

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Forgotten leaders: Chinese Hui Muslim merchants in the Yangzi River region, 1880s–1940s

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Abstract

Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a commercial network of Chinese Hui Muslims emerged in China's mid and lower Yangzi River region. Through this commercial network, Muslim merchants achieved economic success and positioned themselves as Muslim community leaders and leading reformers of Chinese society. Past scholarship on Chinese Hui Muslims has focused on intellectuals or warlords and missed this important group of Muslim leaders – a group that, with the rising prominence and influence of entrepreneurs in the early twentieth century, had growing political clout. Chen Jingyu, a Muslim merchant from Nanjing, symbolized the culmination of the Muslim commercial network. Indeed, Chen's economic achievements were the direct result of the coordinated effort of Muslim merchants. With sufficient financial backing, Chen then invested in charitable activities and gained unprecedented influence in Muslim communities and Chinese society at large.

Key words: Charity; Chinese Hui Muslim merchants; Hankou; Nanjing; Republican China

Introduction

In recent years, the study of Chinese Hui Muslims or Hui people has transformed from a neglected problem to a flourishing field.¹ Existing scholarship has significantly expanded our understanding of Chinese Hui Muslims and, particularly, Muslim intellectuals' and warlords' complex roles in China's transition from empire to nation-state between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Muslim warlords, through their adroit participation in the late Qing and Republican national politics, managed to keep Muslim autonomy in northwestern China.² Muslim intellectuals, on the other hand, actively engaged with Chinese nationalist rhetoric and strongly argued that the Muslim religious awakening would inform the Chinese national awakening, so that Chinese Hui Muslims had an important role to play in modern China's domestic and foreign affairs.³ Meanwhile, Chinese Hui Muslim intellectuals had close ties with warlords. Intellectuals and warlords worked together in many modernizing projects to advance their agendas.⁴

In comparison, sufficient scholarship had not been done into the role of Muslim merchants in that same transitional period. Perhaps it is because Muslim merchants' activities were less dramatic, as they

¹This paper focuses on those Muslims who traditionally live in the Han Chinese cultural areas and call themselves “Chinese Hui Muslims” or “Hui.” However, from the late Qing to the Republican period, “Hui” was also a generic term referring to all Muslims in China. Meanwhile, in this paper, I avoid the term “*Huizu*,” as it has been subsumed in the officially designated ethnic category since 1949.

²Bulag 2002; Lipman 1984; Lipman 1997, pp. 29–62.

³Ben-Dor Benite 2004; Cieciora 2016; Mao 2011a; Matsumoto 2016; Sager 2021.

⁴Chen 2022.

did not command large armies, propose innovative theories, and intimately cooperate with intellectuals or warlords. Nevertheless, Muslim merchants were not less effective in shaping Muslim communities and modern Chinese society. Notably, between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Muslim merchants from the lower Yangzi region, especially Nanjing, created a new commercial network in south China. Through this commercial network, these Muslim merchants gained economic power and then successfully positioned themselves in a space where they were leading reformers of Chinese society and leaders of Muslim communities at the same time.

Similarly, during the Qing period, a Muslim educational network in the lower Yangzi region produced a group of Muslim scholars, such as Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi.⁵ They, through composing the *Han Kitab* – a corpus of Islamic texts in Chinese, created a space that overlapped Chinese culture and Islamic tradition and negotiated a Chinese elite (literati) identity for themselves.⁶ However, as Ben-Dor Benite points out, when those Muslim scholars claimed that their Islamic scholarship made them “as an elite as literati,” other Han literati did not necessarily see them in the same way.⁷ In comparison, unlike their predecessors, the elite status of these Muslim merchants in the twentieth-century lower Yangzi region did not exist only in an imagined space – rather, it was fully recognized in Chinese society.

If in the Qing period, Muslim scholars played a leading role in maintaining Islamic traditions for Muslim communities in the lower Yangzi region through scholarly production, Muslim merchants had taken over that leading role and achieved even more in the twentieth century. Therefore, if scholars of Chinese Hui Muslims today continue to ignore merchants, we will only overestimate the roles of Muslim intellectuals and warlords in twentieth-century China, when the influence of those two groups of Muslims had strong geographical and professional boundaries. This paper fills this gap in the literature by focusing on Muslim merchants in China’s transition from empire to nation-state.

The focus on Muslim merchants also brings a new perspective to the study of urban elite activism in modern China. China scholars’ examination of urban elite activism once led to an intense debate about whether Habermas’s bourgeois public sphere existed in China.⁸ This debate has subsided since the 1990s. However, the study of urban elite activism should not. The expansion and institutionalization of the Chinese elite’s influence during the late Qing and Republican periods is hard to deny. Therefore, in recent years, scholars have tended to study Chinese elite activities within the specific historical conditions of modern China, and moved away from concerns over the applicability of Habermas’s theory.⁹ Building on the previous scholarship, this paper calls attention to ethnic-religious identity – another historical condition of modern China – in studying urban elite activism. We cannot fully understand Chinese Hui Muslim merchants and their actions in modern China without an understanding of their Hui, or Muslim, identity.

Chen Jingyu was the epitome of a Nanjing Muslim merchant in twentieth-century China. From a humble Muslim textile family in Nanjing, Chen ascended the commercial and industrial world of the Yangzi region with the help of fellow Muslims. By 1938, Chen even planned to upgrade his manual soap factory with German-imported machines, which would have made it one of China’s best-equipped soap factories of the time.¹⁰ The study of Chen Jingyu, who rose from a humble background to become an influential entrepreneur thanks to a previously little-studied Muslim commercial network, echoes a recent trend in the research of Chinese industrialism: the reexamination of the influence of seemingly unconventional and unusual elements, like peasants and handicraft, in China’s modern industrialization.¹¹

⁵Wu Yiye 1999, pp. 128–37.

⁶Ben-Dor Benite 2005, pp. 5–17.

⁷Ibid., p. 7.

⁸Huang 1993; Rankin 1986; Rowe 1984; Wakeman 1993.

⁹For example, Lean 2007; Xu 2001.

¹⁰Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 101.

¹¹For example, Eyferth 2009; Lean 2020.

Chen Jingyu's success resembles the achievements of Chen Diexian, who Eugenia Lean has called a vernacular industrialist. The vernacular industrialists took an informal, local, and native approach to industrialization. They built up China's light industry in the twentieth century with little resources or state support.¹² Of course, Chen Jingyu differed from Chen Diexian in several ways. While Chen Diexian's entrepreneurial success was dependent on his literary skills, including translating and editing,¹³ Chen Jingyu's success was dependent on a Muslim commercial network in the Yangzi region. Therefore, the case of Chen Jingyu can extend the concept of vernacular industrialism by incorporating ethnic-religious factors into the study of industrialization.

Meanwhile, Chen Jingyu's influence transcended the realm of commerce and industry. After attaining a certain level of financial resources, Chen began rebuilding mosques and funding charities. Muslims were not the only ones who benefited from Chen's social activities. In 1933, the Hankou General Chamber of Commerce elected Chen as its president in recognition of his commitment to local modernizing projects and the public interest. After 1949, Chen even became the deputy governor of Hubei province. The case of Chen Jingyu reveals how, with the support of the Muslim commercial network, Muslim merchants played a leading role in both Muslim communities and the local Chinese society at large.

