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EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

Chinese Islam: A Complete Concert

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Jonathan Lipman, ed. *Islamic Thought in China: Sino-Muslim Intellectual Evolution from the 17th to the 21st Century*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.

Roberta Tontini. *Muslim Sanzijing: Shifts and Continuities in the Definition of Islam in China*. Leiden: Brill, 2016.

Mathew S. Erie. *China and Islam: The Prophet, the Party, and Law*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

China's people are so numerous [that it is a] small wonder we had not noticed those five or ten millions of Mohammedans among them. Yet there is a mosque in every sizable city, thirty perhaps in Peking, schools for the teaching of Arabic, mullahs who speak Arabic, Chinamen who have pilgrimaged to Mecca, and China-men who pray toward Mecca with sacred if uncomprehended, Arabic words. No province is without its Moslem contingent, though in Fukien, opposite Formosa, they number but a thousand. Fairly half the total of the Empire live in the western provinces, Kansu, which marches with Mongolia and Tibet and Yunnan on the Burman border.

This passage was the opening of a 1911 review of the first comprehensive English-language book on Chinese Islam and its history (Jefferson 1911). And, indeed, one of the intriguing features accompanying the Western study of and discourse about China's Islam and Muslims is the urge to "rediscover" them from time to time. We somehow forget that there are Muslims in China until we reencounter them. In the book in question, the famous missionary to China and historian Marshall Broomhall (1866–1937) declared that Islam in China was a "neglected problem" (Broomhall 1910). Broomhall's original intention was to state that the Muslims of

China have been “neglected” as a target for missionary activities, but his book was an excellent scholarly work concerning the history and life of Islam and Muslims in China. In 1924, the great Arab intellectual Shakib Arslan (1869–1946) declared that, concerning “the Muslims of China, it is as if they are not from this world” (Muslimu al-Sīn, ka’inahum laysū min hadihi al-dunyā) (Arslan 1924, 168).

China’s Islam, and China’s Muslim population, were not exactly “neglected,” as Broomhall declared. His statement disregarded a long, and quite “thick,” history of Western observation and conversation concerning China’s Muslims. Since early Tang times, China has shared its longest, and deepest, borders with the Islamic world. China interacted with the Islamic world in Central Asia and the Indian Ocean from as early as the ninth century and more so since the tenth (Mackintosh-Smith 2011, 2014).¹ China and the Muslim world have had a complex, multifaceted, multifocal and geographically diverse history of exchanges and relationships since well before the arrival of the first early modern Europeans in China in the late 1600s. This history produced the collectivity we know today as “China’s Muslims”—the names one could use for them are many and debated—and created what we now call Chinese Islam.² European observations, and bewilderment, concerning the presence of Muslims in China produced a rather rich body of knowledge comprising Jesuit, Russian, and French studies and observations of this intriguing phenomenon. Shortly after his arrival in China in the 1580s, the famous Jesuit Matteo Ricci (1552–1610) mentioned encountering Muslims in China. Ricci was intrigued by their presence and spent time thinking about their origins, what they were doing in China, and what their religious orientations were. Ricci seems to have moved from viewing China’s Muslims as complete strangers to accepting the fact that they were somehow “at home” in China.³ After Ricci, Russian missionaries asked similar questions about Muslims in China during the early nineteenth century (and, ironically, compared them to the “evil” and conniving Jesuits).⁴ Between the second half of the nineteenth century and the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, Protestant missionaries like Broomhall created an impressive body of scholarship on Chinese Islam and Muslims.⁵ At this point, it is also important to briefly mention two other bodies of scholarship on Islam in China, both of which are connected more directly than missionary work to colonial projects. During the late nineteenth century, French officers based in Indochina produced several important studies on the Muslims of Yunnan, a southwestern Chinese province that is home to a sizable Chinese Muslim population.⁶ Japanese

interest in Chinese Islam, a complex issue closely related to Japan's interests in different parts of Asia and to Pan-Asianism, began to rise at the turn of the twentieth century. It peaked during the 1920s and 1930s, when Japan occupied vast territories in eastern China.⁷

After 1949, Western scholarship on Chinese Islam almost entirely ceased.⁸ In the late 1970s, after the end of the Cultural Revolution, a period of relaxation of the state's grip on religious life and the opening up of China, Western observation and study of Chinese Islam resumed; however, it took another decade and a half for the fruit of this research to ripen. Several books published during the 1990s and early 2000s helped set a new agenda for the scholarship and deserve to be mentioned here. Anthropologist Dru Gladney's *Muslim Chinese: Ethnic Nationalism in the People's Republic* (1996) placed Chinese Muslims at the center by insisting on the "ethnogenesis" of the Hui nationality, as it is known and classified in China today. *Muslim Chinese* was a call for historicizing and contextualizing Chinese Islam. Gladney also set the anthropological/ethnographical tone by presenting four different case studies—focused on villagers in Ningxia, two types of urban communities in Beijing, and one family lineage in Fujian, respectively. Chinese Muslims and Chinese Islam were no longer viewed as a monolith, a unified entity that behaves the same way no matter where in China you find it. Gladney's reinterpretation of historian Joseph Fletcher's conception of "tides" in the history of Chinese Islam—the former counted three, the latter added a fourth—also invited greater attention to the dynamic dimension of the history of Chinese Islam and the Hui. Anthropologist Maris Gillette's *Between Mecca and Beijing* (2000) followed with an ethnography of urban Muslim communities in Beijing and Xi'an, introducing the themes of women, consumption, and modernization in contemporary China into the conversation. *The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam*, by Maria Jaschok and Jingjun Shui (2002), provided a unique ethnography of Muslim women's religiosity and religious activity in contemporary China. On the historical side, Jonathan Lipman's *Familiar Strangers: A History of Muslims in Northwest China* (1997) offered the first contextualized historical account of Chinese Muslims in northwest China with a detailed analysis of the on-and-off Muslim violence and rebellions there in the late Qing and early Republican periods. Also looking at the question of Muslims and violence in China, historian David Atwill's *The Chinese Sultanate* (2006) provided a carefully detailed and contextualized account of the Du Wenxiu 杜汶秀 (Panthay) rebellion in Yunnan (1856–1873), focusing on the question of

ethnicity. The latter two studies broke away from the tendency to view violence among Muslims in China as rising from an inherent trait shares with all other Muslims in the world (Israeli 1980), or as the result of state failure concerning the “handling” of minority groups (Chu 1966). On another front, the *Dao of Muhammad* (Ben-Dor Benite 2005a), focusing on the social and intellectual contexts of the formation of the Chinese Islamic canon—the Han Kitab—turned scholarly attention to the Muslims of the east, to the Yangzi Delta (or to what we should be calling now “Grand Canal Muslims”). The *Dao of Muhammad* presented an intellectual history of Chinese Islam during the early modern and modern period. This turn to social and intellectual history showed that the Han Kitab was not a product of random unconnected episodes in which someone wrote something about Islam in Chinese. Rather, the creation of the Han Kitab was closely related to the emergence of a sophisticated, literate elite that was quite conscious of its intellectual project. Socially speaking, this educated elite behaved like any other school of thought in the Confucian world of letters of the time. Its teachers and scholars understood themselves to be Chinese literati in the fullest sense of the word. The Han Kitab scholars self-identified as *shi* 士 (literati), and the body of the knowledge they were learning, preserving, and transmitting was a *dao* 道 (way).⁹ They laid the groundwork for a textual tradition that developed over centuries and, in some regards, continues to develop to this day. There was one big difference between the Han Kitab scholars and other Confucian scholars, of course: the Han Kitab’s “way” was the Dao of Muhammad—Islam. How this all worked in a Chinese social and cultural environment, and what happened when China transitioned to modernity, is a big question with which two of the three books discussed in this essay are concerned. This sketchy overview of the scholarship is not complete without mentioning the translations of Sachiko Murata, a scholar of Persianate Sufi thought (2000, 2009), who offered two invaluable translations of Han Kitab texts—one of Wang Daiyu 王岱輿, a seventeenth-century scholar from Nanjing, and one of Liu Zhi 劉智, also from Nanjing, who was active several decades later.

