



Internal Feelings of Hijab: The Lived Experiences of Chinese Young Muslim Women in Guangzhou

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<https://doi.org/10.18280/ijstdp.170631>

ABSTRACT

Received: 18 July 2022

Accepted: 27 September 2022

Keywords:

ethnic, ethnic identity, minority, religion, religious faith

Ethnic identity is considered a fundamental aspect that provides an individual with a sense of belonging and commitment to a particular ethnic group. Wearing Hijab, for example, is a major consensus and obligation for Muslim women. This article focuses on the status of the hijab among young Muslim women in Guangzhou, China. Living in one of the world's socialist states, they are struggling with their identity and faith as a minority. This paper study of how they negotiate their ethnic identities within and outside their families. The study draws data gathered from semi-structured interviews with nine young Muslim women. The findings suggest (1) Ethnic identity is a dynamic process. (2) Social and cultural contexts have great effects on an individual's ethnic identity development. (3) Ethnic identity is multidimensional: family, friends, gender, and religion play vital roles in the process of achieving a positive ethnic identity. Prior to this, Muslim women find Hijab as one of the major barriers to living in mainstream society. They choose to wear Hijab or not, based on the above reasons. They may find out more possible ways of educating their members to consider religion as a potential source of empowerment and strength in their identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

Islam was established in China during the Tang Dynasty (618-906 CE) following the visits and settlement of Persian and Arab traders [1]. Through subsequent intermarriage with Chinese women in port cities such as Guangzhou, these foreigners were the first generation of Chinese Muslims. Following the first official delegation by Sa'ad ibn Waqqas, one of the Prophet Mohammed's (P.B.U.H.), maternal uncles, the first major settlements of early Muslim traders made successive delegations to Guangzhou and were well received [2]. From that time, Muslim traders made Guangzhou known to the whole world as the center of the "Silk Road". They were one of the first Muslim settlements in China. These early Muslims settled down, intermarried with the Han Chinese and Mongols, and converted them to Islam and at the same time assimilated into Chinese culture, and their descendants gradually constructed a new group of people, the Hui [3]. For centuries, this group, or later categorized as Hui people, believe in Islam and live different spiritual and material lives from that of the majority Han people.

At present, The Hui is the third largest ethnic group of the

55 Chinese ethnic minorities. They use Mandarin as the official language and share many Chinese customs, which creates the impression that the Hui are more integrated into Chinese society, as they are found all over China, particularly in cities. Although widely spread over China, the Hui mainly come from Ningxia, Gansu, Henan, Xinjiang, Qinghai, Guizhou, and Yunnan provinces [4].

Compared to their male counterparts, the female Muslim Hui are more struggling to practice their belief, faith, and tradition. In 2017 for example, President Xi Jinping issued an order saying all religions in China should be Chinese in orientation, there have been further crackdowns. Campaigners say China is trying to eradicate Uyghur culture.

On the issue of why Muslim women wear the hijab, most studies affirm first and foremost that it comes from the rulings of the Qur'an. However, scholars in China differ in their opinions and understandings when it comes to explaining the reasons. Some argue that Islam requires women of faith to wear hijab mainly for the purpose of protection, both to protect women's private property from infringement and to protect them from men. Some argue that the actual purpose of this requirement is to ensure the purity of patrilineal lineage

through the segregation of women, which is one of the important measures of gender segregation in Islam; at the same time, the purpose of requiring women to wear the hijab is not only to protect women but also to protect men from the temptation of beauty.

Some scholars, on the other hand, emphasize that Shariah requires Muslims to have their own individual characteristics, to behave and look distinct from non-believers, and not to wear clothes similar to those of non-believers. In conclusion, scholars generally agree that the wearing of the hijab by Muslim women is an important sign of faith in Islam and has become an integral part of the traditional dress culture of the Muslim nation.

In addition to the material functions of the hijab itself, such as keeping warm and cold, and the symbolic function of expressing religious beliefs, scholars have also noted its other functions. Some scholars believe that the deeper cultural meanings of the head covering include the followings: regulating behavior and passing on culture; the taboo cut of incest among relatives; and reflecting the simple view of female chastity. In particular, the head covering worn by Hui women is becoming increasingly common today, and the head covering is becoming more and more exquisite, which also serves the function of beautifying life and decorating the self.

Zhao Keren has published successive articles elucidating the cultural value of the Muslim women's veil, pointing out that the veil connotes the tendency of Muslim political values and is a political weapon for Muslim women to go against Western cultural expansion and hegemony; that the veil contains the Muslim beauty of the city and can bring psychological pleasure and relaxation to women; and that it also embodies the Islamic concept of equality for all.

