

# The Role of Education in Raising New Generations: A Case study of Chinese Muslim in Northern Thailand

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Islam was introduced to China in the Tang Dynasty, since 652 A.D. or twenty-two years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Even though Chinese Muslims migrated from Yunnan, China and settled in northern Thailand a hundred years ago, the study of this group is rare and not up to date. However, they constitute a minority within a minority/majority? of Thai society that is a less well-known but equally compelling chapter in the story of the Muslim minority. They are *Hui* in China, *Panthay* in Burma and *Haw* in Thailand. Interestingly, they have successfully built their own communities within two generations to become known as middle-class Muslim, a group who peacefully coexist with other religions in Thailand, a Buddhist dominated society.

This paper attempts to explore the role of education in the establishment of Chinese Muslim generations in Thai society. Drawing data from the life-history and survey research in Chinese Muslim communities in northern Thailand, I argue that as a minority, the first generation Chinese Muslim immigrants consider education as the most effective mean for the next generation in moving up the social ladder after attaining higher levels of education. The making of Chinese Muslim communities in Thai society may be a good example of how a minority group of people who migrated from another land have established their own communities within two generations and have been able to live with pride and dignity by negotiating their identities while still firmly maintaining their Islamic identities and peacefully coexisting with other people in their host society.

## Introduction

Islam was transmitted from Arabia to China in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Over the centuries, diplomats and traders built a bridge of economic and cultural exchanges connecting the two major areas, China and Arabia. According to Chinese historical records, Islam was transmitted to China's interior during the Tang and Song Dynasty (618-1279). There were two silk roads (a sea road and a land road), which both contributed to the development of world culture by shortening the distance between eastern culture and the western culture (Ting 1993; and Ma 1991).

Now, there are fifty-six official "nationalities" in China (including the Han majority), and ten of which are Muslim. The total Muslim population in China is still debatable. According to the 1990 national

census, China's Muslim population made up 17.6 million of China's 1.04 billion people (or roughly 1.7%). The [\*U.S. News & World Report\*](#) (2005) puts the number of Muslims in China at 65.3 million (or roughly 6%).

Regardless of the actual total number of Muslims in China, the Hui are the most numerous and unique among the recognized nationalities in that their religion (Islam) is their only unifying category of identity. They have no common language and live in virtually every city and town across China. They also have one autonomous region (Ningxia), two autonomous prefectures, and nine autonomous counties (Gladney 1993: 276).

In the overseas Chinese communities outside China, the Hui is not considered an ethnic nationality. In the Republic of China on Taiwan, for instance, the Hui is considered Han who practice Islam (Ben-Adam 1999: 193). In northern Thailand, Hui is considered to be a religion (Islam).

In 1856, a Muslim Sultanate was founded in Dali as the Kingdom of Southern Peace (Ping Nan Guo), led by Du Wen-Hsiu or Sultan Suleyman. In 1873, seventeen years later, this Sultanate was annihilated, and after the collapsed of Ping Nan Guo, many Muslims who escaped the massacres in Yunnan fled to Burma. Subsequently, Hui settlements developed at other areas in the Salween valley, notably at Tanyan, near Lashio, as well as such urban centers as Rangoon, Madalay, Taunggyi, Bhamo, the gem center of Mogok, and Kengtung in the Shan States immediately to the north of Thailand's Chiang Rai Province (Forbes and Henley 1997: 97).

In Burma, the Hui were called "Panthay" and today they are still overwhelmingly involved in businesses including restaurants, noodle shops, groceries, and bakeries. Most Panthays involved in trade outside the major urban centers are still peddlers or in the transport business.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century the caravans of Yunnanese Muslim traders ranged over an area extending from the frontier of Tibet, through Assam, Burma, Thailand, and Laos, to the south Chinese province of Sichuan, Guizhou and Guangxi. Goods carried south during the winter season included cloths (wool, cotton and velvet), fruit, nuts, carpets, brass utensils and salt; the same caravans returned to Yunnan carrying raw cotton, tea, opium, gem-stone, and sometimes grain. By the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, two main routes of the caravans of Yunnanese traders existed between Simoa in southern Yunnan and northern Thailand, one passing through Burma territory, and one across Laos (Berlie 2000).