The handful of books produced over a decade and a half during this new phase of scholarship on Chinese Islam and Muslims signaled a significant shift from previous scholarship. In the past, the study of Chinese Islam was mostly a part of missionary projects (Jesuit, Russian Orthodox, and Protestant) or colonial projects (nineteenth-century French and later Japanese scholarship). The new scholarly phase is independent, at least in the sense that it is not attached

to missionary or colonial projects. This does not mean that knowledge about Chinese Islam produced by missionaries ought to be entirely dismissed, but one can no longer engage with it uncritically. Furthermore, past scholarship seldom gave voice to Chinese Muslims themselves and tended to speak above and around them. When Broomhall, for instance, presented some folktales of Chinese Muslims in his 1910 book, he prefaced his discussion with a passage by the Scottish scholar of Islam Sir William Muir (1819–1905), stating that “the system of pious frauds is not abhorrent from the axioms of Islam. Deception, in the current theology, is, under certain circumstances, allowable” (Broomhall 1910, 60). The blatantly essentialist tone of this statement aside, the fictional nature of the folktales cannot tell us much about Chinese Islam. It can only affirm what we already know about Muslims—they like to deceive, and the Chinese chapter of the Islamic nation (race?) is no different.¹⁰ Contrariwise, the current phase of scholarship engages Chinese Islam far more directly with a conscious effort to give voice to its many aspects. This turn in the scholarship is greatly aided by the fact that the scholarship on Chinese Muslims and Islam in the PRC itself is both flourishing and becoming increasingly productive.¹¹ If, in the past, missionary writing was the primary source for what we knew about Chinese Islam, it is impossible today to work on the topic without engaging with PRC scholarship on Chinese Islam and Muslims. Perhaps the most important turning point in the new scholarship on Chinese Islam and Chinese Muslims is the escape from the single, isolated or exclusive, historical trajectory in which Muslims in China were placed for centuries by Western observers.

Each of the three books reviewed here, therefore, represents what we can certainly call the newest phase in the scholarship, picking up on the achievements of the earlier period and taking the research a giant step forward. In the past ten years, the field has grown tenfold at least, both in China and in the West. Equally importantly, many Chinese Islamic archives have become available to scholars. Of particular interest is the *Huizu Diancang Quanshu* 回族典藏全書 (Wu et al. 2008), a compendium of 235 volumes containing almost everything significant that was ever published in the Chinese Muslim world, as its ambitious name, “Hui Nationality Complete Repository of Significant Items,” suggests. This, in addition to massive projects of digitization of republican archives, has transformed the field (which we can at last call a field).

Islamic Thought in China: Sino-Muslim Intellectual Evolution from the Seventeenth to the Twenty-First Century

Islamic Thought in China, edited by Jonathan Lipman, represents most forcefully the turn to the intellectual history of Chinese Islam. As a whole, the book is in effect a history of the Han Kitab as a textual tradition from its early days until the present. The eight essays in the volume are situated across the Qing/modern China divide (1636–1912/1912 to today). It is important to note that some of the contributors do cross the divide by pointing to continuities and connections between the late imperial and the modern periods. In this regard, the book’s subtitle is apt in the sense that it exposes various milestones in the intellectual history of Chinese Islam. At the same time, the term “evolution” is perhaps inaccurate here in the sense that it implies an inevitable progress that Chinese Islamic thought has undergone over the years—the book is organized chronologically from the late seventeenth century to the early twenty-first. For reasons of intellectual convenience, I discuss the essays in a somewhat different order than they appear in the book.

The opening essay by Lipman himself introduces the question of the creation of the world in the thought of Ma Zhu 馬注 (ca. 1640–1710), a Yunnanese Muslim scholar who lived through the Ming–Qing transition and its immediate aftermath. Ma, who received a classical Chinese education and even managed to serve as a minor official in the Southern Ming court for a short while, is a natural candidate for the opening essay of the volume. He is one of the first scholars who authored an original, as opposed to a translated, Chinese Islamic work. Moreover, his career shows how much the beginning of textual production is rooted in the political, social, and cultural transformations of the early Qing. Ma’s work, the *Qingzhen Zhinan* 清真指南 (Guide [or Compass] to Islam), is one of the best-known Chinese Islamic works. Yet the biography of the book itself during the seventeenth century is different from that of most, if not all, of the Han Kitab books. Most of Han Kitab authors wrote within the social context of the education/scholarly network that took shape and spread in the Yangzi Delta and extended northward, eventually reaching Beijing and incorporating many existing Muslim communities (Ben-Dor Benite 2005a, 21–71). Ma, who spent years in Beijing and returned eventually to Yunnan, wrote outside this network. Moreover, to my mind, his social and intellectual concerns and motivations were somewhat different than those of others in the network. But Ma’s travels to

locations where members of the scholarly community that created the Han Kitab network resided and his exchanges with them certainly make his book part of the corpus of Chinese Islamic knowledge that was being produced mostly in Jiangnan at the time. Lipman is right to put his finger on the most important issue that Ma Zhu grappled with: the question of creation and the natural world. We must remember that, in effect, that question is not only about the created world but about the creator, God, and his relationship with the creation. As Lipman shows, the problem of the created world was, for Ma and for several generations of Chinese Muslim scholars during and after his time, a critical issue.

The scope of this essay does not permit a thorough discussion of this question, but one must highlight why was it such a thorny issue for Chinese Muslim scholars during the late imperial period. As Muslims, they adhered to the principle that the one God created the world. However, as Muslim members of the Chinese educated elite—at least this is how they saw themselves—they had to reconcile this cosmology with that of the Chinese. Ma’s solution to the problem rested on two simple moves. First, he argued that the “various schools of [Chinese] thinkers have not understood the original Mover of Creation” (*Islamic Thought*, 23). Second, he placed Allah “outside,” or beyond, the Chinese (neo-Confucian) cosmological system—with its many operating elements and forces—and claimed that he was their prime mover. Following historian Akiro Matsumoto, Lipman points out that this basic idea had already been circulating among Chinese Muslims in a rudimentary form for at least a century and half. A mosque inscription in Jinan, Shandong, dated to 1528, stated that “all [forces and elements in Chinese cosmology] originated in the Soundless and began with the Formless [God]” (*Islamic Thought*, 17). This small piece of evidence, written by the local imam of that mosque—someone no doubt much less versed in neo-Confucian thought than Ma Zhu—is crucial. This inscription not only shows that Muslims in China had already been struggling with the issue during the mid-Ming period (if not before). In my view, it also reminds us that borrowing ideas and “Islamizing” them—which is what Ma Zhu essentially does—was a known practice in Islam. The prophet did not discredit the revelations to Jews and Christians through the many earlier prophets (*al-anbiyā’*) of God. Rather, the argument was that while the previous messages of God were valid, they were misunderstood or distorted by the people who received them. Thus, from an Islamic point of view, Ma Zhu’s claim that the various Chinese schools lacked understanding concerning the identity of the real prime mover is not necessarily radically innovative. What is new in this case

is the notion of “Islamization,” through inclusion of neo-Confucian Chinese cosmological ideas within an Islamic framework of thinking.

Furthermore, scripture—the Bible and the Qur’an, in this case—only states that God created the world but does not describe *how* it was done. Therefore, the problem of creation (*al-khalq*) became a fertile arena for numerous speculations and theories—mostly in the mystical realms of monotheist religions—about how God “worked.” Think, for instance, of the Sufi thinker Ibn ‘Arabi (1165–1240) and the Kabbalist Isaac Luria (1534–1572). Perhaps more than in other areas of religious thinking, the body of knowledge concerning creation proved to be the most open to external influences, most notably ancient gnostic traditions.¹² In this regard, Ma Zhu’s experiment in explaining the creation using Chinese terms is not too far from many other such exercises undertaken elsewhere in the Islamic, and the Jewish, worlds at different times. The big difference is of course that, in this case, the terminology brought before us is Chinese. Ma Zhu’s *Qingzhen zhinan* can certainly be seen as an excellent example of the first intellectual processes that were already taking place in the Yangzi Delta, a region that produced the more sophisticated, and perhaps also elitist, communities of Islamic scholars in the early modern period. These trends would peak with Liu Zhi (ca. 1660–1730), the most systematic and prolific Chinese-Muslim scholar of the time, whose career and legacy are summarized in another essay by James Frankel (*Islamic Thought*, 34–154).