So, it is interesting to know, how these Chinese Muslim women negotiate their identity in a non-Muslim country. There is an urgent need to tell the public who they are, what they need, why they are there, and how they live their lives differently from mainstream society. Apart, there must be an initiative to reveal the ethnic identity development of young Minority Chinese Muslim women, which is scarce and needs to be introduced to the general public.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

In Guangzhou, most of the young Muslim women migrated from the Northwestern part of China, where life experiences are extremely different from Cantonese Guangzhou. Wearing a hijab is their main identification as Muslim. Many of them are rejected by the officials due to their way of dressing. This explains a large number of female Muslim translators on the streets and markets of Guangdong. Most of them chose to work for private trading companies where they have more religious rights such as wearing the hijab and praying five times a day.

The current situation of Muslim women has urged to study which will be tabled in this paper. The research questions are multi-fold:

- (1) What are the antecedents of wearing hijab among the Chinese young Muslim women in Guangzhou?
- (2) What are the consequences of hijab context among the Guangzhou non-Muslim community towards their Chinese young Muslim counterpart?

The rest of this paper is presented as follows: First is the literature review section where the core theory of this study is

discussed. Second is the methodology section where the research steps taken in this study are elaborated. The third is the findings section where the results of the interviews are discussed and explained. Fourth is the discussion section on how a phenomenological approach shows the lived experiences and understandings of educational influences on Chinese Muslim women's ethnic identity being developed. Fifth is the conclusion section where the summary, recommendations for future studies, and managerial implications are offered.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in nature, studying the lived experiences of the participants in a natural setting or a Phenomenological Approach. For this particular study, the experiences and stories of the young Chinese minority Muslim women are designed, which means to depict and explain their experiences. Steps of data analysis using a model call "modification of the VAN KAAM" [5].

In this study, the respondents were selected through a combination of convenience and purposive sampling. Convenience sampling is a technique for obtaining samples from respondents who are easily available to the researcher and who are located close to the sampling locations. For instance, the researcher interviews respondents who are around the location and the respondents provide information and answer the questions asked. This technique is also employed when it is challenging to reach individuals who possess the characteristics of the desired respondent. This technique is efficient and cost-effective for locating respondents who may be difficult to identify. Sampling continues until data saturation is reached. In addition, the researcher asks interviewees if they know anyone with similar experience or knowledge who might be willing to engage in the study.

Moreover, purposive sampling is a widely used technique in qualitative research to identify and select information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources. This involves identifying and selecting individuals who are knowledgeable or experienced with a phenomenon. The importance of availability for participating respondents to share information through this sampling is more clear, expressive, and reflective. Thus, the population of Muslim women in Guangzhou is an appropriate respondent for the study because it possesses the aforementioned features. Interviews were conducted with Muslim women in Guangzhou at locations that are easily accessible, have experience or answers that can address the research questions, and are appropriate for the context of the study.

Through the interwoven process of data collection and data analysis, various data validation strategies were utilized, which included seeking constant feedback from the participants, triangulating data, using a peer debriefer, and member checking procedures to increase the creditability and trustworthiness of the study. Finally, in order to conduct the study ethically, cultural sensitivity was considered, professional standards were applied, and a letter of consent was provided.

Participants:

The study draws on data gathered from semi-structured interviews with nine young Muslim women who studied religious knowledge at various community-organized classes

in the city of Guangzhou. Using an integrated approach from developmental, social psychological, and acculturation theories as a conceptual framework, this study provides rich descriptions of the participants' identity negotiation, interpersonal interactions, and sense of belonging within a changing psychological, social and historical context.

Demographic Questionnaires:

The demographic of participants (Table 1) was designed to solicit basic information about the participants (name, age, and ethnicity) and their level of education, birthplace, length of residency in Guangzhou, and marital status. The questionnaires were distributed to the participants with consent letters before each interview session. It was proven to be helpful in providing the researcher a sense of who the participants were.

3.1 Profiles of individual participants

Bing: - Coming from Liaoning, Bing was 26 at the time of the interview. Bing grew up in a traditional Hui family in Shenyang, where the Muslim population is rather small. Her family only keeps the Hui tradition of eating halal food, and she started having her own lunch box ever since primary school. Feeling different from the rest of her classmates, she was eager to learn about her own ethnicity and religion. By the time she joined the university in Nanjing, Bing joined the Muslim society on campus and learned some basic knowledge about Islam. After she completed her master's degree from the University of Nanjing, she got a job offer from Guangzhou. Currently, she secured a good salary and position in her company and participates in different types of charitable community works in Guangzhou. Although currently, she faces some difficulties in putting on the hijab for work, she does have the intention to wear the hijab one day. She herself is looking for a pious Muslim guy who has a similar background to build a good future.

Ma: Ma is the youngest girl (20 years old) among the 9 participants. She is a very normal Chinese-looking girl as she described that nobody ever asked her whether she is a Muslim, for she looks no different from others. Her area of study is chemistry, which is quite surprising to the ordinary Muslim public, as most of the girls either quit education at this age or work in the field of trading or in Ma's words, "some girls are already married with children".

Although she grew up in a Muslim family and Muslim province (Xinjiang), Ma is not a practicing Muslim although she is strict with halal food as how Bing is. When mentioning her identity, she prefers to use Hui rather than Muslim. She

learned a few verses of the Quran from the mosque when she was a child and knew all the basic religious practices at home. She left home for secondary school education by the age of 15, and school was very far from her hometown. She came to know more about her religion since she entered the university.

