

Learning Arabic as a Third Space: An Ethnography of Chinese Muslim Women

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Received June 12, 2020; Revised July 13, 2020; Accepted July 22, 2020

Abstract In the context of China-oriented new economy, non-English foreign languages have been conceptualized as capital for China's global governance and individuals' upward mobility. As one of the valorized foreign languages, Arabic is gaining in importance in China. Adopting the concept of language investment [1,2], this study examines Arabic language learning trajectories of three Chinese women from a Muslim-centered and poverty-stricken region in China. Findings demonstrate that learning Arabic constitutes a third space for Chinese Muslim women's identity transformations and empowerment in fulfilling their educational and employment prospects. However, their empowerment is not without contestations but restricted in the wider structural constraints that are beyond their control. The study concludes by considering the implications for language policy and language education.

Keywords: *learning Arabic, Chinese Muslim women, language investment*

Cite This Article: Jia Li, Yuanmeng Ma, and Yuanyuan Bi, "Learning Arabic as a Third Space: An Ethnography of Chinese Muslim Women." *Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, vol. 4, no. 2 (2020): 54-59. doi: 10.12691/jll-4-2-2.

1. Introduction

As the world's second largest economy, China's economic power and its growing domestic market play a pivotal role as a hub for regional trade growth and economic integration in Asia and Africa [3]. As part of its socioeconomic rise, non-English foreign language programs are gaining in importance in China. In 2017, 583 Chinese universities offered 1,417 foreign language programs at undergraduate levels and these foreign languages are predominantly the national languages of China's neighboring countries [4]. The emergence of non-English foreign languages has been framed by Chinese sociolinguists as China's national language capacity [5] and constructed by China's mass media as profit and upward mobility [6]. The promotion of non-English foreign languages from above has been framed by Chinese sociolinguists as China's national language capacity [5] and constructed by China's mass media as profit and upward mobility [6]. However, what seems to have been largely overlooked is the language learning from below and the empowerment it can bring. This study aims to investigate how Arabic language learning might empower Chinese women in a Muslim-centered and poverty-stricken region and how their life trajectories are intersected with the wider process of socioeconomic transformations in China and beyond.

2. Contexts of the Study

2.1. Shifting Meanings of Speaking Arabic in 21st Century

In the 21st century, the meanings of speaking Arabic have been shaped and reshaped by the historical, political and socioeconomic factors in many parts of the world. Arabic is both the national language of 22 countries and the international language for migrant workers seeking their transnational mobility. The total number of Arabic speakers is estimated to be about 250 million [7]. When migration trajectories emerge from peripheral to semi-peripheral countries, Arabic constitutes a capital that facilitates the transnational flow between people, commodity and social status. Many countries such as Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates have emerged as popular destinations for foreign migrants working and seeking for better life. Arabic as an international language connecting the migrants from low-income countries to the newly emerging countries has challenged the traditional perception of speaking Arabic for religious purpose but has been increasingly perceived as economic capital to fulfill individual upwardness and national capacity.

As one of the important foreign languages for China's new governance in the form of Belt and Road Initiative, Arabic has been widely promoted at Chinese universities

in recent years. In China, 46 Chinese universities have established Arabic language degree program, 15 Arabic & Middle-East Research Bases have been founded [8]. The values of learning Arabic in China is not only for academic mobility but also for identity transformations for grassroots learners to fulfill their transnational mobility and economic prospects. Speaking Arabic has become one of the popular foreign languages for making business between China and the Middle East. In China's Yiwu, the world largest wholesale trading center, for example, Arabic has become "the language of globalization" [9] and "the Arabic-speaking translators in Yiwu are part of a grassroots change that is binding the Arab world to China". [9].

2.2. Shifting Status of Muslim Women in an Era of Globalization

Muslim women's life trajectories worldwide are intersected with many social factors including religion, poverty, gender and region. In Middle East, females are less likely than males to work outside because of the traditional expectations from religion and family responsibility that bestowed upon women [10]. Such constraint on Muslim women is not even challenged given the fact that there are more female college graduates and undergraduates than males [11]. Apart from the social constraints as mentioned above, Muslim women are confronted with various types of discrimination in Europe. There are alarming levels of anti-Muslim discrimination within the job market [12]. While in education, there are fueled heated debates on whether Muslim women can wear hijab on class. In France, a decade after headscarf is banned in secular education, Salafist Muslim women choose to be homeschooled or study in mosques [13].

