

# Understanding Domestic Violence Against Muslim Women in China

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## Abstract

The abusive experiences of Hui Muslim women in China are understudied. Data from interviews with 14 women who lived in west China examine the dynamic nature of domestic violence they have experienced. The Hui women were vulnerable to the violence because of their low social status and minority ethnic identity. Under the oppressions, a fear of being ignored, discriminated, and marginalized resulted in the women's tolerance or silence toward abuse. However, the Hui women are not only powerless but also resistant to violence. Their negotiation of the self under a social control and structural inequality reveals their autonomy and wisdom.

## Keywords

domestic violence, religion, ethnicity, qualitative research, subcultures

## Introduction

Domestic violence is a global health and human rights issue, affecting women in developed and developing countries (Watts & Zimmerman, 2002). Although international comparative data are limited, García-Moreno, Jansen, Ellsberg, Heise, & Watts (2005) study suggests that domestic violence is evident across the world even when taking into account cultural, social, and economic differences. Prevalence rates differ, however, as evidenced in their survey of 24,000 women in 10 culturally and economically diverse countries, including Japan, Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Serbia, and Thailand. The proportion of women ever experiencing physical or sexual violence by a partner ranged from 15% in Japan to 71% in Ethiopia. Across these 10 countries, approximately 1 of every 5 women who experienced physical violence had not reported the

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incident to anyone. A meta-analysis of prevalence studies from around the world revealed the highest rates among women in South America, Europe, Asia, and Japanese immigrant women living in North America (Alhabib, Nur, & Jones, 2010).

Domestic violence in China represents an important case for comparison given its Confucian patriarchal structure, the communist party's struggle for gender equality beginning in 1949, and in more recent decades, its emerging and rapid transformation into a developed country (Parish, Wong, Laumann, Pan, & Luo, 2004; Tang & Lai, 2008). Although research on domestic violence in China has a recent history, population surveys estimate lifetime prevalence of male on female violence at 19% (Parish et al., 2004), with rural and health care samples reporting higher lifetime prevalence (Tang & Lai, 2008). Despite this growing body of knowledge about domestic violence in various locales across China, little is known about gender, family relations, and violence among China's small but significant ethnic minority communities, particularly Muslim Chinese.

China, in fact, is an ethnically diverse country. Besides the Han majority, there are 55 officially recognized ethnic groups representing an estimated 9% of the total population. Hui Muslims represent the largest of the 10 different Muslim ethnic groups, are widely dispersed throughout China, but have a significant presence in Quinghai province in West China.<sup>1</sup> Despite past political struggles, the Hui in Qinghai have benefited from their historical role as Silk Road business middlemen, from market development in China's opening its west region. At the same time, in spite of China's rapid social transformation, the Hui have a collectivist reputation, and have maintained patriarchal traditions in domestic and religious matters (Cooke, 2008). While observers have noted the role of Confucian ethics in Hui culture—"they have acquired all the major Chinese traits, such as family structures, which are based on Confucian social principles and emphasize a hierarchical authority structure" (Yick, Shibusawa, & Siewert, 2003, p. 97), Islamic culture plays a major role in the construction of Hui Muslims' social roles and structures.<sup>2</sup> Domestic relations in this context can be highly problematic, as on one hand, Hui Muslims follow Chinese traditions and live within modern economic reforms, and on the other hand, subscribe to the Islamic gender roles and religious beliefs and practices.

Given Hui Muslim's traditionalism, it is not surprising that Hui women are comparatively disadvantaged from their male counterparts as well as from the Han Chinese majority (males and females). Hui Muslim women in general have lower status in family and outside of political, economic, and educational fields. According to Zheng's (2010) analysis, the 2005 national census data indicate that Hui women are most likely to never have had any education (25%) compared with Hui men (12%), and Han men (4%) and women (12%). Because of their limited education and patriarchal traditions, Hui women are more likely to be unemployed or work in menial low paying jobs, earning far less than Hui men (Y. Ma, 2000; Nan, 1993). Hui women status in the family remains traditional, subordinated to the males in the household and to mothers-in-law (Zang, 2008). Arranged marriage remains a dominant practice, with parents assuming sometimes an advisory role or a great extent control. Even Hui women with some education and living in urban areas often do not make independent decisions on

their marriage (Zang, 2008). For Hui women in rural villages, the situation is far more controlled due to their isolation (Jiang, 2011).

Domestic violence among the Hui Muslim, as in other locales, is complex, requiring an intersectional lens which can take into account in the Hui's specific cultural, ethnic, and religious contexts of subjugation, domination, and silence. Violence against Hui Muslim women has been unknown to researchers and even to their own communities due to women's oppression. This article seeks to understand the experiences of Hui Muslim women who are in a double bind—a subordinate position within the Confucian nation as well as within the local Islamic culture. This article draws from 14 in-depth qualitative interviews with women from the ethnic minority Hui community, who experienced domestic violence and lived in a city or a small town of Qinghai province in West China. Adopting the intersectionality standpoint, we explore the ways in which their lives are marginalized, and despite their oppressive conditions, find ways to resist and negotiate a sense of autonomy.