Frankel traces how Liu related to contemporary and earlier Chinese Muslim scholars (such as Ma Zhu and Wang Daiyu). He is correct in calling Liu the “Great Integrator of Chinese Islamic Thought.” The term Great Integrator (Ch. *Dacheng* 大成, which could also be translated as “Great Completer”) is worth looking at more closely, because it offers a rare opportunity to see the Islamization of Confucian concepts very clearly through a relatively straightforward philological investigation. The term was first used with regard to Liu Zhi by Jin Jitang 金吉堂 (1908–1978), one of the first modern Chinese Muslim historians, who was active during the 1930s. Jin summarized the history of Chinese Islamic thought in the early modern period and praised Liu Zhi as its culminating thinker, “until Liu Zhi [appeared] and [this was] the great completion [of Chinese Muslim thought (Ch. *zhi Liu Zhi er ji dacheng* 至劉智而集大成)]” (Jin 1935, 199).¹³ But that is the end point of the exercise. The beginning of it is in ancient China, when Mengzi 孟子 (Mencius, 372–289 BCE) coined the term *dacheng* with regard to Kongzi

孔子 (Confucius, ca. 551–479 BCE) when discussing the latter’s place in the evolution of Chinese thought. Let us look at the beautiful passage in full:

In Confucius, we have what is called a complete concert.
 A complete concert is when the large bell proclaims the commencement
 of the music, and the ringing stone proclaims its close.
 The metal sound commences the blended harmony of all the instruments,
 and the winding up with the stone terminates that blended harmony.
 The commencing that harmony is the work of wisdom.
 The terminating it is the work of sageness.
 (*Mencius*, “Wan Chang” part II, chap. 1, verse 6, in Legge [1866, 138])

The key phrase in the passage, *ji dacheng* 集大成, suggests something that is being assembled or gathered and reaches its epitome or culminating point, hence the plainer translation of the term— “great integration.” Mengzi uses it here to describe the evolution of Chinese thought from the time of the ancient mythical sage kings until Kongzi. The references he makes to the world of music— “complete concert”—are very fitting here. The appearance of Kongzi does not erase the earlier voices and thoughts of past thinkers. Rather, Kongzi’s thought brings them all to be heard as a great concord of sound—a symphony, a complete concert. This is, according to Jin Jitang, what Liu Zhi did with Chinese Islamic thought. And Frankel demonstrates this in his essay. However, this exercise is not complete if we ignore the early modern phase of Chinese Islamic writing in Liu Zhi’s own time (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). I am talking about how Liu Zhi and other contemporary Chinese Muslim scholars have used the term *dacheng*. At that time, several Chinese Muslim scholars used the same term—Great Completer/Complete Concert—in reference to none other than the Prophet Muhammad. Ma Zhu was the first to use the term in this way, and several other scholars followed him.¹⁴ The timing makes sense if we consider that, during the same period, the term Great Integrator/Complete Concert became, for the first time in Chinese history, part of Kongzi’s posthumous ritualized title when he was being turned into the center of an imperial cult. His title was “Great Completer, Supreme Sage, Exalted First Master” (*dacheng zhisheng wenxuan xianshi* 大成至聖文宣先師).¹⁵ Chinese Muslims eventually borrowed the first two, but not the third, for Muhammad (Ben-Dor Benite 2005a, 178).¹⁶

On the face of it, the early modern equation of Muhammad and Kongzi is basic: Muhammad is to Islam what Kongzi is to Confucianism. But there is more. This act of borrowing is not only about positioning Muhammad in a special exalted place, and Muslims do not need Kongzi to do that. As is well known, in Islam, Muhammad is considered the Seal of the Prophets (Khātām, or *Khātim, al-Anbiyā'*, Qur'an 33:40). This unusual title, Seal of the Prophets, places Muhammad at the end of a long line of messengers of God from Adam through Abraham, Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus, and many others. Muhammad is the greatest of them and the last. This, I suspect, may explain why the third honorific in Kongzi's title, Exalted *First* Master, was never used by Chinese Muslims, while the other two were. In this regard, we can see Muhammad not as a parallel or equal to Kongzi, but as the “complete concert” of Islam, regardless of Kongzi's status. A known hadith has Muhammad saying thus of himself:

My similitude in comparison with the prophets before me is that of a man who has built a house nicely and beautifully, except for a place of one brick in a corner. The people go about it and wonder at its beauty, but say: “Would that this brick is put in its place!” So I am that brick, and I am the seal of the prophets. (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Kitab al-Manaqib, Hadith 44)

The metaphor Muhammad gives here is taken from the world of architecture and not from that of music. But it is similar in its effect—completion means not only bringing a certain process to a simple end but also making the entire enterprise “beautiful” or “harmonious.” In this regard, the term *dacheng* regarding Muhammad makes sense from a traditional Islamic point of view.

I would say that what we have here, again, is not an act of borrowing Chinese and Confucian, vocabulary and terminology to make Islam “look” like Confucianism. Instead, it is an act of *Islamization* of Confucian and Chinese language—an Islamization that rests on known Islamic viewpoints. Thinking of “Islamization” in this context merits our attention. Most of the scholarship on Chinese Islam typically struggled with the question of “Confucianizing” Islam, or how Muslims wrestled to make Islam more “compatible” with the Chinese world. The current phase of the field allows us to see Chinese Islam in a far less apologetic or “defensive” way—Islamizing Confucianism, if you will, rather than Confucianizing Islam.

The philological exercise offered above tells us another important thing about the evolution of Islamic thought in China. As we have seen, in the early modern period—the time of Ma Zhu and Liu Zhi—the term *dacheng* was used with respect to Muhammad himself, and quite

justly so. We have also observed the strong religious overtones of this term, with regard both to Kongzi and to Muhammad.¹⁷ The term *dacheng* is consequently Islamized and becomes sacred as the designator for Muhammad. However, we have also seen Jin Jitang, a modern twentieth-century Chinese Muslim historian, making that same reference to Liu Zhi. Now, Liu Zhi was indeed great, but he is not the prophet. Was Jin a heretic trying to equate another human being with the prophet of Islam? Clearly no. Evidently, Jin Jitang does not mean to say that Liu Zhi is equal to Muhammad. (No one is!) We can only understand Jin's use of the term with regard to Liu Zhi as signaling a profound shift of paradigms in Chinese Islamic thought during China's twentieth-century transition to modernity. Jin Jitang's use of the term *dacheng* "secularizes" it (in the sense that he would not be using a sacred term reserved for Muhammad). This view must mean that the Han Kitab itself had undergone a major transformation. The canon's "founding fathers"—men like Ma Zhu and Liu Zhi—considered it a body of knowledge that was part of the religion. During the days when the Han Kitab was created, Muhammad and his *dao* were the center of learning. However, during the formative years of the republic, when China spoke the language of nationalism and Chinese Muslim intellectuals struggled to find their "national" tradition and heritage *within* their *Chinese* past, they found it in the Han Kitab. Thus, Liu Zhi became the center of learning, a national cultural hero of sorts. The Han Kitab was therefore not a religious body of knowledge, but a secular, "ethnic," or "national" one (Ben-Dor Benite 2004).

We have so far discussed the issues of God and Prophet. What about the people, the Chinese Muslims? Was this transition from religion to ethnicity/nation as easy as Jin Jitang's use of *dacheng* makes it appear? Historian Włodzimierz Cieciora's "Ethnicity or Religion? Republican-Era Chinese Debates on Islam and Muslims" (*Islamic Thought*, 107–147) shows that the answer is "certainly not." Cieciora carefully and systematically presents the case that has been troubling historians of Chinese Muslims, and Islam, for decades. In this review essay, I simply use the term "Chinese Muslims" and "Chinese Islam" instead of Hui or Huihui (the terms used during the Yuan and the Ming for Muslims), Huimin 回民 (Hui people) or Huizu 回族 (Hui ethnicity/nationality), and Huijiao 回教 (Hui teaching, Islam). Nevertheless, anyone even remotely interested in the topic knows that a long list of terms is used to describe Sinophone Chinese Muslims and that scholars always debate the relevant terminology.¹⁸ However, whereas today debates concerning who or what is Hui are academic in nature (insofar as they take place

outside China), during the Republican period they were politics. After the 1911 revolution, China was declared the “republic of five nations” (*wuzu gonghe* 五族共和)—the Han, Manchu, Tibetan, Mongol, and Muslim (Hui). As Cieciura states, this formulation “can be traced to the Qianlong era conceptualization of the Qing Empire as comprising five cultural spheres (*bu* 部, namely, Manchuria, China proper, Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang) inhabited by distinct peoples (*zu* 族), each possessing unique cultural traits” (*Islamic Thought*, 114). In other words, “Huizu” in this formulation referred to the Uighurs and other Muslim groups who were living in Xinjiang (or Huibu 回部). For Muslims inside China proper the formation of Huizu as an official category presented a whole set of unique problems: were they Huizu? And, if so, were they part of the Huizu in Xinjiang? Each of these questions had grave consequences for the status and social and political position of Chinese Muslims within the new republic and, in effect, the new Chinese nation. On the one hand, they did not want to be seen as an “extension” of the Hui of Xinjiang simply because they shared the same religion. On the contrary, they insisted also that they were different from the Han majority. Remarkably, Chinese Muslim intellectuals reacted to this problematic right from the start, soon after the republic was declared. Ding Zhuyuan 丁竹園 (1869–1935), one of Cieciura’s protagonists, declared as early as 1912 that the “root of the ‘Hui problem’ lay in the vocabulary employed in China to refer to Islam and its followers.” Ding explained that the term Hui, meaning “both Islam and Muslims, not differentiating among various cultural and ethnic groups,” was problematic (*Islamic Thought*, 117). This is entirely correct, and one could add to this that the young republic did not have the power and luxury of the previous imperial view. When he wanted to, the Qianlong emperor knew very well to differentiate between *Neidi hui* 內地回 (Muslims of Inland China) and, for instance, *Sala Hui* 薩拉回 (the Salars of northwest China) (Ben-Dor Benite 2005, 229). As Cieciura shows, the discussion was quite complex, with many twists and turns. It peaked in a 1936 debate concerning the question between Jin Jitang and other Han and Hui intellectuals. At this point, the discussion touched on major questions: not only who counted as Hui, but also what their relationship was to other Muslims groups, to other Hui in different locales within China and, above all, to the religion, Islam, itself. And indeed, Chinese Muslim intellectuals debated the question with varying degrees of intensity pretty much until the late 1940s, when the CCP, then rising to power,