Zainab: She was 27 by the time of the interview, married with one child. She has lived in Guangzhou for seven years and put on her hijab for four years. She talked a lot about gender role issues and displayed her dissatisfaction with her life. She wanted to go for further education instead of just staying at home.

Zainab is from Ningxia which officially is called the "Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region", which means a large population of Muslim Hui people resides there. However, it is also known that, due to the government's assimilation program, only people of rural areas of Ningxia still practice Islam and those in cities like the capital Yinchuan do not observe Islamic practices. According to Zainab, only those who study Arabic wear the hijab, and the rest of the women wear hats as symbols of Muslims. She had a lot of influence from her family and the religious classes she attends now. Her parents and sister are very religious, and perform daily prayers and fasting, and they directly influence her on issues of wearing the hijab.

Aisha: - Aisha was 30 years old during the interview session. Come from Harbin, Northeastern China. She is a typical career woman and earns a very high income compared with the rest of the participants. During the time of the interview, normal Muslim women's salary in Guangzhou was about RMB 4,000, and Aisha's salary was nearly RMB 20,000. Working as a social researcher in an international company's top management, she has gained fame, position, and high respect among her colleagues and the Muslim community. Her journey of searching for a Muslim identity started when she entered university in Guangzhou. She participated in all kinds of activities held by the Muslim community and became a prominent organizer even after she graduated. She utilized her resources and connections with the government and NGOs to help promote the growth of the Muslim community in Guangzhou.

Due to her nature of work, although she knew the importance of wearing a hijab for Muslim women, she chose not to wear it. She claimed that wearing a hijab makes her a better Muslim, but it is not professional to wear it. She believed that through good behaviors and excellent performance at work, the stereotyping of the Muslim image can be changed, and it all depends on the individual's behavior to tell people that Muslims are good citizens.

Table 1. Participants demographic

No.	Name	Age	Origin	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Education	Length of residency (years)	Hijab
1.	Bing	26	Liaoning	Hui	Unmarried	University	-5	No
2.	Ma	20	Xinjiang	Hui	Unmarried	University	-5	No
3.	Zainab	27	Ningxia	Hui	Married	High school	+5	Yes
4.	Aisha	30	Dongbei	Hui	Unmarried	University	+5	No
5.	Saleena	30	Shandong	Hui	Married	High School	+5	Yes
6.	Lin	27	Guangxi	Han	Unmarried	College	+5	No
7.	Yang	35	Ningxia	Hui	Married	University	+5	Yes
8.	Huang	45	Henan	Han	Unmarried	High school	+5	Yes
9.	Weiling	26	Xinjiang	Hui	Unmarried	University	-5	No

Saleena: - By the time of the interview, Saleena was 30 years old, married, and lived in Guangzhou for seven years. She is a housewife who studies Quran in the women's class at

Hengjiao together with Zainab. She comes from Shandong province where the Muslim population is very small. Due to the small Hui population, and historical assimilation with the

Han, there is not anyone wearing a hijab in her hometown, and people there do not practice religion but rather take it as a custom. She learned nothing about Islam from her hometown and never wore a hijab before she joined the class. She started wearing a hijab one month before the interview took place. Although she did not have much knowledge about her religion, she was influenced greatly by her husband who is from the Northwest, and also by her friends who are very devoted Muslims. She was intrigued by the good behaviors of the sisters, and she started to learn from them some basic religious practices such as prayers. In the beginning, Salena wore a hijab to avoid being different from other sisters in the class, but later she found it very meaningful and decided to wear it voluntarily. She is eager to learn more about Islam and tries to teach her child religious knowledge.

Lin: A new converted Muslim who was 27 at the time of the interview. Lin speaks Mandarin, Cantonese, English, and a little Arabic. She is Han by ethnicity. She came to Guangzhou for college and found a job after she graduated. She studied Logistics during college and works in the same field. Due to the nature of that job, she has a lot of customers from the Middle East, and some Muslim girls work in her company, so she slowly developed a love through the kindness of her Muslim friends and learned about Islam.

Lin joined the night classes for the new converts and systematically learns about religion and finally converted to Islam in the class. She used to be an active Marxist and also deeply rooted in Confucius's teachings. As she grew up, she started thinking about her future and the nature of things. She found peace by learning Islam and being with the sisters at her weekend classes. Through studying religious practices, she found some commonalities between Islam and Confucius, which are virtues. There are still some barriers for her to being a Muslim, for example in traditional customs and being with her parents, as they are non-Muslims.

Yang: Yang was one of the Quran teachers at the highest level. Yang was 35 years old by the time of the interview. She was married with three children. She is from Ningxia and grew up in a traditional Muslim family. She went to study Islam in Thailand and returned to China with a bachelor's certificate. She was married during her study period to her college mate who is also from her hometown. They both came to Guangzhou to settle down after their studies. Yang said at the beginning they spent a few years in tremendous difficulties. They were graduates from religious colleges, and therefore, they could not get a formal job in government offices or companies. They had to work as Arabic translators for some trading companies. She insists on wearing a hijab and that is also the reason she could not work in government offices.

