

THE TANGPING WASHING CAN – A SYMBOL OF PURITY AND ETHNICITY FOR THE HUI MUSLIMS IN CHINA

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This article discusses the practical and symbolic meaning of a washing can called *Tangping* among the Hui Muslims of Northern China. Besides being used in ablutions before prayers, it is also represented in pictures to denote that something is *qingzhen*, that is, pure according to Islamic principles, whether it be a restaurant or a bag of roasted peanuts. The origin of the Tangping symbol will be discussed as well as its significance in setting apart the Hui as an ethno-religious group.

According to the census in 1990, there were 17.5 million Muslims in China, forming 1.98 % of the total population, and altogether ten Muslim minority nations (e.g. the Uighur, Kazakh, Dongxiang etc.). Of these the Hui are the largest nation, their number being 8.6 million (Gladney 1996: 28–29; Li & Luckert 1994: 3, n. 1.). The Hui use Chinese as their native language, and they are found in several provinces in various parts of the country.¹ The material for this study was collected between August 1999 and April 2000 in Inner Mongolia (where there are 192,808 Hui), Gansu (some 1 million Hui), Qinghai (638,847), Ningxia (1.5 million) and Shaanxi (130,899).²

1 The Hui are especially numerous in Ningxia, Gansu, Henan, Xinjiang, Qinghai, Yunnan, Hebei and Shandong provinces. See e.g. Gladney 1996: 20.

2 The figures according to the 1990 census, see note 1. Only the Hui are counted here, not other Muslims (Gladney 1996: 28–29; similarly presented in Gladney 1998: 33). I am indebted to all the Hui I interviewed, and also to my assistant Mrs. Secengowa and my Hui colleague Bai Junrui from the Inner Mongolia University, Hohhot. I also wish to thank the Inner Mongolia University for providing me the chance to do research.



Fig. 1. Green plastic Tangpings in the women's washing facilities at Xincheng mosque (Xinchengqingzhensi) in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia.

ISLAMIC PURITY

The rules of purity in Islam govern every aspect of life. Besides the need to maintain everyday cleanliness, there is the requirement of ritual purity before and during prayers. The main point of these regulations is not so much hygienic as ritualistic, even if they have also gained hygienic significance. The Quran encourages: *wathiyābaka fa-tahhir wa al-rujza fa-ahjur*, 'clean your cloths and avoid dirt' (Quran 74:4–5). "Cleanliness" (*ṭahāra*) is a much wider concept than merely avoiding dirt. *Ṭahāra*, actually meaning 'purification', is the state of ritual purity, and requires the fulfillment of certain conditions: performing ritual ablutions, cutting one's fingernails, being circumcised (for men), shaving (for women removing body hair), eating only meat properly slaughtered (*ḥalāl*), abstaining from pork, abstaining from alcohol, avoiding body secretions (vomit, blood, sperm, urine, excrement and menstrual blood), and avoiding dogs and pigs (Chebel 1995, s.v. purification). A person in the state of purity is *muṭahhar*, 'purified'. This is not only a physical but also a mental state, and only a *muṭahhar* can approach God in prayer.³ The Quran gives

3 *Ṭahāra* is often understood in the narrow sense of ablutions with no treatment of the other aspects. G. H. Bousquet (1950: 53–54) mentions e.g. circumcision, impure food and clothing as related to the concept of *ṭahāra* but only concentrates on ablutions.

instructions how to fulfill the requirements of *ṭahāra* (Quran 5:6), but the practical model for this comes from prophet Muhammed.

Abu Hurayra said that when the Prophet went to the toilet he [Abu Hurayra] brought him water in a container (*tawr*) or a skin (*rakwa*), and he cleansed himself. Then he [the Prophet] wiped his hand on the ground. Then he [Abu Hurayra] brought him another container (*inā*'), and he made ablution (*tawaḍḍa'a*).⁴

As can be seen from the *ḥadīth* quoted above, prophet Muhammed used a water container made of skin for toilet purposes, and another for ablutions. These were two different containers, since according to Islam any contact with body secretions would destroy the state of ritual purity needed for prayers. The washing of private parts after having been to the toilet is called *istinjā'* (after defecating), or *istibrā'* (after urinating).

In performing ablutions, there is a distinction between *wuḍū'* and *ghusl*. *Wuḍū'* is necessary when the person is in the state of minor ritual impurity (*ḥadath*) and wants to perform one of the five daily prayers (*ṣalāt*). The state of *ḥadath* prevails after sleep or unconsciousness, calls of nature or any emission from the body orifices (including vomiting), contact with unclean substances such as sperm, pus, urine, or fermented liquor, or contact with dogs or pigs (except for the Maliki school of law) – in other words, anything that destroys the *ṭahāra* (Bousquet 1971: s.v. *ḥadath*).⁵ Through *wuḍū'*, the state of purity is restored. *Wuḍū'* means washing the face and those parts of the limbs that are not covered by clothes, i.e. hands and feet.⁶ They should be performed using running water, but we know that the Prophet also used open bowl-like vessels, plunging his hands into the water after he had first thoroughly washed them three times with running water (Bousquet 1950: 64). *Ghusl* is needed if the person is in the state of major ritual impurity (*janāba*), such as after sexual intercourse or menstruation. It means first performing the *wuḍū'* and then washing the whole body, including the hair.⁷ The Hui likewise distinguish between *wuḍū'*, called the small wash (*xiao jing*) and *ghusl*, or big wash (*da jing*).

