


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Lost Voices: Chinese Muslim Modernists and the Issue of Polygamy in the Republican Era

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Abstract

This study brings the voices of Chinese Muslim modernists back into discussions on polygamy in the Republican era. Starting from the late nineteenth century, abolishing the practice of polygamous marriage became a vital component of Chinese modernizing elites' vision of modern Chinese society, as they saw polygamy as an obstacle to modernization. Chinese Muslim modernists actively engaged in China's struggle with polygamy. Their dynamic discussions on polygamy were not insignificant and peripheral. On the contrary, when the Republican law promoting monogamy was hard to implement, some Chinese Muslim modernists pushed their fellow Muslims to set examples for other Chinese to obey the law. The Chinese translations of Arabic scholarly work even helped some Chinese Muslim modernists take a different approach to the issue of polygamy by arguing that polygamy, if properly regulated, could be beneficial to modern societies.

Keywords: polygamy; monogamy; Chinese Muslim modernists; Republican law; the Chinese translation of Arabic work

Introduction

Family reform was an essential component of many Chinese modernists' goal of modernization during China's transition from empire to nation-state over the course of the late nineteenth century to the twentieth century. Those modernists considered China's traditional family system as a liability to the country and traced the source of Western power to its family system. Therefore, they advocated replacing China's traditional family system with the Western-style family, which was monogamous and emphasized conjugal fidelity.¹ Against this backdrop, the abolishment of polygamy became a crucial part of China's family reform and modernization.²

However, the idea that polygamy would impede modernization put Chinese modernists in a dilemma. On the one hand, modernists had to embrace the ideal of monogamy. On the other hand, they lacked an effective means to end the practice of polygamy. As a result, the dichotomy between polygamy and modernization created a confusing picture. On the face of it, Chinese regimes and modernists' abolishment of polygamy was swift and complete. Republican lawmakers had defined the action of marrying more than one person as the crime of bigamy in the very first year of the Republic of China.³ However, upon a closer look, it was apparent that Republican lawmakers were largely paying lip service to the ideal of monogamy when they outlawed the behavior of marrying

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¹Glosser 2003, pp. 1–12, pp. 44–49.

²Tran 2015, p. 20.

³Zhou Dongbai 1924, p. 50.

multiple persons, because concubinage was not considered as marriage.⁴ In other words, no matter how many concubines a man took in, he would not commit the crime of bigamy!

Therefore, as some scholars have revealed, the issue of polygamy was an ongoing matter in the Republican period, and Chinese modernists constantly discussed the issue and proposed potential methods to deal with it.⁵ However, so far, not enough attention has been paid to the voices of modernists of ethnic minority backgrounds on polygamy. It has even been suggested that some minorities were hesitant to embrace modern marriage reform.⁶ This paper aims at bringing back the neglected ethnic minorities' voices, particularly Chinese Muslim modernists, in the discussion of a significant modernizing issue for China.⁷ Past scholarship on the history of Chinese Islam has revealed that Chinese Muslims actively participated in China's transition from empire to nation-state.⁸ More recently, scholars have started to emphasize the agency of Chinese Muslims in the construction of modern China; their research revealed that Muslim modernists' participation in China's modernization projects was often shaped by their own vision and agendas.⁹

The issue of polygamy was another excellent opportunity to study Chinese Muslims' agency in building modern China. While other Chinese modernists mainly attempted to learn from the West, many Chinese Muslim modernists drew inspiration from Arabic scholarship. In recent years, scholars have paid increasing attention to the Arabic-Chinese ideological interactions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁰ However, it was still challenging to measure the impact of Arabic work in China and vice versa. One scholar has even questioned the possibility of such an approach.¹¹ By focusing on the case of polygamy, this paper shows that a new body of scholarship from the Middle East helped Chinese Muslim modernists take a different approach to tackling polygamy. This paper does not attempt to examine every single essay by Chinese Muslims on the issue of polygamy. Such an approach requires a much greater space than an article. Instead, this paper centers around understanding a dispute over polygamy among Chinese Muslim modernists.

Modernization and the Issue of Polygamy in the Republican Era

As mentioned above, from the late nineteenth century onward, Chinese modernists began to consider the abolishment of polygamy as a vital part of their family reform and their embrace of modernization. Liang Qichao, a major influence in China's modernizing movements, co-founded the Association for [the Promotion of] *yifu yiqi* 一夫一妻 (one husband and one wife) in the World with another influential intellectual, Tang Sitong, during the 1898 Reform movement.¹² This association was probably as short-lived as the 1898 Reform movement itself. However, it revealed that the principle of monogamy had quickly become appealing to many Chinese reformist elites.

By the early twentieth century, the ideal of monogamy had become influential enough that the early Republican regime committed itself to it by codifying the crime of bigamy. Article 291 of the 1912 provisional criminal code issued by the early Republican regime said that those who had a spouse and married again should be sentenced to fixed-term imprisonment of up to three years.¹³ The Guomindang (GMD) government that succeeded the early Republican regime increased penalties for bigamy in its criminal code in 1928.¹⁴ Article 254 of the 1928 criminal code stated that those

⁴Tran 2015, chaps. 2, 3.

⁵*Ibid.*, 11; Cheng Yu 2006, pp. 340–80.

⁶Tontini 2016, p. 168.

⁷The term “Chinese Muslim” in this paper refers to those Muslims whose native language is Chinese. It is largely interchangeable with the contemporary ethnic category, “Hui.”