The marginalized Chinese Hui Muslims in Nanjing

Chen Jingyu was from Nanjing, which was a metropolis of the lower Yangzi region or Jiangnan – China's economic center since at least the Southern Song period (1127–1279).¹⁴ Commercial opportunities, along with other political and social factors, drew Muslims to the Jiangnan region. According to folk tales, a mosque had been erected in Nanjing as early as the Song Dynasty (960–1279).¹⁵ In the Yuan Dynasty, Muslims were often allies of the Mongols. Therefore, more Muslims moved into Nanjing, as the Mongols conquered south China.¹⁶ By the early Ming, there was a sizable Muslim community living in Nanjing, and the estimations of its population ranged from 10,000 to 100,000.¹⁷

Some scholars have argued that the early Ming court's policies toward Nanjing Muslims were relatively benign. Indeed, compared to Muslims in northwestern and southwestern China, who were constantly in conflict with the court, the situation of Nanjing Muslims was better.¹⁸ Yet Nanjing Muslims still suffered from some of the discriminatory policies of the Ming court. The early Ming court's ban on intermarriage among Muslims designed to compel integration, as well as foreign hairstyles, names, and clothes, also applied to Nanjing Muslims.¹⁹ The court even forced many Nanjing Muslims to relocate to northwestern and southwestern China.²⁰ Nanjing was the capital of the early Ming. The relocation of Muslims there attested to the court's suspicion of them. During the Qing dynasty, Muslims' legal situation did not improve much, and they often had to face discrimination from local officials.²¹ As a result, Muslims in Jiangnan generally lived on the edge of society.

Against this backdrop, Chen Jingyu was born into a humble "textile household" of the Nanjing Muslim community in 1880. Jiangnan had a highly prosperous textile industry. There were some large-scale handicraft factories, but most of the textile products in Jiangnan were still made by small domestic workshops. Many Muslim households ran such workshops for their living, but they mostly did marginal work in the industry. Chen Jingyu's family was one of them. They collected

¹²Lean 2020, pp. 2–8.

¹³Ibid., pp. 201–03.

¹⁴McDermott and Yoshinobu 2015.

¹⁵Mi Shoujiang 1996, p. 32.

¹⁶Wu Yiye 1999, pp. 78–79.

¹⁷Ben-Dor Benite 2005, p. 22.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 23–24; Rossabi 1979, pp. 179–94.

¹⁹Wu Yiye 1999, pp. 96–97.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 39–40.

²¹Lipman 2006.

raw silk from the government's textiles bureau to weave satin and then only earned meager processing fees.²² To make matters worse, when Chen Jingyu was born, the traditional textile industry in the lower Yangzi region was facing new challenges. The small domestic workshops had to compete with Western modern textile factories, whose products began to flood into China after the Opium War (1840–1842).²³

Chen Jingyu's family was struggling under new circumstances. Chen's parents had four sons, and Chen was the youngest.²⁴ Chen's brothers all had to work in the family business when they were still young.²⁵ Nevertheless, their lives were difficult. Even so, Chen's mother was determined that she would not allow all of her sons to grow up uneducated. Therefore, she sent Chen Jingyu to receive an education in a traditional home school in the neighborhood when he was eight years old (late 1880s), despite the heavy burden on the family and his father's strong disapproval. In the traditional home school, Confucian classics, such as *Sanzijing*, *Baijiaxing*, *Daxue*, were the main learning materials.²⁶

Chen Jingyu did not receive any formal Islamic education. Nevertheless, Chen was not ignorant of Islam. Living in a city with a rich Islamic cultural legacy, Chen Jingyu could expose himself to Islamic knowledge through many informal ways. For example, when Chen was young, his father often took him to the mosque.²⁷ We do not know what Chen and his father did in the mosque. However, the experience of Chen Jingyu's fellow Muslim, childhood friend, classmate, and long-term business partner, Yang Shuping, might give us some clues.²⁸

Yang once recalled he picked up some Islamic knowledge from an imam when he was young.²⁹ Yang Shuping did not specify where and how he learned from the imam. Considering that Yang Shuping and Chen Jingyu's shared a similar humble background, it was highly likely that Chen would also learn from the imam informally, perhaps during a religious celebration. Despite all this, the religious knowledge that Chen Jingyu and Yang Shuping picked up when they were young had a long-term effect. Years later, they still came back to that knowledge to justify their charitable activities and to support their fellow Muslims who continued to live on the margins of society, as explained below.

From the periphery to the center: a new adventure in Hankou

Chen Jingyu's formal education ended in the late 1890s. By that time, he had become good at writing and calculation and soon find a job in a Muslim money house in Nanjing. The elder Chen was thrilled because he finally had a son who could make money for the family through means other than the miserable and marginalized textile industry. In the Muslim money house, Chen Jingyu became acquainted with the business quickly, as the house was small in scale. Indeed, the house only exchanged money for nearby shops and residents and survived by earning the meager intermediate price difference. But Chen Jingyu was not satisfied with just surviving. Through his market survey, Chen found out that the loan and deposit business was much more profitable. Yet the money house that he worked for dared not engage in that relatively risky business.³⁰

Nanjing Muslim merchants had long lived on the edge of the society, just like other Muslims. They might have only made conservative economic investments, because their ability to withstand risk was poor. But Chen probably did not fully understand those merchants' situation at the time. He felt

²²Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 99; Nanjing shi difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 2009, pp. 40–41.

²³Zheng Mianzhi 1989, p. 2.

²⁴According to a survey conducted by the Nanjing Islamic Association in 1985, Chen Jingyu was the youngest among his brothers. However, according to Zheng Mianzhi, Chen was the third one. Since the survey of the Nanjing Islamic Association contains more details and lists all the names of Chen's brothers, this paper adopts the description of the Nanjing Islamic Association. See, Nanjing Islamic Association 1985, pp. 1–2; Nanjing Islamic Association 2009; Zheng Mianzhi 1989, p. 2.

²⁵Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 99.

²⁶Zheng Mianzhi 1989, pp. 4–5.

²⁷Ibid., p. 19.

²⁸For the relationship between Chen Jingyu and Yang Shuping, see Unknown 1985.

²⁹Yang Shuping 1934, p. 9.

³⁰Zheng Mianzhi 1989, pp. 4–5.

terribly caged in the money house and blamed that on the house owner's lack of vision. It was said Chen once prayed: "God, when can I break out of this cage?"³¹

An opportunity soon arrived through the Muslim commercial network that emerged in the mid and lower Yangzi region in the late nineteenth century. One day, Chen Jingyu went to visit his parents and ran into his cousin, Jin Runsheng, who was doing business in Hankou. Hankou was one of the three towns that constitute modern-day Wuhan city. (The other two were Wuchang and Hanyang.) Hankou had long been a commercial center of central China.³² In the second half of the nineteenth century, Hankou developed into one of the largest urban places in the world, as it became a treaty port, enhancing its status as the hub of domestic and foreign trade for central China.³³

Thus, starting from the late nineteenth century, attracted by its vibrant economy, many Muslim merchants in Nanjing went up the Yangzi River to set up business in Hankou. They even had a nickname: the Hankou gang.³⁴ Jin Runsheng was one member of the "gang." Upon learning of Chen's gloomy working environment, Cousin Jin invited Chen to work for him in a grocery store he cofounded with some other Muslim merchants in Hankou.³⁵

Compared to Hankou, the city of Nanjing at the time was as much a "cage" as the money house for Chen Jingyu, because the Taiping Rebellion (1851–1864) had devastated it. The Taiping rebels used Nanjing as their capital. When the Qing retook Nanjing in mid-1864, the city was in ruins: "[Within the city] you could walk over a mile without seeing a single house or person."³⁶ Even by 1927, Nanjing had not yet recovered from the mayhem caused by the Taiping Rebellion. Indeed, the Guomindang (GMD) or Nationalists found Nanjing an appealing location to construct a national capital, because they could take advantage of the city's abundant empty space to build modern facilities and infrastructure.³⁷ In a word, Nanjing in the late nineteenth century had little to offer to ambitious young men like Chen Jingyu. Therefore, Chen accepted Cousin Jin's invitation and began a new adventure in Hankou in 1900.³⁸ In this way, Chen first connected with the growing Muslim commercial network along the Yangzi River.