In both washes, a special washing can, called a Tangping (湯瓶), is used. The characters mean 'hot water' or 'soup', and 'bottle'. Tangpings are found in the washing facilities of mosques and public baths (see fig. 1). In the small wash, the

4 From Abu Dawud, quoted in von Denffer 1979: 19. See also *al-Bukhārī* I, p. 87.

5 The impure substances are called *khabath*, 'refuse, dross', or *najas*, 'impurity, dirt' and any contact with them should be avoided. Any other substances are considered pure (Bousquet 1950: 54–55). In the Quran in Chinese, the word used for impure substances is *wuhui*, 'dirt, filth' (Quran 74:4–5).

6 See Quran 5:6. On *ḥadath*, see Bousquet 1971, s.v. *ḥadath*. For ablutions water should preferably be used, but if no water is available, one can also use clean sand (see Quran 4:43). This is called *tayammum*, or *istijmār*, 'dry ablution'. *Tayammum* is still used in the desert areas of China, where the sand is very delicate (YG, Imam, Lanzhou, 16 September 1999).

7 In *ghusl*, the Prophet poured water over his body from a vase (*al-Bukhārī* I, p. 98).

Tangping is held in the right hand and the parts of the body are washed in the required order: mouth, nose, face, hands up to the elbows, head, ears, neck, and feet up to the ankle bones.⁸ For reasons of hygiene and because of the requirement that water used for ablutions should be ritually pure, the Tangping should not be replaced by a wash basin.

If necessary (after calls of nature), the person “washes the lower parts” (*jing xia*), namely the anus and the genitals, as part of the *wuḍū*⁹. This is done with the left hand, holding the Tangping in the right hand. After that the hands are carefully washed again (*Huhehaote Huizu shi*, pp. 305–306).⁹ Using the can to wash the lower parts is here part of the *wuḍū*⁹ and not *istinjā*⁹ or *istibrā*⁹. In Arab countries, there are water cans in toilets for washing, which resemble common watering cans. I have found no oral or written references to any cans being used in toilet by the Hui. An Imam in Hohhot explained that the Tangping “is used for washing hands whereas the Arabic and Indian people use it when going to the toilet” (WJ, Imam, Hohhot, 26 August 1999). Among the Hui, the use of toilet paper is widespread.¹⁰

The Tangping also has a role in the big wash, since *wuḍū*⁹ is obligatory before the big wash (*ghusl*). After *wuḍū*⁹ with the Tangping, in order to wash the whole body, the Hui use a hanging canister (*diaoguan*), which is a round bucket hanging from a rope, with either a reed tap or holes in the bottom and filled with warm water – thus making a kind of a simple shower (see fig. 2). For heating the water, no cooking utensils should be used but instead a separate kettle, and the Tangping is often used for that purpose.¹¹ Nowadays the hanging canisters may still be used in the countryside, but in cities, they are often replaced by showers – bath tubs are not favoured among Muslims in general.

[The Hui still use the Tangping] because the Hui people (*Huihuiminzu*) are *qingzhen* which means clean (*ganjing*). In this pot you could heat water and then wash. This pot contains 2,5 *jin* [1250 g] of water, and the Hui must use running water for washing. Only one person uses the water of one pot for washing. Then the water flows out. (CS, healer, Xi'an, 26 March 2000.)

8 For detailed instructions on how to perform the ablutions, see e.g. *Musilin daquan*, pp. 37–46.

9 Li Shujiang (1999: 37), however, claims that Tangping is only used for washing the hands and the face.

10 This is not surprising, since after all, paper, including toilet paper, was invented in China. The famous Muslim traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1304–1368-9 or 1377), who visited China during the Yuan dynasty, tells of the use of paper with abhorrence (*Ibn Baṭṭūṭa* II, pp. 248–249).

11 MB, researcher, Xi'an 26 March 2000; Li 1989: 39; *Huhehaote Huizu shi*, pp. 306–307.

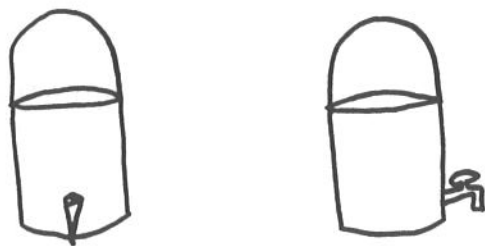


Fig. 2. Drawings of two different kinds of “hanging canisters” (*diaoguan*) for washing the whole body. They used to be of earthenware (*waguar*), with a reed (*lu*) tap for the water to flow out. Nowadays a plastic bucket may be equipped with a tap and used for the same purpose.

THE TANGPING

Tangpings come in various forms and materials. They were formerly made of brass, bronze, copper or ceramic material, but nowadays more often of aluminium or plastic. There are even wooden Tangpings. In spite of the name “hot water bottle”, the Tangping is actually not a bottle at all. It is called *ping*, ‘bottle’ because the mouth is narrow to prevent dirt from entering, but the belly is big.¹² The Hui Tangping always has a lid (*gai*), a handle (*ba*), and a high rising mouth or spout (*gaoqiao huzui*).¹³ There are several local variations of Tangping (see fig. 3).