## Domestic Violence

### *International Context*

Research from around the world has identified a number of risk factors of domestic violence including alcohol and substance use, poverty, education, age, and prior witnessing or experience of family violence (Abramsky et al., 2011; Jewkes, 2002). Although there are varying views on the nature and strength of the association of these risk factors to domestic violence within and across cultures, there is general agreement that domestic violence is “entirely a product of its social context” (Jewkes, 2002, p. 1423) and is a “structural rather than an individual problem” (Ammar, 2006, p. 250).

At the root of this structural problem are the patriarchal values and practices in many cultures which, either implicitly or explicitly, facilitate and reinforce men's dominant position over women in the family, at work, and in the community. In the patriarchal context, men's dominance is rationalized in relation to gender proscriptions of masculinity where independence, decisiveness, and authority are juxtaposed to women's subordinated feminine role of domesticity and economic and emotional dependence (Morash, Bui, & Santiago, 2000). Although patriarchy is embedded in many cultures, the ways in which it manifests itself may vary within and across cultures. These cultural differences, in turn, shape the meaning and reaction to intimate violence.

For example, in the American context, Kasturirangan, Krishnan, and Riger (2004) compare the cultural reasons for women's reluctance to seek help. While African American women, socialized to be independent and in control, may be reluctant to access services from Caucasian staff, Mexican women tend to respond, first and foremost, to domestic violence in relation to their perceptions of their children's welfare and safety. Asian women are socialized to believe in the greater needs of the family over the individual, rationalize the violence against them, and therefore not seek help (Alhabib et al., 2010). South Asian immigrant women living in the United States, often with limited English abilities, respond within a distinct cultural paradigm in which marriage is

perceived as a permanent union, divorce is unacceptable, the family must be intact, “fate” must be accepted, and abusers must be tolerated given their authority in the family (Dasgupta, 2005). Even when minority populations have become established with several generations, traditional beliefs and practices are passed through generations, and may even create additional stress with the heightened tension between traditional customs and the dominant culture (Kasturirangan et al., 2004). It becomes clear that even within the U.S. context, the social context of domestic violence is shaped broadly by patriarchal beliefs and practices, but understood within distinct cultural paradigms. As we describe below, domestic violence in China occurs in some similar yet distinct ways.

### *The Chinese Context*

The historical root of gender inequality is inextricably linked to traditional Chinese culture in China (Tang & Lai, 2008; X. Wang, 2004; Xu et al., 2005). Chinese patriarchy, embedded in Confucian tenets, emphasize women’s subservience to father, husband, and son and her virtuous domestic role.<sup>3</sup> Today, gendered norms, beliefs and practices of traditional Chinese culture in families and the larger society remain significant co-factors in violence against Chinese women, although it is noted that violence runs counter to the cultural emphasis placed on family harmony and support (Du, 2001; Li, 2005; J. Wang, 2002). Violence is rationalized as a means for husbands to reinforce, what Tang and Lai (2008) point out as, the “rules of the family” (p. 12), or women’s subservient position in the home. Moreover, the cultural notion of “face” has specific gendered meaning, and for a man, it is connected to his masculine roles in the family and social networks.<sup>4</sup> The more a man feels stressed from having lost face, the more likely he is to resort to violence against his wife (Chan, 2006). Having a son carries a different social and cultural meaning than having a girl, and consequently a woman who fails to bear a son may be discriminated and abused.

Traditional Chinese cultural notions of the family go beyond the immediate nuclear family to include parents and other relatives. Of particular significance to domestic violence is the role of the mother-in-law. Studies have found that a mother-in-law is able to create in-law conflict “by disciplining a wife” to enhance the power of her son (Chan et al., 2009). This explains the particular vulnerability of wives to the culturally proscribed domination of their mothers-in-law. Lower economic status in the family, the risk of loss of property and children, and pressure from the public contribute to the great likelihood of staying in an abusive relationship for women (M. Liu, 2004; J. Wang, 2002; Wu, 2003).

Despite the persistence of these Chinese patriarchal beliefs in the family, the Communist party, from 1949 onward, implemented legal reforms to address gender inequality providing women with better legal and economic protections against traditional practices like concubines, arranged marriages, and abuse (Tang & Lai, 2008). Yet, many researchers recognize that a gap between the enactment of laws and social practices has resulted in inadequate enforcement of those laws that prohibit domestic violence (M. Liu, 2006; X. Wang, 2002; Zhang, 2006). As with most social sanctions that are devised by the state to reflect changing social conditions, everyday practices

often follow or are sometimes pulled reluctantly into compliance particularly when those practices are based in deeply entrenched societal norms such as gendered and family relations (Tam & Tang, 2005). Patriarchal values continue to play a dominant role among young adults in China and are less likely to favor proactive enforcement (Sun, Su, & Wu, 2011).

Relational and structural level developments in contemporary China have been at the center of many scholars' attempts to understand domestic violence, particularly how rapid economic changes over the last two decades have affected marriage and family (J. Wang, 2002; Wu, 2003; Xie, 2005). The effects of these socio-economic changes have disrupted the ways individuals and social structures have traditionally functioned, and resulted in increased social and economic mobility/inequality, and modifications in social and interpersonal relations across various domains (Bian, 2002; Kanbur & Zhang, 1999; Postiglione, 2006; Young, 2007). Violence against women in contemporary China has been linked to economic inequality between husbands and wives, marriage crisis and job pressures (Wu, 2003). T. Wang (2006) observes that wives who have higher earning power than their spouses, are more likely to be abused because their husbands tend to act out their frustrations with their lower economic standing by physically abusing their "successful" wives (T. Wang, 2006). Domestic violence also tends to be more prevalent in families with less education than in highly educated families (Luo, 2001; Yan, 2005). These risk factors, apparent in developed countries, support the notion that domestic violence is not only related to patriarchal and gendered cultural values and structures but also a result of the complex interrelationship between many variables including social class, educational status, age, and ethnicity (Parish et al., 2004; Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005).

