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# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **Introduction to “Islam in China/China in Islam”**

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#### **The Islamic Renaissance in China**

There are over twenty-three million Muslims in the People’s Republic of China (PRC),<sup>1</sup> more than in Malaysia, Tunisia, Russia, Jordan, Libya, or Kazakhstan and slightly fewer than the number in Saudi Arabia or Yemen. China’s Muslims, including those who are ethnically Chinese, Mongolian, and Turkic, have historically had a major impact on Chinese affairs, both domestic and across the border (Bellér-Hann, Harris, Cesaro, and Finley 2007; Fletcher 1975; Forbes 1986; Han 2013; Kim 2004; Millward 2007). In light of China’s ascendance in international relations over the past thirty years and, specifically, its (re)engagement with the Middle East, Central Asia, and North Africa (Carlson 2011; Kemp 2012; Olimat 2012; Simpfendorfer 2009), China’s Muslim population is poised to play a significant role in the evolving relationship between China and the rest of the developing world, as well as in the resurgence of global Islam in state politics.

Following interethnic riots in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, in 2009, a series of violent anti-state incidents have taken place in Xinjiang, home to a number of Muslim minorities, including the Uyghur, of whom there are about ten million. Most recently, violence has spilled out of Xinjiang, affecting Beijing in October 2013 and Kunming in 2014. In the first eight months of 2014 alone, suicide bombs and knife attacks have resulted in some 120 deaths and 332 injuries, according to PRC reports. The state has responded by labeling such events “terrorism” (*kongbu zhuyi*) and has launched a yearlong crackdown on Islamic radicalism in Xinjiang.

While the state-run media has been careful not to presume that Uyghurs are behind the recent attacks, popular discourse on the Internet commonly conflates Muslim minorities,

especially Uyghurs, with terrorists. Uyghurs complain of facing discrimination in hotels, restaurants, schools, and even mosques throughout China. The condition of Muslim minority-state relations would seem to confirm the political scientist Samuel Huntington's thesis that there has been a "clash of civilizations" between the Chinese and Islamic spheres. Huntington's world view, which has become popular in Chinese academia, suggests an inevitable confrontation between China and Islam.

Rather than China *versus* Islam, the overarching theme of this special issue is "Islam in China/China in Islam." In thinking through "Islam in China," we argue that the relationship between China and Islam is not one of opposition, but rather one of cultural, linguistic, and economic imbrication. Indeed, it is difficult to describe Islam and China as two separate or essentialized entities. For some Muslim minorities in certain regions of China, there is no distinction between neo-Confucianism and Islam or between the nation-state and the global *umma* (community of Muslims). Through intellectual labor, modes of prayer and worship, art, calligraphy, architecture, cuisine, linguistic creoles, and legal pluralism, these Muslims embody multiple cultural referents. For other Muslim minorities in other regions in China, political and economic circumstances present challenges to living in accordance with Islam while also being a citizen of the PRC. In other words, the Muslim experience in China encompasses a complex mosaic of accommodation, adjustment, preservation, and, at times, resistance. Thus, generalizations about this incredibly diverse population are unhelpful, and careful attention must be paid to history, politics, and place.

Similarly, the perspective of "China in Islam" notes that, following China's remarkable economic reform, state policy has begun to integrate China into the larger Muslim world. Perhaps the most visible facet of this development since the late 1970s has been the rebuilding of mosques and centers of Islamic learning within the country. This has been accompanied by a resurgence throughout China of halal (Ch. *qingzhen*) restaurants. This development has been so extensive that in most of China's cities it is possible to find Chinese Muslim cuisine, bookstores, clothing and grocery stores, cemeteries, monuments, and places of worship. In addition, Sufi pilgrimage routes have been reestablished within the country. Outside China, the hajj to Mecca has been performed, educational and scholarly networks have been reconstituted, and ties through trade and investment with Arab nations have been consummated. Such international ties have led to the circulations of migrants, books, and capital between China and the Islamic

heartland in the Middle East. These trends are a result of both state policy and the labor of China's Muslims.

Still, "China in Islam" points to the tensions between globalizing Muslim communities within China and the political regime. Despite Islam's visibility in China, religious reform has been limited, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has sought to channel transnational Muslim financial networks for its own benefit while curtailing the possibility of Islamic extremism (Becquelin 2000; Clarke 2007; Millward 2004; Millward and Tursun 2004). Following the "Arab Spring," China is embedded in a global reawakening of Islamic consciousness and practice. It, too, is contributing to new modes of Islamic finance in Hong Kong, novel Muslim Internet communities, and halal food industries—all with a global reach (Chen 2013; Ho 2013; Peterson 2006).