In Hankou, Chen Jingyu's enthusiasm for work quickly drew the attention of Ma Dichen, another fellow Muslim merchant and the principal shareholder of Cousin Jin's store. A few years later, Ma restructured Jin's store and named Chen Jingyu its manager. Chen was only 25 years old at the time.³⁹ To develop his new Yishuncheng grocery store, Chen Jingyu decided to bring in more Western commodities. At the time, those commodities were still rare in Hankou, but they were abundant in Shanghai.⁴⁰ Chen Jingyu could purchase Western commodities from Shanghai through middle persons, but instead, he chose to send his friend Yang Shuping to set up a purchasing department in Shanghai in 1907. In this way, Yishuncheng did not need to share profit with a third party and, moreover, it could quickly buy any products that were popular in Hankou.⁴¹

Yang Shuping was the best candidate to run Yishuncheng's purchasing department in Shanghai. He joined Chen in Hankou when Chen became the manager of Yishuncheng.⁴² As Chen Jingyu's childhood friend, he had the trust of Chen. Above all, as a Nanjing Muslim, Yang could tap into the Nanjing Muslim commercial network in Shanghai. As mentioned above, starting from the late nineteenth century, many Nanjing Muslim merchants went up the Yangzi River to seek business

³¹Ibid., pp. 5–6.

³²MacKinnon 2000, p. 162.

³³MacKinnon 2000, p. 162; Rowe 1984, p. 1.

³⁴Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 99.

³⁵Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 99; Zheng Mianzhi 1989, p. 6.

³⁶Mao Xianglin, Mo yu lu, pp. 17–19, quoted from Wooldridge 2015, p. 123.

³⁷Musgrove 2000, p. 140.

³⁸Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 99.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Zheng Mianzhi 1989, pp. 10–11.

⁴¹Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 105.

⁴²Unknown 1985, pp. 1–2.

opportunities. At the same time, many also went down the Yangzi River to Shanghai. Some of the Nanjing Muslim merchants were already well-established in Shanghai by the early twentieth century. Ma Yitang (1869–1930) was such a representative figure.⁴³

Ma Yitang mainly engaged in the business of silk and folding fans in Shanghai. In 1907, when Yang Shuping went to Shanghai, Ma Yitang, together with his peers in the business community, had established the Association of Sojourning Merchants in Shanghai, the largest organization of its kind at the time, and served as the president.⁴⁴ Ma Yitang proved to be of tremendous help to Yang Shuping. He first assisted Yang in settling down in Shanghai. Then, his Association of Sojourning Merchants in Shanghai was the place where Yang learned about the market and negotiated deals. As a result, the Yishuncheng store always had all sorts of Western products on its shelves: from undershirts, bedding, candles, soaps, perfumes, and lipsticks, to fashionable woolen clothes. All those stylish goods attracted waves of customers to Yishuncheng. Thus, Chen Jingyu's business was booming.⁴⁵

On October 10, 1911, the 1911 Revolution, which eventually led to the end of the Qing dynasty, broke out in Wuhan, opening a new era for China. The fights between the revolutionaries and the Qing forces ruined much of the city.⁴⁶ The building of the Yishuncheng store was destroyed as well. However, Chen Jingyu soon recovered from the loss. Yishuncheng's purchasing department in Shanghai remained intact during the 1911 Revolution. It kept shipping products up the Yangzi River for Yishuncheng. All of these goods were eagerly sought by consumers after the situation calmed down in Wuhan.⁴⁷

Before long, Chen Jingyu constructed a new three-story building for his store and upgraded it to the Yishuncheng Department Store. Wuhan's upper-class men and women now frequently patronized the new department store. To further broaden his business, Chen Jingyu established a wholesale department in a mosque in Wuhan, whose customers presumably included many Muslim grocery stores. Thanks to the Shanghai purchasing department's ability to continuously provide it with sufficient and low-priced goods, the wholesale department soon began to make handsome profits.⁴⁸

Therefore, Chen Jingyu's business soon revived from the ashes of the 1911 Revolution and became even more prosperous. Chen's personal vision and talent were critical factors for the success. However, considering that most of Chen's business partners were Chinese Hui Muslims and Chen's purchasing department in Shanghai heavily relied on other Muslim merchants, a commercial network of Chinese Hui Muslims was directly responsible for Chen's success in the retail and wholesale business, as well.

The success in the sales business did not stop Chen Jingyu from seeking new opportunities. In 1914, WWI broke out and disrupted the economy of Western countries. And because of the war, foreign products became less available in China. For example, British soaps are usually sold very well in Yishuncheng. But they were hard to come by after 1914, and Yishuncheng had to replace them with domestic soaps of lesser quality. Thus, the sale of domestic soaps picked up. Around this time, Chen Jingyu was hatching a plan to invest in the soap manufacturing industry.⁴⁹

If Chen Jingyu had based his decision on purely commercial terms, he did not have to enter the soap manufacturing industry, because the domestic soaps of lesser quality still sold well in Yishuncheng. However, starting from the late nineteenth century, especially after Qing's defeat in the First Sino-Japanese War (1894–1895), the idea of saving the country through industries arose among Chinese elites of all kinds. Zhang Jian, China's early reformer, argued that industry was the basis of the power of Western countries and Japan. Therefore, only by developing industry could China overcome poverty and weakness. Sun Yat-sen, China's revolutionary leader, also placed heavy emphasis on developing industries. Moreover, both Zhang Jian and Sun Yat-sen placed industry

⁴³Wu Dehou 2008, p. 572.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Zheng Mianzhi 1989, p. 12.

⁴⁶Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 100.

⁴⁷Zheng Mianzhi 1989, p. 13.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 14.

⁴⁹Ibid.

ahead of commerce. From their perspectives, industries were the foundation of commercial wealth.⁵⁰ Under these circumstances, engaging with modern industries became a means of retaining elite status, since entrepreneurs were the people who were saving the nation.

Most likely, the idea of saving the country through industries influenced Chen Jingyu's decision-making process. Chen was sympathetic with the cause of national salvation. On one occasion, Chen voluntarily stopped selling foreign goods altogether in his store in support of domestic products, even though a department store across the street made huge profits by continuing to sell foreign products.⁵¹ Although this event happened much later, it still revealed that Chen was an individual who would take the national interest into consideration when making decisions. Not to mention that according to the idea of saving the country through industries, investing in the soap industry would create a win-win situation for both Chen and the Chinese state. Chen had been successful in the sales business, but by engaging in the soap industry, he could build his commercial empire on a more solid foundation, raise his social status, and benefit the cause of national salvation at the same time.

