bukhārī, Muḥsin KHān (Vol.I), 1971:181). All the devout Muslim no matter male or female will be rewarded, which is so different from the popular view in Dongxiang that females are born to go to hell. The event that the Prophet met women in the mosque on Al-Fiṭr clearly shows that women can take part in the most important festival ritual, from which most Dongxiang women are excluded.

Nazira Zin al-Din, a most famous female interpreter in Islamic history, has argued: "Islam is based on freedom of thought, will, speech, and action, and no Muslim has authority over another Muslim in matters of religion, mind and will", and, "as all Muslims are free in will and thought, it follows then that Muslim women are free" (Shaaban, 1995: 65-67). Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali also stresses: "Looking down at women is a crime in Islam, and that true Islam rejects the

customs of nations which impose constraints on women or belittle their rights and duties” (Shaaban, 1995: 73).

### **Who are the Dongxiang people?**

Dongxiang Muslims mostly reside in the Dongxiang autonomous county of Gansu province in northwest China, a nationality identified as such by the People’s Republic of China only in the early 1950s. They speak their own language (very much like Mongolian language spoken in the 13<sup>th</sup> century) whilst using Chinese characters.

According to the 2000 national population census, the Dongxiang county had a population of about 530,000. Their female illiteracy rate was among the highest of all the Chinese nationalities. Besides, the females’ mobility was strictly limited both inside and outside the community: they (except girls under 12 years old) were not allowed to enter mosques and approach an *ahong* (*imam*, all of whom are male). Those who left their house would be the subject of gossip. In such circumstance, going out to find a job (*dagong*) was almost impossible. As women, they must obey their parents (especially fathers and paternal relations) before marriage and then submitted to their husbands and parents-in-law after that. All these showed a striking gender hierarchy, which was often attributed to Dongxiang’s strong religious Islamic culture (such as Sun, 2005; Liu, 2006). If this is the case, why were Dongxiang women more constrained than other Muslims in Northwest China? We know very well that not all the Muslim societies are oppressively patriarchal and not all non-Muslim societies are egalitarian, so Dongxiang gender relations should be probed within their own context.

### **Gender relations in Dongxiang**

The complicated relationship between males and females in Dongxiang Muslim society can be explored from four aspects: space allocation, education, marriage and family, and rituals and festivals’ participation.

#### *Space*

Foucault said that “space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (1984:252). Space allocation and mobility of the two gender in Dongxiang society display power relations between women and men. Different from males, females (aged 12 or above) are forbidden to enter mosques and to approach *ahong*. If a woman insists on going out, she is regarded as not likely to come back again and will shame her parents and relatives. Girls (aged 12 or above) can not go on the street without companions such as her mother or sisters and the “wandering” one will be rumored to have been with a man, which may prejudice her prospects of marriage. Many female informants said that Muslims were so strict with their daughters that they could not go about freely at their own will. Male informants expressed the same idea slightly differently, saying that only flirtatious women strolled about. One *ahong* also openly said that “Women had better stay at home. They should not go on the street or join the crowd.” But inside her courtyard, women must behave appropriately too: when visiting her natal family, she should request permission from husband and mother-in-law in advance and return as scheduled. Any aberration would result in the prospect of divorce (*xiqui*). Non-kin male guests and *Ahong* would be hosted by males of the family instead of women who were always in charge of food. Unmarried girls withdrew into their own rooms the moment guests came in. It seems that in Dongxiang, to some degree, females must hide and conceal themselves to perform in line with their assigned gender roles.

### *Education*

As mentioned above the illiteracy rate of Dongxiang women was the highest one among all the nationalities in China. During the one year fieldwork in 2007, it was very typical to meet uneducated and illiterate women in their 20s (most of them were mothers of at least one child). They were not only blocked from attending government schools but also religious schools as girls (12 or above) should not enter mosques. In 2003 Dongxiang villagers were interviewed who held the idea that girls were only temporary inhabitants of their natal family waiting to be married off at 17 or 18 years old. So it was the male descendant who was considered a pillar of support to parents in their old ages, enjoying the privilege of going to school even when tuition fee was required. Since 2006, tuition fee and payment for textbooks in primary and secondary schools have been free of charge, but girls still drop out of school at about 12 years old to get ready for marriage. Some student girls said they were always stigmatized as *genrenpo* (females who run away with males). One president of a middle school (a Dongxiang male) also reported that Ahongs discouraged girls from attending schools for fear that they will marry outside their own *menhuan*. There was a sect which does allow girls to study in mosques or religious school after they left government schools, but this was only transitory arrangement applied to girls who were not needed to help with housework and too young to marry. As for parents, they were reassured by the fact that girls and boys were taught separately in mosques of their own *jiaopai*. Even so, abiding by gender rules, girls still should avoid staying away from home for a long time. This meant they must be kept under supervision.