However, Muslim women's marginalized status has been counterbalanced in recent years when Arabic language has been acknowledged as a potential foreign language for business transaction and cross-cultural communication between China and the Middle East. Previous studies [14] on Chinese Muslim women demonstrate that Chinese Muslim women have experience a different life trajectory from those in the developed countries. In China, learning Arabic language at mosque becomes an opportunity for Muslim women to continue their education and learning to speak Arabic at mosque also offers them a chance to work as translators for a profitable life and a new destiny [14]. Besides, speaking Arabic helps Chinese Muslim women, especially those from poverty-stricken areas, to gain their social and economic independence and change their destiny of forced marriage and being "a farmer forever", and left a lasting impact on her siblings who also studied in Arabic schools [14].

2.3. Socioeconomic and Demographic Contexts of Minquan

Located in far east of Henan province, central China, Minquan County has a population of 870,000 and the vast majority of these are farmers [15]. As a traditional agricultural region, Minquan has been struggling with its long-term and deep-rooted poverty. The traditionally

produced crops are maize, cotton, peanut and wheat. Due to the impact of frequent droughts, productions are often unstable. An increasing number of young people are leaving Minquan for China's big developed cities in search of better opportunities [16].

Education and literacy levels in Minquan are low in comparison with the rest of China and only two third of teenagers in Minquan continue their studies beyond compulsory junior high school education. In 2018, only around two thirds teenagers continued their study after compulsory education [17].

Another feature of Minquan is its sizable Hui ethnic minority, whose members are Muslim. In Minquan, it is common for local people to exchange greetings in Arabic and for the women to wear colorful hijabs. Five times a day, the streets echo with the Muslim call to prayer chanted slowly and sonorously in Arabic over the audio systems of the local mosques.

3. Theoretical Framework

Drawing on Bourdieu's [18,19] notion of economic metaphors and cultural capital in particular, Norton [1] conceptualizes investment as acquiring "a wider range of symbolic and material resources, which will in turn increase the value of their cultural capital. Learners expect or hope to have a good return on their investment—a return that will give them access to hitherto unattainable resources". Norton expands the return of language learning not only to the material but also symbolic ones by centering on the convertibility of capital theory.

Acknowledging the power of language as capital converting to other forms of capital, Norton also argues that language learners' access to key resources might be facilitated or impeded by their social and gender identities. It is not the language but the learners' identities that would shape the trajectories of their future. Norton's studies on investment have sharpened our understanding of identities. Following her notion of investment, Norton argues that language learners are those having "a complex social history and multiple desires" [1]. Rather than seeing language learners as "having a unitary and coherent identity with specific character traits", Norton considers language learners as "a social being with a complex identity that changes across time and space and is reproduced in social interaction" [20]. This notion is particularly useful for considering Chinese Muslim women learning Arabic language and the process of forming their identities in different social contexts across time and space.

However, Norton's conceptualization of investment also has its limitations with its insufficient attention to the non-English speaking contexts. The previous studies on language investment and identity construction seem to focus on the traditional ways of learning foreign languages in the formal education settings. To the best of our knowledge, there is scarcity in how language learning from below might shape the investment and the trajectories of language learners. This study aims to examine how learning Arabic at mosque might empower Chinese Muslim women from Minquan.

4. Methodology

4.1. A Critical Ethnography

The critical ethnography [21,22] was adopted to explore the multiple levels of interactions between individual, institution and nation. The critical ethnographic approach takes into account the situatedness and the changing human experiences at ideological levels [21]. In exploring web-like trajectories, we will attempt to interpret Chinese Muslim women's language practices and identity transformations against the ideologies underpinning wider discourses of local, national and international processes of socioeconomic change. The critical ethnography also focuses on the tensions and contradictions that participants experience in locally situated practices in relation to historical dimensions and policy agendas [22]. This is highly relevant to our study to address the issues of ideological changes embedded in learning Arabic in the shifting paradigm of world economy and China's regional and global expansion.

4.2. Participants

In China, Chinese Muslim, namely the Hui ethnic group, do not have their own language but speak Chinese. However, in recent years, there is an increasing trend for local people to study Arabic, the holy language of Islam, not only for religious purposes but also for material profit. In this study, we probed the Arabic language learning experiences of three Muslim women from Minquan. All three participants, two of whom are relatives of one of the authors, were born and raised in Muslim families in Minquan. Their mother tongue is Chinese and they all started to study Arabic formally in their teens as indicated in the following table.

Table 1. Description of three Female Muslims from Minquan

Acronym	Age	Arabic proficiency	Other language backgrounds	Educational background
P1	19	Elementary level	Chinese, English	Senior high
P2	32	Advanced in four aspects	Chinese, English	Junior high
P3	38	Advanced in reading and writing, average in listening and speaking	Chinese	Junior high

The three participants are pseudonyms and named as P1, P2 and P3 accordingly. Three of them have learned Arabic at a low-cost mosque for various periods of years. Their years of exposure to learning Arabic have shaped their different life trajectories.