Meanwhile, the Muslim commercial network again affected Chen Jingyu's decision-making process on a practical level. Yu Shuzhan, a Nanjing Muslim and colleague of Chen in Yishuncheng, had experience in making soaps with indigenous methods.⁵² Chen Jingyu obviously wanted to rely on his fellow Muslim's experience, as Yu became deputy manager of Chen's soap factory later. Thus, under the combined effects of WWI, the idea of saving the country through industries, and the Muslim commercial network, Chen Jingyu decided to set up a factory. Chen then convinced shareholders of Yishuncheng (most of whom were Muslims) to agree with him and withdrew tens of thousands of taels of silver from the store to establish the Hanchang Candle & Soap Factory.⁵³

With the support of Yishuncheng's funding and fellow Muslim personnel, preparations for the Hanchang Candle & Soap Factory went smoothly. By 1916, the Hanchang factory was in operation. However, the new factory's soaps had problems with quality control and packaging, resulting in poor sales.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Chen Jingyu was not dejected. In order to increase sales, Chen organized a sales team of about 20 people. They sold soaps on the streets from morning till night, with Chen Jingyu emphasizing quality control.⁵⁵ At that time, like the vernacular industrialist Chen Diexian, Chen Jingyu's product quality refinement probably involved regular "tinkering" with production processes and materials, because he could not turn to outside support.⁵⁶ Yet, the Hanchang factory still struggled to be profitable.

The main reason was that, by 1916, the soap market in Wuhan had become highly competitive. After 1914 and before 1916, merchants in Wuhan established at least four new soap factories, like the Taipingyang Soap Factory and Xiangtai Soap Factory.⁵⁷ The Taipingyang factory's owner used to work in a Japanese factory that made premium soaps in Wuhan. As a result, he was more experienced in making high-quality soaps.⁵⁸ The Xiangtai factory was also particular about product quality. Meanwhile, Xiangtai tapped into China's nationalist sentiment to market itself, as the factory used the term *jingzhong* or alarm bell to brand its soaps.⁵⁹ Products of Taipingyang and Xiangtai were both quite popular. Despite hard work, Hanchang only occupied a small market share in Wuhan.⁶⁰

⁵⁰Ma Min 2012, pp. 91–93.

⁵¹Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 103.

⁵²Ibid., p. 101.

⁵³Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 101; Zheng Mianzhi 1989, p. 15.

⁵⁴Zheng Mianzhi 1989, pp. 15–16.

⁵⁵Liu Rui 1995, pp. 80–81.

⁵⁶Lean 2020, pp. 16–32.

⁵⁷Hubei sheng difangzhi bianzuan weiyuanhui 1994, p. 287.

⁵⁸Xue Ziren 1982, pp. 133–38.

⁵⁹Cao Meicheng 1986, p. 26.

⁶⁰Zheng Mianzhi 1989, p. 16.

Chen Jingyu realized that Wuhan's market was too crowded. To survive, he had to sell Hanchang's soaps in other regions. Chen utilized two "networks" in his business expansion. The first was Hankou's convenient water transportation network, which provided a low-cost shipment option for Hanchang's soaps. The second network – a Muslim commercial network – played a more decisive role in Chen's business expansion. Whenever Hanchang's salespersons arrived in a new place, they first looked for retail stores run by Muslims. Such stores were not difficult to find because many Muslims relied on doing business to provide for themselves. These Muslim retail stores were quite willing to do business with Hanchang, for Hanchang was run by Muslims, and its soaps did not use lard. In this way, Hanchang's soaps found inroads into the markets of adjacent provinces, and the factory began to gain a strong foothold in China's soap industry.⁶¹

After the end of WWI in 1918, foreign soaps returned to Hankou, and they reduced the sales of domestic soaps for a while.⁶² However, they could not drive domestic soap factories out of business. In particular, Hanchang's relations with a network of Muslim retail stores were hard to undermine, as these stores were much more comfortable selling Hanchang's lard-free products.⁶³ It is not difficult to imagine that Hanchang would still have substantial revenue despite the impact of the returning foreign brands. Meanwhile, the return of foreign soaps to Wuhan markets pushed Hanchang to keep investing in product quality, packaging, and marketing strategies. Foreign brands did not expect fierce competition from domestic soaps, and their sales eventually declined in Wuhan.⁶⁴

In comparison, Chen Jingyu's Hanchang and Yishuncheng continued to grow and eventually developed into top enterprises in their respective fields in Wuhan. In 1927, Chen Jingyu's business peers elected him president of two trade associations in Hankou: the Hankou Department Stores Trade Association and the Hankou Chemical Industry Trade Association.⁶⁵ It was said that the reason Chen Jingyu became president of two trade associations was that his companies were too competitive and too profitable, and Chen's business peers hoped that he would share the market with others when he became president of the trade associations.⁶⁶ Therefore, the election of Chen, on the one hand, was a recognition of Chen's business success. On the other hand, it revealed the power of the Muslim commercial network, given the importance of the network to Chen.

Philanthropy and patriotism: Chen Jingyu as a reformer of Chinese society

As a result of his business success, Chen Jingyu began to accumulate huge personal wealth. Chen later was even able to purchase a villa in Mount Lu for himself.⁶⁷ In Mount Lu, Chen could live side by side with top political, military, and economic elites in China, as they all loved to own villas on that mountain.⁶⁸ Chen had come a long way from his humble beginning in a Nanjing Hui neighborhood. But Chen did not indulge in material enjoyment. He was keen to shoulder social responsibilities for his fellow Muslims and the wider local society by engaging in charitable activities.

It was Chen Jingyu's charitable activities that defined his role as a reformer of Chinese society and a leader of Muslim communities. Indeed, starting from the late 1920s, Chen became increasingly involved in organized charity as he became more and more successful in business. Chen's father strongly influenced Chen's attitude towards charity. Even when Chen was a child and the family was still poor, the elder Chen would remind his son that there were unfortunate Muslims out there who needed help, and he often gave away money to Muslims begging outside mosques.⁶⁹

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 16–17.

⁶²Liu Rui 1995, p. 81.

⁶³Jiang Baoning and Zhao Yuting 2008, p. 121.

⁶⁴Liu Rui 1995, p. 81.

⁶⁵Zheng Mianzhi 1989, p. 17.

⁶⁶Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 100.

⁶⁷Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 105; Zheng Mianzhi 1989, p. 38.

⁶⁸For stories between Chinese elites and villas in Mount Lu, please see Zhang Lei and He Wei 2003.

⁶⁹Zheng Mianzhi 1989, p. 19.