⁸Lipman 1997, pp. 167–211.

⁹Mao 2011a; Unno-Yamazaki 2018.

¹⁰Ben-Dor Benite 2008; Matsumoto 2006; Ben-Dor Benite 2014; Halevi 2019.

¹¹Ben-Dor Benite 2014, p. 250.

¹²Zhu Zheng 2002, p. 30.

¹³Zhou Dongbai 1924, 8, pp. 50–51.

¹⁴“Zhonghua minguo xingfa 1928,” p. 271; Qinshu 1930, p. 14.

who entered into a marriage while still having a spouse or who had married more than two individuals at the same time should be sentenced to imprisonment of up to five years.¹⁵ This article was kept in the 1935 criminal code of the GMD regime.¹⁶

On paper, the polygamous issue had been solved by Chinese modernists in the early twentieth century. However, in reality, the practice of polygamy in China remained decidedly intact until after 1949. The traditional Chinese custom of polygamy had a unique feature: a man technically could only have one wife. He could continue to marry and have sexual relationships with other women, but those women could only acquire the status of concubine.¹⁷ However, the “modern” ideal of monogamy that started to rise in China from early in the twentieth century was heavily influenced by Western monogamous marriage, and it acquired the meaning of conjugal fidelity, which meant that a man could only marry one woman, and he should maintain sexual relationships only with that woman.¹⁸

The “modern” ideal of monogamy essentially required Republican regimes to choose between polygamy and modernization, and that placed the regimes in a dilemma. On the one hand, the regimes wanted to embrace monogamy to demonstrate their commitment to modernization. But, on the other hand, they were not too keen on regulating men’s sexual relationships. As a result, the Republican laws and regulations contradicted themselves in the treatment of polygamy. While Republican regimes codified the bigamy crime, they also insisted that concubines were not wives, and concubinage was not marriage, so taking in concubines did not constitute bigamy. For instance, the Supreme Court of the early Republican regime, *Dali Yuan*, issued a judicial interpretation in 1917 that “marrying a concubine should not be considered a marriage, so those who have a wife and then accept a concubine will not be guilty of bigamy.”¹⁹ The Judicial Yuan of the GMD regime also declared that “marrying a concubine is not a marriage and cannot be the excuse of divorce.”²⁰

When the Republican regimes turned a blind eye to the practice of polygamy, male modernizing elites did not always set good examples for the larger societies themselves. Even Liang Qichao took in a concubine a few years after he established the so-called Association for *yifu yiqi* in the World.²¹ As late as 1925, Liang Qichao still argued that it was necessary to protect the status of existing concubines and unwise to ask them all to divorce.²² Therefore, despite the rhetoric of monogamy, the custom of polygamy remained resilient in Republican China.²³ Many Chinese modernists were not blind to reality. They continued to explore possible solutions to the issue of polygamy. For example, several women’s organizations successfully pushed the GMD lawmakers to categorize concubinage as adultery (because it was an “illegitimate relation” between a married man and an “unmarried woman”) in the regime’s 1935 criminal code. This change was a significant milestone in Republican China’s struggle with polygamy, because a wife could now divorce her husband for adultery (but not bigamy) should he take in a concubine.²⁴

However, categorizing concubinage as adultery did not solve China’s polygamous issue. The GMD regime set up several restrictions on how wives could invoke the regulations on adultery to protect themselves. If wives had given consent to their husbands’ relationships with concubines, they lost the right to divorce on the grounds of adultery. If wives did not file a suit “within the first six months of first learning about the adultery,” they lost the right. If two years had passed since the adultery began, they lost the right.²⁵ Therefore, Chinese modernists continued to discuss possible solutions

¹⁵“Zhonghua minguo xingfa 1928,” p. 271.

¹⁶“Zhonghua minguo xingfa 1935,” p. 251.

¹⁷Bernhardt 1999, pp. 161–62.

¹⁸Tran 2011.

¹⁹Wu Jingxiang 1948, vol. 5, p. 381.

²⁰Yu Zhongluo and Wu Xuepeng 1932, p. 87.

²¹Cheng Yu 2006, pp. 345–46.

²²Wang Zheng 1925, pp. 11–12.

²³Tran 2009b, p. 126.

²⁴Tran 2015, pp. 36–41; Tran 2009a, pp. 191–214.

²⁵Tran 2015, p. 44.

to the issue of polygamy until after 1949. Chinese Muslim modernists actively engaged in the discussion on polygamy, but, unfortunately, their engagement has not yet attracted the scholarly attention that it deserved.

Assumptions about Chinese Muslim Modernists' Positions on Polygamy

To discuss Chinese Muslims' engagement in the discussion on polygamy during the Republican period, we need to address two assumptions. First of all, polygamy was practiced by Prophet Muhammad and allowed in the Qur'an. Still, we cannot assume that polygamous marriages in Chinese Muslim communities were more prevalent than in Han Chinese communities. Evidence suggests that no significant difference existed in the popularity of polygamous practice between the two communities. For instance, one missionary observed in Northwest China around the last years of the nineteenth century that polygamous marriages were mainly common among the wealthier Chinese Muslims, as with the wealthier Han Chinese.²⁶ Moreover, we cannot assume that because polygamy was allowed in the Qur'an, Chinese Muslim modernists would always endorse it. Chinese Muslims did not have a homogenous attitude towards polygamy. Though Islamic doctrine would certainly influence how Chinese Muslim modernists approach the issue of polygamy, it did not mean that they could not hold diverse opinions about polygamy like other ethnic groups of Chinese intellectuals.

