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ON CHINESE HUI-MUSLIM ELEMENTARY VOCABULARY (3): FUNERAL TERMINOLOGY [II]¹

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Abstract

Following on from a previous contribution in this journal, the article gives three additional examples of lexis in the field of funeral terminology among Chinese Muslims (here from those collected from Chinese Muslims in the Malay Archipelago) as well as various considerations regarding the socio-linguistic environment.

I.

A few years ago, the author of the following article, together with Ms Sūn Mèngyáo, discussed the funeral terminology of the Hui Muslims of Eastern China in this journal, a discussion that was part of a series of articles “On Chinese Hui-Muslim elementary vocabulary”. This short text is a continuation of that discussion (Sūn and Knüppel 2021) and expands on certain aspects from an article by the authors in the “Mitteilungsblatt der Deutschen China-Gesellschaft” (Sūn and Knüppel 2020). 18 terms from the field of burial traditions were presented, in addition to some general observations on direct borrowings from Arabic (indirect borrowings could not be ascertained in this admittedly specialist field). In this brief article, additional remarks will be made on several of these terms, based on data collected during recent field research among the Chinese Muslims in the Malaysian capital.

¹ This paper results from fieldwork in the context of socio-linguistic research on the Chinese Muslim community in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia (in summer 2022).

It should be noted in advance that the Chinese Muslims of Southeast Asia can be roughly divided into two groups:

1. the descendants of Chinese Muslim immigrants – mostly Hui Muslims – who have migrated to these regions from various provinces of the “Middle Kingdom” since the late Yuán period, and
2. converts and descendants of individuals who converted to Islam only in the recent past in the immigration areas of Southeast Asia (i.e. Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, etc.).

What is striking is that there is a definite difference between the situation of the Chinese Muslims – whether converts or descendants of Muslim immigrants – in this region and that of their co-religionists in China itself. While Sino-Muslims in the “Middle Kingdom” are a minority (albeit a minority of more than 10 million individuals) within the non-Muslim population, in the analyzed region of Southeast Asia they are a minority within a minority (namely the Chinese), but share their religion with the majority population. The sometimes different relationship with the rest of the Chinese population, on the one hand, and the Muslim, mostly Malay population on the other, has led to some groups (such as the Chinese Muslims of Jakarta) almost completely abandoning their language, while others in a less Islam-influenced environment (such as in Sarawak, Malaysia, where Muslims make up only about 30% of the population, or in Singapore) have predominantly retained their language.

It is necessary to distinguish the level of Islamic religious terminology from the higher level of the language situation in general. While Chinese Muslim terminology is widely known and used among the Hui Muslims of China, it has been lost to a considerable extent in the communities of Southeast Asia. In the latter instance, either the specific Arabic terms as used among the non-Chinese majority populations – i.e. often in their Malay or English form – have replaced the Chinese-Muslim forms, or the latter were never known (especially among the converts). If the Chinese equivalents are still familiar, the circle of individuals who are familiar with them is limited to the few people who have undertaken a profound religious education and/or maintain very close contact with the Muslim communities in China themselves.

II.

To supplement the vocabulary from the above-mentioned article from 2021, the additions are listed below:

1. 停屍房 [*tíng shī fāng*] – room for preparation of the corpse (literally ‘room where the body remains’), corresponds to 殡仪厅 [*bìn yí tīng*], ‘house for washing, shrouding and preparing the corpse before burial’ (~ Arabic محسلة للموتى *maḥsala lilmawtā*) that was listed in the previous article (Sün and Knüppel 2021: 25); while wealthier Hui Muslim communities in China have their own buildings (Sün and

- Knüppel 2020: 29), the smaller Chinese Muslim communities in Malaysia do not and have to use rooms that may be attached to mosques;
2. 韋歸貞者大淨 [wéi guī zhēn zhě dà jìng] – ‘washing of the corpse’, this corresponds to the 淨禮 [jìng lǐ] ‘[the ritual of] washing the corpse’ (~ Arabic تغسيل الميت *taḡsīl almayit*, غسل الميت *ʿasl almayit*) that was listed in the previous article (Sün and Knüppel 2021: 26); the Malay equivalent is (according to Chinese Muslim informants) *mandi hadas besar*; while 淨禮 actually denotes cleansing, we have a more descriptive term in the form of 韋歸貞者大淨;
 3. 棺 [guān] – place in the prayer hall of the mosque where the body is placed during the prayer for the dead (actually ‘coffin’); the Malay equivalent (according to Chinese Muslim informants) is *keranda* (also ‘coffin’²), whereby the deceased, prepared for burial, is not kept in a coffin but merely wrapped in shrouds. This latter term seems to have been coined following the Malay term in the absence of a suitable equivalent. Among the Chinese Muslims of Kuala Lumpur, the ritual is performed inside the mosque (in this case, the prayer hall), whereas among the Hui Muslims (at least those of the communities visited by the author in the eastern Chinese province of Shāndōng) it is performed in front of the mosque.

As the three examples show, in the case of the Chinese Muslims of Southeast Asia, we are not simply facing a decline in the knowledge of Chinese Muslim terminology, but also the terms attested a) reflect certain cultural peculiarities, and b) have been coined due to the existing particularities (for example, as adaptations to the environment). However, the absence of certain terms also reflects the situation of the communities, as example 1 demonstrates. Further terms that are missing include the transparent cooling containers/coffins for keeping the corpses before transporting them to the cemetery (~ Arabic غرفة حفظ الموتى *ḡurfat ḥafẓ almawtā*) (Sün and Knüppel 2021: 26) or stretchers for the transport of the corpse from the house of the deceased’s family to the cemetery (~ Arabic نعش *naʿš*, a terminus that can indicate both a stretcher and also a coffin) (Sün and Knüppel 2021: 26).

Although the three examples given here offer only a small sample from the problematic area addressed, it is already evident which factors play a role in the use/non-use of certain religious terms among Chinese Muslims outside China and how these are reflected.

References

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² Wilkinson (1901: 515): “کَرَنْدَ kērandā [Skr. *karanda*.] A native coffin [...]”.