However, back then, there was only so much the elder Chen could give away. When Chen Jingyu became an increasingly successful businessman, thanks to the Muslim commercial network, he had both the means and the will to help more people. Between June and August of 1931, flooding broke out along several major rivers in China, displacing tens of millions of people, and more than 400,000 people died in the turbulent waters.⁷⁰ In Wuhan alone, floods caused more than 600,000 people to become victims.⁷¹ The Hubei Flood Rehabilitation Committee, a government organization,⁷² set up several temporary relief centers for women and children. The committee gradually sent victims in those centers back to their places of origin. By the mid-1932, there were still around 340 orphans who had no place to go. The rehabilitation committee then hoped that the Hankou Charity Society could take over the care of these orphans, as the society once planned to start an orphanage, albeit unsuccessfully.⁷³

The Hankou Charity Society, established in 1910, was an organization of Hankou merchants.⁷⁴ Chen Jingyu was involved in the charity society. The rehabilitation committee's wish was not something that Hankou merchants could easily refuse. Soon, a preparatory committee for the Hankou Orphanage, which included one government official and seven local business elites, was established. Chen Jingyu was not only one of the seven elite merchant members of the preparatory committee but also its director. Chen Jingyu's position in the committee confirmed that Chen had become a prominent businessman in Hankou, considering that the committee included figures like the president of Hankou Chamber of Commerce and the president of the Bank of Communications in Hankou.⁷⁵ However, the task Chen Jingyu had taken on was difficult and even risky. Hankou merchants failed to establish an orphanage before, and they could fail again. But this time, they would upset the government and 340 poor orphans.

Although there were a few Hui among them, the vast majority of the 340 orphans were Han Chinese.⁷⁶ Nevertheless, Chen Jingyu lived up to his responsibilities. The opening of an orphanage required huge amounts of money. Some Hubei government agencies allocated the rest of the 1931 flood relief funds to the preparatory committee, yet it was far from enough to meet the need.⁷⁷ Chen then took the lead in donating money to the orphanage and went on to raise money among Hankou's rich businessmen.⁷⁸ By the end of 1932, the Hankou Orphanage was ready to open.⁷⁹ Chen Jingyu's commitment to the orphanage went beyond fundraising. He assumed the institution's presidency and appointed Li Jiahe – a private tutor for Chen's children – as the director of General Affairs.⁸⁰ The appointment of Li Jiahe meant that Chen Jingyu was emotionally invested in the orphans, as he put the orphans in the hands of someone who he trusted with his own children.

Despite Chen Jingyu's deep involvement in the Hankou Orphanage, the institution had no trace of Islam. In comparison, in 1934, when Yang Shuping cofounded the Private Nanjing Orphanage with Chen Jingyu, Yang at least mentioned that both Islamic and Confucian teachings that he picked up in his childhood inspired his philanthropic action. According to Yang, when he was young, he learned from an imam that the Qur'an and Hadith emphasized numerous times that Muslims should take care of orphans.⁸¹ Given the similar background of Chen and Yang, it was likely that Islamic teachings also inspired Chen's commitment to charity.

⁷⁰Li Wenhui 1994, pp. 202–03.

⁷¹Tu Wenxue 2006, vol. 1, p. 213.

⁷²For evidence that the Hubei Flood Rehabilitation was a government organization, see Sun Yusheng 2008, p. 292.

⁷³Chen Jingyu and Li Jiahe 1932b, p. 1.

⁷⁴Bianzuan weiyuanhui 1989, vol. 2, p. 703.

⁷⁵For information about the members of the preparatory committee, see Chen Jingyu and Li Jiahe 1932a.

⁷⁶Zheng Mianzhi 1989, p. 20.

⁷⁷Chen Jingyu and Li Jiahe 1932b, p. 1.

⁷⁸Zheng Mianzhi 1989, p. 20.

⁷⁹Chen Jingyu and Li Jiahe 1932b, p. 25.

⁸⁰Zheng Mianzhi 1989, p. 20.

⁸¹Yang Shuping 1934, p. 9; Chen Jingyu 1934, pp. 1–2.

However, Chen Jingyu did not acknowledge the influence of Islam in the project of the Hankou Orphanage. Instead, he heavily emphasized the symbols and ideas of nationalism and modernization. In a book that recorded the preparation process of the Hankou Orphanage, Sun Yat-sen's image, his will, and Chiang Kai-shek's image were placed at the forefront of every book's content, only behind the cover page and table of contents. The position of those political leaders' images was a homage, and it also helped create an impression that the creation of the Hankou Orphanage was under the gaze of the nationalists.⁸²

Moreover, when the orphans officially joined the orphanage, they needed to take oaths. The very first oath was "I am willing to follow the teachings of Sun Yat-sen." Inside the campus of the orphanage, there was a Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall. The portrait of Sun Yat-sen was hung eye-catchingly in the front of the classroom. In addition, every Monday, the orphans were required to gather together and pay tribute to Sun Yat-sen.⁸³ The manner in which the Hankou orphanage embraced the symbols of Sun Yat-sen was not determined by any external pressure; rather it was a choice of Chen Jingyu himself.

Although the Nationalists had energetically popularized the cult of Sun Yat-sen among schools since at least 1927, the actual implementation varies dramatically.⁸⁴ The Nanjing Orphanage was established in the same period as its Hankou counterpart. Seemingly, the pressure on Yang Shuping to adopt the cult of Sun Yat-sen should have been heavier, as his orphanage was in the capital city of the Nationalist regime. However, quite the contrary, the Nanjing Orphanage contained far fewer symbols of the Sun. Furthermore, the campus of the Nanjing Orphanage did not have a memorial hall of Sun Yat-sen.⁸⁵ This is not to claim that the Nanjing Orphanage ignored the cult, as it did celebrate events like Sun Yat-sen Memorial Week.⁸⁶ But the way the Nanjing orphanage practiced the rituals of the cult differed significantly from that of its Hankou counterpart. And apparently, both manners were acceptable to the Nationalists, as the two orphanages were successfully registered with the government and lasted a few decades.⁸⁷

Therefore, through Chen Jingyu's own choice, the Hankou Orphanage practiced the rituals of the cult of Sun Yat-sen more thoroughly than its Nanjing counterpart and left no trace of Islam. To understand why Chen made such choices in the establishment of the Hankou Orphanage, a project that he physically, emotionally, and financially invested in, we need to understand Chen Jingyu's strategy of behavior when he was surrounded by Han Chinese. Such a strategy is exemplified in how he handled banquets in Hankou. It is not hard to imagine that Chen Jingyu, as an ambitious and successful merchant, would need to attend numerous banquets to socialize with fellow merchants and officials, and, most often, in Han households with a majority of Han attendees. In these situations, Chen Jingyu would still sit down and dine with other attendees as long as there were vegetarian dishes.⁸⁸

Vegetarian dishes were not the equivalent of halal food, which Muslims were allowed to consume. However, in Chen's mind, he had to make some compromise in order to climb into the upper echelon of society, which was dominated by Han Chinese.⁸⁹ Due to the influence of Buddhism, many Han Chinese were at least familiar with vegetarian meals. Moreover, in the early twentieth century, many urban elites, like merchants, government officials, bankers, doctors, lawyers, and judges, turned to Buddhism. They also organized new Buddhist organizations like the World Buddhist Householder Grove to better practice Buddhism in their own way.⁹⁰ The householder grove promoted and glorified

⁸²Chen Jingyu and Li Jiahe 1932b, sec. forward.

⁸³Chen Jingyu and Li Jiahe 1932b.

⁸⁴Chen Yunqian 2009, pp. 382–89.

⁸⁵Nanjing Gu'er Yuan 1934, p. 85.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁸⁷For the issue of registry and the existing time of the two orphanages, see Chen Jingyu and Li Jiahe 1932b, p. 19; Jiang Baoning and Zhao Yuting 2008, p. 118; Nanjing Gu'er Yuan 1934, pp. 64–65; Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, pp. 106–07.

⁸⁸Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 102.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 102–03.