As a result of this trade network, taken together with some indirect Muslim settlement in Thailand via Burma following the collapse of the Yunnan Rebellion, by the late 19<sup>th</sup> century a distinct Yunnanese community of several dozen persons had become established in the Wiang Phing district of Chiang Mai, Thailand--an area commonly known, because of its long association with Yunnanese settlement, as Ban Haw, or "Haw Village."

By the late 1890s, therefore, the nucleus of a predominantly Muslim Yunnanese community had been established in several of the main urban centers of northern Thailand, most notably in Chiang Mai. According to Suthep Soonthornpaschuh, the first group of Yunnanese Muslim migrants to settle

in Chiang Mai's Wiang Phing district were led by a Hui Muslim whose name was "Chowng-lin." Suthep identifies Chowng-lin as a leader of a "dozen traders" who were settled in the Wiang Phing area, and adds that "the site where he first settled his house was originally used by Yunnanese traders to unload their goods and rest the pack animals" (Suthep Soonthornpasuch 1977). As a result of the expansion of the Chiang Mai Yunnanese Muslim community, a mosque intended primarily for the use of Yunnanese Muslims was constructed and opened on September 9, 1917. The Yunnanese Muslims of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai were primarily engaged in wholesale or retailing activities, and developed as successful "middle-men" between the itinerant Yunnanese caravans and the lowland Thai (Scupin 1998: 256).

It is, as may be expected, difficult to estimate the number of Yunnanese Muslims resident in the northern Land in general, but Farouk (1988) puts the Yunnanese Muslims of Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai, and Lumpang provinces, taken collectively, at 20,000. According to the census 2000, there is a population of 15,580 Muslims in northern Thailand, thus I estimated that by this amount, Chinese Muslims comprise 65% of the total Muslim population of the north which is 10,127 Chinese Muslims.

## The Making Chinese Muslim Middle-Class

After the Chinese Communist Revolution led by [Mao Zedong](#), in 1949, the second big wave of Chinese Muslims fled to Burma and northern Thailand. Most of them were Chinese caravan traders who traveled across border China, Burma, Laos, and northern Thailand. Mu, a 83-year-old Chinese Muslim, told me that after he crossed the Thai border at Mae Sai, Chiang Rai, he heard about the Chinese Muslims in Chiang Mai who came earlier. Thus, he decided to move to Chiang Mai, and later met Lii, a local Thai non-Muslim woman who was working with Nu, a local Thai non-Muslim woman who married Na, another first generation Chinese Muslim. In 1961, Mu and Lii were married. They have four children and settled in Chiang Mai by opening a small restaurant. All of their children attend a Christian school for modern education, and, finally, two of them received master degree, and the other two earned bachelor degree. Mu still holds an Alien identification despite having stayed a long time in Thailand and having married a Thai woman. He said:

*I don't mind for myself to obtain a Thai nationality because I am now too old; I just care for my children that they have to be a Thai citizen legally so that they will be secured in this country. I'm glad that they are now become a Thai citizen because their mother is Thai, that's enough for me.*

Presently, the eldest son of Mu's family is teaching in a university and pursuing his doctoral degree while the rest enjoy working in their businesses in Chiang Mai. Mu's story is an example of many Chinese Muslims who seek to settle down in the new society. The making of the Chinese Muslim middle class in Thailand within two or three generations is astonishing to Muslims in other regions and worth acknowledging in this study as a possible comparative research project.

Class distinctions in Thai society as a whole are perhaps most clearly drawn through the system of national education. The present educational system was designed by state agencies to promote state defined objectives (Keyes 1987). It is known that taking up formal higher education in Thai

society can be a strategy for status maintenance and upward mobility among the middle-class. Studies have discussed how the accumulation of cultural capital through education serves to reproduce the middle class. In Thailand, the premium placed on excellent school results and cultural capital activities suggest a deliberate or logical strategy, by presumably middle-class parents, to help their children race up to higher and more exclusive rungs of the educational ladder (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Ball 2003; Devine 2004; and Sin 2009).