Huang: A single woman aged 45 during the time of the interview. She is a Han and has converted to Islam for almost ten years. Huang is one of the oldest among all the students but still remains unmarried. Coming from Henan, Huang never heard about Islam or Muslims when she was in her hometown. She only got to know about Islam when she started doing business in Guangzhou with some Arab people. She was influenced by the Muslims and converted to Islam. Huang has a very supportive family who does not set any obstacles for her even when she became a Muslim.

Weiling: Coming from Xinjiang, Weiling was 26 at the time of the interview. She was born into a traditional Hui family and grew up in Xinjiang. Her parents did not teach her much about religion, but kept strict Muslim dietary habits, so she knows what is lawful and what is unlawful to eat. She did not

have a clear understanding of her identity as a Hui until she left home to study in a secondary school in another province. Her life before that was more mixed with Han people and Hui identity was not discovered. And when so many young people of different ethnicities sharing the same faith met in a strange place gave new meanings to them. That is, they were all Muslims and they felt like one family. However, the education they received during that time did not contain anything about faith or religion, and the policy is to blend all ethnicity into one Chinese core, a process of cultural assimilation, which is to set no boundaries between Muslims and non-Muslims.

She joined the university and started contact with some leading Muslim students, and gradually felt her sense of belonging as a Muslim. The community organized religious classes that affected her to return to her Muslim religion, and also it caused her some confusion on the hijab issue. She insisted that in China, a non-Muslim country, wearing a hijab is not necessary, and it attracted people's attention. So, she preferred to dress like a normal Chinese woman.

As a newcomer to Guangzhou, she says she is still at the periphery of the Muslim community, and she wants to learn more about the religion and be a good Muslim like them.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Main theme: Internal feelings of hijab

The issue of the hijab has been debated in the literature, history, and in both Muslim countries and non-Muslim countries like China. The word hijab may be used as a head-cover, and it is used to promote privacy for females and to prohibit the intermingling of sexes. The "hijab" is for Muslim women to ensure modesty, decency, chastity, and most importantly, to worship God. In this research, "hijab" has become one important subtheme under the main theme of barriers.

4.2 Meanings and practices behind hijab

There was one interesting question that the researcher bore in mind: Do the researcher's participants, those who wear hijab and those who choose not to, really understand the meaning of hijab according to Islamic law? Many meanings of wearing hijab or not were reflected by the participants in this study, for instance in Ma's perspective. She was asked if she understood the meaning of wearing a hijab. According to her, she does not understand the purpose and reason of having a specific dressing for example wearing a scarf and the restriction of wearing short-sleeves shirts. Muslims were educated to accept what they have been told about the proper dressing of a Muslim.

Ma added that hijab is a practice of Hui's custom, which is not congruent with the Chinese mainstream. People normally will assimilate to the normal Chinese custom because they do not want to be looked differently. They will dress the same way the locals dressed, with short sleeves and without scarves whenever they go to a strange place.

It is understood by Ma that wearing a hijab means more of a traditional ethnic practice. She told the interviewer that her mother will cover her hair with a scarf or even using a handkerchief in a religious function because it is a must. However, in the other situation, she was permitted to not covering her hair.

Interestingly, there were similar data collected from Weiling, another research participant. She stated that China is a non-Muslim country, so she prefers to follow the normal Chinese custom by putting ordinary clothes without a scarf to cover her hair because she does not have much insistence to be conventional.

The study found out that both Ma and Weiling did not want to use the hijab as an indicator of their identities, and they hold the opinion that wearing the hijab in China is not appropriate and such an act would “arouse people’s attention”.

Besides that, although Weiling understood the function of the hijab, which is to protect women from harassment, she still felt “this kind of protection is different from the meaning of protection in Muslim countries”. So, she thought, if she goes to a Muslim country then she “would certainly have been wearing it”. Therefore, the notion of the hijab for Weiling differs in China and in Muslim countries.

Zainab who wears a hijab in public now has mentioned that she misunderstood the meaning of hijab back in her hometown. According to her, Muslim girls in some parts of Ningxia do not have to cover their hair before marriage, and even after they got married, they wear a special type of cap instead of a hijab as their custom. She added that using the cap (which shows part of a woman’s hair, ears, and neck) has become a special phenomenon for some Muslim women in China. Especially in Guangzhou, as the weather is rather hot for the most part of the year, some Muslim women like to wear hats.

More data were gathered from Salena. She proposed that Muslim women should be obliged to dress properly from top to bottom and must wear a scarf to cover the hair thoroughly rather than exposing a certain part of their hair. Otherwise, they better take the scarf off.

From the collected data, it is understood that for them those who wear proper hijab regard it as representing the “image” of Muslim women. As Muslims are minorities in China, and people pay special attention to them. Salena noted that when those without a scarf is making a mistake, people will normally let it go easily than those who wear a scarf. The scarf will restrict people from doing the bad things.