⁹⁰Jessup 2016, pp. 37–42.

the vegetarian diet⁹¹. In other words, for many urban elites at the time, abstaining from the consumption of meat was an admirable practice.

Therefore, when surrounded by Han Chinese, like at a banquet, Chen Jingyu would behave in a way that, from his perspective, was expected, acceptable, or even admirable to his Han Chinese hosts and other guests. In establishing the Hankou Orphanage, Chen Jingyu was surrounded by Han Chinese, because the provincial government initiated the project, the majority of the preparatory committee was Han Chinese merchants, and the majority of the orphans were Han Chinese. Chen did what, from his perspective, was expected from him as the president of the orphanage, including, quite importantly, accommodating the nationalist agendas.

The Nanjing nationalist regime in the 1930s was consolidating its power. The regime began with a sphere of influence limited to the lower Yangzi region. But over the course of the 1930s, it defeated most of the local warlords who blatantly challenged its rule and asserted more control over Chinese society.⁹² At the same time, the nationalist regime justified its leadership as a necessity to China's modernization.

Thus, during this period, adopting the Nationalist rhetoric could be beneficial to any modernizing projects. More specifically, the Hankou Orphanage began as a task that the Hubei local government assigned to Hankou merchants. The government obviously would love to see that the orphanage dutifully followed its ideology and rhetoric. The Hankou merchant community would love to see that the government's agendas were satisfied. It was up to Chen Jingyu, the director of the preparatory committee, to determine how the Hankou Orphanage would engage with the nationalist rhetoric and present itself as a modern institution. In the end, under Chen Jingyu's leadership, the orphanage thoroughly embraced the nationalist ideology, especially the cult of Sun Yat-sen, as mentioned above.

Other than the nationalist rhetoric and ideology, Chen incorporated many modernizing elements into the construction and organization of the orphanage as well. The most notable element was the combination of "feeding and educating" in the upbringing of the orphans. China had a long tradition of organized orphan relief.⁹³ However, from the final years of the Qing Empire, China's reform-minded elites began to adopt a new approach to poverty relief (including relief for orphans). These elites increasingly saw the poor as responsible for the poverty of the country, and traditional relief practices focusing on feeding the poor made them further dependent on the labor of others; however, industrial training could transform the poor into a productive force for national renewal.⁹⁴ Under these circumstances, it became a fashion for China's relief organizations to open factories.

For example, the Benevolent Hall in Tianjin (1878–1948), founded to house chaste widows and orphans, originally allowed its dependents to spend much of their time on "unproductive" things (sewing, cleaning, doing wash, chatting, cooking, eating, reading books on morality). But, after 1900, the hall noticed the rise of a new approach to poverty relief. So it established a women's factory and required the dependents to work in it to "sweep away laziness" for national development. The hall even reduced time spent on moral instruction to let women workers focus more on factory work.⁹⁵

Chen Jingyu knew about this new approach to poverty relief. From its inception, the Hankou Orphanage had emphasized the combination of "feeding and educating." In its meetings, the preparatory committee had claimed that, while taking in orphans, the orphanage should teach orphans general knowledge and industrial skills, so that they could later become independent persons in society. The charter of the Hankou Orphanage contained an article stating that the combination of feeding and educating was the purpose of the orphanage. Later, a factory was indeed erected at the orphanage. Orphans could learn skills like printing, sewing, and stitching there.⁹⁶

⁹¹Tu Jiuqu 1927, pp. 7–10.

⁹²Eastman 1986, pp. 116–360.

⁹³Leung 2001.

⁹⁴Chen 2012, pp. 13–85.

⁹⁵Shue 2006, pp. 428–30.

⁹⁶Chen Jingyu and Li Jiahe 1932b, pp. 19–26.

The Hankou Orphanage's embracement of the Nationalist rhetoric and the new approach to poverty relief deeply impressed observers. A journalist, after his visit to the institution, praised the good fortune of orphans because they had the love of philanthropists and received a decent education. These orphans knew themselves and their country. Moreover, they knew how to improve themselves now in order to rejuvenate the nation in the future. The journalist even lamented that the limited financial resources of the orphanage prevented it from taking in all of the orphans in China and turning them into useful people to society.⁹⁷ Overall, it is clear that Chen Jingyu successfully built the Hankou Orphanage into a patriotic and modern institution.

Forgotten legacy: Chen Jingyu's leadership in the Muslim communities

Although Chen Jingyu left no trace of Islam in the Hankou Orphanage, he by no means tried to hide his Muslim identity. Even when surrounded by Han Chinese, Chen still drew the line at things that, in his view, could compromise his Muslim identity. For instance, in the aforementioned strategy of behavior in a banquet, Chen would eat vegetarian food, but he would not go so far as to eat pork. Chen did not want to disconnect himself from the Muslim community.

In fact, after Chen became a successful merchant with the help of the Muslim commercial network, he assumed a leading role in supporting Muslims and Islamic development in the Yangzi region. For example, in 1922, Chen Jingyu, together with a few other Muslim merchants, donated money to rebuild a mosque that had been destroyed during the Taiping Rebellion in the Nanjing neighborhood where he grew up.⁹⁸ Chen also provided direct economic assistance to some mosques and their imams for a long time, including the Hepingmen Mosque in Nanjing and the Qingzhenli Mosque in Hankou.⁹⁹

Chen Jingyu engaged in organized charitable activities for Muslims, as well. In the late 1920s, Chen's father was turning sixty years old, and Chen at first planned to hold a grand birthday party for his father. The elder Chen, on the other hand, wished that the money to be spent on his birthday party could be distributed among poor Muslims.¹⁰⁰ Chen Jingyu not only respected his father's decision but took it a step further.

Chen used the money from the birthday party to purchase commercial buildings in downtown Hankou, and then used the rental income to set up the Qiutan Student Aid Foundation (Qiutan was the name of Chen's father). Chen entrusted the management of the foundation to a middle school principal in Nanjing, who was a Han Chinese. The foundation officially began operations in 1933, and, as late as 1953, it was still providing aid to both Muslim and Han students. However, the bulk of the aid recipients were Muslim students. The foundation supported some students all the way through college.¹⁰¹ It is unclear whether the foundation supported male and female students to the same extent. Under the influence of Chen Jingyu, Yang Shuping, Chen's business partner, set up the Lequan Student Aid Foundation named after his father. Yang's foundation lasted from 1939 to 1948. It was open to male and female students alike, and the majority of them were Muslims.¹⁰²

Meanwhile, the 1931 flood also created numerous orphans in Nanjing. Due to the relatively large Hui population in Nanjing, many of the orphans were Muslims.¹⁰³ But the government and Muslims in Nanjing were unable to bring enough relief to these children. Although Chen Jingyu was organizing an orphanage in Hankou at the time, he and his business partner Yang Shuping still planned to establish another orphanage in Nanjing, which was the Private Nanjing Orphanage, as referenced above.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷Shu Shaonan 1937, p. 28.

⁹⁸Wu Yiye 1999, p. 237.

⁹⁹Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 102.

¹⁰⁰Zheng Mianzhi 1989, p. 19.

¹⁰¹Wu Yiye 1999, pp. 306–07.

¹⁰²Ibid., p. 307.

¹⁰³Zheng Mianzhi 1989, pp. 20–21.

¹⁰⁴Nanjing Gu'er Yuan 1934, p. 1.