Charles Keyes (1987) accurately states that although people throughout Thailand have complied to a significant degree with the compulsory education requirement, only a small percentage of the populace has gone beyond the required primary schooling to acquire further education. Those who do pursue secondary and tertiary education are mainly townspeople rather than villagers. Not only do few parents in rural communities see the relevance of secondary or tertiary education for agricultural occupations, but rural schools also provide poor preparation for those seeking higher education. Moreover, schools in up-country towns are not the equal of the best schools in Bangkok or Chiang Mai, some of which are privately operated by Christian organizations or are connected to the major universities. The difference among primary schools, as well as those among secondary schools and institutions of higher education, both reflect and create class differences within Thai society.

As a national system of status markers, educational attainment serves as a clear indication of someone's position within the national society. The school, academy, college, or university one has attended determines the opportunities open. Moreover, the economic boom of the 1960s and 1970s created a large number of new jobs in commerce and industry, and increasingly the qualifications that people acquire through the educational system also determine access to these jobs as well as to traditional positions of status.

Overall, it was evident that the middle-class interviewees' parents mobilized their economic resources, directly and indirectly, to ensure that their children enjoyed the best education possible, either in private schools or in the public school system. They sent their children to schools with excellent facilities where they enjoyed a high level of individual attention from high-caliber teachers. For example, consider the story of the three Chinese Muslims' family, Ma Woo (deceased), Ma Ning (deceased) and Na Yao.

Ma Woo migrated from Yunnan sixty-years ago, and he married with Sri, a non-Muslim Thai woman who converted to Islam after her marriage. They ran a retail store of agricultural products after settling in downtown Chiang Mai. Ma Woo and Sri had six children (four sons and two daughters). Una, the eldest son, graduated from the medical school of Chiang Mai University and serving as a faculty member of the medical school after completing his specialized medical training from abroad. His younger brother, Tarun, and Eenat, his younger sister, also graduated from the medical school of Chiang Mai University. Tarun is working at a governmental hospital in Chiang Mai while Eenat is working in a private hospital. Another two of Una's younger siblings, his brother and sister Naw and Ila, graduated from the Nursing school, at Chiang Mai University, while Lopun, his youngest brother, received a master degree in education from Chiang Mai University. Lopun is the

only one of Ma Woo family who is working outside of the medical field by running a small business with his wife Mey, who is a second generation Chinese Muslim woman.

Una married a second generation Chinese Muslim in Chiang Mai, and his younger sister Naw, married with Qing, a Chinese Muslim medical doctor who is working at the Medical school of Chiang Mai University. Qing has two brothers, Auh and Ganch, both of them are also medical doctors. Qing's father, Ma Ning (deceased), migrated from Yunnan during the same time as Ma Woo and married with a local Thai woman as well. Now, Naw and Qing, also second generation Chinese Muslim, have one daughter, Waj, the third generation of Chinese Muslim, who is now in the second year of medical school at Chiang Mai University.

Na, a 93-year-old first generation Chinese Muslim immigrant who is still healthy said that he sent his three daughters to a well known Christian School in Chiang Mai:

*Since, I have decided not to go back to my home country, so I want my children to settle here with the best quality of life and secure. The only and most effective way to short cut for their success is they have to pursue the best and highest education. Luckily, nowadays we have several best private or public schools in Chiang Mai, and we have the best university (Chiang Mai University) of the northern region. So, they have to attain the modern school and entering to university for higher education, otherwise they will get into trouble in this land. I am so proud that all of my three children graduated from universities. The eldest one graduate from a private university with B.A. in business administration and now doing her small business at home, the second one is now being a teacher in a governmental school and got her M.A. in education, and the youngest one just completed her Ph.D. degree in something, I don't know the name of the subject (Research and Evaluation) and working at Chiang Mai University.*

It is quite usual for a Chinese Muslim family to bring their children to Christian school for primary level until high school. All of the second generation Chinese Muslims who have been mentioned above completed their secondary school and high school from the Christian schools in Chiang Mai. This story would hardly happen among Malay Muslims in the South, who mostly prefer to bring their children to Islamic school. But in northern Thailand, it is possible to mix Chinese Muslim identity with attending Christian schools.