As we know from the growing international body of literature on domestic violence, women do not experience, understand, or conceptualize domestic violence in a singular way. Experiences, reactions, strategies, and resistance to domestic violence are framed and experienced at the intersection of gender, race, ethnicity, and class. In China, little is known about domestic violence among minority ethnic groups in China, as current research focuses largely on the Han experience, "de-emphasizing" (Gladney, 2003) multicultural differences between and among ethnic groups. As we discuss below, it is important, theoretically and programmatically, to go beyond the majority experience; understanding Hui Muslim women's experiences underscores diversity of women's positioning at the intersection of ethnicity, class, religion, and gender. Their voices are critical for breaking the silence and taking the first steps toward empowerment and engagement.

### *Muslim Context*

Domestic violence in Muslim countries continues to be a pervasive social problem, involving not only battering, sexual abuse, marital rape, emotional abuse, and stalking but also "expelling wives from the marital home, forced marriages, polygamy and 'honor killings'" (Joseph & Najmabadi, 2004, p. 111). Researchers have argued that the patriarchal structure of Muslim families and communities plays a significant role in violence against women (Barlas, 2002). In Arab and Islamic societies,

male dominance over women in the private and public domain provide the context for marriage and the “conspiracy of silence” when domestic violence occurs (Douki, Nacef, Belhadj, & Bouasker, 2003). In Pakistan, Haroon and Zia (1995) observe that “the notion of woman as ‘property’ is linked to the concept of protection, ownership and honor. Part of feudal traditions and values, a woman’s identification is through her male partner and through her sexual capacities” (p. 66). In Malaysia, being female is equated with being feminine, a characteristic that comes “natural” to “good” women (Joseph & Najmabadi, 2004, p. 130).

The social historical structure of Muslim cultures makes it difficult for Muslim women to recognize the practice of violence as legally and morally wrong, and in turn, they may accept violence as simply part of domestic affairs (Hajjar, 2004; Joseph & Najmabadi, 2004). This lack of recognition and acceptance of violence has been the subject of much debate over whether Islamic culture and religion trigger violence against women (Dudley, 2004). At issue are different interpretations of the Qur’an. Ammar (2006) identifies four interpretations of the Qur’an: (a) a husband’s violence is justified when his wife does not obey him; (b) his violence is acceptable after reprimanding her and her refusal of him in her bed; (c) his violence is “permissible but not desirable” (p. 249), and (d) a misinterpretation of a key concept in the Qur’an. Some Muslim feminists (al-Jadda, 2004; Siddiqi, 1990) argue that religion should not be the focus, but individual batterers as Islamic religion does not teach men to harm women. Accordingly, the Qur’an emphasizes equality between the sexes, with women having rights over men similar to those of men over women (al-Jadda, 2004). Siddiqi (1990) argues that some Muslim men use Islam to justify their abusive behavior because of their weak faith and poor Islamic knowledge. Today violence against women has become part of public discourse in some Muslim countries, and has resulted in the establishment of laws and social services (Douki et al., 2003).

### *The Present Study*

As an exploratory study of domestic violence against Hui Muslim women, this analysis seeks to build on and extend existing knowledge on domestic violence in China, by focusing on a group of highly marginalized women who must negotiate family life between Islamic and Chinese cultures, customs, and laws. Specifically, it seeks to uncover and explore their experiences of intimate violence in the context of their cultural identities. In the following sections, we first provide the framework for our analysis and the research design, and then turn to the analysis where Hui women describe five rationales for their positioning, the paradox of Islamic religion for them, and their steps toward autonomy and change.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In the 1990s, feminist theorists argued that domestic violence was the result of “social constructed and culturally approved gender inequality” (Sokoloff & Dupont, 2005) but by the end of the millennium, calls for a broader framework emerged which could

take into account the intersection of structural power (race, class, gender) and cultural oppression (racism, class inequality, gender bias). Women of color, immigrant women, women in ethnic minority groups, women in lower social classes, and other women at the margins perceive and experience their lives and social conditions differently from women in “the mainstream.” This is critical in accounting for the ways domestic violence is constructed within the intersections of race, class, and gender.

Several scholars (Abraham, 2000; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1994; Dasgupta, 2005; Hampton, Carrillo, & Kim, 1998; Hooks, 1984; Kanuha, 1996; Websdale, 2001; Yick, 2001) have examined domestic violence against women of color and in ethnic minority communities in the United States. Hooks (1984) and Collins (2000) argue that women of color, women in ethnic groups, lower and working-class women, and other exploited women, are not subject to gender discrimination alone, but more significantly, to racial discrimination and other oppressions because of their ethnic cultural differences, small populations, and low social status. Abraham (2000) argues that “although gender-role stereotype oppress all women under patriarchy, ethnic minority women experience multiple subordination on the basis of their gender, ethnicity, and class” (p. 8). Those who are deemed “invisible others” such as abused immigrant women lack social connection and integration that makes them voiceless and unspeakable. As Kanuha (1996) states, “All women *can* be battered, but only some will be protected. And all men *can* batter, but only some will be held accountable” (p. 44). In addition, external barriers from police, courts, and health care services, and internal barriers from parents and in-laws, religion, and community directly and indirectly heighten immigrant women’s vulnerability to abuse.