### *Marriage*

Almost all the marriages of young people were arranged by their parents, especially fathers. One of the female informants mentioned that all the matchmakers were males in Dongxiang for it was convenient for him to communicate with fathers who had the final say in the children's marriage. Both young male and female Muslims depended on their parents to make the choice for them. Girls and boys originating from the same patrilineal line would not marry each other, but it was very possible for a male to marry the daughter of his aunt (his father's sister) for they did not belong to the same family according to the Dongxiang kinship system. Marriage between members of different Islamic traditions was prohibited, but on the other hand, there was certain freedom to be enjoyed by those who had employment. They were allowed to date but must ensure this results in wedlock, otherwise, girls would be burdened with a bad reputation while boys were not affected so much. Generally speaking, girls were married off at about 17 or 18 years old, so it was difficult for a girl above 20 to find a good spouse. The more beautiful and better at housework the girl was, the earlier she would get married, so did the girls who always stayed at home. Boys often got married in their 20s or even later, but they were past their prime when older than 25 according to one of the male informants.

### *Religious participation*

Dongxiang females were nearly always excluded from religious rituals (which span their whole life and permeate every aspect of their lives), from child-naming to wedding and from funeral to festivals as they were not entitled to approach an *ahong*. Take the Id al-Fitr (end of Ramadan) as an example. When the month of Ramadan came round each year, and Muslims had to fast from dawn to dusk, it was a custom to invite people to dinner before dawn and after dusk in Dongxiang, but women were among the guests except very old ladies. On the day of Id al-Fitr, males gathered in the mosque for worship in the very early hour of the morning (say 6:30 am) and then visited their ancestors' tombs. A large crowd gathered in the open air to worship (consisting of all the male Muslims of a given Islamic sect). In 2007, to observe the big festival, this female researcher was in the procession to the destination along with at least one thousand males and was put in an awkward situation by the curious glances at me. Only one sect allowed women to take part in this festival ritual, but they should leave earlier for they were responsible for cooking dinner. This

principle was also applied to females' daily worships. Some male informants explained the reason why women seldom prayed in daytime in *nixue* (a separate house from males' hall for females' worships that was near the entrance to the mosque). They said: "females have no time to come to mosque (this is the only sect that permitted women to pray inside mosque but not in the hall, where males monopolize) during the day because they should do housework and take care of children, etc. It seemed that women could not forego their "female" duties even for religious reasons, which in turn provided a good excuse for males to belittle women in the name of Islam.

In brief, females were controlled and subjugated by males in the Dongxiang area just as one local official (Han Chinese woman) said: "everything here is determined by males."

### **Dongxiang (Hui)-Han Chinese classifications: Ethnic boundary and gender relations**

As for the origin of Dongxiang people, a historical investigation of Dongxiang from 1953 states that "The name of Dongxiang comes from their residence. In the past, they were called "Dongxiang *hui*" for they inhabited the east of Linxia County where west region, south region and north region simultaneously existed. They were also addressed "Mongolian *hui*" or "Dongxiang Mongolian" because of their language and because they frequently mixed with members of the Hui nationality. After liberation, the Chinese government officially identified them as Dongxiang people" (Gansu Editorial Committee, 1987:53). One male respondent (Han Chinese) said: "Dongxiang nationality people and Hui are the same. Among them, Hui nationality Muslims live in Linxia but Dongxiang Muslims reside in Dongxiang County." Another male said: "Dongxiang nationality and Hui are no different except that Dongxiang people can enjoy preferential treatment when taking an entrance examination." The investigation of ethnic relations in Dongxiang conducted in 1953 argued:

"There are few conflicts between Dongxiang and Hui for members of the Dongxiang nationality had not only been thought of as Hui but also identified themselves as Hui before liberation [1949]. After liberation, they are officially called Dongxiang nationality. Believing in the same religion, Dongxiang and Hui are almost the same except for speaking different language. Even now, many Dongxiang people still call themselves "we, the Hui", which shows common people do not care for the distinctions between two groups" (Gansu Editorial Committee, 1987:79).

The above citation tells us that Dongxiang nationality and Hui are not that different; that Dongxiang people do not take themselves to be different from Hui Muslims. And although after 1949, the Chinese state officially identified the Dongxiang nationality as a distinct people, most Dongxiang people (male and female) call themselves "*Hui min*". It may be understood that *Hui min* does not mean Hui nationality but stands for Muslim, a religious identity.

However, besides the different language, some people thought there were other differences between Dongxiang and Hui. One male informant (Han Chinese, village cadre) said: "the Hui nationality inhabits the whole country with a bigger population and higher educational level while Dongxiang people only reside here (in Dongxiang county) with more complicated *jiaomen* (religious organizations) and we pay more attention to Islamic scriptures." Another male informant (Dongxiang Muslim) said: "Being uneducated, Dongxiang people are short-sighted and different from Hui." But such differences can be ignored in many instances for Dongxiang and Hui were all used to calling themselves *Hui min*, and making no further distinctions.