Ma Ning, a first generation Chinese Muslim said during an interview that:

*It doesn't matter to send our kids to Christian schools because they didn't teach students to be a Christian; they just teach students to get into universities. Besides, our mosque also provides an Islamic teaching for all kids that they have to attain Islamic school after finishing from their formal schools. They have to learn the Qur'an, Hadith, and how to be a good Muslim.*

The stories of those three families, Ma Woo, Ma Ning and Na, are not exceptional for the Chinese Muslim communities in northern Thailand. Table 5.1 shows the very high proportion of second generation Chinese Muslims who pursued higher education and have earned at least a Bachelor degree from prestigious universities in Thailand.

## Table 5.1 Educational Attainment among Chinese Muslims by Generations

generation	Highest Degree			Total
	High school	B.A.	M.A. or higher	
First-generation	0 % ( 0 )	0% ( 0 )	0 % ( 0 )	100% (42)
Second and Third-generation	12% (22)	70% (130)	18% (33)	100% (185)

The accomplishment of higher education among Chinese Muslims is quite well-known to Muslims from other regions. For example, Pnif, a Thai-Indian Muslim activist from the South who graduated from Chiang Mai University thirty years ago, once said to me:

*I'm so proud of Chinese Muslims in the north. They are high-educated people because their parents had an excellent vision and good plans for their children. We, Muslims, need a high quality of umma like Chinese Muslim in Thailand who both focus on modern education and Islamic practices.*

Pwee, a retired professor of biology at Chiang Mai University, and the son of the former Imam at Yunnanese Mosque in Chiang Mai, said:

*It's extremely important that our children must have both formal education and religious education. They must pursue higher education for having good occupation and standing in this society with great pride and self-reliance. Nowadays, the economic world is so competitive, so, if we don't pay much attention to the formal education, they will not be able to compete with others. So, we must be strict into both ways: religious piety and worldliness. Currently, our Muslim societies are downward, and we have to bring back our prosperity as in the past by pursuing higher education.*

The role of education in promoting social mobility is among the central issues in contemporary sociological and political debate. In modern societies, education has become an increasingly important factor in determining which jobs people enter and in determining their social class position. Over time there has been an increase in the proportions of people from all social classes who reached the highest educational qualifications (Iannelli and Paterson: 2004).

In one interview, Wang said:

*As a second generation Chinese Muslim, my life is so different to that of my Mum and my Dad. While they experienced many hardships since they moved from China and struggled for stability in Thai society during 1950s and 1960s, myself and my siblings enjoyed many opportunities and privileges in the 1980s because of our higher education provided by my parents.*

Wang Zhe, a second generation Chinese businessman, states:

*As a Muslim, we have to balance for both this world and the next world. I mean, Islam teaches us to help others and then you will gain great reward from Allah. As a minority, we have to struggle a lots for our success to stand with pride and dignity in this country. By doing so, we have to strengthen and stand firmly by ourselves first, and then we can help others. Islam teaches us to be an upper hand (to give) rather than the lower hand (to take). So, we have to do our best for this world to be a person who has potentiality to give. It is no doubt, education is the best mean and most powerful to fulfill our mission in this world. We must give thanks to our parents whom had long open-eyes and let us become a good quality citizen in Thai society even though we are a minority.*

Any system of formal state-sponsored education entails the establishment of a uniform system of credentials which are distributed among all citizens. People will be considered qualified or not qualified to seek particular occupations depending on the credentials the person has acquired. Because minority people recognize that the credentials acquired through schooling have state-wide salience, they often see formal education as the major means for achieving upward mobility. Thus, as a minority, the first generation Chinese Muslim immigrants consider education as the most effective mean for the next generation in moving up the social ladder after attaining higher levels of education.