simply declared them a minority nationality (*shaoshu minzu* 少數民族) and put an end to one of the most intense debates about ethnicity and religion in China. Cieciora concludes that in declaring “Islamic and Muslim history in China as a ‘minority *minzu* history’, the Party’s doctrine has reduced Wang Daiyu, Liu Zhi and other authors of the Han kitab to ‘famous persons of Huizu history’” (*Islamic Thought*, 141). Thus, in essence, the party turned them into “secular” figures, as opposed to “men of religion” (*zongjiaoren* 宗教人), as Jin Jitang called them earlier (Jin 1935, 199). However, if we take into account that it was also Jin Jitang who “secularized” the title “Great Integrator/Completer” by assigning it to Liu Zhi (even though he called him “a man of religion”), we must entertain the possibility that even before the party “reduced” these thinkers to secular “minority national” figures, Chinese Muslim intellectuals were “aggrandizing” them to the same effect.

One could say that much of the Chinese Islamic intellectual production of knowledge in this period was, to varying degrees, connected to the question of whether Hui is a religion or an ethnicity. The “religion or ethnicity” debate touches on the third major theme with which Chinese Muslim intellectuals have been struggling since the seventeenth century. The other two, as I tried to show above, are the question of God in a Chinese cultural framework (cosmology), and the place of Muhammad in a Chinese intellectual, and political, setting (which entailed dealing with questions of sagehood, in the Chinese sense of word—as opposed to prophecy, for instance). Viewing the three key issues—God, Prophet, People—next to each other allows us to appreciate the major transformations in Chinese Islamic thought and to understand its “evolution,” to use the book’s title better. One could say that the question of creation and the place of Muhammad, which were the loci for intense intellectual activity during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, have pretty much subsided during the twentieth century. They gave way to the third theme, the people, which is almost entirely modern.¹⁹ One must remember that it is at this point that the social sciences, modern historiography, and above all the concepts of “religion” (*zongjiao* 宗教) and nation/ethnicity (*minzu* 民族) begin their shaky career in China. One must also take into account the question of “secularization” in this context. In a way—and I hope that the philological exercise above made this point—the Han Kitab was secularized because it was more important for the making of a modern “national” Hui identity in a republican, as opposed to imperial, Chinese setting.

Islamic Thought in China also presents other strands within the intellectual history of Chinese Islam, and discusses new streams that feed into it. The question of the secularization of Islam in twentieth-century China during the Republican period is discussed in an essay by historian Masumi Matsumoto (*Islamic Thought*, 171–196). Matsumoto does not explain what she means by “secularization” in this context, but she makes several important contributions that certainly inform any discussion of what do we mean by secularizing Islam in China. In addition to tying the secularizing process to educational reform and modernization in general, Matsumoto connects it to the disappearance of Persian learning from the Chinese Islamic curriculum during the twentieth century. Matsumoto documents the gradual fading of the once-compelling Persian learning from the curriculum during the 1920s and 1930s. This brings to mind the observation of Joseph Fletcher, in collaboration with art historians Wasma’a Chorbachi and Mary Ellen Alonso, that, during the twentieth century, Chinese Islamic calligraphy changed styles markedly. It turned away from its traditional pattern, which had been influenced by “Turco-Iranian” styles, in favor of a style of “Arabic purity.” Fletcher linked this change to the general turning away from “Turco-Iranian practices” then under way in the Middle East among modernizing elites. He also pointed out that the shift in calligraphic style was linked to the desire on the part of Chinese Muslims not to be lumped together with China’s other Muslims, the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs (Fletcher, Alonso, and Chorbachi 1989).²⁰ Matsumoto ties her observation concerning Persian learning to a far more profound development. Not only was the Persian language seen as a barrier to modernization and reform, she argues. Persian was also the primary vehicle through which Sufi ideas, most notably the theory of *wahdat al-wujūd* (unity of being), have entered and permeated Chinese Islamic thought for centuries and were now being pushed away by new versions of revivalist Islam coming from the Middle East. The theory concerning the “unity of being” (*wahdat al-wujūd*) arrived in China through several dominant medieval Sufi works, mostly from the Persianate world. According to Matsumoto, the theory played a critical role in shaping the world view of Chinese Muslims. As she explains, the “Parmenidean”²¹ theory of oneness of being helped to shape a more open and flexible Islam in China. That Islam was now disappearing and being strangled by two powerful transitions: the secularization of Islam and religion in general, on the one hand, and the entrance of stricter forms of Islam through revivalist movements, on the other. Another dominant element in the secularization of Chinese Islam, according to Matsumoto, was Japan. As she points out, Japanese policies toward Chinese

Muslims and the fact that many religious leaders escaped the occupied territories destroyed the traditional (read Persian-oriented) Islamic education system, thereby eventually driving secularization further.

Yufeng Mao's essay on Chinese students at al-Azhar University during the 1930s adds another dimension to our understanding of external impacts on the evolution of Chinese Islamic thought (*Islamic Thought*, 147–170). Whereas Matsumoto's essay brings in the impact of occupation of a foreign invader, Mao's essay exposes the power of traveling to the Islamic heartland—to Egypt—for study. As she shows, travel to al-Azhar, the most important and prestigious Islamic educational institution in the past millennium, was not only closely linked to the increasing connections between China and the Middle East. Chinese Muslim students arrived in China as part of agreements between the governments of China and Egypt. At the same time, travel to al-Azhar was also part of a major educational project within China—as part of the effort to increase the levels of literacy and, for that matter, Islamic literacy. New imams and new teachers were needed. As Mao points out, many of the Chinese sojourners in Egypt, young men who came to train and bring back Islamic knowledge to China, were connected to institutions such as the first Chinese Muslim Normal University—the Chengda Teacher's College in Beijing. But it is important to understand that the flow of knowledge and information was not unidirectional. Just as they were receiving education in Egypt and learning Arabic, the Chinese Muslims were also educating their Egyptian counterparts about China.

Travel by Chinese Muslims to the Middle East no doubt increased during the twentieth century, after centuries of isolation. Indeed, before the twentieth century we have only rare records or documentation of Chinese Muslims traveling to the Middle East.²² I am by no means saying that there were no connections between the Middle East and China, but there is no doubt that travel during the twentieth century was by far much more frequent than in previous centuries. This point renders the question of Chinese Muslim views on the Hajj (Ch. *chaojin*, lit. pilgrimage) exceptionally important (*Islamic Thought*, 81–104). Religious Studies scholar Kristian Petersen's essay on the multiple meanings of pilgrimage provides an in-depth reading of three thinkers: Wang Daiyu (ca. 1590–1658), one of the earliest Han Kitab scholars; Liu Zhi; and Ma Dexin 馬德新, a prominent Yunnanese imam (1794–1874).²³ Of these three, only Ma Dexin went on the Hajj and left a record of his travels. Petersen's reading of how these three well-known

Chinese Muslim thinkers grappled with the obligation to perform the Hajj is innovative in the sense that he approaches them as Islamic thinkers first and foremost and investigates a specific question: how did they approach this fundamental “pillar of Islam” as Muslims? Petersen, who brings the discipline of religious studies into the fold, interrogates the Chinese texts as Islamic texts, paying attention to matters of language and theology. This kind of comparative exercise is a novelty in the field, and the outcome of this framing of the research is thus different than what we have been familiar with. Instead of asking how Chinese Islamic thinkers “localized” Islam in China or how they “Confucianized” it, we get to read the evidence in a way that allows us to compare three views on an Islamic obligation and then understand how the Chinese context shaped them. It is no surprise that all three, as good Muslims, hold the Hajj to be a paramount religious duty and, to varying degrees, discuss its liturgical aspects and theological dimensions. However, Petersen also shows how they differed from one another. Both Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi, thinkers who lived in Eastern China during times of relative isolation from the Muslim world, tended to de-emphasize the concrete necessity to go on the Hajj itself. For them, Mecca was an imagined sacred space on Earth, a center of what Petersen pertinently calls “cosmography,” and an object of desire and longing. For them, the Hajj was more an internal journey than a real, external one. This view perhaps offered a way to think about a spiritual journey to Mecca rather than a literal one. Liu Zhi, the more systematic of the two, even offered specific reasons why one might not make the real trip, plainly declaring:

In general, all believers should go on the pilgrimage.... However, if the journey is too difficult or obstructed, or one does not possess traveling expenses, or father and mother are living, or one is crippled by illness, then it is permitted not to go on the pilgrimage. (*Islamic Thought*, 91)

For Ma Dexin, who lived in southwestern China in an age when steam offered more opportunities for travel, the Hajj was an actual possibility. He treated pilgrimage this way, placing significant importance on the *performing* of the Hajj. If one has the means and is in good health, he declared, then one must go on the Hajj (note here that he is not ultimately differing from what Liu Zhi says, but his rhetorical framing of the obligation is different). One should discount the proximity of Yunnan to the Indian Ocean—an arena of intense Hajj activity for centuries—as the final reason behind his approach.²⁴ Thus, differences between regions and time

also affected the ways in which Muslims in China thought about performing a significant legal obligation.