Sometimes, besides being referred to as a “bottle”, the Tangping is also called a “pot” in the sense of a washing pot (*xihu*). In the words of a young Muslim woman:

We use the Tangping in ablutions before prayers – it is a pot (*hu*) – because we are very clean (*ganjing*). We perform prayers five times daily, and we perform ablutions each time according to the Qur’an. This is the small wash: washing the face and so on. (QT, teacher, Lanzhou, 15 September 1999.)

The Tangping is sometimes even called a “tea-pot” (*chahu*). This is especially true of the pictorial representations of the Tangping on Hui restaurants and food kiosks, which are interpreted as tea-pots not only by non-Muslims but also by Muslims themselves. All the Hui unanimously told me that the Tangping on restaurants conveys the meaning that the food offered is *qingzhen*, that is, pure according to Islamic standards. I have mostly seen this symbol in association with foodstuffs. Other Islamic items sold under the symbol of *qingzhen* would use a calligraphic representation of either the Chinese characters for *qingzhen* or some Arabic formu-

12 On this explanation see e.g. *Tangping de gushi*, p. 38.

13 See the description in *Huhehaote Huizu shi*, p. 305.



Fig. 3. Various Tangpings. From the top: a Tangping from Xi'an, made of tin; a wooden one from Beijing, with a spout of sheep bone; an aluminium one from Linxia (also comes in plastic, see fig. 4); and a widely used copper one (see also fig. 5).



Fig. 4. A plastic Tangping produced in Linxia, Gansu, here in use in a Hui public bath in Xining, Qinghai. The yellowish color is in imitation of brass, which was probably the original material.



Fig. 5. A copper Tangping from the mid-Qing a dynasty (1644–1911, thus probably early 19th century). From the collections of the Inner Mongolia Museum, Hohhot.

las such as *bismi llāhi al-raḥmāni al-raḥīm*, or *lā ilāha illā Allāh* – although these could be attached to food as well.¹⁴ The connection with food may be the original meaning of the term *zhen*, which appears in early sacrificial texts related to “ritual cooking”.¹⁵

14 It is to be noted that for other Muslim minorities, the calligraphic representation of *qingzhen* is used alone; e.g. Uighur restaurants do not use Tangping symbol.

15 Vernon Fowler, *The Truth about zhen*. *Asian Review* 1(1): 26–42 (1987), p. 41. Quoted in Gladney 1996: 12.



Fig. 6. A Tangping over a restaurant entrance in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia. Note the steam rising from the pot.



Fig. 7. A Tangping over a restaurant entrance in Lanzhou, Gansu. Note the calligraphy inside the pot, reading "There is no god but God".



Fig. 8. A non-Tangping representation of *qingzhen* in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, reading "There is no god but God". The items sold are women's underwear, but the board advertises for "qingzhen fried chicken".

My informants often had different ideas of what to call the pot above restaurant entrances: some called it a tea-pot, others a Tangping, while others said they were one and the same. However, it seems odd that a tea-pot would have been chosen as a symbol for the Islamic purity required in foodstuffs as well as in personal hygiene.

THE COMING OF TANGPING TO CHINA

It is of importance here to look at the possible explanations of the origins of the Tangping and how it is said to have come to China. Some of these explanations are as mythical as the explanation of how Islam came to China. According to Hui folklore, the first Muslims settled in China during the Tang dynasty, the golden period of Chinese history (618–907), although there is no historical evidence of this.¹⁶ This is also when the first Tangping is said to have entered China.

There is a story known among the Hui in which the Tangping plays a role. A Tang emperor had a dream in which one of the roof beams of his palace fell down. Then there appeared a figure dressed in a green robe, wearing a white scarf on his head and a scarf on his shoulders, with deep-set eyes, and holding the long nose of a Tangping (*Tangping de gaobi*) in his hand. The following day the emperor asked a specialist on dreams for the meaning of this strange dream. He was told that the beam fell because the Tang dynasty was nearing its end. The white scarf and the Tangping referred to the Hui people of the West who would come to rescue the dynasty. As a result, the emperor sent for sixteen “Hui” to come from Dashiguo (Arabia) (*Tangping de gushi*, pp. 36–37). After a few years, there were rebellions in the country, and the emperor asked Dashiguo for help. The king of Dashiguo sent Wan Garsi with 5000 soldiers, and since the Arabs were good at horseback riding and archery, the rebellion was soon suppressed. Wan Garsi and more than 300 men stayed in Chang’an (today’s Xi’an), married local women and built a mosque in Chang’an (*Tangping de gushi*, pp. 37–38).

There are three main characters in the story. The man in the green robe was none other than the prophet Muhammed, who thus encouraged the use of the Tangping, and Wan Garsi (also spelled Wan Gasi) was Sa’ad ibn ‘Alī Waqqās, the Prophet’s companion, who, according to one version of the story, was sent to China by the prophet Muhammed himself (Li & Luckert 1994: 237–243). The Tang emperor is sometimes identified as Yonghui, who in 651 (31 AH) received an Arab delegation sent by Caliph ‘Uthmān and consisting of fifteen men led by ibn ‘Alī

16 We know that a Muslim army sent by the Umayyad caliph al-Walidi and led by Qutayba ibn Muslim al-Bahili arrived from Samarqand to Kashgar (Kashi) in 714 (96 AH) (Kettani 1986: 84). Whether any these men remained in China and thus became the ancestors of today’s Hui is doubtful.