In general, participants hold different opinions on wearing the hijab and their own reasons for wearing it and not wearing it.

4.3 Not wearing hijab

Aisha, Bing and Weiling had reported in the interview that due to their own feelings, understandings, and professional constraints, they chose not to wear hijab.

Weiling felt that hijab is “not so important” in her heart. She does not wear it nor does she refuse it, but rather has a kind of confusion and considering of wearing it after marriage. She did not think of it seriously at the moment.

According to Bing, some Muslim women chose to wear scarf among their Muslim friends but not when they are in the Chinese mainstream society. So, she has decided to not wearing a scarf because she only puts on scarf when she attends gatherings with her Muslim friends but not when she goes to work and goes out.

From the interview, the researcher found that those who do not wear hijab, do want to wear it one day as mentioned by Weiling, “...even though I’m not wearing hijab now, I did have this intention”.

The researcher came to know that Bing’s company has some projects in a few Muslim countries and she thought of applying for a position there and that would be a chance for her to put on a hijab representing her company to work in a Muslim country.

The same intention to put on the hijab also applied to Aisha. As a successful career woman, Aisha has gained a high position in her career, and at the same time she kept on enriching herself with religious teachings. She claimed to be a pure believing Muslim who tried to practice all religious duties except wearing a hijab. What prohibit her from wearing a hijab is her nature of work, she needs to meet many clients. She felt that if she can be a little stronger, she will definitely be wearing the headscarf.

Aisha realized that as a career woman who is often in touch with the government’s organizations, the hijab for her is troublesome. She did not go against the rulings on wearing hijab, “wearing hijab makes it easier to be a Muslim”, and “with no scarf, it is easier to be a professional person”.

4.4 Wearing hijab

As a symbol of religiosity, the hijab has a position in all the researcher participants’ hearts, although half of the participants do not wear it. However, from the interviews, they reported that they wore the hijab on some occasions. As Ma claimed that she only wears hijab when she attends special formal occasions. Bing also wore a hijab when she attended gatherings with her Muslim friends and when going to the mosque. Weiling and Aisha also reported that when they went to religious classes or mosque on weekends, they wore hijab.

This study has figured out that the participants who wear hijab consistently are mainly from a relatively religious background, such as Yang and Zainab. Salena decided to wear a hijab not long before the interviews with the researcher. Huang, on the contrary, as a Muslim convert, put on a hijab after she learned a lot about the Islamic religion.

The research discovered that hijab has become part of Yang’s identity because she has a strong religious background, studied religion systematically at a religious university and she internalized the teachings of religions into her way of life. She works as a Quran teacher and as a role model, she exhibited a Muslim woman’s image in people’s eyes. According to her, religion is the core of her life, so, dressing in accordance with Islam is the most important to her.

Self-internalization of studying and understanding the religion has made Zainab changed from wearing a cap to a hijab. She said after a person decided to study Islam and following the right people, then one will understand the meaning of wearing a scarf and reach the understanding the existence of Allah and it is His requirement for a woman to wear a scarf.

These participants shared that they knew about Muslim women should wear a hijab, and currently, many girls wear it in public. However, this is not the evidence to show they have reached the level of understanding that scarf is to protect themselves. As they reported that some Muslims with hijabs did not behave well in public and that has ruined the positive image of Muslims. Aisha claimed that there are many people in her hometown who wear hijab and pray, but do not have good characters which represent the majority of Muslims. She believes that wearing a hijab must be accompanied by good behaviors.

To conclude the topic of hijab, no matter what choice one makes on wearing it, the researcher's participants suggest that they should be more lenient because after all, they are living in non-Muslim countries.

5. DISCUSSIONS

Chinese Muslims (the Hui) has become one of the most successful minorities in the world by choosing assimilation [6]. And in response to this assertion, the researcher's findings of current research indicate that Chinese Muslims, in particular women, have achieved their sense of ethnic identities as Muslims and Chinese through their unique educational experiences of adapting, acculturating, and integrating Islamic beliefs into the mainstream communist Chinese society. In order to maintain their status as Chinese citizens, they keep exploring their ethnic identities through community religious education for religious and familial fulfillment.

The participants in the current study shared societal and cultural challenges they experienced as the floating population in Guangzhou. Even after years of living in this big city, many of them still experience ignorance, misunderstandings, and negative stereotyping from society. The current study shows that a successful ethnic identity of a Muslim woman is achieved through exploring the process of acculturation and integration, involving in community activities and religious classes, redirecting to ethnic and religious practices, and internalizing religious beliefs into real-life experiences.

Figure 1 and Figure 2 show a comparison of the original and revised version of the conceptual frameworks.