Thinking of the Hajj brings us to China's increasing integration with global routes of transportation and communication from the second half of the nineteenth century onward, and the impact this process had on Chinese Muslims and Chinese Islam. *Islamic Thought in China* ends with a contemporary observation regarding the goings-on in Chinese Islam today by Leila Chérif-Chebbi (*Islamic Thought*, 197–232). This essay offers a fascinating sociological study of what “Islamic knowledge” means in contemporary China. The fault line, as Chérif-Chebbi states, is “between ‘Abd al-Wahhab and Liu Zhi.” As she illuminates, two major processes took place during the twentieth century. On the one hand, the increasing exposure to a contemporary version of Islam originating in the Middle East ended up producing a much more “mainstream,” stricter Islam in China that is significantly influenced by Saudi support (concerning training of clergy and money). “‘Abd al-Wahhab” is, therefore, code for an array of transformations that make Chinese Islam less unique and less “Chinese.” Many Muslim clergy in China today speak better Arabic than their predecessors, and what they say and teach in the mosque in Chinese is sometimes based on material coming from the heartlands of Islam, most notably Saudi Arabia. In addition to Wahhabi influences, one also can count other revivalist/restorative strands of Islam that have come from the Middle East and have helped give rise to a Chinese Muslim brotherhood, the Yihewani 伊赫瓦尼 (not to be confused with the image of the Middle Eastern brotherhood). The Han Kitab canon is now almost fully out of the mosques as a source of authoritative Islamic learning. It has migrated elsewhere: a new type of Islamic scholarship has developed in China's universities. These are secular scholars who study the history of Chinese Islam or, if you will, the history of the Hui. As Chérif-Chebbi maintains, these scholars are the successors of Liu Zhi and his colleagues. She is probably right. Four hundred years after the beginning of the Chinese Islamic intellectual tradition, the Han Kitab is no longer an Islamic theology; it is now “history.” We have already seen signs pointing to the movement in this direction in the first half of the twentieth century. But as Chérif-Chebbi points out, the adoption of a *minzu* paradigm after the rise of the PRC has turned Chinese Islamic history into an object of increasingly academic study.

It is interesting to think about this new fault line, which Chérif-Chebbi ties to other primary processes and transformations. One is the bifurcation—social, religious, and

identitarian—of the term “Hui.” Only a century ago the word “Hui” signified both the religion (Islam) and the people (Chinese Muslims). Now the gap between the religion (renamed Yisilanjiao 伊斯蘭教) and the people, the Huizu, seems to be widening. The second process is the ongoing fragmentation—religious, social, and to a degree political—of what is still considered one united collective: the Hui minority nationality, a process that has intensified since the revival of religious life in China in the 1980s. This ongoing fragmentation produces new types of Muslim intellectuals and new forms of intellectual lineages, and they all need to negotiate a certain mode of coexistence since they are still considered by the Chinese state to be members of the same collectivity. The state is the one red line that no one dares to cross. Reading this essay leaves the reader thinking about unity and fragmentation. The Han Kitab, the product of sophisticated Yangzi Delta literati, is the one tradition that was alone on the stage for a long time because its authors were able to adapt to, appropriate, and Islamize the Confucian channels of knowledge production in the late imperial period. But the pace at which the newly emerging intellectual traditions of the twentieth century grew suggests that fragments and fragmentation were always part of the history of Chinese Islam. We just did not see them in print until now.

Thus, perhaps “evolution” may not after all be the right term for describing the history that began when some men of letters started writing about Islam in Chinese. Suddenly, instead of a more or less unified trajectory of an intellectual tradition, we see too many raptures, rifts, and radically different strands that either emerged from within or came from without. It is obvious that we cannot speak of one single intellectual tradition within Chinese Islam. Perhaps we were never able to.

Muslim Sanzijing: Shifts and Continuity in the Definition of Islam in China

Historian Roberta Tontini brilliantly engages the problem of continuity and shifts head on in her *Muslim Sanzijing* 三字經, a social, cultural, and intellectual “biography” of one of the Han Kitab texts, the *Tianfang Sanzijing* 天方三字經 (Three-character classic of Islam).²⁵ The text, a rather short primer on Islamic law written by Liu Zhi, has eluded scholarly attention up until now. Most scholars have paid attention to the *Tianfang Dianli* 天方典禮 (Norms and rituals of Islam), a much larger and more ambitious project of Liu’s that he composed with a book about

Creation/God and a book about the Prophet (the *Tianfang Xingli* 天方性理, and the *Tianfang Zhisheng Shilu* 天方至聖實錄, respectively). Tontini's *Tianfang Sanzijing* comes to life, and what a life it has. As she shows, in writing the *Sanzijing*, Liu intended to reach a wider, less educated, audience. Evidently, this was a conscious move on his part, and the title he picked says it all. Liu borrowed the title from the famous Confucian book *Sanzijing*, or Three-Character Classic, authored at some point during the late Song period (early thirteenth century). Organized in triplets of characters to enable easy memorization, the original *Sanzijing* was designed to serve as a child's first step into the tortuous world of classical learning in China. In the Ming and Qing periods, the book became the basis of classical education. The second triplet reads as follows: "If foolishly there is no teaching, nature will deteriorate. The right way in teaching is to attach the utmost importance in thoroughness" (Giles 1900, 4–5). Liu Zhi wanted to do the same for Chinese Muslim children and "uncultivated" Muslims: "And you, young fellow! When knowledge approaches, learning is plain and straightforward, it does not [require] deep reflection" (*Muslim Sanzijing*, in Tontini's translation, 80). Note the differences in tone here: while both texts encourage children to learn, the Confucian text seems a lot sterner in its attitude (after all, it is Confucian...). Liu Zhi is more seductive and inviting in his manner. A comparison of the tone in several other triplets relating to learning shows what Tontini argues concerning this text. The *Muslim Sanzijing* was a book consciously produced by a learned man for uneducated people. During the latter part of the eighteenth century, a critical commentary on the text was added by Yuan Guozuo 袁國作 (fl. late 18th century), the great popularizer of Liu Zhi's work. Quite rightly, Tontini shows that one could not read the *Muslim Sanzijing* without this commentary, which was designed to make it even more popular. And indeed, the text proceeds with explaining in simple terms the basic laws of Islam. Take, for instance, the issue of the Hajj: "[If you are] productive, tax [your own] wealth and realize benevolence and righteousness. Undertake the pilgrimage to the Kaaba, and test [your] sincere devotion" (*Muslim Sanzijing*, in Tontini's translation, 80). See also another one about ablutions: "You need to know that *mu* [沐 ablutions] consist of four norms: the first is washing the face, from the hairline to the jaw, including the lobe of the ears. Those [who have] dense beards will need to dig into [the beard's thick hair]" (*Muslim Sanzijing*, in Tontini's translation, 53).

One is struck by the rich history of this text that Tontini exposes as she writes the biography of the book, looking at the many lives it took on during the past 200 years. The book had many versions, many editions, and it seems that each took on a life of its own. Why? One reason is the genre. Primers, abridged versions of classics such as *yulu* 語錄 (records of utterances) category, and texts designed for easy memorization like the Thousand-Character Classic were always popular in China. (Think of Mao's Little Red Book; the *Quotations of Mao Zedong* is a truly global bestseller.) But that does not explain why there are so many different versions of the *Muslim Sanzijing*. The answer lies in its content—the book is a guide for leading life as a Muslim and it is about Islamic law. However, the question of Islamic law in China is a thorny one. Not only do we have serious difficulty defining “law,” let alone religious law, in the Chinese context, we also have a problem with the state. Chinese law was, and is, the law in China, and practicing Islamic law could lead to serious clashes with it. Tontini puts it thus: Muslims in China were “undoubtedly exposed to the challenge of reconciling the legal hints in the [Qur’an] with the sociopolitical reality (and the policies) of China. On the one hand, they were exposed to Islamic law, but, on the other, they had to respond to the Qing code.” To put it crassly, China had its own “Shari’a problem” centuries before the West developed its own.