Waqqās, thus forming the sixteen “Hui” of the story. However, the story receives no confirmation from Arab sources (Kettani 1986: 84). Sometimes the emperor is identified as Wu De (618–626),¹⁷ sometimes as Li Shimin. The latter is also said to have invited ibn ‘Alī Waqqās to China (Li & Luckert 1994: 237–243; Gladney 1998: 111). Li Shimin was the personal name of emperor Taizong (r. 626–649 AD), “Grand Ancestor”. He was a great strategist and the first Chinese ruler to attain power over the Turkic peoples of Mongolia. He expanded the Tang empire into Central Asia, reviving the old Silk Road, and as a result many foreign merchants settled in Chang’an. He was also a good civil administrator and interested in religious matters, even if he favoured Confucianism (Perkins 1999, s.v. Taizong; Hucker 1975: 141–142). Taizong would thus be a suitable candidate for the role of a ruler who invited Muslims to China.¹⁸

Common to all the versions of the story is that they trace the arrival of Islam to the early Tang dynasty, i.e. the first part of the 7th century. It is worth noting that in this story, as well as in many other oral communications, these first Muslims are referred to as the “Hui” – a term developed much later and not covering all the Muslims of China. As for the predicted downfall of the dynasty, it reflects the situation in the 8th century when there were anti-Tang rebellions (see below). In this story, the rescue of this most glorious period of Chinese history is attributed to Muslims. According to Dru Gladney, the legend dates from the 18th–19th centuries and may dimly reflect the actual facts. It is “still repeated among the Hui who share the common belief that Islam entered China during the Tang dynasty at the emperor’s invitation” (Gladney 1998: 111). All my Hui informants shared the same view. There are several folk etymological explanations connected with the mythical beginning of Islam in China. One is the name of the Hui: since Wan Garsi became homesick and wanted to return (回 *hui*) home, the emperor is said to have called him *Hui*, ‘the returner’ (Li & Luckert 1994: 243, n. 7; 247).¹⁹

The connection of the Hui with the Tang dynasty is emphasised so much that even the origin of the Tangping is traced to that era. Consequently I began to wonder if there might be a connection between the name of the Tang dynasty and the Tangping – even if the characters and tones are different. Some of my informants

17 During Wu De’s reign, two saints, Imam Sayyid and Imam Waqqās, are said to have visited southern China. They are buried in the Aṣḥāb mosque in Quanzhou, founded in 1009–1010 (Gladney 1987: 498).

18 It was during Taizong’s reign that “the Chinese Buddhist monk Xuanzang (Hsuan-tsang, c. 602–664) made a pilgrimage from 629 to 645 to Buddhist centers in India, where he collected scriptures and brought them back to Chang’an for translation. Emperor Taizong built him a retreat called the Great Wild Goose Pagoda, which can still be seen in Xi’an.” (Perkins 1999, s.v. Taizong.)

19 The origin of the term Hui has been treated widely elsewhere, and will therefore not be discussed here. See e.g. Gladney 1996: 15–16, with ample references.

denied any connection between the two words, others where doubtful. An educated Hui in Lanzhou expressed his doubts:

During the Tang dynasty many foreign merchants came to China, and there are many sayings related to the Tang dynasty. But it has not been researched. The *Tang* in Tangping is not the *Tang* in Tang dynasty. That *Tang* means hot water, liquid, it is a water bottle (*shuipingzi*), and has nothing to do with the Tang dynasty. (GZ, Hui administrator, Lanzhou, 21 September 1999.)

One Imam, however, said: “Yes, I think there must be a connection between the Tangping and the Tang dynasty, but this should be studied” (YG, Imam, Lanzhou, 16 September 1999).²⁰

A connection was found in a Hui story in which Wan Garsi and his men brought with them their “Arab-style washing pots (*xihu*) made of gold and bronze to wash (*jing*) themselves before prayers” (*Tangping de gushi*, p. 38). In one version, a golden Tangping was given to ibn ‘Alī Waqqās by the Tang emperor himself (*Wan Gasi*, pp. 86–88).²¹ Because all this took place during the Tang dynasty, people called this pot “Tang [dynasty] bottle” (唐瓶 *Tangping*), and later generations of Hui started calling it “hot water bottle” (湯瓶 *Tangping*) (*Tangping de gushi*, p. 37). The confusion is understandable, since the difference in pronunciation is only a difference of tones. This folk etymological explanation thus reveals a tendency to trace the Tangping to the glorious dynasty.

MODELS OF THE TANGPING

Since the first Muslims came from the West, from the Arab countries and Persia, it is there we must look for the first models of the Tangping. When Muslims came as merchants along the Silk Road, they brought with them all their necessary utensils, including the cans used for personal hygiene and ablutions. Whenever Muslims entered new areas in the early years of Islam, the concern with which they performed their daily washings and ablutions must have been keenly observed by the locals, who in adopting Islam also adopted their use of water vessels and other items. The frequent washings and the high standard of hygiene must have set them

20 The same view is shared by a scholar in Hohhot: “The Tangping is closely connected with Islam, and it has a relation with the Tang dynasty, even if there are many views. Some say that during the Tang dynasty an emperor invited some Western ambassadors who used the Tangping, and the emperor became interested.” (DL, publisher and editor, Hohhot, 3 September 1999.)

21 See also Li & Luckert 1994: 237–238; photograph 1 with text, according to which it is called a Tang kettle, because it was given to Wan Garsi, the legendary founder of Islam in China, by a Tang emperor.

apart from others, in the same way as the Hui of today claim to be different by reason of their cleanliness, as many of my informants put it.