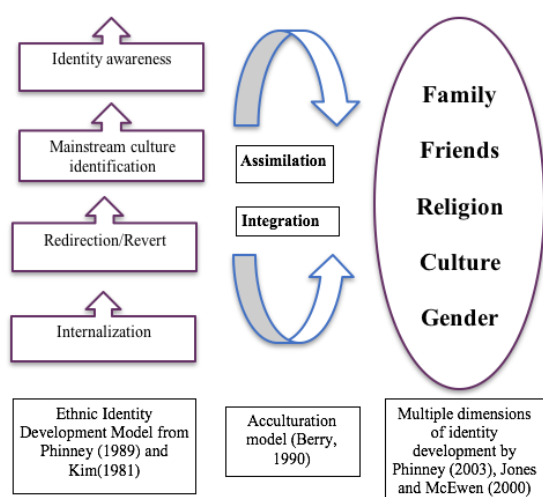


Figure 1. Original conceptual frameworks

The researcher's journey of the whole process of analyzing the findings of this researcher has revealed some new findings from the study. The findings reveal that firstly, ethnic identity is a dynamic process. Second, social and cultural contexts have great effects on an individual's ethnic identity development. And thirdly, ethnic identity is multidimensional: family, friends, gender, and religion play vital roles in the process of achieving a positive ethnic identity. The fourth point shows that people's perceptions; of hijab issues are major barriers for Muslim women living in mainstream society. And single Muslim women face difficulties looking for a partner in big cities like Guangzhou. Finally, Ethnic identity is understood and internalized through community religious education.

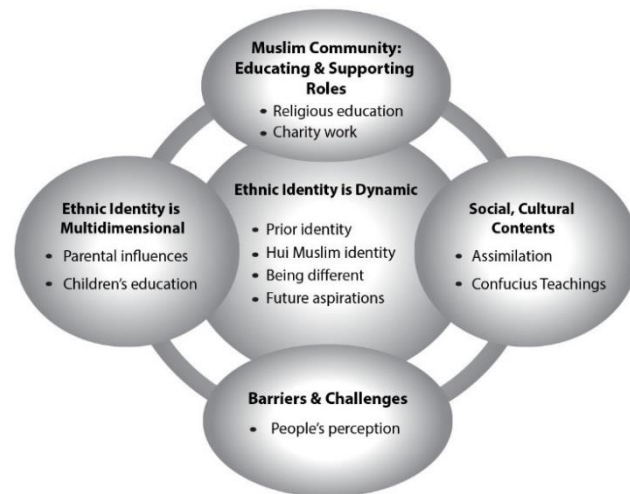


Figure 2. Revised conceptual frameworks

5.1 Perceptions of hijab issues

Identity formation and development can be challenging for ethnic minority groups in particular. Ethnic identity as part of an individual's self-concept and also the value or emotional significance attached to that member of the ethnic group [7]. The young Muslim women in this study came to Guangzhou as individuals with all kinds of educational and familial backgrounds. And they have struggled in different stages of life to locate themselves in mainstream society. To answer research question 4 about barriers these women encountered in life, the participants addressed social and cultural barriers in the process of searching for positive ethnic identities.

No doubt that all participants faced different levels and types of barriers in life, hence not all of them voiced out their problems. Instead, they commented on many good aspects of living in Guangzhou and some disappointments of their own hometowns. All the problems and topics they articulated were closely related to their ethnic identity Hui and their religion, Islam. To successfully live their Muslim identity in the Han majority society, the core of the solution is to achieve a successful ethnic identity through the right teachings of the faith that is Islam and at the same time, actively involved in all aspects of their life to maintain their Chinese identity. However, Muslim women are still encountering obstacles from misunderstandings and negative stereotypes by mainstream society, and they also face difficulties in putting their hijab on in public. Single Muslim young women, in particular, find it not easy to look for a future partner who shares the same values and beliefs.

Ethnic identity has been defined as "one's sense of belonging to an ethnic group" [8], which is also constructed through the process of communicating with others [9] and is dependent on ways and degrees of how others accept them [10]. It expresses both our separateness from others and our ways of connecting to others [11]. The onset of active exploration is triggered when individuals experience discrimination or are increasingly exposed to people from backgrounds different from their own. These experiences or crises initiate an interest in learning and comprehending the history, traditions, and cultural values of the in-group [12, 13].

For women, identity development focuses on the need to assert the self while maintaining a connection to others. Failing to achieve one's identity is synonymous with failing to separate or maintain a healthy balance between individuality

and being part of the group. While women may begin at different starting points, they all focus on the kind of person they want to become. In opposition to male development, interpersonal relationships play a major role in women's identity development [14]. Rooted in self-awareness, women possess a greater capacity for intimacy and establish their identity by relating to others. Always evolving, women negotiate identity by considering the world they live in, the relationships they have, and how they gain a sense of pride in themselves without needing the approval of others.

Hui Muslims' sense of identity is closely attached to their group membership. Looking into Hui's history, Hui groups gradually learned to negotiate their cultural identity through interaction with the Han culture and manipulation of mainstream ideology by tolerating collisions raised from both internal and external criteria, as well as keeping an upward desire to achieve personal social value. The young generations of Chinese Muslims today, still face challenges when living in big cities like Guangzhou. With few changes, the majority of Han still keeps negative perceptions of the Hui people.