Chen Jingyu was the president of the Nanjing Orphanage, and Yang Shuping the director of General Affairs. Chen needed to stay in Hankou for his business and other duties. But Yang Shuping resigned from his post in Shanghai to work for the orphanage full time. Yang was in more control of the institution. Nevertheless, Chen still played an important role in fundraising for the orphanage.¹⁰⁵ The Nanjing Orphanage also adopted the new “feeding and educating” method to the orphan relief and strove to convert them into useful individuals for society.¹⁰⁶

With the establishment of the two orphanages, Chen became ever more influential as a reformer of Chinese society and the leader of Muslim communities. The Hankou merchant community recognized his commitments to China’s cause of reform and elected him as the president of the Hankou Chamber of Commerce in 1933.¹⁰⁷ Around that period, Chen also became the president of the Association of Jiangsu Sojourners in Hankou.¹⁰⁸ Both associations were highly influential.

The Hankou Chamber of Commerce was established around 1906 with government support, and it was deeply involved in local economic and political affairs.¹⁰⁹ The Association of Jiangsu Sojourners in Hankou was a native-place association. Native-place associations traditionally played a significant role in the life of sojourners.¹¹⁰ The Association of Jiangsu Sojourners in Hankou did not leave many sources behind, but it is safe to conclude that it was an influential organization, as Chen Jingyu often participated in public activities as the president of the association.¹¹¹ In a word, as the president of the Hankou Orphanage, the Hankou Chamber of Commerce, and the Association of Jiangsu Sojourners in Hankou, Chen Jingyu was a force to be reckoned with in Hankou. He achieved this status because of his business success, his commitment to the public interest, and his modernizing reform of charities.

At the same time, as Chen Jingyu’s status rose, he increasingly became a representative of Muslims. In particular, after Chen became the president of the Hankou Chamber of Commerce, his Han Chinese colleagues constantly asked him questions about Islamic teachings. This also proved that Chen’s Muslim identity was not a secret to the people who knew him. Chen claimed that he felt upset that he could not provide them with satisfactory answers. Eventually, he reprinted thousands of copies of *Tianfang dianli*, a *Han Kitab* text of Liu Zhi. Due to Chen Jingyu’s social status, he was able to send these copies as gifts to government departments, military offices, universities, libraries, chambers of commerce, and even YMCAs.¹¹² Through Chen Jingyu, Liu Zhi’s works reached a broader audience.

Chen Jingyu’s dissemination of *Tianfang dianli* drew the attention of *Yuehua* (1929–1948), a magazine mainly published by Muslim intellectuals in north China. It has been claimed that *Yuehua* was “the most influential and longest lasting periodical” of Muslim society in Republican China.¹¹³

Yuehua praised Chen’s copies for being well printed and rigorously proofread, which showed Chen’s sincerity in helping non-Muslim elites learn more about Islam.¹¹⁴ However, this was the only time that *Yuehua* mentioned Chen Jingyu throughout its long history. Considering Chen’s influence in Muslim communities and the wider local society in Wuhan and Nanjing, *Yuehua*’s lack of interest in Chen, except when he reproduced *Tianfang dianli*, revealed that the magazine’s focus was quite narrow. It was primarily a periodical for Muslim intellectuals in north China and it did not reflect the voices of all Muslim groups.

¹⁰⁵Chen Jingyu 1934, pp. 1–2.

¹⁰⁶Unknown 1985, pp. 12–13.

¹⁰⁷Wang Xiang 1933, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸Zheng Mianzhi 1989, p. 21.

¹⁰⁹Beiyang guanbao 1906, p. 5; Liu Jie 2019, pp. 104–11.

¹¹⁰Goodman 1995.

¹¹¹Jiang Baoning and Zhao Yuting 2008, pp. 119–20.

¹¹²Chen Jingyu 1935, pp. 19–20.

¹¹³Matsumoto 2006, p. 118.

¹¹⁴Yuehua 1935, p. 30.

The lack of attention from seemingly the most important Muslim periodical in the Republican era had no effect on the influence of Chen Jingyu. In May 1937, Chen Jingyu completed his first five-year term as the orphanage's president. The board of the orphanage unanimously reelected Chen for another five years.¹¹⁵ Everyone hoped the Hankou Orphanage had five more bright years. Chen Jingyu also may have had ambitious plans for the orphanage. However, no one could have anticipated that the year 1937 was the beginning of a long turbulent period for Chen, his business, and his charities, as well as for China.

On July 7, 1937, less than two months after Chen Jingyu began his second term as the president of the Hankou Orphanage, a total war between China and Japan broke out. By the end of that year, the Japanese had captured Nanjing and were threatening Wuhan. The war made Chen busier than ever before, because of the influx of refugees into Hankou and the Nationalist government's incompetence in dealing with the problem. As an influential local leader and a successful businessman, Chen self-funded seven refugee service centers. As of the end of January 1938, those centers had received more than eight thousand refugees.¹¹⁶ At least one of Chen's refugee centers was set up in a mosque and reserved for Muslim refugees.¹¹⁷

Later, the Executive Yuan of the Nationalist government publicly praised Chen Jingyu for his refugee relief work in Hankou.¹¹⁸ In times of crisis, Chen played an even more significant role in Hui communities and the Chinese society at large. However, as the war further developed, especially when Wuhan fell to Japan in October 1938, Chen Jingyu's business empire began to suffer huge losses. Prior to the war, Chen imported some advanced equipment from Germany with a large amount of money to upgrade the Hanchang soap factory, as the factory still centered on manual production. If things went well, the Hanchang soap factory would be able to mass-produce the best quality soaps in China. But when the war broke out, the new equipment had just arrived in Shanghai and remained stuck there, making it impossible for Chen to recover the investment.¹¹⁹ This was only the beginning of a series of disasters Chen Jingyu had to face.

On the eve of the fall of Wuhan, Chen Jingyu managed to move some old equipment, raw materials, and workers of the Hanchang factory out of Hankou and into Chongqing. Chen planned to continue his soap business. However, wartime Chongqing was nothing like Hankou. In Hankou, a vibrant Muslim commercial network supported Chen Jingyu. Wartime Chongqing, on the other hand, was packed with bureaucrats. They dominated the economy and did virtually nothing to support private merchants like Chen Jingyu. Although Chen successfully reopened the Hanchang factory in Chongqing, he had a difficult time selling the products without the kind of strong support Hanchang previously enjoyed from fellow Muslim merchants. Some Muslim warlords were active in wartime Chongqing, especially Bai Chongxi, as he worked directly with Chiang Kai-shek, the top leader of the Nationalists.¹²⁰ Bai often provided generous support to schools established by Muslim intellectuals.¹²¹ Yet no evidence suggested that Bai did anything to help Chen Jingyu's wartime business. Worse still, in Chongqing, Japanese planes bombed Chen's factory into ruins.¹²² And apparently, Chen was unable to reestablish it.

The end of the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1945 rekindled Chen Jingyu's business ambition. He moved back to Hankou and convinced the former shareholders of the Hanchang factory to invest in the soap industry together again. But soon, China fell into another war – the civil war between the Nationalists and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). The back-to-back wars ruined China's

¹¹⁵Wuhan ribao 1937, p. 11.

¹¹⁶Zhu Qinglan 1938.

¹¹⁷Huijiao dazhong 1938, p. 7.

¹¹⁸Kong Xiangxi 1938.

¹¹⁹Jiang 1935, p. 6; Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 101.