In the Middle East and North Africa, Muslims used – and still use today – beautiful ewers made of brass, copper or bronze to wash their hands after meals, as hands are used for eating. These ewers all have a long, slender spout, and can hold up to 4 to 5 liters of water (Allan 1985: 248–252, and picture plates 271, 281, 293, 294). In various parts of the Middle East, similar ewers were used for heating wine or another intoxicating drink, called in Arabic *qahwa*. The same ewers were later used for preparing coffee (*qahwa*) after coffee became generally known in the Middle East by the mid-15th century (tea became popular only after it had been introduced from China).²² This pot was called *ibrīq*, which according to E. W. Lane's dictionary is an Arabicized Persian word meaning "a ewer, such as is used for wine and also such as is used for water to be poured on the hands, each having a long slender spout, and a handle" (Lane 1865, s.v. *'b-r-q*). In Iran, this kind of ewer is called an *aftabe*. An *ibrīq* is perfect for boiling liquids quickly, using the least possible amount of fuel – which makes it suitable for areas where wood is scarce. There is a description of a typical coffee *ibrīq* by a 17th-century Frenchman:

In the Levant, for cooking coffee they use a type of kettle made of copper, tinned inside and out, of a rather particular design, which has still not been duplicated in France. They call it an *ibrīq*. ... I've found it quite suitable for this purpose, since the base, which is broad, receives more of the flame, in consequence of which the water boils more quickly. Additionally, the opening is quite narrow, to better retain the volatile essence of the brew.²³

In Ralph S. Hattox's book on the history of coffee we find a description of what an early coffee pot, "the classical *ibrīq*", looked like (Hattox 1985, plate 3; see fig. 9). The ewer used for washing the hands was also called an *ibrīq*, but it had a long curved spout. In China, similar pots appear in the Song dynasty (960–1127): "For hot water or warmed wine, tall ewers with long spouts and fluted sides had appeared as early as the Song dynasty, in both silver and ceramic ware" (Mowry 1993: 143). They continue through Ming (1368–1644), although to a lesser extent, and Qing (1644–1911), when they occasionally appear in paintings and prints. These pots are described as "tall, cylindrical ewers with short necks, long spouts, and ornamented handles" (Mowry 1993: 143–144).

22 The word *qahwa* refers both to wine and to a drink made either of coffee beans or the stimulating leaves of the *qāt* shrub growing in the Yemen. Coffee became generally used in the Arab lands by the mid-15th century, but how much earlier it was known is uncertain. The Sufis used *qahwa* during their *dhikr* sessions, which were often held at night, and a legend ascribes the spread of *qahwa* to some Sufi *shaykhs*, one of whom is said to have been from Mocha, around the early 15th century. (Hattox 1985: 16–24.)

23 Philippe Sylvestre Dufour, *Traité nouveaux et curieux du café, du thé et du chocolat*, Lyon 1685, p. 57, quoted in Hattox 1985: 86.



Fig. 9. "A classical *ibriq*", or coffee pot, from Turkey. Note that the spout is short to prevent the coffee from cooling off while being poured. From a 17th-century painting. (Philippe Sylvestre Dufour, *Traité nouveaux et curieux du café, du thé et du chocolat*, Lyon 1685, p. 57; in Hattox 1985, plate 3).

These Chinese pots obviously have their roots in the Middle East, although this question needs further study.²⁴ Talking about the Iranian ewers called *aftabe*, Robert Mowry writes:

Proof that ewers of this type found their way to China, awaits discovery, but the similarity of form to Chinese ewers suggests they might have, a realistic possibility given trade relations between China and the Middle East in Ming times, not to mention 16th-century Chinese interest in Islam (Mowry 1993: 134).

All these ewers were connected with drinking or washing hands after meals, not with ablutions. In the Middle East, *wuḍū'* and *ghusl* were performed with various pails, such as are also used in *ḥammāms*, or public baths.²⁵ They followed the example of the Prophet, who used open bowls, cups or vases made of brass, bronze, stone or earthenware, some of which may have looked like cans, too (*al-Bukhārī* I, pp. 82–83, 85–87). It can be imagined that the Chinese traded with Western Muslims or otherwise obtained some *ibriqs* and that the Chinese Muslims, instead of limiting their use to simply washing their hands after meals, started using them for ritual ablutions, thus confusing the function. It is, however, beyond the scope of this study to determine when this actually took place. This is a natural idea, when we consider that the Chinese do not eat with their hands but use chop-sticks, and thus there is no need for hand-washing after meals. Later the Chinese Muslims produced ewers and pots of their own, imitating the shape of the original *ibriqs*, and using not only metal, but also Chinese materials such as ceramic material as well. Since they used to heat the water, they called their washing cans "hot water bottles".

24 "Often said to be of Middle Eastern form, ewers of this type are firmly rooted in Chinese tradition, though they reflect a degree of influence from Persian metalwork" (Mowry 1993: 133).

25 For a description of such pails, see e.g. Allan 1985. The Bedouins of the Northern Arabian Peninsula still use three different kinds of pots today: brass pots with long curved spouts for coffee; round aluminium or enamel kettles with a handle on the top for tea; and simple pitchers made of plastic or tin, resembling watering cans used in gardens, for toilet purposes (information from Professor Heikki Palva, University of Helsinki, February 2000).