Furthermore, the long history of Islam in China did not produce any great jurists, and there is no tradition of jurisprudence to speak of. We also do not have a rich, or even small, archive of Chinese Islamic court rulings, and we do not know if Muslims went to court, or even if they had a court. In short, we still know very little about how Chinese Muslims in the late imperial period practiced Islamic law (beyond the basics). We do not have precise knowledge of what Islamic legal institutions they had (if they had them). We do have scattered evidence that Muslims knew Islamic law, and that a few knew it well. For instance, a seventeenth-century text praises one scholar, Feng Tongyu 馮通宇, for his knowledge of *feige* 費格 (*fiqh*) and for mastering inheritance and property law. Feng is said to be so learned in *fiqh* that he once even impressed Arabic-speaking foreign Muslim visitors with his knowledge. However, the author of the tale also tells us that the book on inheritance and property law that Feng studied so well was in his community’s possession for a long while but “was never studied” before that scholar undertook to study it “day and night for many days” (Ben-Dor Benite 2005, 98–99). So, there we have it: Chinese Muslims knew *fiqh*. They had a term for it, and some of them even spent time

studying available *fiqh* books. But when someone did, it was rare and remarkable. Of course, anecdotes like this one do not tell us much about how Islamic law was practiced in China and how Muslims thought about it. In this regard, the question is how to write a history of Islamic law in later imperial China and if we do, where to find the evidence relevant for such a project? Can we even say that Islamic law has a history in China? Muslims practiced it and thought about it, even if state law was the only accepted legal realm, but how did they practice it in concrete terms?

The gap between the *Dianli* and the *Sanzijing* that Tontini identifies at the outset of her book is crucial. The *Dianli* enjoys special status within the Han Kitab corpus. It is one of the only works that engage Islamic law before the appearance of Ma Dexin and his school in the second half of the nineteenth century. The *Dianli*, perhaps not surprisingly, was the Han Kitab text that got closest to gaining top official recognition and evaluation.²⁶ A little over sixty years after its composition, the *Siku quanshu zongmu tiyao* 四庫全書總目提要, or Annotated Catalog of the Complete Imperial Library, included a short, but very telling, entry about the *Dianli*. Evidently, the Hanlin academicians who compiled the catalog thought that the book was important enough to be included in the *tiyao* (but not in the *Siku* library itself). This was no doubt because this is a book that engages two of the most central Confucian categories: norms and rites (*Dianli*). The Hanlin official that read the book appreciated the style and the author's command of classical prose. He even went into detail praising the author for the "vast amount" of books (*zhuanzhi hao fan* 卷帙浩繁) that Liu had read to write his *Dianli* and providing a breakdown of the content of the book (pilgrimage, fasting, marriage, slaughtering, sacrifices, etc.). The official enjoyed Liu's explanations for each rite. But, in the end, he was not too impressed:

Islam was from the beginning a somewhat absurd belief (*huihuijiao ben pimiu* 回回教本僻謬), but he [Liu] had a good deal of knowledge in Confucian books (*rushu* 儒書), so he borrowed variously from the meaning of the classics to decorate his arguments. His literary style is in fact rather elegant. But the root was wrong, to begin with, and decorating it cleverly with literary elegance did him no good (*ran gendi xianfei qiao wei wenshi wuyi ye* 然根柢先非巧為文飾無益也). (Ben-Dor Benite 2005a, 150)

We can now understand why Liu felt the need to compose the *Sanzijing* and what he meant by saying it was for "uncultivated Muslims." The *Dianli* was a work that only the most

educated in China could read and appreciate. That aside, if Liu Zhi were alive at the time of the composition of this *tiyao* note, he would have been devastated. He invested a lot of work and thinking when he wrote the *Dianli*. To my mind, the Hanlin academician understood exactly what Liu Zhi was trying to do with the *Dianli* and specifically failed him for it. Liu wanted to represent in Chinese what Islamic law meant and, for that purpose, skillfully used the Confucian distinction between law (*fa* 法) and ritual/rite (*dian, li*). As Tontini explains, while “the realms of law and rite overlap in various traditions, the Chinese approach assigns a greater role to ritual practice in the maintenance of social order. This approach had a strong impact on the Chinese redefinition of Islamic law” (*Muslim Sanzijing*, 82 in Tontini’s translation).

As Tontini establishes, Liu Zhi was well-versed in Islamic law, much like Feng Tongyu, mentioned above. But he “never claimed that his text was a work of Islamic jurisprudence regarding *fiqh*. However, [the] very title of the book implies that the *Tianfang Dianli* was intended to be germane to the norms (*dian* 典) and the rites (*li* 禮) of Islam (*Tianfang* 天方), which are precisely the two main concerns of classical Islamic jurisprudence” (*Muslim Sanzijing*, in Tontini’s translation³⁶). In other words, Liu Zhi’s choice to present Islamic law within the realm of *Dianli* (as opposed to *fa*, law) was the way in which he solved the problem of avoiding a disastrous clash with Chinese law (in that case, the Qing Code). At the same time, he made an intelligent use of the Confucian distinction between law and rites. Thus, to quote Tontini,

The *Tianfang dianli*, with its “Confucian” reworking of the ritual and social dominions of Islamic jurisprudence, represents an attempted way out of this problematic situation. The text accounts for a comprehensive reappropriation of Islamic jurisprudence from a local perspective, in which both the ritual and the social branches of classical Islamic jurisprudence are reworked and reconciled with the local mindset and political reality. (*Muslim Sanzijing*, 36, in Tontini’s translation)

Perhaps we can take this line of thinking about Islamic law in imperial China a step further. Maybe what have here is, again, an instance of “Islamization” of Confucian ideas rather than the “Confucianizing” of Islam. This is the message I take from this book.

But does this Chinese Islamic law—Chinese Shari’a, as Tontini calls it—have a history in China? Did it “develop” or change as time passed? The *Dianli* remained inaccessible to many Muslims in China and was simply reprinted. Its lesser counterpart, the *Tianfang Sanzijing*, had

an excellent career. It was the real bridge between the Muslim literati and society, and we can certainly think of a distinct *Sanzijing* track within the broader track of Chinese Islamic intellectual history. One of the achievements of Tontini's book is showing that this text formed the basis for a textual tradition of its own and that this tradition means much historically. Tontini traces and discusses the many editions and versions of the short book and shows how it spread out of the Yangzi Delta region to virtually everywhere in China. She provides historical context for nearly each version. The history she tells allows us to think about the history of Islamic law in China. For instance, her comparison between two versions of the *Sanzijing* produced in the late nineteenth century in Shanxi and Yunnan in the wake of major rebellions that devastated the Muslim communities there shows how dissimilar historical conditions created various versions of the book. The Yunnanese version omitted the section that emphasized the sociopolitical implications of Islamic law, and tended to present a more "inward" and "spiritual," and therefore harmless, image of it. The Shaanxi version, on the other hand, emphasized that Islamic law was incompatible with the legal culture of the Qing. The chapter on the twentieth century is fascinating, showing how the *Sanzijing* regained new life with more editions and versions. Three of these versions are of interest for us here. The first is a version of the *Sanzijing* produced by the newly established Yihewani. The brotherhood's version shows an apparent attempt to "Arabize" the language of the primer, on the one hand, and a struggle to mediate between the old values that shaped it and the newly introduced ones of the brotherhood, on the other. From another side of the spectrum, we find a version, done in the late 1930s, dedicated to girls, which appeared to be more progressive on questions of gender. Closing Tontini's book is a discussion of the most recent version by Na Guochang, a contemporary Yunnanese Chinese Muslim scholar, that attempts to accommodate Islamic law within the framework of contemporary state law.

Admittedly, this is not a history of jurisprudence per se. But these examples allow us to see how Chinese Muslim thinkers writing for wide constituencies (and for the state's censors) thought about the *meaning* of Islamic and how this significance changed over time. Tontini's conclusion is a bit anticlimactic in that it is not surprising:

Islamic legal theory in China illustrates a remarkably adaptive quality.... Chinese ulama were able to avoid the problem of having to choose between the law of the state and the law of Islam by approaching the two systems as mutually reinforcing, rather than mutually exclusive. They did so primarily by identifying principles in

the scriptures that enabled the state to perform its ordering function on behalf of Islam. (*Muslim Sanzijing*, 218, in Tontini's translation).

Still, the history of how Muslims in China chose between the law of the state and the law of Islam, a history exposed by looking at the textual tradition of the *Sanzijing*, is valuable. It is the history of the changing *meanings* of Islamic law for Chinese Muslims.