¹²⁰Pai 2012, vol. 1, pp. 176–79.

¹²¹Mao 2011b, pp. 164–65.

¹²²Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 102.

economy. Chen Jingyu and his business partners were not able to make profits out of the Hanchang factory like they used to before 1937.¹²³

Nevertheless, Chen Jingyu's social status in Hankou was comparable to that of the pre-war period. This was mostly due to the social connections that Chen built previously and his continuous commitment to charitable activities. Despite his economic difficulties, Chen Jingyu reopened the Hankou Orphanage in 1946 and then kept it functioning by soliciting donations from people from all walks of life in Hankou. Thanks to Chen's hard work, the Hankou Orphanage, against all odds, added new classrooms and enrolled more students during the extremely difficult civil war period of China.¹²⁴ Chen did not let economic issues interfere with his commitments to Muslim communities as well. In the post-Sino-Japanese War Hankou, he once founded a continuation school for Muslims in the name of the chairman of the Hankou Islamic Association.¹²⁵ Therefore, though Chen faced serious financial problems, by utilizing his previous social connections, he kept his commitment to the public interest and remained an influential figure in Hankou.

By early 1949, the CCP's army was approaching Wuhan, and the defeat of the Nationalists in the civil war was all but certain. The Nationalists eventually abandoned Wuhan before the CCP's armies even entered the city. In this power vacuum, Chen Jingyu and Wuhan local elites again worked closely together to maintain the city's public order.¹²⁶ Later, Wuhan local scholars considered the city's liberation exceptionally smooth.¹²⁷ Local elites like Chen Jingyu made significant contributions to a smooth the liberation process in 1949.

The new CCP regime recognized and rewarded Chen Jingyu's contributions, as he rose quickly through a diverse assortment of posts, including deputy mayor of Wuhan, director of the Wuhan Federation of Industry and Commerce, deputy director of the Central-South China Ethnic Affairs Committee, vice president of the Islamic Association of China, deputy director of the All-China Federation of Industry and Commerce, and deputy governor of Hubei Province.¹²⁸

Besides Chen, there were still many other Muslim merchants who had achieved high social status in modern China.¹²⁹ Due to space limitations, this examination cannot discuss them all. Still, it is worth noting that Yang Shuping – Chen's business partner – enjoyed similar treatment from the government after 1949, as he became a member of the East China Military and Political Committee and deputy director of the Shanghai Islamic Association.¹³⁰ The fact that Chen and Yang occupied posts in agencies specifically for ethnic affairs, religious matters, and industrial issues attested to the Muslim merchants' status as leading reformers of the Chinese society and leaders of Muslim communities once again, even under a new regime.

Conclusion

The story of Chen Jingyu reveals that between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a Muslim commercial network arose in the mid and lower Yangzi River region. Through this commercial network, merchants from Nanjing, like Chen Jingyu and Yang Shuping, secured economic power. Without the Muslim commercial network, it would have been difficult for Chen Jingyu to leave the Nanjing "cage" to start a new business in Hankou. Moreover, his soap factory would have been far less likely to have survived the fierce market competition, never mind evolve into a mechanized modern factory. After achieving entrepreneurial success, Chen and Yang used it to support social programs

¹²³Zheng Mianzhi 1989, 23, pp. 33–39.

¹²⁴Wang Helin 2009, p. 3.

¹²⁵Gao Wende 1995, p. 1259.

¹²⁶Zhang Yunmian 1989, pp. 47–48.

¹²⁷Hubei ribao 2021, p. 4.

¹²⁸Fan Yuhao 1995, p. 77.

¹²⁹Ge Zhuang 2008.

¹³⁰Nanjing Islamic Association 2009, p. 108.

in Muslim communities, and the Chinese society at large. Through this process, they became leading reformers of Chinese society, and leaders of Muslim communities.

Muslim scholars from Nanjing in the Qing period – predecessors of merchants like Chen Jingyu – positioned themselves as elite literati of the Chinese society and leaders of Muslim communities by composing the *Han Kitab*. However, the literati status of these Muslim scholars was not recognized by other Han Chinese Confucian scholars. In comparison, the leadership status of Muslim merchants was fully recognized in Republican China and even under the new regime that took power in 1949. However, the leading role Chen Jingyu would play after 1949 would be quite different. Due to the CCP's promise to socialize the Chinese society, the Muslim commercial network that once powered Chen Jingyu's business could no longer exist. The way Chen engaged in social activities drastically changed, as he handed over his enterprises and the Hankou Orphanage to the state and lived mainly as a state cadre.¹³¹

In 1967, Chen Jingyu died of illness. In his dying wish, he gave up the opportunity to be buried in a revolutionary cemetery, and instead chose a Hui cemetery with these words engraved on his tombstone: "The Tomb of Muslim Chen Jingyu." Since the 1980s, former students of the Hankou Orphanage have held meetings from time to time. Although most of them have been Han Chinese, they still go to the Hui cemetery to sweep the tomb of Chen Jingyu to commemorate the kindness of this Muslim leader, who was also their leader.¹³²

The success of Republican-era Muslim merchants has not attracted enough scholarly attention. Muslim merchants in the mid and lower Yangzi region, like intellectuals and warlords, were leaders of Muslim communities in Republican China. Moreover, they served their own critical role to society, while contemporary Muslim intellectuals and warlords largely ignored them. Yet still, Muslim merchants helped industrialize China and achieved high social status. They were another pillar that supported the development of Islam in China in the early twentieth century.

Glossary

Chen Diexian 陳蝶仙

Chen Jingyu 陳經畬

Yang Shuping 楊叔平

Ma Dichen 馬棣臣

Jin Runsheng 金潤生

Yishuncheng 義順成

Ma Yitang 馬乙棠

Yu Shuzhan 余叔瞻

Jingzhong 警鐘

Li Jiahe 李嘉禾

Tianfang dianlia 天方典禮

Han Kitab 漢克塔布

Yuehua 月華

Benevolent Hall (Guangren tang) 廣仁堂

Hanchang Candle & Soap Factory (Hanchang zhu zao chang) 漢昌燭皂廠

Taipingyang Soap Factory (Taipingyang feizao chang) 太平洋肥皂廠

Xiangtai Soap Factory (Xiangtai feizao chang) 祥泰肥皂廠

Hankou Orphanage (Hankou gu'eryuan) 漢口孤兒院

Hubei Flood Rehabilitation Committee (Hubei shuizai shanhou hui) 湖北水災善後會

World Buddhist Householder Grove (Shijie Fojiao jushilin) 世界佛教居士林

Hepingmen Mosque (Hepingmen qingzhensi) 和平門清真寺

¹³¹Nie Tiande 2011, p. 122.

¹³²Wang Helin 2009.

Qingzhenli Mosque (Qingzhenli qingzhensi) 清真里清真寺
 Qiutan Student Aid Foundation (Qiutan zhuxue jin) 秋潭助學金
 Lequan Student Aid Foundation (Lequan zhuxue jin) 樂泉助學金
 Association of Jiangsu Sojourners in Hankou (Jiangsu lv han tongxianghui) 江蘇旅漢同鄉會
 Hankou Islamic Association (Hankou shi Huijiao gonghui) 漢口市回教公會
 Tomb of Muslim Chen Jingyu (Huimin Chen Jingyu zhi mu) 回民陳經畬之墓

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