In the Middle Eastern countries, the climate is warm for most of the year, and the water used for washing does not need to be hot. The situation is different in North and Northwestern China, where temperatures can stay well below freezing point for long periods, and using warm water to wash is thus a necessity. It is not surprising that the newly converted Chinese Muslims would have heated even the water used for ablutions. For this purpose, they would definitely not use any of their own cooking utensils, but rather something that already bore an Islamic stamp: vessels or cans used by Western Muslims. They thus adopted the elegant *ibrīq*, or *aftabe*.²⁶ That the Tangpings were actually heated on the fire can be seen from figure 5, which shows a Tangping made in China but imitating the Arab style: it is made of copper and has a blackened lower part caused by smoke rising from the fire. Some of the Hui also share the idea of the Tangping's Western origin. A Hui healer in Xi'an noted:

It is originally from Pakistan, originally it was a wine-pot (*jiuhu*). But when it came to China, the Hui who believed in Islam adopted it and started using it for washing. All along the Silk Road these kinds of water-pots (*shuihu*) were hung up. It is used for washing hands. ... This is not something the Chinese people invented (CS, healer, Xi'an, 26 March 2000.)

A Hui scholar from Xi'an said that the model for the Tangping was that of the winepots (*jiuhu*), or *khimra*, of the 'Abbās dynasty, which have a big belly. Later he said that "the first pictures of the Tangping look like Arab pots, but in the Northwest and in Yunnan, the shape is not the same but has adopted the Chinese form. The first pictures of the Tangping look like Arab *wuḍū*' pots" (MB, researcher, Xi'an, 24 March 2000). Another Hui from Xi'an expressed the idea as follows: "The Tangping thus came from the Arab countries. It is not of Chinese origin, but the form has changed" (MZ, wushu teacher, Xi'an, 24 March 2000).

Even if in some cases the form of the *ibrīq* really has changed, continuity of the form can sometimes be seen. The 17th-century *ibrīq* shown here (fig. 9) is identical in form with one from 1999 published on the cover of a Chinese collection of Hui folklore stories and entitled "The Golden Tangping", the text of which runs below in Arabic: *ibrīq dhahabī*. The original *ibrīq* shaped Tangping is today mostly seen as a symbolic representation of *qingzhen* on restaurants.

26 It may be noted that the Persian word *aftabe* probably comes from *ab*, 'water', and *tabe*, "a vessel in which water or food is warmed", and thus means "a vessel in which water is warmed". They were originally made of bronze, brass, iron, or even of silver or gold, but are nowadays mostly of plastic (information from Dr. Morteza Alamolhoda, University of Helsinki, June 2000).



Fig. 10. A symbol resembling a tea-pot, a picture of a mosque and the words *God* and *Muhammed* outside an Islamic shop selling Qurans and Islamic literature, skull caps, scarves, Tangpings and other items in Lanzhou, Gansu (cf. fig. 7 where you have a clearly *ibrīq* shaped Tangping).



Fig. 11. Two Tangpings photographed in Xi'an. The brass one on the left is from Xi'an and resembles a watering can, the other resembles a tea-pot and is from Linxia (cf. figs. 3, 4 and 5). The owner of the cans, a traditional Hui healer, said that both are used for ablutions, but that originally, "during the Tang dynasty", the *ibrīq* would have been used for warming wine.

THE TANGPING AS A TEA-POT

As noted earlier, the Tangping is sometimes referred to as a tea-pot, which it may resemble in form. This is understandable and probably due to others rather than Muslims themselves. Muslims would know that the can stood for ablutions and thus cleanliness, but others unfamiliar with its significance interpreted it as a tea-pot, which of course was a very common object in China. The tea-pot as we know it today is quite a recent invention in China. Steeped tea was probably invented during Yuan, or early Ming, i.e. in the 13th–14th centuries, and soon “Chinese potters began to produce ceramic pots specially designed for brewing tea” (Mowry 1993: 124, n. 28,1). Earlier, during the Tang and Song periods, tea was prepared in bowls, and bronze ewers were used to heat the water for tea (Mowry 1993: 124, n. 28,1). These ewers were the ones referred to above.

There are various stories about how this symbol of a tea-pot Tangping came to be on restaurant doors. In one of the stories, there was an army uprising in Cangzhou, Hebei province, towards the end of the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). One of the rebel officers was wounded, but a young woman in a nearby village had seen it happen and took the officer to her own home to look after him. Only after he had recovered did the officer learn that the people in the village were Muslims and used the Tangping for washing. To express his gratitude the officer told the girl that from now on, each Hui should hang a Tangping at the door, and his army would protect them. Gradually, hanging Tangpings at restaurant doors and in other places became a custom used to denote *qingzhen* (*Tangping de gushi*, pp. 38–39).²⁷

That the Tangping hung at doors was interpreted as a tea-pot is clear from another story, resembling the previous one. During the Tang dynasty, under the reign of Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–756), northern troops attacked a village. The commanding general promised a kind-hearted Hui woman called Aunt Sha that he would order his troops to spare anyone who had a turnip hung at their door. Busy seeing that all the villagers learned the news and donating her last turnip to a neighbor, the poor woman was left with nothing but a tea-pot that she hung at her door. All the other villagers were spared except her, and they wept in gratitude (Li & Luckert 1994: 203–205).²⁸ The story of Aunt Sha, who hung a tea-pot at her door instead of a turnip, is used to explain why the Hui use “a tilted tea-pot” as their symbol.