What was most interesting was how Dongxiang people and Han both used gender relations to express ethnic differences, and simultaneously how ethnic boundaries affected gender relations within the nationality. Keng-Fong Pang wrote that "Utsat constructions of gender identities are

based not solely on religious and Utsat traditions, but also derive from their experience with Han and their understanding of what Han do that they should not” (1992:106). The author maintains that “Utsat gender identities and ethnic identities are inextricably intertwined”, expressing Utsat ethnic identity through gender identity.

In the same way, Dongxiang people too used gender relations to indicate their ethnic characteristic and differences from Han Chinese mainstream society. According to one Dongxiang man: “The contrast between *Han min* and *Hui min* is that Hui males are served by their females.” A male Han village cadre said:

“The differences between Han and *Hui min* are as follows: In the ordinary way, Han marry at an older age after male and female get to know each other and enjoy a relatively equal relationship between two genders, women are even in charge in many places; among *Hui min* [Muslims] husbands have the last word and wives must be submissive to their husbands’ will.”

When a father was asked why his daughter was not going to university, he answered: “We Dongxiang don’t have the custom of sending girls to university.” Another Dongxiang male expressed the same idea: “Women should obey their husbands, which is our habit.” One female respondent said: “Women must tolerate more. Han’s female and male are equal. *Hui min* is different.” Another male Dongxiang informant said: “China is a Han nationality country. In Arab countries, women can only show their eyes, this is how it should be.” It is obvious here that being treated as ethnic customs, Dongxiang gender relations are further used to symbolize nationality, locking these into core identity. The general thinking was that since customs must be respected, women cannot change these customs, such as the custom of confining women to the home.

Although Dongxiang women were equally conscious of the differences between Han and Dongxiang (Hui) gender relations, they were less concerned about maintaining sacred traditions. Instead, they aim to live up to expectations as best as they can, showing envy at times when they discussed the better situation of the Han women. A young woman sighed during the field interview, “It’s better to be a Han woman for she does not have to work.”

Ethnic boundaries between Dongxiang (Hui) and Han directly affected gender relations within the Dongxiang group. Based on the fieldwork she did in 1970-1972 and 1975 in Taiwan, Pillsbury wrote,

“In social relationships it appears that the greatest restriction on Muslim women in China was not in the form of seclusion from men but rather derived from social boundaries between themselves and non-Muslim Chinese. These boundaries have resulted in Muslim women in general being more confined to their homes than either Muslim men or non-Muslim women.”(1978: 659)

Muslim women should stay at home to avoid contacting with pork-eating Han as they must serve their husbands and children (in a wider sense, the whole nationality) with pure and clean (*halal*) food. Some female informants mentioned they do not go out for fear of pork. But why were women who are controlled by ethnic demarcations? Paulette Pierces wrote: “The need to protect the nation’s women does not stem only from a concern for sexual purity but also is strongly related to the belief that women are naturally more susceptible to cultural corruption(assimilation) and co-optation than are men” (1996:222). Moreover, women bear the burden of being transmitter and maintainer of ethnic culture which closely relate to their reproductive capacities(see, Nayereh, 1996; Huseby-Darvas, 1996; Kandiyoti, 1998; Kurien, 1999). They are responsible for raising the descendants of the ummah (the Muslim society), transmitting ethnic culture and avoiding spaces of contamination – the public space as a site of social, uncontrollable intercourse. Only thus can assimilation with Han Chinese culture be prevented.

Some theories on ethnicity and gender hold the idea that gender always plays a role in ethnic rivalry and that the excluded group will be feminized and its “inappropriate” gender relations be identified as the source of deficiency. In the Dongxiang area, gender relations also provided the

basis for mutual evaluation among nationalities. One Han male informant said:

“A *Hui mi* [Muslim] husband determines everything. Women should be obedient and do whatever demanded by their husbands. If the husband is unhappy with his wife, he can easily divorce her by saying *buyaole* (*talaq* in Arabic) three times. Comparatively speaking, they are less educated and backward.”

Based on gender relations, the negative comments (including self-evaluation) made about Dongxiang people, in turn, became an excuse for Dongxiang males to maintain the status quo -- that is, resistance to what was perceived as arrogance of the privileged and a subsequent withdrawal into their familiar spheres and ways of life.

### **Dongxiang women's reactions to gender hierarchy**

Yet even given such circumstances, Dongxiang women were not overcome by their seemingly unchangeable destiny. One female informant said:

“Males are very picky though they seldom work in the household. I don't know why we should treat them very well. For fear that they will not return if go out? [laughed] In fact, the better you treat them, the less they will appreciate it.”