Our analysis then is guided by the theoretical frame of intersectionality which seeks to illuminate how individuals and groups are socially constructed in connection to others in social systems (Crenshaw, 1994). These systems “operate independently or simultaneously, and the dynamics of each may exacerbate and compound the consequences of another” (Bograd, 1999, p. 26). The intersecting oppressions, in the systems of race, social class, ethnicity, age, and gender, work together to produce intersectional subordination that explains women’s experience of domestic violence (Collins, 2000).

## Research Setting and Method

The study sites for this study were the rural county of Datong County and the urban city capital of Xining in the province of Qinghai in northwestern China. In 2010, the Hui comprised 15% of the total provincial population (D. Wang, 2011). Eighty-four percent of the residents in Xinzhuang are Hui Muslims. Unlike other mountainous areas, Xinzhuang has a number of irrigable lands, from which residents receive an average yearly income of US\$400 per capita. As an agrarian society, it tends to be isolated from the outside world and faces widespread poverty and a low standard of living. In Xining, Hui people constitute about 16% of the total population (Xining Statistics Bureau, 2012) with the majority of Hui residing in the eastern district of Chengdong.

Similar to trends in the Chinese context of marriage, Hui communities have witnessed a decrease in arranged marriages, and an increase in freedom of choice in love and marriage, and equality between husband and wife (Wei, 2008; Zang, 2008). This has been attributed to the rise of modern values of marriage—personal happiness, free choice, equality—and modernization (Xia & Zhou, 2003). However, divorce is on the rise in China, but is likely to be lower among the Hui. In China, the Ministry of Civil Affairs of the People's Republic of China (PRC) reports an increase of 7% per year over the past 5 years. In 2010, 2.7 million couples divorced through legal procedures and civil services (Legal News, 2011). While there are no official statistics on the divorce rate among ethnic groups, a crude measure is the divorce rate in Xining, where this study took place, which was 1.37% and 0.48% lower than the national rate in 2009 (C. Y. Wang, 2012). The divorce rate among Hui may be lower due to their adherence to Islamic religion, which acts as a legal force, especially in inner China (Z. J. Ma, 2001). For local Hui, marriage is understood as given by God and divorce is discouraged. Despite state legal prohibitions of polygamy and religious (talaq) divorce among Muslims, these religious practices persist in the local Hui context (Jiang, 2003, 2010). Talaq divorce provides women with the right to initiate a divorce if she desires, but requires her husband's permission (Jiang, 2010).

For the study, Hui women who experienced abuse and who lived in either locale were recruited through personal contacts and two social workers, who work at Qinghai and Xinzhuang women's federations. The two social workers also contributed to developing the research questions and were interviewed as key informants. Of the 20 Hui women referred for an in-depth interview, 18 were contacted but 2 were inaccessible due to changes in their contact details. Among the 18 women, 4 refused to participate because they "did not want to talk about it." Finally, 14 women consented to an interview with 9 from the rural areas and 5 from the urban locale. The face-to-face interviews, conducted in the summer of 2007, took place in public, safe, and convenient places. They used a pseudonym to remain anonymous and to protect their identity. Six agreed to be tape-recorded and, for the other eight women, detailed notes were taken in Chinese. Because of the impossibility of writing verbatim notes, their stories were summarized as main points and their essential thoughts were recorded. During these interviews, the notes were reviewed and verified with the participants to ensure the notes were in accord with their narratives. The interviews were conducted in the local dialect and Mandarin. Following from Temple and Young (2004) observations of the interpretive process of translation, the first author transcribed the interviews, and tried to capture not simply "words" but the cultural nuances and meanings of language along with the interviewee's tone. The first author, a native speaker from the area in which the study was conducted, paid close attention to the cultural meanings in the translation, and was cognizant of her positioning as both translator and researcher. Moreover, as English is not the native language of the first author, there were instances with no direct cultural equivalent translation. For example, some Hui Muslim women speak of *dai or hai* in the local dialect when they describe their inner psychological strength, yet in Mandarin or in a literal translation into English, the term *dai or hai* frequently is used in the context of physical strength. However, in working with the second author, and



with the understanding of translation being a subjective and reflexive process the authors translated with an understanding in accordance with the participants.

Although a series of questions guided the interviews, the natural conversation grew organically. The interview topics included questions about relationships with family members, understanding of spousal abuse, and experiences of spousal violence, religious beliefs, and attitudes about social support. The data analysis involved a process of categorizing and inductively analyzing the transcriptions and field notes. This was a reflexive process in which the first author was able to repeatedly immerse herself in the field and understand what the women said, felt, and thought. The data were organized, coded, and summarized, and examined in relation to key intersectionality themes including gender roles, Chinese cultural beliefs and values, impact of religion, protection of family face, and reactions to abuse. Key themes thus emerged from reviewing the findings with the literature review and the theoretical frameworks. The second author reviewed the transcripts and came up with similar categories.