Mei Li, a second generation Chinese Muslim professor at a university in Chiang Mai, said:

*Today, the Chinese Muslim are in almost every good occupations such as medical doctors, nurses, dentists, pharmacists, engineers, lawyers, professors and teachers, and businessmen. We are so proud that right now, one of the best medical doctors of heart surgery in Thailand is a Chinese Muslim. In Chiang Mai, we have the biggest computer company with seventeen branches, we have the transnational tourism company, we run a private modern school in Chiang Mai and a private nursing school in Chaing Rai, we owned four branches of motorcycle dealer. We owned a factory of paper packaging, a factory of plastic bag, two factories of agricultural products, and we have one politician as a provincial representative of Chiang Mai.*

This is an example of how the families of Chinese Muslim immigrants became the middle-class within two to three generations in Thai society. After the first generation, when Chinese Muslims were successful as traders and then as local businessmen, more than eighty percent of them sent their children to the best modern schools in northern cities, and then later to professional training in various fields in higher education, which occurred mostly at Chiang Mai University.

# Conclusion: Gülen's Philosophy of Education and Chinese Muslim in Thailand

Despite the fact that Chinese Muslims in Thailand are minority people in Thai society, they have raised their new generation to be a good Thai citizen and a good Muslim *umma* through both modern education and Islamic school in their communities. It has no doubt that education becomes an effective mean for the next generation of Chinese Muslims in moving up the social ladder after attaining higher levels of education. Nowadays, they have been able to live with pride and dignity while still firmly maintaining their Islamic identities and peacefully coexisting with other people in their host society. The Thai people both non-Muslims and other group of Muslims alike have experienced that the Chinese Muslims have made great contributions to Thai society. More than thirty of them are serving as medical doctors in provincial hospitals as well as numerous numbers of nurses, pharmacists, dentists, teachers, professors, civil servants, and various business sectors.

The raising of new generations of Chinese Muslims' parents in Thailand has affirmed Fethullah Gülen's philosophy of education that education is a duty for all humans and "by fulfilling it we attain the rank of true humanity and become beneficial element of society," and Gülen states that parents and a healthy family life are the first essentials of a child's education (Gülen, Fethullah 2002: 61; Unal and Williams 2000: 310-311). The life stories of Chinese Muslims have illustrated clearly as Gülen has mentioned idea that "people who want to guarantee their future cannot be indifferent how their children are being educated," and "the first school in which we received the necessary education to be perfected is the home" (Gülen, Fethullah 2002: 64). As He Qiang, a second generation Chinese Muslim, spoke about his life during his childhood:

*You're asking me about my life during my childhood? I'd say that actually, what I want to tell you here is not only about my life-history, but also, I could say, it is the story of all second generation Chinese Muslim in the North.*

*I still remember when I was just four or five years old, I always aware of my Dad and Mom's praying together at home. When my dad went to pray in the mosque, he always brought me and my brother with him, and it enjoyed so much at the mosque because I met many friends there and we played together after finishing from a prayer and waiting for another prayers.*

*When I was in elementary and secondary school, the school finished around 4 p.m., and we had to continue to study the Qur'an and Islamic teaching at our Islamic school the mosque during 5.00 p.m-6.30 or 7.00 p.m. every day except Friday. During weekend on Saturday and Sunday start from 9.00 a.m until 13.30 p.m., we also had to learn Arabic and Islam at the mosque. Then, we could hang around and played with our friends during the afternoon. It always full of fun.*

*I just want to give my big thanks to my parents for sending or forcing me (sometimes) to the mosque during my childhood because without their concerns about Islam, I can hardly be a good Muslim and a good person like this day. Now, I have children and it is my turn to take the same responsibility to send them to Islamic school at the mosque like my childhood. It is very important to inject them with*

*the Islamic faith, it's like an immunization. I firmly believe that in this modern world our kids are in higher risk and easily motivated by Shaitan or evils than the past unless we provide them with religious knowledge regardless any religions.*

The statement clearly confirmed as Gülen's stated that "we are human only truly human if we learn, teach and inspire others" (Gülen, Fethullah 2002: 62).

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