China and Islam: The Prophet, the Party, and Law

The two books reviewed above are intellectual histories that revolve around the textual tradition (as perhaps I should call it from now on) of the Han Kitab and the many subtraditions that came out of it. Matthew Erie's *China and Islam: The Prophet, the Party, and Law* is an ethnography of contemporary Chinese Islam that examines the question of Shari'a versus Chinese law within the context of the contemporary party state framework. Furthermore, whereas the first two books mostly center on texts and textual traditions, *China and Islam*, while making great use of the various textual traditions, engages the people—the Hui—in contemporary China. In this regard, Erie's "approach weighs in the subjective along with the objective, the 'emic' beside the 'etic,' the user's view of the law in addition to familiar conceptions" (*China and Islam*, 7). This complex book searches for, and locates, Islamic law in today's China. In this regard, it encompasses much more than just the law and covers a great deal of Muslim life in China since, of course, the law touches everything. Moreover, as both Erie and Tontini show, once we engage the question of Islamic law in China and realize we must expand our definition of what we mean by "law," our framework of research becomes far more flexible, and the results encompass a lot more than what a narrow definition of legal practices and thinking would mandate. Finally, Erie writes within a context in which Chinese Islam, writ large, is experiencing a "renaissance"—a moment of revitalization and revival of Islamic life in China that is significantly affected by goings-on both at home and in the Islamic world. This renaissance is crucial, and the book tries hard, with success, to capture the dynamism in Chinese Islamic life that it is producing.

The scope of this review does not allow me to do justice to this rich and multipart book, so I will focus on a few themes that can be tied to issues that have been brought up above. If Islamic law seemed to be a thorny issue during the imperial period, today the question is far more serious and complicated. First off, we are dealing now with the strongest state ever in

China, a secular-socialist state that has “entered the mosque” like no other government before it. At the same time, state law provides space and basis for religious law, and the state’s courts can enforce this effectively (or not so much, as we shall see). This is certainly true with regard to all laws that have social implications—marriage and property laws, for instance. Hui Muslims can still pray and fast and give alms according to Islamic law, but nothing more. When the state does make room for Islamic law, it is within the context of “customary law” (*xiguanfa* 習慣法) that is part of the autonomy that “minority ethnicities” or nationalities in China enjoy. But this law, known in the Hui case as *Huizu xiguanfa* 回族習慣法, is not necessarily Islamic law; indeed, it is not defined as such, and the state can play with the degree of autonomy it enjoys (particularly after moments of political tension). Second, the Muslim population in China is now officially diverse—today there are multiple state-classified Muslim ethnicities. Within the narrower context of Hui nationality, as Erie is careful to note, there are numerous strands of Islam, many of which are competing Sufis, Yihewani, locally grown Chinese Islamic traditions such as the Gedimu 格迪目 and the Xidaotang 西道堂, and Salafis. This is a time when liberal Western democracies struggle with different versions of “Shari’a problems,” and the whole world seems to be fearful of Islamic law and its global expansion. Thus, on the face of it, there is no room to think of Islamic law in China. The Chinese state and its laws and the Shari’a are mutually exclusive, and contradictory. *China and Islam* argues that the reality is quite different. Islamic law and modern state law, at least in China’s case, are not mutually exclusive and are not “entirely antagonistic.”

How can this be? Several continuities with the imperial period that we have already noticed above are highlighted in Erie’s book. These continuities all direct us to expand our definition and our search for the meaning of “Islamic law” for Muslims in different contexts and to make them more flexible. The most important one is the tendency to “moralize” Islamic law and render ethics (what in the past was represented in the realm of *Dianli*) “law-like.” The Chinese Muslim tendency to moralize shapes Erie’s approach to the question of Islamic law (*China and Islam*, 18). As he plainly admits, his use of “law” is a shorthand for what would otherwise be an enumeration (i.e., “law” plus “ethics” plus “morals” plus “customs”) (*China and Islam*, 18).

Thus, the anthropologist’s strategic choice concerning how to frame his or her research mirrors the general way in which Muslims in China have been discussing and engaging Islamic

laws. This involves not only engaging intellectually, but is also the only way one can speak about Islamic law in China. Therefore, without expanding our scholarly definition of what counts as “Islamic law,” we cannot study it. Second is Shari’a versus *fiqh*. Echoing what we have seen above about *fiqh*, Erie points out that the Shari’a is more prominent within the mosque. *Fiqh* “remains largely fragmented and oral” (remember the seventeenth-century scholar Feng Tongyu?), and “clerics for the most part do not write opinions of matters they hear as such records could be used against them by state authorities” (*China and Islam*, 19). Muslim China, it seems, will continue to remain silent when it comes to Islamic jurisprudence, just as it has been for centuries. This, however, does not mean that Islamic law is not studied in China. As Erie shows, each of these groups has its own approach to Islamic education, and to teaching Islamic law, and each implements this approach in its mosque-based madrasas. At the same time, there are also some private schools established by “enterprising Hui educators” (*China and Islam*, 189–197). A review of the curriculum reveals the same complex picture of continuity, rupture, and change that we have seen before. But studies do not take place only in the recognized schools. One of the fascinating stories Erie brings here is that of a reading room in Linxia 臨夏 (formerly Hezhou 河州, a major Hui center in Gansu, known as “China’s Little Mecca”) that operated for about a decade until 2006. The You Read Books Room (as in *iqra’*, Ar. read, recite) was founded in 1995 by a Yihewani cleric with the support of some wealthy Hui businessmen. It functioned as a library and as a center of learning of sorts, hosting lectures and offering courses and classes. Among other things, the place offered courses on the central Hanafi *fiqh* text: the *Sharh al-Wiqaya* (but *fiqh* was certainly not the primary purpose of the site). Over the years, the You Read Books Room developed into a more formalized, but not officially recognized, organization with connections all over China. It was exactly at that point that the government stepped in and closed the place. Different people would give you various reasons as to why the place was closed. But one thing is clear: closing the room signaled the state’s “anxiety about allowing underground networks, in this case, educational ones, to flourish in Linxia (and elsewhere for that matter).” As Erie explains, such “learning centers threaten the state’s monopoly on defining Islam and Islamic law” (*China and Islam*, 127).

The story of the reading room in Linxia reminded me of the story of the educational center in Jining 濟寧, Shandong 山東, in the seventeenth century. Jining has been known as a

historically significant Muslim center since late Song times. During the last years of the Ming dynasty, the city became home to a major site of Islamic learning cofounded by Chang Yunhua 常蘊華 (fl. seventeenth century). Chang, a charismatic teacher, arrived in the town during the mid-seventeenth century and, with the help of a local cleric, Li Yanling 李延齡, built a large school that attracted many Muslim students from several regions in China. The place was funded by local wealthy Muslims, and the money for its construction was collected from many Chinese Muslim communities in the Jining area. Some evidence suggests that local state officials who were Hui also patronized the place. The school in Jining, which was not officially recognized by the Qing state, flourished for a long while and produced some of China's great Islamic teachers of the time (Ben-Dor Benite 2005a, 50–52).

Comparing the stories of the two learning centers tells us a lot about the power of the state today and what it wants to do in such situations. And, indeed, the arena where Islamic law is located is where we find Islam in its most “freed” expressions, the *minjian* 民間—literally, “between the people.” *Minjian* is a “set of practices... which inform Hui religious belief and which are diversifying and deepening partly in response to state-led reform” (*China and Islam*, 20). The various less literal translations of *minjian* help us to understand why this set of practices (following Bourdieu) is so important: “among the people,” “popular,” “unofficial,” “folk,” “nongovernmental,” “nonstate,” and “grassroots.” *Minjian* can assume an institutional form, but it can also be a “set of rules.” These rules can be expressed within a broad spectrum of interactions ranging from the person-to-person level all the way to what we might call informal, popular international diplomacy. In the context relevant to us here, “Hui use *minjian* to describe those people, places, and things that are not registered or sanctioned by state law (e.g., clerics, students, mosques, tombs, prayer halls, publications, property transactions, and so forth)” (*Islam in China*, 20). The abovementioned You Read Books study room, for instance, was known as *minjian zuzhi* 民間組織 (popular organization), and the word *minjian* in that context meant that it was unregistered. Again, what we are looking for here is the arena where less rigid conceptualization of the law exists. In other words, let us not look for Islamic law, now flexibly defined, in the Chinese courts, or in the legal codes. As Erie explains, a “view that considers the *minjian* shows that decision making does not always occur in the legislative halls of people's congresses or the basic-level people's courts, but rather in mosque offices and even such ‘neutral’

spaces as halal restaurants.” Thus, “*minjian* law, such as Islamic law, provides interlocutors (Hui clerics, ‘lay’ Hui, Hui cadres, and even Han) with a way to mediate their relationship with nodes of power, whether in Linxia, Mecca, Cairo, Kuala Lumpur, Beijing, or elsewhere” (*China and Islam*, 33). One area in which one can see how Islamic law plays an important role is the practice of “popular mediation” (*minjian tiaojie* 民間調節). The process usually begins in a state venue but ends outside it when it transforms into a *minjian* case: a dispute arrives in the people’s court, but the judge, a Hui himself, refers it to the local cleric so it can be resolved outside the court through mediation. This probably happens a lot in Linxia. Erie tells us that almost half of the cadres of the Linxia People’s Court are Hui. These people are obliged to follow state law, but “social ties among coreligionists transcend the Party-State’s attempt to demarcate secular and religious domains. When these cadres call on their cleric, they do so both as representatives of the Party-State and as members of the mosque community” (*China and Islam*, 326). Nassim, the local cleric and one of the main protagonists of *Islam in China*, fully understands the meaning of what happens:

I may come across issues relating to inheritance, marriage, or divorce. The procedure of referring a case back down to the local religious authority is, in fact, illegal. The case should not be taken out of the state venue. Once the complaint is lodged there, it should be decided by that authority. This has been going on for many years. Not only will official PRC court decisions exclude any mention of religious law, but there will be no instances of even remnants of Islamic law in decisions, or references of any kind, however vague. (*China and Islam*, 327)

One of the things that makes the whole process possible is an article in the PRC Civil Procedure Code that allows the court to “invite” a governmental unit or an individual to assist with mediation. This is how Nassim is brought in. The fact that he is a cleric and the fact that he consults Islamic law—he consults a “small library of Hanafi *fiqh* compendia in his office”—are not officially registered anywhere (*China and Islam*, 327). This way the court, the state, can still pretend it is in charge of the entire process.

What we can learn from this example is that *minjian* is not the most sought after, by historians, of Chinese “public spheres” (see Wong 1993). The state is not completely absent from the *minjian*. In fact, as Erie shows throughout the book, the state is sometimes there as one of the players, trying to use it to its advantage, to block or eliminate it, or to transform it. This is the

case, for instance, in the way in which the state cultivated Ningxia, the Hui Autonomous Region, as the center where *minjian waijiao* 民間外交, a form of popular diplomacy that brings in foreign Islamic organizations and businesses and encourages them to invest in the province. As Erie shows, Islamic-based *minjian* diplomacy is not only about money. It began in the 1980s and peaked in 2005, when the province hosted an international symposium on the celebrated Chinese-Muslim admiral Zheng He (*China and Islam*, 296). That year was the 600th anniversary of the first of his famous seven voyages in the Indian Ocean. Since then, Zheng, who was born to a Muslim family but was actually a devout Buddhist, has been relentlessly invoked as a symbol of China's "peaceful diplomacy" and as the hero of the maritime Silk Road. China has been celebrating both Silk Roads, the land-based one and the maritime one, for a while now, and it is not lost on anyone that many of the countries that the two roads connect with China are home to Muslims (in fact, the majority of the Muslim world is located around the silk roads—the ancient silk routes, as well as the ones invented recently). One of the factors at work in this vast enterprise is Islamic financing and banking, two venues that allow Islamic law to come into play. This is one example where we see Islamic law in practice. The state, as Erie points out, is ambivalent about this. It wants to benefit from the economic fruit of this international enterprise, but at the same time it does not want to highlight the fact that Islamic law is somehow regulating a segment of the financial activity in the province (*China and Islam*, 298). Reading about the state's ambivalence concerning this blend of Islam and mercantile activity in northwestern China invokes distant echoes from the Ming period. Ming China tried hard, and in some cases succeeded, in regulating the relationship between Chinese Muslims in northwestern China and their co-religionists across the border. In the fifteenth century, the throne complained that too many tribute embassies from Central Asia were coming to China and that too many envoys stayed there permanently without returning home. Chinese Muslims were often accused of helping Central Asian Muslims defy state regulations. Merchants from Turfan, then outside China's borders, were repeatedly accused of falsifying credentials to gain entrance to China. However, when the state needed Muslims to serve as interpreters and translators—for instance, during the sixteenth century—many were invited to settle (Ben-Dor Benite 2008a, 275–308). What was the shape of the Ming-Qing Muslim *minjian*? Surely there was one, but we can hardly see it in the scattered evidence. Erie's book about contemporary China allows us to imagine it.

The picture that Erie paints is almost unsurprising if we remember that Muslims in China are a minority—Chinese Islam is highly adaptive, making creative use of gaps and holes between the state and the society. *China and Islam* brings to life many of the processes and practices that probably produced the histories of Chinese Islam’s textual traditions. When we read the texts—the various *Sanzijing* editions, for instance—we can sometime only suspect what was going on behind the scenes of composing and publishing a new version.

Why study a Chinese “minority” and its history? The task of scholars of Chinese Islam since the 1990s has been twofold: on the one hand, we have wanted to study Islam in China in its Chinese social and cultural context, as opposed to imagining it as a single separate entity, and to show that its history is relevant and meaningful for Chinese history in general. One could almost say that this goal was achieved a while ago. The next task has been to make the study of Chinese Islam and its history meaningful and useful for the greater community of scholars of Islam in general. It seems to me that with the books reviewed here, and with others in the making, we are getting close to reaching this target. In 1910, Marshall Broomhall’s *Islam in China* declared that Chinese Islam was a “neglected problem.” These books show that it is no longer neglected, and no longer a “problem”; rather, it is an exciting topic. Indeed, a complete, even if not harmonious, concert.

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Notes

- 1 For a discussion of these sources in the context of Chinese Islam, see Ben-Dor Benite (2002/2003, 93–114).
- 2 For an overview of this history, see Ben-Dor Benite (2010).
- 3 I have recently discussed the Jesuit early position on China's Muslims in a series of essays (Ben-Dor Benite 2012, 2015).
- 4 For a discussion of Russian discourses on Chinese Islam, see Ben-Dor Benite (2005b).
- 5 For a bibliography of missionary scholarship on Chinese Islam, see Israeli and Gorman (1994). This is also the moment to mention Donald Leslie’s important bibliographical project on Chinese Islam (Leslie, Yang, and Yousef 2006).
- 6 See, for example, d’Ollone (1911). To this, as one of many examples, we should add the works of the two great French sinologists Henry Cordier (1920) and his successor Paul

- Pelliot (1959). For a history of the study of Chinese Islam with particular attention to the French trajectory, see Aubin (2007).
- 7 See, for instance, Esenbel (2004), Aydin (2007).
- 8 One should mention, however, Tasaka (1964).
- 9 On the invention of the name Han Kitab itself, see Ben-Dor Benite (2005a, 159–160).
- 10 As it turns out, one can learn a lot about the more distant past of Chinese Muslims, even from the tale about the Muslim identity of the Ming founder that has no ground in concrete reality (see Ben-Dor Benite 2008a, 275–308).
- 11 A review of PRC scholarship on Chinese Islam and Muslims deserves another whole essay. Here I would like to mention only one relevant journal, which is solely dedicated to the topic: the *Huizu Yanjiu* 回族研究, which has been continuously published four times a year since 1991.
- 12 See Nasr (2006) for the tip of this iceberg of knowledge.
- 13 In an earlier discussion of this passage, I used a slightly different translation: “...and [he was] the Great Completer of Chinese Islamic Thought” (Ben-Dor Benite 2004, 100). Jin Jitang is not discussed in Frankel’s essay, but he appears later in *Islamic Thought in China*.
- 14 For a discussion of these references by Ma Zhu and others, see Ben-Dor Benite (2005a, 174–178, 183–184).
- 15 On Kongzi as the center of a cult, see Wilson (2002, 43–94).
- 16 The fact that Kongzi himself acquired the title as part of becoming the center of a more “religious” cult helped the migration of part of this title to Muhammad.
- 17 This is a radically different view than the invention of Kongzi as the *Sinarum Philosophus*, the Chinese Philosopher, by the Jesuits at the exact same time that Ma Zhu begins to use the term.
- 18 See, for instance, Jonathan Lipman’s discussion concerning the “*minzu* paradigm,” “religion” and “ethnicity” (1997, xx–xxx).
- 19 This does mean that the early Han Kitab scholar did not ask themselves who were the Hui. See Ben-Dor Benite (2005a, 200–213).
- 20 See also Ben-Dor Benite (2008b).
- 21 I use this term here for the sake of discussion.
- 22 For a discussion of the issue of Chinese Muslim travels to the Middle East within a global context, see Ben-Dor Benite (2013).
- 23 Petersen (2017) is the first serious introduction of this last and least-studied Han Kitab scholar, Ma Dexin; at same time, the book offers a systematic reading of key religious issues in the Han Kitab as Islamic studies, like no one before.
- 24 On the Indian Ocean and the Hajj, see Tagliacozzo (2013).
- 25 Tontini also has a chapter in *Islamic Thought* that is a digest of her book (55–80).
- 26 Occasionally, non-Muslim scholars also contributed prefaces of praise to some Han Kitab texts, but these cannot be considered expressions of official recognition.

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