Unfortunately, non-Muslim Chinese intellectuals often ignored Chinese Muslims' diverse perspectives on polygamy, and most of them assumed that Muslims would support polygamy. Moreover, influenced by the modern ideal of monogamy, many non-Muslim Chinese intellectuals viewed Islam's insistence on polygamy as a confirmation of its backwardness. For example, in *ABC of Religion*, a popular series by a major Chinese publisher during the Republican period to disseminate knowledge about different religions to young students, polygamy was considered a defect of Islam. However, when discussing Confucianism, the *ABC of Religion* did not even mention polygamy.²⁷ This treatment might leave some readers with the impression that Islam had a uniquely strong connection with polygamy.

Even some of the non-Muslim intellectuals, who called for respect for Islam, assumed that Chinese Muslims would always approve the practice of polygamy. A public lecture in the Chengda Teachers' Academy in May 1940 vividly demonstrated this assumption of those intellectuals. It was a lecture by an influential Chinese law professor, Wang Jin. Wang used to teach at top Chinese universities like Tsinghua University. By 1940, he had relocated to Guangxi University in Guilin due to the impact of the Sino-Japanese War, which created more opportunities for him to interact with the Chengda Teachers' Academy, another displaced school in Guilin.²⁸ Chengda was originally founded in Jinan, Shandong province, under the leadership of local Muslims and Muslim intellectuals and officials from several other regions. Scholars widely considered the academy as a milestone in the development of modern Chinese Islamic education.²⁹

Wang Jin was exceptionally knowledgeable about criminal law.³⁰ He was not a Muslim, but probably to attract the attention of Muslim students, his talk in Chengda was titled "My Opinions on the Application of the Current Marriage Regulations and Islamic Marriage Doctrine and the Shortcomings of the Marriage Regulations."³¹ This lengthy title revealed Wang Jin's main point. He claimed that Republican China's marriage law had many shortcomings. One of them was the lack of clarification of what to do when marriage regulations conflicted with Islamic doctrine. And, according to Wang Jin, the most severe conflict was the one over whether a male could marry multiple wives. Wang Jin gave an example. If a Muslim man first married a non-Muslim woman and then continued to marry another three women, the non-Muslim wife could bring a lawsuit against her husband. What

²⁶Sommer and Zwemer 1907, pp. 276–79.

²⁷Xie Songgao 1928, p. 83–98; Xu Weinan 1929.

²⁸*Liuyang xianzhi*, p. 906; Liu Dongsheng 1993, p. 71.

²⁹Li Huaying 2006, p. 89; Mao 2011b, p. 144.

³⁰*Liuyang xianzhi*, p. 906.

³¹Wang Jin 1940, p. 144.

should the judge decide in this case? Should the judge sentence the Muslim man to a few years in prison according to the Republican criminal code, or should the judge reject the non-Muslim wife's request according to the Islamic doctrine?³²

Wang Jin stated if he were the judge, his judgment would respect the principles of Islamic doctrine and Chinese law because there was a way to exempt Muslim males should their non-Muslim wives take legal action against them for bigamy. That is, Article 16 of the criminal code stated that [in principle] the offenders should not be exempt from criminal liability because they did not know the law, but their sentences could be mitigated according to their circumstances. And, if offenders were confident that their actions were permitted by law, they could be exempt from liability.³³

Although Wang Jin claimed he would respect the principles of Islamic doctrine, his bias against Chinese Muslims was quite telling in his speech. He assumed that Muslims' default position on polygamy was that a male was entitled to marry up to four women, and Muslims' polygamous marriages would only become problematic when non-Muslim women were involved. More startlingly, he assumed that Chinese Muslims were not familiar with the Republican law regarding monogamy, so that they ought not to be punished if they violated it. Wang Jin could not be more wrong about Chinese Muslims' positions on polygamy.

Chinese Muslim Modernists' Discussion of Polygamy

Chinese Muslims did not have a unified position on polygamy. Some Muslim intellectuals would argue for polygamy. For instance, *Musheng bao* ("The Sound of Muslims"), a Muslim periodical, published an article "Fufu zhi zhi" ("The System of Couples") to defend polygamous marriages in 1925. Echoing Confucian values, the author of "The System of Couples" argued that the ideals of equal rights [between men and women] and the freedom of marriage would disturb the order of families and then endanger the safety of the Chinese nation, because those ideals compromised the family's crucial function of procreation by disapproving the practice of polygamy.³⁴

On the other hand, some Chinese Muslim intellectuals agreed that polygamy was an obstacle to modernization, and Chinese Muslims should choose between polygamy and modernization. However, they often did not simply repeat what had been argued by the modernists of other ethnic groups. In the arguments of Muslim modernists, Chinese Muslims could be unique and active players in promoting monogamy. Ma Xiang's essay "Huijiao duoqi zhi de jiantao" ("A Review of Muslim Polygamy") in *Chengshi Yuekan* (Chengda Monthly) 1935 epitomized such an approach to the polygamous issue.³⁵ Ma Xiang was born into a poor Muslim shoemaker family in Baoding City, Hebei province. Thanks to his fellow countrymen's generous support, Ma had his chance to receive a modern education in the top Muslim school, the Chengda Teachers' Academy in Beijing.³⁶

By 1935, Ma Xiang had become a fourth-year student at Chengda. Ma was clearly influenced by the school's modernizing agenda, as he regularly published essays in the school magazine talking about broad topics such as modern thoughts and Islam, the relationship between "new" and "old," and the value of Islam in modern times.³⁷ In comparison, polygamy seemed to be a narrow topic. Yet Ma Xiang still dedicated an extended essay, "A Review of Muslim Polygamy," to it. And he claimed that although Chinese Muslims needed to cope with many problems, they must treat polygamy as a priority issue. Moreover, the society at large knew that Islamic doctrine allowed the existence of polygamy, and non-Muslims often weaponized the issue of polygamy to attack Islam.³⁸

³²*Ibid.*, pp. 144–46.