4.3. Data Collection

The ethnographic data were collected periodically from October 2019 to February 2020. The methods include the semi-structured interview, participant observation and online interaction. The semi-structured interviews via

online voice calls range in length from 20 minutes to 85 minutes for each. The rationale of choosing semi-structured interviews is to unfold the narrative and leave exploratory space with participants. [23]. It is an instrumental tool to form a prearranged but open-ended, vigorous questionnaire. When participants were busy with work or study, written questions were sent to them and they answered through recordings or also written materials adjusting to their schedule. These questions centered on how Arabic-learning changed their life trajectories. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, in total over 26,000 words.

Besides the semi-structured interview, participant observation and online interaction are also adopted as triangulation of the data source via WeChat, a popular Chinese messaging application with over one billion active users globally in 2018 [24]. WeChat is not only a platform for daily messaging, but also for business promoting and public emotional ventilation, and thus, another perspective to observe participants and strike interactions. For example, in their WeChat "moments", P2 tends to share her insights on current social events and P3 prefers to express her personal feelings. Screenshotted and analyzed, the WeChat "moments" provided a way to verify recurring narratives coinciding with the precious interviews.

4.4. Data Analysis

In line with ethnography, we conducted inductive analysis to discover emerging "patterns, themes and categories" [25] by adopting content analysis [26,27,28,29]. Content analysis has been adopted for the data analysis, as "it is a widely used research method in social work and in allied disciplines and professions." [30]. Content analysis provides an opening, in a methodical way, in drawing meanings and identifying patterns from materials and creates potential for future exploring. Generally speaking, as Holsti put it, content analysis is "any technique for making inference by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of message." [31]. Throughout qualitative semi-structured interviews and the additional data sources, the common themes emerge as "meanings of learning Arabic in local contexts", "potentials in speaking Arabic in Sino-Middle East contexts" and "tensions and contradictions in speaking Arabic". Informed by both the data and the relevant literature, relationships between these themes were established. Below in section 5 we will discuss three themes in relation to each other.

4.4. Limitations of the Study

This study is a qualitative research with ethnographic approach as research orientation. The ethnographic study is limited to three multilingual Muslim women born in Minquan county. The number of participants is not capable of generating a holistic description of the Arabic learning experiences in China or beyond. However, this study is situated in the current contexts of China's incorporating into the world system while the increasing impact of learning Arabic is shaping the trajectories of Chinese people of diverse backgrounds. It is hoped that a

longitudinal study may be conducted in future for in-depth analysis of how learning Arabic might constitute the power of Muslim women from poverty-stricken area and how their Arabic learning trajectories might reveal a new approach in foreign language pedagogy.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Arabic as a Way out for Minquan's Muslim Women

The reasons for learning Arabic language were initially due to their limited opportunities. The youngest participant, P1 is a 19-year-old high-school graduate, who has studied Arabic in a mosque since 2018. After failing the Gaokao, she followed an imam's recommendation to learn Arabic in order to maintain her education and with an eye to a profitable future through Arabic as experienced by P2 and P3.

By the time of conducting this study, P2 has become an entrepreneur, who now runs her own translation and interpreting company in Yiwu, the world largest wholesale market. Despite her excellent academic performance in junior high school and her desire to continue her studies, she was denied the opportunity of receiving a high school education because of her family's poverty. The traditionally low expectations on Muslim women in her community also played a role. While she did not have the courage at age 15 to oppose her parents when it came to high school, she found a way to convince them to let her study Arabic in the mosque:

Others kept telling me, suggesting that I should tell my parents (I want to study), but I didn't have such courage. My older sister also meant to study, but my dad and mom refused and she could not. I just didn't have the courage. Later Arabic interested me more and more, I had to be brave enough to tell them. (Interview with P2)

Perhaps it was P2's talent in memorizing Arabic verses that contributed to her success; or the fact that her older sister could share the family's financial burden so that P2 could have the chance of further study for a couple of years. Either way, while seeking her spiritual asylum in the holy language of Islam, P2 could continue to study and build her dream for the future.

Her excellent performance together with her deep faith next launched her to another opportunity to continue her Islamic and Arabic studies in Xi'an, one of China's largest cities and the capital of Shaanxi Province. At that stage, she won a scholarship to go to Egypt for further Arabic study. There, she met her husband and when both of them returned to China, they settled in Yiwu, where they first took up Arabic translation and interpreting jobs and eventually opened their translation company in 2012.