Another woman who always quarreled with her husband said:

“I should treat him nice, abiding by Islam, but I can't do it. When he comes back, I never welcome him; while serving food, I use hands instead of tray. Males are easy to be spoiled, so occasional indocility will lead to being beaten if you keep him waiting. I don't even try to serve him as I should for that will make me age more quickly.”

Some women use religion to defend themselves and even question the validity of an *ahong's* statements. One informant protested when reprimanded by her husband for oversleeping, “Why didn't you get up early and pray in the mosque. You know, you are a Muslim”. Another regarded it as unfair that women suffered while their male counterparts drank, smoked and did not pray in the mosques. Again, when told that the *ahong* in the village argued that women should submit to their husbands completely, a middle aged woman responded:

“Nonsense, this *ahong* is not good at the holy scriptures. My son almost fell into sleep when listening to his teachings. Another *ahong* is a real expert. He required males to pray in the mosque five times every day and not to drink, smoke or play mahjong and held the idea that women's prayer can be exempted during menstruation and breast-feeding periods. He also said that women share with men the road to Paradise”.

This woman further said:

“We have one Koran but varied explanations of it. Males always find excuses. Originally, male and female share the same road, but now they [men] try to push females into the fire [of hell]. Women are forbidden to enter the mosque, then they can't hear the *ahong's* teachings and know nothing about the Koran. Women are not allowed to have access to an *ahong* who is an important teacher, so they have no way to learn the Koran.”

Nevertheless, although women had their agency, such resistance was always kept inside the nuclear family and seldom “damages” males' reputation. Instead, women's agency was often expressed within the framework of Islam. Few of the women would resort to state law to protect their own rights, which shows a distinct difference from Han Chinese women. One female informant said, “The Koran never forbids women to go out. It just requires that women and men should not mix together”. With few exceptions, females put up with the unfair treatments and

discriminations they encountered in the religious area. For examples, they were refrained from entering, had no access to the *ahong*, did not participate in religious festivals, and kept within the boundaries of their own sect. Except for one lone male university student (Dongxiang), nobody thought it likely that inter-sect marriages could ever take place. Rules were in place to be followed.

## Conclusion

In her discussions of the construction of gender relations, Bonvillain (2001:3) emphasized the effects of economic and political systems on gender. Bourdieu (2001) made similar points, arguing that masculine domination has been stabilized by creating gendered spaces, dividing labour between women and men, determining appropriate, gendered conduct, postures, dress, language, social responsibilities and mobility. This study found that gender relations were not just decided by direct interactions, confrontations and competition between men and women within the same society or group. Barbara Pillsbury had already noticed the role ethnic boundary played in gender relations: "In social relationships it appears that the greatest restriction on Muslim women in China was not in the form of seclusion from men but rather derived from social boundaries between themselves and non-Muslim Chinese" (1978: 659). This is consistent with what was observed in Dongxiang: the gender hierarchy there was constructed, intensified and sustained to function as symbolic boundary between Dongxiang Muslims and Han Chinese. It was also explained how internal segregation within the many local Islamic *jiaopai* and *menhuan* organizations helped to entrench gender hierarchy: women's submissiveness underpinned the identity of *jiaomen* and herein laid the constraints for women. Boundary demarcations constructed and perpetuated gender relations, leading to the proposal of a 'theory of gendered boundary construction.'

Due to women's reproductive capabilities and their related function as communal symbol, social divisions (religious, national, political), if giving rise to confrontations and tensions among the various groups, will lead to women be more controlled. Kandiyoti said as follows:

"Wherever women continue to serve as boundary markers between different national, ethnic and religious collectivities, their emergence as full-fledged citizens will be jeopardized, and whatever rights they may have achieved during one stage of nation-building may be sacrificed on the altar of identity politics during another. Women may be controlled in different ways in the interests of demarcating and preserving the identities of national/ethnic collectivities" (1998:6-7).

Furthermore, the degree of such social division is inversely proportional to that of women's confinement. In other words, the higher the degree of social differentiation and the more stark the social boundary, the more strictly women are controlled and less freedom they can enjoy.

Such a theory of the construction of gender relations through demarcations of ethno-political boundaries may contribute to understanding gender relations in an increasingly diverse and complex human society, enriching theories of gender construction. It is thus not difficult to understand Kurien's argument in a study of Hindu Indian migrants (1999), observing that, on the one hand, the migration and settlement of Hindu Indians in America led to women's higher educational level and entry into the workforce, thus to greater gender equality. On the other hand, the need to preserve Indian American ethnicity in a foreign host society served also to reinforce gender inequality as women's lives came to be equated with the identity of the migrant community as such. Here again, it can be observed how group boundary blocked the further development of gender equality.



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