All 14 participants were from working and lower social classes. They worked in a variety of paid occupations including service workers in the city, but for those in the countryside, all of them were unpaid peasants and farmers. Of the 14 Hui women, 11 reported that they were financially dependent on their abusers. Thirteen of these women had no access to higher education. Three of the rural Hui women married after completing their compulsory elementary education at 16 years of age. Among the 5 urban women, 2 were illiterate, 2 completed high school, and 1 graduated from a junior college. Nine of them remained married and 4 were divorced with one in the process of divorcing. They ranged in age from 20 to 65 years, with 8 in the 35- to 50-year-old range. Two of them had no child; 3 of them had one child, 6 were with two children, and 3 with three to four children.

## Results

### *Chinese and Islamic Traditional Beliefs and Values About Gender Roles*

Similar to other cultures, violence against Hui Muslim women comprises a range of violent acts from verbal threats to physical and psychological abuse. Physical abuse was the most common form of violence reported, resulting in bodily injuries including bruises, broken fingers, internal injuries, and in some cases, aggravated with a weapon. From their narratives, they are clearly aware of their gendered positioning at the intersection of Chinese and Islamic cultural contexts. The traditional Chinese values, to a great extent, parallel and reinforce Islamic beliefs—both advocate women's subordinate positioning to their husbands. The dominant image of the binary culture dictated and "conditioned their acceptance of their subordinate" positioning as a Muslim, a wife, a mother, and a daughter-in-law (Parekh, 1999, p. 70). Their acceptance and rationale of their positioning lies in five areas.

First, eight Hui women in this study describe the violence as "fate"—as an unpleasant and yet unavoidable part of their culture as Chinese and as Muslims. Acculturated to accept this "fact," they believed that they could not control their own lives, but had

to accept that this was their destiny having to obey their husbands. In the Chinese Confucian context, her obedience threads across generations, from father to husband to son. In the Hui Muslim context, husbands are to be obeyed at all costs to the self. One of the social service workers stated, “they think they are in the wrong. They think it is ok to keep it as a secret because it is their life and their fate. It is normal.” Ma Hanfei, a 55-year-old farmer, expressed this feeling of fate,

Where can I go? I was born here and will die here. If I leave here, where can I go? People would laugh at me because they would think, as a woman and a Hui, it is impossible to do something new . . . I am used to living such a life. Taking care of my children, cooking, cleaning, and serving my husband. I have no more desire. There is no use for desire.

Second, as a Hui Muslim and a Chinese woman, six respondents felt it was their duty and responsibility to protect the reputation and honor of the family. In line with the notion of the “conspiracy of silence,” they had to refrain from telling others about abuse for fear of bringing disgrace to their family. Ma Xiaolan, a 65-year-old woman, has got married for 42 years. She describes the importance of saving “family face”: “If my neighbors knew my situation, I could no longer live here because they would all know what happens in my family. It is so shameful.”

Such a “duty” required them to preserve the family’s reputation regardless of their personal vulnerability. Other members of the household expected women to sacrifice and uphold their duty to the family. Ma Ying, a 45-year-old woman, married when she was 19. She felt sad about her brother’s response after she reported being abused to the local women’s federation:

The officer of the women’s federation called my brother to deal with the problem. He lived in another village. When he came to my in-laws place, I was in bed. I saw him talking with my parents-in-law. I could not see him because I couldn’t walk. After a while, I saw my brother leaving on his bicycle. Some days later, I went to the federation again, and the officer called my brother again. My brother criticized me. He told me not to tell my story to other people. Not to spread the family matter to others because it was just a family matter. It was not the family’s fault but mine because I was a woman who should consider our relatives’ face and my in-laws’ face.

So while a Hui Muslim wife feels the duty to protect family honor, despite her own vulnerability, she is also expected to promulgate the values of the family by bearing male offspring. A third intersecting rationale lies in the Hui Muslim expectation to give birth to a son. A Hui Muslim woman’s “worth” to the family and community is based on her ability to bear a male heir. To bear a son implies an ability to reproduce a child of “value” (male) and honor to the family, whereas bearing a daughter represents her inability to continue the “Xianghuo” of the family.<sup>5</sup> Because of this, a woman who fails to bear a son may face serious negative, social consequences.

By being given an entitlement, Muslim families in many regions are allowed to have more than one child despite China’s birth control policy. However, female devaluation persists, as three Hui women in this study described violent encounters,

resulting from their inability to produce a male heir. A Yishe, a 38-year-old divorcee, had two daughters and was not able to bear any other children. Because of this, her husband was violent toward her for many years:

He beat me quite often. He said he would divorce me because I wasn't able to give him a son. I made him lose face because I was not able to give him a son. He felt angry. He went outside and found other women. He had affairs with some women. I thought that I had to tolerate it because I wasn't able to feed my two daughters alone. Now they have grown up and I do not want to bear his beating. They can support me in the field. I am living with them. I feel safe with them.

The valuing of male over female children in Chinese culture extends across the life span, and importantly, mothers of male children may eventually come to have a dominating role over their daughters-in-law. As a fourth rationale, mothers-in-law play a significant role not only in facilitating their sons' abuse but also in directly perpetrating violence against Hui wives. Of the 14 participants in this study, 6 were from extended families. In an extended family, a mother-in-law is the wife of the man who holds the highest privilege. In turn, she is endowed with the authority to be in charge of the entire family. Within the household, paradoxically, she shares power with the men, her husband, and her sons, to control the daughter-in-law.