P3 also works as an Arabic-Chinese translator and interpreter in Yiwu. Like P2, she was denied a senior high school education after graduating from junior high school in 1998. She was sent to learn Arabic at a local mosque-based school instead. At the time, she did not expect any material rewards from learning Arabic at all. She simply followed the local expectation of being a good

Muslim woman in the hope that she might assist her future husband and educate their child in the faith. Upon graduation, she got married but almost immediately found herself engulfed in constant domestic violence. Over many years, P3's life was torn to pieces as her only financial support was her tormenting husband. She finally managed to regain her freedom through a painful divorce. In 2014, with the help of friends doing business in Yiwu, she revived her Arabic language skills and migrated to Yiwu to work as translator there.

5.2. Self-transformation through Arabic

Confronting their disadvantages in age, gender and poverty, these three women turned to Arabic as a way out. All three women started to learn Arabic as a low-cost study option when they failed to progress in the Chinese public educational system. Their parents believed that learning Arabic would increase their daughter's marriage prospects by making them good assistants to their future husbands serving the faith. The value of speaking Arabic as a profitable commodity in the new contexts of China's global expansion was not obvious to my participants until they embarked on their journey and seriously invested in learning Arabic. Nevertheless, their Arabic skills have shaped a brand new life vision for them.

Their years of investment into Arabic have transformed their identities from poor subjugated Muslim women into independent and enterprising individuals. Despite failing to gain admission to a Chinese university, P1, for instance, now even considers PhD study within her reach:

Some (textbooks) are from Peking University, and some are written in Arabic, imported from abroad. Many teachers graduated from abroad, some with PhD degree. (Interview with P1)

When asked what she wanted to do with her life, P1 readily talked about several options, such as taking up a translation job in China's booming export industry or going abroad for higher education, just like her teachers.

P2 has experienced the transformational career that P1 anticipates. Learning Arabic has expanded her life trajectory from a poor village girl first to the bid city of Xi'an and from there to Egypt. The level of Arabic language proficiency she gained there, enabled her to work as an interpreter and translator in Yiwu, and later established her own business there.

Business opportunities related to Arabic are plentiful, as she explained:

There are foreign businessmen from 102 countries coming to Yiwu to purchase commodities. 40 or 50 countries out of 102, about 50% of foreigners use Arabic for communication...the majority of my foreign customers are above 40 years old. You know, people above 40 are not aware of the necessity of speaking English. (Interview with P2)

Although P3's career has been less stellar, Arabic has transformed her, too, into an economically and spiritually independent woman supporting herself and her family. In January 2020, her family (her parents and her disabled son) was able to move into a newly built two-story house.

5.3. Tensions and Contradictions of Arabic

Despite their empowerment, Arabic is not a panacea and all three women face tensions and contradictions embedded in the wider process of structural constraints that are beyond their control.

Reflecting on the profits Arabic has brought to her, P2, for instance strongly feels the tension between its material and spiritual rewards. While she is grateful for the material rewards that learning Arabic has brought her, she also finds herself in a constant state of dilemma between her entrepreneurial identity as a successful businesswoman and her sense of guilt at not having enough time for prayer and reading Quran, or for mothering her school-aged daughter.

The gendered market also impacts their opportunities to invest in their future, as Arabic language practices are more gendered than those of many other languages. P3 explained that women can only go so far with Arabic. While they might be able to secure a translation job in Yiwu or elsewhere in China, their opportunities to work abroad or even travel for business are heavily constrained, particularly when it comes to major Arabic-speaking trading partners like Saudi Arabia and Iraq.

P3's reflections on working abroad must be understood against the emerging oversupply of Arabic speakers in China as Chinese universities have begun to actively promote non-English foreign languages. As a middle-aged woman without a degree, Arabic proficiency alone is no longer enough to make her feel confident of her future.

6. Conclusion: Speaking Arabic as a Third Space

Arabic has become a significant foreign language for China's relationship with the Middle East. However, for the women in my study, it is much more than that. Arabic also functions as a way out, as a reachable escape route for Muslim women who have been trapped in the cage of poverty and religion. Reciting Arabic as a child, reading the Koran as a teenager, and eventually translating for Sino-Middle East trade as adults, Chinese Muslim women from less-developed areas turn Arabic into a third space to continue their education, to obtain career success, and to achieve emancipation in their daily lives. In Minquan, this impoverished corner of the world, Arabic provides both a spiritual asylum and financial independence. It frees and awakens Muslim women tormented by misogyny and poverty.

After quoting to me the Hadith "all men are brothers", Ma Zhenyi added what has been missing from there: "and women are sisters."

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