As social context has a great effect on one's identity formation, almost all the participants stated their feelings on how others perceive them as minority Muslims. Regardless of where they came from and how long they have resided in Guangzhou, these young women have faced or are still facing ignorance, misunderstandings, and negative stereotypes by mainstream society. Phinney and Rotheram stated that with respect to ethnic group membership, where the dominant group holds traits or characteristics of the group in low esteem, the members of the low-status ethnic group might be faced with negative identity and low self-regard [14]. In congruence with Phinney's assertion, Chinese minority Muslim women have been ignored and stereotyped for centuries by mainstream society [15].

As more and more Muslim women with hijabs appear in big modern cities such as Guangzhou, this phenomenon is seen as normal for both majority and minority groups. This study explored how Muslim Chinese young women negotiated their identity within and outside of their families. Both men and women, Muslim females' religious behaviors are more visible, such as the head covering, and may bring on the greater unwanted attention [16]. And Islam receives heightened attention from the media and mainstream culture, female Muslims experience the identity process differently than males [16]. After expressing themselves as being "different" from the rest of the society, almost all of them shared their opinions and experiences hijab issue. Regardless of wearing the hijab, they do care about this piece of cloth and hold their own meanings toward it.

The participants reported that some years ago, there were a few women wearing hijab in big cities like Guangzhou, and people used to give strange looks to them and asked them why they dressed that way. In recent years, following the economic development and social changes of Guangzhou, an influx of Muslims has arrived and settled in this city. More and more Muslim women with hijab are visible and participating in all walks of life. In this study, four out of nine participants chose to wear hijab, and the rest dressed as normal Chinese young women. Interestingly all the nine women have their own unique views on the hijab issue.

In general, those who choose to wear hijab are comparatively more religious background, such as Yang, Saleena, and Zainab. And they are all married with children. Yang and Zainab grew up in religious families where their

parents strictly followed Islam rules and rituals. Yang in particular went abroad to study religion in an Islamic college and returned to China as a Quran teacher, and she lived as a Muslim role model to her students. The three of them have learned from the religious class about things like prayer, and reading Quran, and they all felt obligatory upon wearing the hijab, although Saleena was still a new hijab wearer during interviews. Based on their interviews, the researcher found that the hijab did not cause them inconvenience or discomfort in their daily lives due to their profession as housewives which led them to have less communication with the public or the mainstream society. Huang, on the other hand, is a Muslim convert who also wore a hijab. She felt "comfortable" appearing in public as a Muslim, even though she does a small business and deals a lot with all kinds of people, and she chooses to wear a hijab. Huang and Yang are confident and satisfied with their Muslim identities and are willing to disclose their identity to other people. They both have ambitions to promote the Islamic faith to people around them in order to contribute to their religion.

However, more than half of the participants do not wear hijab. And they hold different opinions from the ones who choose to wear. And this group of young Muslim women shares one thing in common, which is they all have jobs except Ma, who is still a university student at the time of the interview. Being highly educated, this group of women has their own income and lives separately from their families. Almost all of them had little religious education from their childhood, and the only religious custom they abide by is the dietary practice, as they reported. For this group, their everyday life deals tremendously with the mainstream society, sometimes government officials, and they choose not to wear hijab in order to avoid unnecessary attention and misunderstandings as Weiling and Aisha stated. Although some of them think the hijab is not so suitable to be worn in China as the meaning it changes in China and in Muslim countries, where it may cause more attention from the public than wearing it in other Muslim countries. Furthermore, Aisha as a successful Muslim career woman also feels uncertain to wear a hijab when dealing with mainstream society due to China's political environment. She said that Muslim women needed to work harder to change people's negative stereotypes of them. And what is more important, according to Aisha, is to internalize Islamic faith and practices into proper behaviors and actions of each Muslim individual.

6. LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

There are more than a billion individuals in the world who are Muslims, however, the research literature concerning Chinese Muslim women has been limited. Considering that Chinese Muslim women are understudied, the researcher tried to achieve a thorough understanding of this group. As discussed earlier in Chapter 3, similar to any other research project, this research also faced some limitations. This study only focused on Muslim women of Guangzhou. It is unknown whether the results would be similar to other individuals residing outside Guangzhou. Future studies need to be conducted with different individuals in different cities to ascertain whether these identity types, facets, and influences are applicable. Obviously, this study could not represent every Chinese Muslim woman. The sample of participants was small and future research needs to include a larger, more varied

sample, possibly including a mixed-method design to add triangulation as a means of gaining more information. It is impossible to generalize these experiences. Muslims or people of specific ethnic groups undergo the same identity development process.

There are factors that limit the penetrability of these findings and should be taken into consideration. The lack of diversity in the economic background is a limitation, and future research is needed to ascertain if there are different developmental processes or influences when life circumstances are different. Another limitation to the penetrability of findings is the age of the participants. The age and life phase of the participants is an important factor that has not received prior research attention. Another limitation of this study is that in qualitative research, one cannot generalize the findings from a single case to other similar cases [17]. The lack of generalizability in qualitative research is a limitation of this method.