Ye Guilan, born in 1987, got married at the age of 16. After she married, she moved into her husband's family home:

One day, my mother-in-law took me to a market for shopping and left me alone in the street. I couldn't get back to the family home because I was new to the area. I walked and walked, finally reaching my parents home which was six kilometers away from the market. After three days of staying with my parents, my father sent me back to my husband's family. That night during dinnertime, when I served my husband with a bowl of noodles, he followed me into the kitchen and kicked me and asked me where I went. I told him I was lost and so went to stay with my parents.

Her mother-in-law frequently complained about her to her husband when he returned on weekends from his job in the capital city. She cried recounting an incident where she was beaten because she burned the bread, "My mother-in-law told my husband I burned some bread. They beat me together with a broom and a stick. My back was swelling up and my face was blue."

As five women's experiences suggest, the Hui Muslim family is a patriarchal arena where family members with status can control those who are culturally considered to be subordinate given their positioning as wives and daughters-in-law. A fifth rationale relates more specifically to Islamic religious interpretations about gender roles. Four Hui women described situations in which Islamic beliefs exacerbated their vulnerability to domestic violence.

Ma Xiuxiu was 48 years old. Her husband physically abused her since she married at 22 years of age. Her husband had a bad temper and controlled her. As long as they quarreled, he beat her:

We believe in different religious sects of Islam. He thinks that I am wrong. As a wife, I should obey him. I should believe what he believes. I disagree. Therefore, he beats me. One day last year, I had not told him before I went out for a while. I came back home after a couple of hours and he beat me. He beat me until I could not stand up. He said it was a requirement of Islam. I had no rights to go out if I did not ask for his “*kouhuan*” [religious permission]. After a few days, I called 119 for help. They [the police] asked him to pay a penalty.

On the basis of this interpretation of the Qur’an, Hui men believe their wives are their property, and are, in this capacity, to serve them. Their “versions” of the Qur’an therefore becomes a means for male domination over women as well as a legal license within the religious realm, for condoning intimate partner violence.

This reading of the Qur’an justified men taking on additional wives, so long as he treated them equally. When a husband had a concubine, this often resulted in abuse of the first wife. Of the 14 women, 3 recounted such experiences.

Li Yue was a 41-year-old divorcee. Her husband was laid off from his job, and needed money to support his second wife. He stole from Li Yue, and if he could not get money from her, he would beat her:

He beat me because of his lover. He smoked, drank and had affairs. Every time we discussed the issue, he would beat me. I was scared to go home everyday, everyday . . . I [sigh] I think I was so fragile and weak. I thought it was so shameful to get a divorce . . . My colleagues noticed that I couldn’t carry on with work. They supported me in divorcing him.

While gendered religious practices reinforced the secondary position of women, making them more vulnerable to violence, for five Hui women, Islamic religion also offered some protective benefits and spiritual relief. Two Hui women voluntarily joined Qur’an study groups in which Hui women studied the Qur’an and worshiped the Prophet together.<sup>6</sup> This allowed them to maintain Islamic beliefs and values through interaction and cohesion with one another. Even though they might not receive support from other group members to leave an abusive relationship, the collective, they felt, gave them reassurance and confidence in a world in which they felt isolated.

When Li Yue recalled her experiences, she said that religion made a positive difference in her life despite her abusive situation:

I think Islam helps me to understand myself. I have participated in a studying group where we discuss the truth of Islam. I think I am becoming strong inside. Islam has taught me how to live properly.

For these Hui women, religious belief was a channel through which they felt empowered by maintaining connections with God. They viewed their religious beliefs as a resource which could give them a sense of equality with others and self-confidence. Their belief in Islam brought a sense of collective belonging, and

knowledge and ability to change one's life. It even made it possible for some to hope that their abusive husbands would also be positively affected by religious values and teachings.

Ma Xiaolan has endured an ongoing complicated and painful relationship with her abusive husband for 10 years. Religious conviction has resulted in her believing that it is possible for her husband to change:

I just pray to God to help me. I believe that God will help me to get rid of the pain. Now, my husband is becoming religious. He goes to the mosque to pray. I am hoping he will become better because of the help of God.

These findings explain the complexity of domestic violence as it takes place in the cultural and patriarchal context of China and Islam. Domestic violence for Hui Muslim women is determined by multiple factors, including the construction of cultural and racial identity, gender roles in the family, influences from the public sphere, and responses from social institutions charged with protecting and keeping women safe. The findings illustrate these women's unique and, various perspectives, histories, and experiences of violence in a complex social and cultural context.

### *Steps Toward Change*

While a few Hui women were, paradoxically, able to take refuge from religious collectives and convictions, others took alternative approaches to counter their positioning, depending on their age and location. In general, younger women were more inclined to initiate a divorce, whereas older women in both urban and rural regions developed strategies to cope or resist constraints in abusive relationships. Of the 14 Hui women in this study, 3 from the urban area, where jobs are more likely to be available, reported taking on a job to develop independence from their husbands. Of the 3 women, 2 were younger women initiating divorces. With sufficient economic advantages, they maintained enough independence to protect themselves and their children from continued violence. Being younger and having some, albeit limited, access to employment provides some Hui Muslim women with a step toward change.