27 Interestingly, Cangzhou is famous today for its Hui martial arts. See Liu 1997.

28 This story, recorded in 1984 in Ningxia, is also used to explain the origin of the family name Sha in Ningxia, and so it adds: “As a result, many Han people desired to convert to Islam. Nowadays, nine out of ten Hui people in this area are surnamed Sha” (Li & Luckert 1994: 205).

At first the people would hang a teapot at their doors, on festivals and holidays. Later they put only a picture of a teapot there. The picture image still looks little tilted. ... In the teahouses, inns, and shops which are run by Hui people, at least two or three teapots can be found (Li & Luckert 1994: 205–206.)

This story perhaps reflects the anti-Tang rebellion of 755, led by An Lushan, the Turkish governor-general of modern Hubei province. It led to the Emperor Xuanzong's downfall. Tang troops suppressed the rebellion in 757 (Perkins 1999, s.v. Xuanzong).²⁹ In these stories, a virtuous woman saves the Muslim community from destruction through generosity and self-sacrifice, a common theme in folklore all over the Islamic world. Because of her, the Muslims obtained a new symbol, a tea-pot. "When selling foodstuffs, some people place this pot among their goods. This pot thus represents (*daibiao*) *qingzhen*" (MB, researcher, Xi'an, 24 March 2000).

THE TANGPING AS A SYMBOL OF PURITY AND ETHNICITY

All my informants connect the Tangping symbol with purity and cleanliness. The term *qingzhen* ('pure' and 'true', or 'authentic'), used by the Hui to express the ideas connected with what is pure in Islamic terms, does not translate easily. Dru Gladney maintains that it is wider in meaning than the Arabic term of *ḥalāl*.

The concept of *qing zhen*, I argue, reveals two aspects of Islam in China central to Hui community interests and self-understanding: purity (*qing*), in the sense of ritual cleanliness and moral conduct; and truth (*zhen*), in the sense of authenticity and legitimacy. This wider meaning of *qing zhen* goes beyond the Arabic term *halal*, as *qing zhen* is sometimes translated, for it involves much more than ritually prepared food according to Islamic dietary prescriptions. (Gladney 1998: 28.)

Gladney sees *ḥalāl* in the narrow sense of defining which foods are allowed for Muslims, but the term has a much wider range of usage. *Ḥalāl* is a term denoting anything that is not specifically forbidden legally (*ḥarām*), even if *ḥalāl* does not form a category of its own in the legal definition of human acts. A person described as *ḥalāl* is a person who is legally eligible to be a spouse. Interestingly, Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is more interested in the definition of what is legally forbidden (*ḥarām*) than what is permitted (*ḥalāl*). Consequently in books of jurisprudence the definition of *ḥalāl* is to be sought under its opposite, *ḥarām*. Similarly, in defining ritual purity (*ṭahāra*), the negative, forbidden aspect (what should be avoided i.e. any dirt) is presented together with the positive, permitted – or here, required – aspect (what should be done i.e. keeping the body clean through certain

29 Xuanzong, also called Minghuang, 'the Brilliant Emperor', was a great patron of fine arts who favoured Buddhism.

acts). In a way, the concept and practice of *ṭahāra*, or ritual purity, combines both *ḥarām* and *ḥalāl*. In carrying out the regulations of *ṭahāra*, a Tangping is essential.

Gladney compares *qingzhen* with the concept of *ṭahāra*, and in my view both terms indeed come close to the same meaning, and in fact overlap in many ways. As I went shopping in a Hui market in Hohhot, the lady behind the counter answered my question: “Yes, all the goods here are *qingzhen*”, and then curiously added, “are you *qingzhen*, too (*ni ye shi qingzhen ma*)?” She obviously wanted to know whether I was *muṭahhara*, ritually pure, and the underlying question of course was “are you a Muslim, too?” Here we can see how synonymous the concepts of purity and Islam are. It is unlikely that she had doubts about my impure touch rendering her items unclean, since according to Islamic regulations concerning purity all human beings are pure. Pollution therefore cannot take place through human contact, even if, from the Muslim point of view, the person were an infidel (Bousquet 1950: 54–55).³⁰

We have already seen how the Tangping is used in personal hygiene. It also has other uses: for example, before slaughtering animals according to *ḥalāl* principles, the Imam prays over the animal, after having washed his hands using the Tangping (fig. 12). This is not a complete *wuḍūʿ* but part of the rite of sacrifice. On the impurity of blood various notions occur within Islam, but the main idea is that it is impure (Bousquet 1950: 58).

The symbolic value of Tangping is especially clear when it is not used for ablutions but only as a symbol of purity and “Hui-ness”. A Hui told me that the roundish Tangping was used earlier in Xi’an when getting married.

A mother would give her daughter two pots. They would not be used but placed on top of a large cupboard (*guizi*). When we got married, my wife also received them [from her mother], they are of brass (MB, researcher, Xi’an, 26 March 2000).

Here the two pots obviously stand for the married couple, denoting that both are *qingzhen* or pure, and that they follow Islamic norms.