³³*Ibid.*, p. 146.

³⁴Fan Xiyao 2015b, p. 923.

³⁵Ma Xiang 1935, pp. 7–9.

³⁶Chen Yimin 1994, vol. 10, p. 195.

³⁷Ma Xiang 1934b; Ma Xiang 1934a; Ma Xiang 1934c.

³⁸Ma Xiang 1935, p. 7.

It is clear that Ma Xiang considered polygamy to be an obstacle to modernization, and it should be ended. To justify his criticism of polygamy, Ma Xiang argued that monogamy was in line with the “true” meaning of Islamic doctrine. Ma claimed this conclusion was built on two fundamental principles. First of all, the Qur’an was a code that transcended everything, and it would never lose its authority due to the difference in times and places. Second, the Qur’an was the basis on which Muslims judged whether something was appropriate or not, but the judgment should, in turn, be based on a comprehensive and profound grasp of the meaning of the Qur’an’s different chapters.³⁹

Following these two principles, Ma Xiang analyzed polygamy in detail. He began with a quotation of Verse Three in Chapter Four of the Qur’an. Ma deemed that the verse was at the heart of the argument that Islam supported polygamy: “If you fear that you will not deal fairly with orphan girls, you may marry whichever [other] women seem good to you, two, three, or four. If you fear that you cannot be equitable [to them], then marry only one, or your slave(s): that is more likely to make you avoid bias.”⁴⁰

Ma Xiang claimed that although Verse Three in Chapter Four allowed a man to marry up to four women, it clearly tried to limit polygamous marriages, because the verse required that a man arrange his marriages in good faith and should treat different wives equally. When a man could not marry different women in good faith or could not treat them equally, Ma Xiang argued that Verse Three specifically required him to have only one wife. Therefore, Ma concluded that though the Qur’an tolerated polygamy in certain situations, in principle, it considered monogamy as the norm.⁴¹

Ma Xiang’s essay did not stop at the conclusion that monogamy was in line with the true meaning of Islamic doctrine. He further tackled the Republican law concerning monogamy and Chinese Muslims’ relations with it. Ma agreed that a Muslim must comply first and foremost with the Qur’an, then the Hadith, and third the laws of the state. He also decided that a Muslim should only observe those state laws that were not in conflict with principles of the Islamic doctrine. However, in terms of how many wives a male Muslim could marry, Ma argued that honoring the state law was honoring the Islamic doctrine. Neither monogamy nor polygamy was against the Islamic teaching, but Verse Three in Chapter Four of the Qur’an regarded monogamy as the norm and polygamy as the exception. Thus, Ma claimed that in a country where polygamy was legally allowed, a male Muslim could marry up to four wives. On the other hand, in a more “civilized” country like China where polygamy had been banned, it was a religious obligation for male Muslims to obey the law and only have one wife.⁴²

As stated above, the Republican law regarding monogamy was undermined by other state regulations and hard to implement. By arguing that monogamy was in line with the “true” meaning of the Qur’an and Chinese Muslims were religiously obliged to obey the law promoting monogamy, Ma claimed monogamy as an Islamic ideal and pushed his fellow Muslims to play an enhanced role in promoting the practice. Thus, Chinese Muslim modernists’ discussion of polygamy was far from insignificant and peripheral, as some of them strove to set examples for the broader Chinese society to follow the Republican law concerning monogamy.

Perhaps wanting Chinese Muslims to play an even more active role in the promotion of monogamy, some Chinese Muslim modernists tried to deny the fact that the Qur’an tolerated polygamy. Bai Chongxi was one of those Muslim modernists. Bai was one of the most influential Chinese politicians and generals in Republican China who happened to be a Muslim. He was a sponsor of several modernizing projects for Chinese Islam, in particular after the outbreak of the Second Sino-Japanese War. For instance, in 1937, the influential Chengda Teachers’ Academy was forced to evacuate from Beijing, but it had difficulty in finding a new campus. Eventually, with the help of Bai Chongxi, Chengda

³⁹Ma Xiang 1935, p. 7.

⁴⁰The original text in Ma Xiang’s paper is: “若是你們恐怕不能在一些孤女裏公道了，你們則從一些婦女人中聘娶你們所愛的那個，兩人，三人，四人；若是你們尤恐不能公道了（在一些婦人上），則（聘娶）一人！或者你們的右手所撐管者（婢女）。那個（即如上所說），是最接近你們不行虧！” See: *ibid.*, pp. 7–8; Haleem 2008, p. 50.