The ability to seek independence, however, is more the exception than the norm, particularly for women in rural areas where much of daily life is circumscribed by agricultural and family work in an environment that offers few alternatives. Still, six Hui women without financial independence took action or received support from family members, relatives, or neighbors to resist the oppression. Because Ma Ying, a 45-year-old woman, used her husband's quilt, she was beaten resulting in internal injuries. She decided to seek help from a local women's federation:

He lashed me and beat me on my legs and hip. My urine was red because of the injuries. I could not move around and I stayed in bed for three days. My daughter cooked for me. After a couple of days, I went to the women's federation and asked for help. I did not know it was illegal that he beat me. I just could not bear such a tough situation.

Hei Yuemei, a 55-year-old mother of two children, married when she was 18, was beaten by her husband and her son called the police. The police did not help her because according to them, the beating was not a crime. Later, she was able to leave their house and hid in her nephew's house. The next day, she was accompanied by her nephew's wife to the women's federation in town.

These Hui women were agents who took action to challenge their husbands' power through various ways. Their resistance and struggles over the power of a household indicate their autonomy and power. However, many of the women in this study demonstrated self-limiting and limited behaviors. Due to economic limitations, the Hui women who were financially independent of their abusers stated that they would rather maintain a violent relationship because the situation outside the marriage might be unstable or even more difficult. Age, urban/rural location, and lack of higher education are intersecting factors that might be a channel for them to gain economic independence and autonomy, and also affected their marriage views and prevented them to improve confidence to challenge the domination by men. Three women reported a sense of social isolation by keeping the violence against them secret. This isolation prevented them from contact with the outside world for support. Two believed their ethnicity as Hui Muslim prevented them from seeking help due to shame or fear of rejection from "outsiders."

## Discussion

### *Binary Culture and Binary Oppression*

This research illustrates how the dual binary of Islamic and Confucian ethic is significantly related to the oppression of Hui women. Hui women are subjugated and legitimated by both Confucian ideology and Islamic culture in various ways. They follow Chinese gender roles, obeying their husband as the head of the household; are valued when giving birth to a male heir; and have to accept their subordinate position because the Qur'an supposedly dictates it. If a woman does not fit the traditional image of a Hui woman or challenges it, she is often labeled, as Abraham (2000) notes, as "deviant, without shame, not caring about the honor of the family, too westernized, or feminist" (p. 21).

In a historical and bi-cultural context, although Hui Muslims may understand the concept of domestic violence unless the abuse is extreme, it is regarded as a private problem of the family and not something needing public attention. Yet, Islamic culture can also be a protective factor, enhancing self-value, self-assurance, solidarity, and even hope for change.

### *Structural Intersectionality*

Structural intersectionality suggests that discrimination against Hui Muslim women as women, Hui and Muslim "intersect" at a structural level to limit their access to education and employment. The majority of the Hui Muslim women in this study were illiterate, which was a significant barrier to empowerment and help-seeking. Despite

some women finding strength with others in religious settings, more generally, they find themselves in a highly vulnerable position with little room for social mobility given their educational background and financial dependence on their husband.

In addition, conservative Islamic thought and fear of assimilation into Chinese Han culture limit Hui females' educational opportunities. Historically, Hui Muslims had difficulty accepting a Han Chinese education as Han education was seen as a means of structural assimilation for them as an ethnic minority.

Beyond these structural constraints, however, their marginalized position within Han society further limits their movement. Gender and sex discrimination is apparent starting at the structural level in society filtering down to their marriage and family relationships. The women were clearly cognizant of their ethnic minority positioning, with many stating, "they are Han; we are Hui. We are, of course, different." The women believed that the police and social agencies service the Han majority, not minority groups like Hui Muslims. Along side this perception, the idea of seeking help from "outsiders" would bring rejection and shame from within their own community. The social service providers from the Women's Federation observed:

Some Hui women do not like to seek help because they said they are Hui and cannot get the same treatment as Han women do. They say it is Han's society. They are in the minority.

Another social service officer expressed a similar view, underscoring how Hui women may increasingly limit their contact in the public sphere, and instead restrict their life to the household to save the family honor, and to hide their shame:

Compared to Han women, Hui women are more likely to not report their poor situation to the police or to a social agency. They feel ashamed because they think it is a family matter. They are limited to their households and are scared to talk to a stranger.

Moreover, the Chinese legal system holds traditional views including that domestic violence is a private matter rooted in the patriarchal influence of male dominance within these systems. Judges, frequently who are male, hesitate to get involved in domestic violence cases unless such a specific form of abuse as maltreating, serious injuries, and beating to death is proved to be crime (Tam & Tang, 2005). In addition, judges do not consider the subordinate and therefore vulnerable status of women vis-a-vis men when abused wives seek legal redress. Instead, many battered women are thought to be complicit or the real cause of the abuse.

Su Ying, a 26-year old mother of one child, was married for 8 years to her husband, who delivered newspapers. She endured several years of abuse from him, and his mother and sister (who lived with them), and eventually found the courage to divorce him. She underscored the injustices of the courts:

The court divorced us. But I received no compensation. I disagreed with the judgment, and my husband beat me when I confronted him about this. The court said that I would take care of my son, but could not receive any money from my husband to support my

son. I am poor. They said I needed to appeal. At the time, I believed in the law and the courts. But they are not fair. I think it is because I am a Hui woman. If I were a Han, I do not think they would treat me like this . . . [sigh].