Although the researcher's intention was not to generalize across the population of Muslim women, the lack of generalization in the research still can be regarded as a limitation. Therefore, the findings of this study drawn from in-depth interviews with nine Muslim young women cannot be generalized to other Muslim women in China. As discussed earlier, this research provided further insight into the issues of the hijab, its significance, and its crucial role in constructing the experiences of Chinese minority Muslim women in Guangzhou. The findings of this research have expanded and contributed to the existing literature in the area. However, future research with a broader focus on the hijab would provide more insights into the experiences of those Muslim women who choose to wear or not to wear their hijab. This research is also limited to studying only a few participants from three study circles, while there are other groups of Muslim women who work at private Muslim companies, those who are successful businesswomen, and local Cantonese Hui women.

The findings of this study suggest the importance of additional research that should focus on the multiple identities, religious identity, and gender identity development of the Muslim population. Although this study was limited to a small sample size of people who indicated an interest in talking about their ethnic identity development, the presence of diverse voices and identities contributed to the richness of the data and an understanding of the complexity of the process.

Moreover, conducting research on other groups such as businesswomen, female Muslim translators in foreign companies, Muslim female vendors, and also the large group of new converts to Islam provides further insights into this heterogeneous Muslim population. Through an in-depth interview of a wider variety of Muslim women, future researchers can use more qualitative methods to explore these women's feelings associated with different identity development strategies and discover how they affect their personal and community lives. An additional recommendation emanating from the present study includes a replication of the current study with participants in different provinces of the country where Muslim populations vary. Because of the vast diversity within the Muslim population, it would prove beneficial to conduct similar studies on each group, focusing on their interpretations of Islamic principles and their effects on identity development, and adjustment to social engagement.

7. CONCLUSIONS

In this study, the young minority Chinese Muslim women experienced assimilation and acculturation to Han culture and Confucian teachings, and they learned to keep their ethnic identity through a process of exploration and commitment as they negotiate their identities of being Muslim and Chinese. For them, being open to changes and challenges and actively integrating into mainstream society is the best way of maintaining their positive sense of identity. As a pioneer work, the results of this study provide awareness about this particular group of Muslim women with implications for identity development in the field of education and for psychological and counseling practitioners.

The current study shows that the participants' identities are shaped by multidimensional factors in which family, Muslim friends, gender roles, and religion were found to be influential through internal and external channels. Perhaps the most important insight gained from this study is the powerfully ingrained role that religion and Muslim communities played in these women's lives, particularly in countries like China where the public practice of religion is not allowed. Participants chose to join different religious classes organized by communities to be redirected to their religious faith. Without a strong and supportive community, individuals might face tremendous difficulties in searching for their identities [18].

In this study, the participants actively used religious beliefs and knowledge to make meaning of self and interactions with others. They viewed their faith as an inseparable aspect of their identity. Even though there were barriers and confusion caused by hijab-wearing, which is the focal point of this paper, there were also facing negative stereotypes and misunderstanding by the general, yet these women were able to overcome the odds and exhibited sheer grace and empathy for others in spite of the stereotypes and assumptions that were often placed on them. Through tenacious studying of their religious faith, the participants worked toward creating synergy among their multiple dimensions of self and building and maintaining their ethnic identity as minorities in China.

Furthermore, one of the most significant findings of this study was the crucial role that the hijab played in constructing Chinese Muslim women's experiences when living in Guangzhou. One of the findings revealed that the issue of wearing a hijab was heavily weighted for all of the participants. Almost all of them were preoccupied with the issue of the hijab and nearly all participants voluntarily talked extensively about the challenges associated with wearing the hijab in China. Even those women who did not wear it shared with the researcher their unique perceptions of the importance of the hijab. As a result, participants expressed that there was no contradiction in being a Muslim woman without a hijab. For them, faith should be understood and internalized into good behaviors that bring goodness to people. And finally, individual Muslim minorities wish to freely practice religious rights and live happily in the cities like Guangzhou, and this is also part of their China Dream.

The truth is and not as most believe that freedom of religious practice is thus protected in China. The participants' lived experiences in this study have revealed that the mainstream society is gradually understanding and accepting their minority Muslim members as productive contributors to society. As these women suggested, Muslims should promote themselves to society at large by contributing more to all walks of life. Bearing Chinese cultural identity, integrating with the

mainstream society, being internationalized, and keeping strong faith in Islam and Hui ethnicity is what make them valued Muslim citizens of China. At certain extend, the government gives some freedom of belief to the people yet under certain circumstances, there are some limitations.

For many, the choice to veil is an individual matter that regularly follows marriage and follows to Islamic orders for female modesty. In short, though a significant number of Muslim Chinese have involved more rigid Islamic practices, the community endures to debate the boundaries of its identity just like other Muslim communities all over the world.

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