⁴¹Ma Xiang 1935, p. 8.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 8–9.

relocated to his hometown, Guilin.⁴³ After that, Bai became a regular sponsor of Chengda's activities.⁴⁴ In 1938, in order to mobilize Muslim support for the Sino-Japanese War, Bai Chongxi, together with several other Muslim modernizing elites, established the Chinese Islamic National Salvation Association.⁴⁵

In July 1939, the Salvation Association held its first national convention in Chongqing. After formal arrangements of the meeting were over, the Central Committee of the GMD hosted a banquet for the participants. Several prominent GMD officials attended the banquet to pay tribute to the Islamic association and woo Muslims' support for the GMD government's struggle with the Japanese invaders.⁴⁶ As the president of the Salvation Association, Bai Chongxi delivered a thank-you speech. He urged his fellow Muslims to carry forward the reform of Islam with a revolutionary spirit to keep up with the changing modern society. To do so, in Bai's mind, Chinese Muslims should promote the "true" meaning and virtues of Islam as much as possible and abolish all backward customs that were not related to the true meaning of Islam.⁴⁷

Bai unapologetically considered polygamy as an obstacle to modernization, as he claimed that polygamy was one of the backward customs that was not allowed in the Islamic doctrine. According to him, polygamy was a practice invented by non-Muslims, and the original teachings of Islam only endorsed the principle of monogamy. And they had never confirmed that a Muslim man could marry up to four women. Therefore, it was quite regrettable that some Muslims misinterpreted the Islamic doctrine to justify marrying multiple women. Finally, Bai declared that the Salvation Association would assume the duty to thoroughly study and tackle the issues of clarifying the teachings of Islam and reforming the practices of Islam.⁴⁸

Curiously, Bai also mentioned polygamy in the opening speech that he delivered at the first national convention of the Salvation Association. However, his tone was significantly less harsh when his audience was mainly Muslim representatives from different parts of China rather than high-ranking GMD officials. In the opening remarks, Bai Chongxi still classified polygamy as a custom that needed to be reformed, as he claimed that it was wrong to allow a man to marry multiple wives. However, Bai then emphasized that the meaning of reform was not to abandon Islam altogether, and he "did not have a deep study of [Islamic] doctrines." Thus, he looked forward to his audience's objective and calm discussions on Islamic doctrines to shoulder the responsibility of reviving the religion.⁴⁹

Bai Chongxi's moderate tone in front of Muslim representatives suggested that his statement that Islamic teachings did not allow polygamous marriages was a way to score political points in front of his high-ranking GMD colleagues. Bai was trying to boast that, under his leadership, Chinese Muslims would be a vibrant group of supporters of China's modernizing projects. Therefore, when two different Muslim newspapers reprinted Bai's opening speech, Bai's thank-you speech to high-ranking GMD officials was not reproduced.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Bai's outright denial of the existence of polygamy in the Qur'an was too problematic, and his position as the head of a national Islamic association made it hard for other Chinese Muslim intellectuals to ignore that statement.

⁴³Liu Dongsheng 1993, p. 71.

⁴⁴Chang Qiming 2006, pp. 254–56; Ma Chengfu 2003, pp. 154–55.

⁴⁵Ma Tiangang and Jia Tingshi 1989, p. 573; for more information on the Chinese Islamic National Salvation Association and the role it played during the Second Sino-Japanese War, please refer to Yakubo 2010 and Yakubo 2016.

⁴⁶These prominent officials included: Ye Chuchen 葉楚傖, Chen Shuren 陳樹人, Zhang Lisheng 張厲, Chen Lifu 陳立夫, Zhu Jiahua 朱家驊, Chen Cheng 陳誠, and Zhang Daofan 張道藩, see Xue Wenbo 1939, p. 4.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸In this speech, Bai Chongxi also claimed that the custom of hijab-wearing had nothing to do with Islamic doctrines. This paper focuses on the issue of polygamy, so it will not discuss the issue of hijab-wearing. *Ibid.*

⁴⁹Bai Chongxi 1939a, p. 11.

⁵⁰Bai Chongxi 1939c; Bai Chongxi 1939b.

Shortly after, *Yiguang* (The Light of Islam), a Muslim magazine influential among Chinese imams and other Muslim intellectuals, received several letters from Northwest China.⁵¹ By quoting the Qur'an, these letters furiously refuted Bai Chongxi's claim that the original teachings of Islam had never confirmed that a Muslim man could marry multiple wives. To increase the influence of their rebuttal, at least one of such letters specifically asked the editor of *Yiguang* to weigh in and help dispel Bai's false claim completely. This letter was said to be authored by "Aimusheng" 愛穆生, which could be translated as "a student who loves Muslims." "Aimusheng" tried to force *Yiguang* to put something on the record, as he made it clear that silence on the part of *Yiguang* could only mean that they agreed with Bai.⁵² The full content of the letter from "Aimusheng" was unknown to outsiders, but it was reasonable to infer that the letter wanted to invite Imam Wang Jingzhai to the conversation.

Wang Jingzhai was one of the most active reformist imams in twentieth-century China.⁵³ Wang established *Yiguang* himself in 1927. More importantly, the survival and development of *Yiguang* relied heavily on the personal commitment of Wang, as he was the manager, editor, and journalist of this periodical. He was the author of most of the articles published in *Yiguang*.⁵⁴ In turn, *Yiguang* was a magazine that mainly reflected Imam Wang's thoughts and personality.⁵⁵ Therefore, it was safe to assume that the letter from "Aimusheng" was requesting Imam Wang to respond to Bai Chongxi's words. The editor of *Yiguang* or, presumptively, Imam Wang, answered this request by publishing two articles in a row in *Yiguang* to discuss the issue of polygamy.⁵⁶

Imam Wang was put in a tough situation. On the one hand, as an active reformist imam, Imam Wang wanted to appreciate Bai's effort to modernize Chinese Islam, as he stated in his article that Bai Chongxi had been relatively enthusiastic about reforming and promoting Islam, especially in recent years. Chinese imams should not dampen such enthusiasm by nitpicking Bai's speech, who was not an Islamic expert. Imam Wang then even claimed that letters from Northwest China had exaggerated the seriousness of Bai's problem too much and had become personal attacks.⁵⁷ On the other hand, Imam Wang understood that Bai Chongxi did make some mistakes in his thank-you speech to high-ranking GMD officials even though it was a political statement.⁵⁸ He did not want other Muslims to think that, by praising Bai's modernizing effort, he agreed with Bai that the Qur'an did not allow the practice of polygamy.