The meaning of the Tangping symbol above restaurant doors is that the food and the place are suitable for Muslims. A Hui in Hohhot said that the Tangping (he interchangeably also called it a tea-pot) is pictured on the restaurants “to show that the place is *qingzhen*, that is, clean, because the pot is used for washing” (ZQ, wushu teacher, Hohhot, 31 August 1999). As such, it has come to “represent Islam and *qingzhen* foodstuffs. If you buy some snacks, there is a Tangping. Before meals everyone washes their hands, therefore the Tangping represents Islam” (DL, publisher and editor, Hohhot, 3 September 1999). Another Hui says: “The Tangping pot (*Tangpinghu*) is used for washing before prayers, and therefore represents

30 However, the application of this matter among the Hui needs further study, given the possible Jewish and Shiite influence.



Fig. 12. Celebrating the *ku'erbanjie* ('*id al-adha*) in the Xincheng mosque (Xinchengqingzhensi), Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, in March 2000. The *ahong* (Imam), dressed in black and wearing a beard, is praying over the animals after having washed his hands using the Tangping (held by a man on the right).

Muslims" (BW, wushu teacher, Hohhot, 26 August 1999). That the Muslims are clean and observe hygiene is still one of the first – and often the very first – points mentioned by the Hui when asked how they differ from other ethnic groups in China. In their need to follow the regulations of purity they used the symbol of the Tangping to show the quality and origin of the food they had.

The Hui are not distinguished from others through their cleanliness regulations alone. The fact of their foreign origin is also a vital factor in defining their ethnic identity, of which the Tangping serves as a reminder. The Tangping thus not only symbolizes the *qingzhen* quality of the food, but also shows that the place is specifically reserved for a group called the Hui. I consider the "tea-pot" explanation a later, distorted variation of an original idea connecting the Tangping with pure, because it is hard to find a reason why the tea-pot, an everyday object in China, would have been chosen to symbolize Islam and its purity. It is more natural to think that Muslims would have chosen a symbol that clearly distinguished them from others. A very appropriate symbol would be the water can used for ablutions, since it was precisely the ablutions that most clearly distinguished the Muslims from their new neighbors. The *ibrīq* Tangping symbol also showed the foreign origin of the Hui, as expressed by a Hui scholar in Xi'an:

There are two views: one is that when the Arabs were in the desert, the camels carried the Tangping. This is one view, but it has no textual evidence. Another view is that in olden times there were *qingzhen* restaurants that hung the picture of the Tangping at the door of the restaurant. It was used by Arab and Persian people to show that their place is special. It showed others that these were foreign guests and used this kind of symbol (*biaozhi*). This is one view but it has not been studied. (MB, researcher, Xi'an, 23 September 1999.)

Later he told me about a legend traced back to the days of the Chinggis Khan. During the Yuan dynasty all the officials had to wear a symbol of some kind to denote their ethnic origin. The plate used by Muslims had a pot drawn on it.

When eating you would then know that the person did not eat pork, and from this it slowly developed into the *qingzhen* symbol for foodstuffs. ... When this sign was hung up you knew that there was no *henzeire* (from Arabic *khinzir*, pork). If there was no sign hung up, you would not go in. Nowadays we use these large boards [on restaurants]. (MB, researcher, Xi'an, 26 March 2000.)

The symbolism of the Tangping seems to be relevant only to the Hui themselves, since many people of other nationalities with whom I discussed it had no idea of its meaning. This is in conformity with many ethnic markers which have meaning to the tradition carriers alone. They seem to consolidate and maintain the notion of "us", as a particular group of people who share the same symbols. Sometimes it is even undesirable that other people learn about the hidden symbolic meanings – to be in the society and yet outside it is one factor that confirms ethnic identity.³¹

CONCLUSIONS

The Hui Tangping was originally a metal pot, *ibrīq*, or *aftabe*, used for washing hands after meals or for warming wine. The new Chinese converts adopted it from Arabic and Persian merchants and started using it for their ablutions. It is clear that for the Hui, the Tangping is more than a can used for ablutions. Even if washing facilities have improved, many still prefer to use the Tangping at least in mosques: they fill the can from the tap.

The idea of the Tangping – whether it comes in the shape of a slender ewer (*ibrīq*) or of a plump tea-pot – is to remind Muslims of cleanliness as required by Islamic regulations. This is indicated by its symbolic representation at restaurants. Since the Tangping is associated with Islamic hygiene and the tea-pot with food, the merging of these two meanings represents, in consequence, the purity of the food-

31 This ambivalence is perfectly expressed in the title of Jonathan Lipman's book, *Familiar Strangers. (Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northern China.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997.)

stuffs. In its symbolism, a clean body and pure food are connected with the correct Islamic way of life, crystallized in the concept of *ṭahāra*. This makes Tangping a very physical symbol, which is closely connected with the body and its well-being defined along Islamic guidelines.

The Tangping was an object that looked sufficiently different to distinguish the Hui from others. Gradually it became the symbol of Chinese Islam and the *qing-zhen* lifestyle. The Tangping symbol also shows that the place is run by or reserved for the Hui minority, and thus acts as a marker for their ethno-religious identity. The symbol receives more prestige by being traced back to a mythical past, the golden Tang dynasty when the first Muslim ancestors are said to have come to China, not as conquerors but as invited guests who helped to rescue the state. Whether this is historically the case or not, it creates for the Hui an important status within Chinese society and supplies their Tangping symbol with a long history that is ultimately traced back to the prophet Muhammed himself and thus connects the Chinese Hui with their brothers and sisters in the Arabian Peninsula.

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