Clearly, patriarchal norms and practices are a foundational aspect of intersectionality as an organizing framework to explain violence against women. Throughout this analysis, the subjugated status of Hui women in relation to their husbands was described as a critical variable for women's understandings of the abuse directed against them. First, many of the women were very young compared with their husbands, adding age as a variable in the matrix of intersecting causes of violence. Second, Hui Muslim men exercised power over their wives because they have historically been endowed with both power and knowledge to occupy dominant positions in the family institution and were therefore able to employ these discourses and practices to constrain women. Having grown up with traditions in the male + Muslim + Chinese power triad, Hui men could not view their violence as a violation against their wives; but instead, considered their violence as necessary to maintaining order within the household. In their families and household, most of the Hui men in this study retained authority to control economic resources and the division of labor, and were supported by elders in the household. The husbands of the 14 female participants in this study had diverse occupations, ranging from merchants and farmers to service workers and retired employees. Their educational backgrounds ranged from no formal education to high school education. Among the nine men who lived in villages, seven were peasants and two conducted small businesses. Of the five men in city, two were self-employed, one was retired, and another one was a service worker. They ranged in age from 35 to 65 years. Hui women were expected to stay at home, and were trained to cook, sew, and serve their husbands, children, and other family members. For these women, it is the structural complex of their husbands' domination as enacted in religious tenets, rules of marriage, and family life within the larger framework of the patriarchy and paternalism that not only permitted but also encouraged violence against them.

While Hui Muslim women may hold subordinate statuses across the life span particularly in relation to the inherent male dominance, there is one very unique social position through which women are endowed with power, knowledge, and relative "truth" about their social status, and that is for women whose sons have married. The superior status of Hui mothers-in-law is socially constructed not necessarily by individual intent but historical sites, institutions, cultural discourses, and shifts in social relations through which any woman once subordinate (daughter, wife) can transgress traditional gender roles into becoming so powerful.

## Conclusion

This analysis is consistent with intersectionality theory that proposes a nexus of oppression at which many sites and structures of domination converge to construct unique forms of power over those whose lives are situated at those junctures. As we



have tried to show through the intersectionality framework, women's experiences of domestic violence must be understood in relation to their multiple, sometimes competing positionings. In relation to women in China, particularly those from minority groups, further research is needed on prevalence, the differential context of urban and rural experiences and constraints, and ways to overcome barriers to seek help. Several limitations of this study's method are instructive for future research design. Given the lack of social support services for these women, the recruitment of participants was not a random sample, but based on personal and social networks, and resulted in a small sample size of 14. Although this study was exploratory and cannot generalize beyond the data to other Hui and ethnic regions in China, it does provide some key themes for future research. Second, the interviews were conducted in the local Qinghai dialect. The data were translated from the local dialect to Mandarin, and then to English. When dealing with language that lacks clear and unambiguous interpretations, something meaningful or accurate may not be fully captured. Some subtle meanings across three different languages are difficult to translate. The reliability of double translation and interpretation, to a certain extent, influences the validity of the data. Where appropriate, the researchers include footnotes in this study to provide context to culturally specific expressions used by the participants.

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### Notes

1. In China, every ethnic group is named as *minzu* which was originally imported from Japan under Sun Yatsen during the transitional period from empire to nation. *Minzu* in Japanese means people or nation. In the public period, Hui included several Muslim groups on the basis of their same religion were named as one of five *minzu's* when Sun Yatsen advocated his idea that there were five *minzu's* in the country for national unity (Gladney, 1998). After the founding of the PRC in the 1950s, the Hui are officially recognized as a separated group as Hui nationality (Hui *zu*) among 10 Muslim groups along with other 55 minority nationalities (*shao shui minzu*). Unlike other Muslim groups such as Uyghur and Salar, they have no language of their own but speak Mandarin or dialects based on Chinese. For information about Hui history, please see Liu (1998, Chapter 2).
2. For an insightful study about the Muslims within Confucian China, please see Israeli (2002, pp. 7-27). In his study, Israeli argues that Muslims of China have experienced struggles of Islamization and sinocization. For other discussion of Islamic cultural identity, please see Lipman (1997); Berlie (2004, Chapter 3, pp. 29-58).
3. The Confucian reference is widely regarded as the three obediences (to father, husband, and son) and four virtues (fidelity, cleanliness, polite speech, and domestic duty).

4. The term “face” in Chinese culture carries a significant meaning beyond the word itself. “Face” called “mianzi” (面子 in Chinese writing) in Chinese means honor, credit, reputation, prestige, and so forth. It becomes a part of Chinese culture and strongly impact on Chinese.
5. To maintain “Xianghuo” means to keep a family continuously from generation to generation by having sons. For Chinese Hui Muslims, they actually do not use the term “Xianghuo,” because it reflects Chinese Han Culture. It is same as they do not hang on a couplet on the door during the Spring Festival and they do not worship any idol. We borrow the word here because of its meaning.
6. In some West China provinces, Muslim women are not allowed to pray together with men in a mosque or public space. The women pray in a private house or with other Muslim women in such instances. In east and central China, there are mosques for Muslim women.

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