Overall, Imam Wang wanted to make a point beyond the dichotomy between polygamy and modernization, as he tried to satisfy both an influential politician who considered polygamy an obstacle to modernization and a group of Northwest Muslim intellectuals who defended polygamy from a religious perspective. Such an objective was difficult to reach, but with the help of a new body of scholarship, Imam Wang could argue that Islamic polygamy was not an obstacle to modernization, and it was in line with authentic knowledge about Islam. In this way, he could stay above the fray and then judge Bai Chongxi and letters from Northwest China at the same time. This new body of scholarship was Chinese translations of Arabic scholars' work, in particular, Ma Jian's *Huijiao zhenxiang* ("The Truth of Islam") and Na Zhong's *Yisilanjiao* ("The Islamic Religion").⁵⁹

Huijiao zhenxiang and *Yisilanjiao* were not monographs of polygamy, but both devoted specific sections to discuss that issue. In his two articles on polygamy, Imam Wang quoted almost the entire sections to support his argument. Therefore, it is vital to understand why Imam Wang thought that the translations of Arabic scholars' work were necessary for supporting his arguments, and what new

⁵¹For the influence of *Yiguang* among imams and other Chinese Muslim intellectuals, see Bai Runsheng 2008, p. 228; Wang Jingzhai 2015b, p. 939.

⁵²Wang Jingzhai 2015b, p. 939.

⁵³For the activities of Imam Wang Jingzhai, see Ben-Dor Benite 2004, pp. 96–97.

⁵⁴Bai Shouyi 2003, p. 1435.

⁵⁵Lei Xiaojing 2006, vol. 1, p. 89.

⁵⁶Wang Jingzhai 2015b, pp. 939–941; Wang Jingzhai 2015a, pp. 929–30.

⁵⁷Wang Jingzhai 2015b, p. 939.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 939–41.

⁵⁹Na Zhong 納忠 was also known as Na Zijia 納子嘉. See Ma Bozhong, Na Jiarui and Li Jianguo 2011, p. 13.

ideas on polygamy those translations brought to Chinese Muslims. The following section provides further analysis.

Translations and a New Perspective on Polygamy

As China was integrated by external forces into a global network of trade and communication starting from the late nineteenth century, it became more feasible for Chinese Muslims to establish a stable connection with the Middle East. As past scholarship has pointed out, Chinese Muslim intellectuals attached significant cultural implications to that connection. To them, viable contacts with the Islamic heartlands meant Chinese Muslims could reclaim their lost Islamic essence with authentic knowledge about Islam.⁶⁰ Against this backdrop, studying in the Middle East, especially in Cairo's al-Azhar University, became popular among Muslim intellectuals, as many of them considered Cairo and al-Azhar as the center of Islamic learning.⁶¹

Imam Wang Jingzhai himself became one of the earliest Chinese Muslims who studied in al-Azhar in the 1920s.⁶² Later on, in the 1930s, with the help of Egyptian authorities, Chinese Muslims were able to send four student delegations to al-Azhar. Both Ma Jian and Na Zhong were members of the first student delegation in 1931.⁶³ Those Chinese Muslim students took spreading "accurate" Islamic knowledge into China as their responsibility, so they were often keen to translate Arabic scholars' work into Chinese. Chinese Islamic periodicals and publishers routinely published those translations to do their part to modernize Islam and China.⁶⁴ Ma Jian and Na Zhong were active student translators.

Ma Jian started translating Arabic scholarship into Chinese shortly after he arrived at al-Azhar. His first major accomplishment has attracted some recent scholarly attention. It was a translation of *Risalat al-Tawhid* by the Egyptian reformer Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1905).⁶⁵ In 1936, Ma Jian began another major translation project, which was about the book *al-Risāla al-Hamīdiyya fi haqīqat al-diyāna al-islāmiyya wahaqqiyyat al-sharī'a al-Muhammadiyya* ("The Hamidian Treatise on the Truth of the Islamic Religion and the Verity of Muhammed's Law") by Husayn al-Jisr (1845–1909) or Hussien al-Gisr in Ma's text.⁶⁶ This book, published in 1886, won Husayn al-Jisr fame and reputation.⁶⁷ Ma Jian simply titled his translation *Huijiao zhenxiang*. It has received less recent scholarly attention so far compared to Ma's previous work, but Ma himself was fascinated by the book's argument. According to Ma Jian, al-Jisr's book mainly argued that the principles of Islam were not contrary to the findings of modern science because both were based on reason.⁶⁸

Al-Jisr's *Risāla* dedicated a section to discussing Islamic polygamy and emphasized that Islamic polygamy was not in conflict with modernization. Ma Jian specially mentioned the existence of such a discussion in his "Translator's Preface."⁶⁹ Like many other Muslim intellectuals, in the mind of Ma Jian, polygamy was a critical issue. Later, Ma even published a separate essay on polygamy in a newspaper.⁷⁰ It can be argued that part of the reason for Ma Jian to translate and publish *Huijiao zhenxiang* was to introduce al-Jisr's perspective on the issue of polygamy to China.

According to al-Jisr, Islamic polygamy was a system that respected the rights of women, because it was an improvement on pre-Islamic marriage systems in the Middle East as the latter allowed men to

⁶⁰Ben-Dor Benite 2008, pp. 8–13; Mao 2016, pp. 147–48.

⁶¹Pang Shiqian 2017, p. 3; Wang Jingzhai 2013, p. 322.

⁶²Ben-Dor Benite 2002, p. 368.

⁶³Ma Bozhong, Na Jiarui, and Li Jianguo 2011, pp. 1–2.

⁶⁴Ben-Dor Benite 2008, p. 4; Ben-Dor Benite 2014, pp. 253–54.

⁶⁵Ben-Dor Benite 2014, pp. 259–60; Matsumoto 2006, pp. 130–31.

⁶⁶Peters 1994, p. 222; Ma Jian 1938a, p. 1.

⁶⁷Peters 1994, p. 222.

⁶⁸Ma Jian 1938b, pp. 1–2.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷⁰Ma Jian 1940.

marry multiple wives arbitrarily without restrictions on number and conditions. In comparison, Islam regulated the practice of polygamy and only allowed a man to marry up to four wives if he could treat different wives equally. Al-Jisr then argued that Islam did not ban polygamy outright due to its benefit to the society and nation. From al-Jisr's perspective, men had an obligation to support their families and defend the country. They worked more, took more risks, and had a higher mortality rate. As a result, the number of women often exceeded that of men, and if polygamy were severely restricted, excess women would not have the opportunities to reproduce, and the nation would be weakened. Essentially, *Huijiao zhenxiang* claimed that through the regulation that a man could only marry up to four wives if he could treat different wives equally, Islam made polygamy compatible with modernization.⁷¹

When Ma Jian was working on his translation projects at al-Azhar, he was also helping Na Zhong translate a book called *Islamic Religion*. The Egyptian Ministry of Education approved *Islamic Religion* as a textbook on religion for boys and girls in secondary schools in Egypt.⁷² Na Zhong titled it *Yisilanjiao*.⁷³ In China as well, this book was used as an Islamic textbook. In fact, even before *Yisilanjiao* was officially published, a Muslim middle school in Beijing adopted it as the textbook for religious education.⁷⁴

Yisilanjiao's take on the issue of polygamy was similar to that of *Huijiao zhenxiang*. First of all, *Yisilanjiao* pointed out that polygamy was common in Arab and other Asian nations, prior to the advent of Islam. *Yisilanjiao* admitted the tradition of polygamy could lead to abuse of women, but it was difficult to prohibit it absolutely, and it could benefit society in some situations. For example, in a post-war society, women usually outnumbered men. If polygamy were not allowed at this time, there would be many women who could not marry and have children, so that they would be left unsupported. *Yisilanjiao* claimed that too many women left unsupported could be harmful to society. Another situation in which polygamy was beneficial was when a woman was unable to have children. If her husband divorced her for that reason, she would be left unsupported, but if polygamy was allowed, the husband could continue his family bloodline without divorce.⁷⁵

Facing the pros and cons of polygamy, *Yisilanjiao* argued that Islam struck a balance by introducing a regulation. Islam still allowed polygamy, but one man could marry up to four wives only when he could guarantee fair treatment of different wives. In this way, the Islamic polygamous system kept the benefits of polygamy while protecting the rights of women. After arguing the advantages of Islamic polygamy, *Yisilanjiao* then claimed even Europeans were changing their attitudes toward Islamic polygamy after World War I, as some of them had started to promote polygamy as a solution to Europe's post-war social problems.⁷⁶ In general, *Yisilanjiao* made the argument that Islamic polygamy was a better marriage system in many ways because of its regulation on polygamy.

It is worth noting that just a few months before Na Zhong went to Egypt, he wrote an essay discussing Islamic marriage and polygamy issues. This essay shows Na Zhong was heavily influenced by the dichotomy between modernization and polygamy, as he tried to distance Islam from the practice of polygamy. Na Zhong claimed those ideas that "Islam promoting polygamy" and "Muhammad was polygamy" were rumors created by Christians, especially Chinese Christians, to smear Islam.⁷⁷ This understanding of the relationship between Islam and polygamy contrasted sharply with that of *Yisilanjiao*. Therefore, at least in the case of Na Zhong, studying in Egypt exposed him to different perspectives on Islamic polygamy.

⁷¹Ma Jian 1938a, pp. 80–81.

⁷²Na Zhong 1935, vol. 1, p. 9.

⁷³According to Na Zhong, *Islamic Religion* or الدين الاسلامي was authored by Hassan Mansur or حسن منصور. I was not able to identify this book nor the author according to the limited information provided by Na Zhong's *Yisilanjiao*. See *ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 28, 30.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 12–13.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 184–85.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 184–87.

⁷⁷Na Zhong 2015, pp. 979–81.

Nevertheless, the Chinese translations of Arabic scholarly work like *Huijiao zhenxiang* and *Yisilanjiao* were not the only potential sources that Imam Wang could quote to claim that polygamy was not a hindrance to modernization. Some Chinese Muslim intellectuals had argued in their publications that it was advantageous to have the Islamic version of polygamy in a modern nation. For instance, in 1931, an essay by “Yang Jiagen” argued that monogamy was against human nature, and non-Islamic polygamy often led to the abuse of women. In comparison, the conditions that Islam set on marrying multiple wives made Islamic polygamy a “perfect” marriage system, because it would overcome the shortcomings of both monogamy and non-Islamic polygamy.⁷⁸

In 1937, an author named “Jianmin” made an effort to defend Islamic polygamy. To make his point, Jianmin claimed that even post-World War I, France could benefit from polygamy. According to him, after World War I, the number of women in France exceeded that of men by seven times. If France would not permit polygamy, nor accept hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers in France to help women reproduce, what would happen to all the surplus women? How could the lost population of France ever recover? Jianmin further pointed out that Islamic polygamy was better than non-Islamic polygamy, because the former guaranteed the equal treatment of different wives. Therefore, Islamic polygamy was a sound system.⁷⁹

Overall, the articles of Yang Jiagen and Jianmin made arguments similar to that of *Huijiao zhenxiang* and *Yisilanjiao*. It is legitimate to ask whether those Chinese Muslim intellectuals came up with these arguments independent of Arabic scholarly work and whether Imam Wang knew those essays. Unfortunately, such questions may be impossible to answer. Regardless, citing the two pieces by Chinese Muslim intellectuals would be considerably less productive for Imam Wang. After all, as a former student who had studied at al-Azhar, Imam Wang must understand that the translations of Arabic work represented authentic knowledge about Islam from the Islamic heartlands. The two essays by Chinese Muslims would not be attributed to the same cultural significance.

Imam Wang Jingzhai quoted *Huijiao zhenxiang* and *Yisilanjiao* heavily. They elegantly put forward a new perspective on polygamy for Chinese Muslims, which was that polygamy could have positive effects in modern times with a mechanism of regulation. Therefore, prohibiting the practice of polygamy outright might not be the only solution that modernists could have in dealing with the issue of polygamy. This alternative perspective provided by the Arabic scholarship was crucial for Imam Wang Jingzhai’s response to Bai Chongxi. He made full use of *Huijiao zhenxiang* and *Yisilanjiao* to come up with a nuanced description of Islamic polygamy: “limited polygamy.”⁸⁰ “Limited polygamy” meant Islam regulated the polygamous practice for the greater interest of the society and the nation. Essentially, it meant that Islamic polygamy, since it was regulated, not only would not impede modernization but could even support it. This understanding of the Islamic marriage system freed Imam Wang from the dichotomy between modernization and polygamy. He then could criticize Bai Chongxi’s view on polygamy while commending Bai’s modernizing efforts in the responses.⁸¹

Conclusion

Chinese Muslim modernists’ dynamic discussions on polygamy had long been ignored, including by intellectuals from the Republican era. Many simply assumed that polygamy was a practice that Muslims would always support. Some non-Muslim intellectuals, like Wang Jin, even envisioned that there would be conflicts between Muslim customs and the Republican marriage law. Contrary to the assumption of many non-Muslim scholars, Chinese Muslims were not homogenous. They took different positions on the issue of polygamy. Chinese Muslims were not blind to Republican law regarding monogamy as well. In fact, when many Chinese ignored the law in practice, some

⁷⁸Yang Jiagen 2015, pp. 894–95.

⁷⁹Jianmin 2015, pp. 1008–9.

⁸⁰Wang Jingzhai 2015b, p. 939; Wang Jingzhai 2015a, p. 929.

⁸¹Wang Jingzhai 2015b; Wang Jingzhai 2015a.

Chinese Muslim modernists, like Ma Xiang, argued that it was a religious duty of Chinese Muslims to follow the Republican state's marriage law, because monogamy was in line with the "true" meaning of the Islamic doctrine.

Ma Xiang's approach to polygamy shared some similarities with Ma Dexin's treatment of divorce, as there were differences between the Islamic doctrine and the state law on divorce. Ma Dexin was an influential Chinese Muslim scholar during the late Qing period. The Qing law gave husbands less freedom to divorce their wives in comparison with Islamic law. To reconcile the two systems, Ma Dexin recommended that Muslim husbands choose domestic violence over divorce to deal with their "disobedient" wives.⁸² However, Ma Xiang's approach differed from that of Ma Dexin in a crucial way. Ma Xiang did not merely want to shield Chinese Muslims from breaking the Islamic doctrine and the state law by recommending an intermediate solution. Instead, Ma Xiang pushed his fellow Muslims to actively practice and promote the state law regarding monogamy by arguing that it was a religious duty. In comparison, even many Republican lawmakers did not share Ma Xiang's enthusiasm for monogamy.

Moreover, non-Muslim Chinese modernists mostly drew inspiration from the West and created a dichotomy between polygamy and modernization. In comparison, some Chinese Muslim modernists, with the help of the scholarship from the Middle East, put forward a new perspective on polygamy, which argued that if regulated, polygamy would not impede modernization. We should not treat this unique perspective as a sign that Chinese Muslims were hesitant to embrace modern marriage reform. Instead, we should regard it as an honest and open way for Muslim modernists to create a marriage system that accommodated Chinese customs during the Republican period, because, at that time, polygamy was still resilient and the Republican regime mostly turned a blind eye to it. Therefore, Chinese Muslims' voices should be brought back into the history of polygamy in modern China. It shows that Chinese Muslims were an active force in shaping modern China.

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⁸²Nakanishi 2018, p. 125.

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