Within this general frame, we note that Muslim minorities in China and the connections they are forging with coreligionists abroad are diverse. Hui, the largest of China's Muslim minority groups as defined by the state, are found throughout China, although they are concentrated in the northwest, including in Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Gansu Province, Qinghai Province, and Xinjiang (Gladney [1991] 1996). Additionally, the northwest is home to most Mongolian (Dongxiang) and Turkic Muslims, specifically the Uyghurs, and also to the Uzbek, Kazakh, Salar, and Kyrgyz (Bovingdon 2010). The Tajik, found in Xinjiang, are of Iranian descent and constitute the only Shi'a population in China. The Muslims in the northwest occupy some 60 percent of the landmass of the PRC and border Afghanistan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Russia. As Turkic minority groups in China have long-standing ties by blood, commerce, and faith with kinspeople in bordering states, relations between the Chinese state and Muslim minorities has implications for China's geopolitics in the region (Mackerras 2003). The northwest is dotted with cities considered holy by China's Muslims, including Linxia (Hezhou) and Lintan (Taozhou) in Gansu; Xunhua, Hualong, and Xining in Qinghai; Yinchuan in Ningxia; and Kashgar, Yarkand, and Hotan in Xinjiang. Similarly, Yunnan Province in the southwest, bordering Southeast Asian states, has significant numbers of Hui and great centers of learning, like Shadian, that have been formative to Hui collective consciousness (Atwill 2005). Beginning in the Ming period, the Hui have adapted Islam to neo-Confucian thought and, in so doing, generated novel forms of learning, mysticism, and ingenious adaptation to a predominately non-Muslim society (Benite 2005).

These cities and their Muslim inhabitants have experienced the possibilities and frustrations of China's economic cum religious liberalization. Thus, the "paradox of China's post-Mao reforms" (Goldman and MacFarquhar 1999) has particular resonance for China's Muslims. They have benefited from state policies that have promoted Arabic education in Muslim minority regions. Young Muslim men and women work as translators in Shenzhen, Yiwu, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and other cities that are attracting Arab and North African businesspeople. State-run schools are prohibited from including the Quran in their curriculum, however. State policy encourages Arabic, but not Persian—the language of many Sufi texts—as Sufism is still labeled "feudal" in the rubric of Chinese socialism. Hui and Uyghur can attend state-sponsored hajj trips, but their numbers are severely limited. Chinese imams (Ch. *ahongs*) must undergo "patriotic" education and licensing by the state, and students (Ch. *manla*) are restricted in their study locations and destinations. Additionally, the state has contained Muslim civil society through its regulations, namely those of the China Islamic Association, the organization constituted by the government to communicate state law and policy to the Muslim masses.

China is hardly unique in implementing security regimes over Muslim minorities. A growing body of literature across the social sciences has contributed to our understanding of the contradictions of multiculturalism and constitutionalism vis-à-vis Muslim minorities in Western liberal states (An-Na'im 2008; Emon 2006; Fadel 2008; Ramadan 1999; Rohe 2007). The status of Muslim minorities as citizens of a socialist state and cultural subjects of China adds additional nuance to the study of Muslim minorities in contemporary politics. Since 1949, when the CCP assumed power, the state has officially promoted a model of a plural society (i.e., a *duominzu guojia*, or multiethnic state), although at different points in its history, the party-state has endorsed assimilation, most poignantly during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Many Muslim minorities live in so-called autonomous regions (e.g., Ningxia and Xinjiang), whose law provides for the modification of national law in light of local circumstances but which have had limited success in securing rights for Muslims to follow the precepts of shari'a (Erie 2013).

### **Islam of the Everyday: Themes and Aims**

The resurgent importance of China's Muslims in domestic and international matters has led to a renewed scholarly interest in Islam in China. A number of scholars in the United States

and Europe are translating and analyzing the works of the Han Kitab, a collection of sources written by Muslim literati in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that interpreted Islam according to neo-Confucian orthodoxy (Erie 2012; Frankel 2009; Murata 2000; Murata, Chittick, and Tu 2009; Peterson 2012; Tontini 2011). In addition to textual studies, social scientists have conducted fieldwork in Muslim areas (Allès 2000; Cooke 2008; Dautcher 2009; Gillette 2000; Hille 2008; Papas 2011; Zhang 2009). These studies have illuminated the processes by which Muslims in China have adapted not just to the dual mandates of being Muslim and Chinese, but to the tensions between membership in the global *umma* and in the Chinese nation-state and, specifically, China's limited reforms.

At the same time, the topic of Islam in China, or, conversely, China's position in expanding global discourses on Islam, is one of the most sensitive topics for scholarship in and on China. It has been over a decade since a comparable meeting of specialists on Islam in China took place in the United States, and, in contrast to that earlier meeting, the focus of the workshop that preceded this special issue was not a single contentious geographic locale (i.e., Xinjiang). Rather, the guiding interest was the manner in which Islam is experienced throughout China, and the various aspects of how Muslims in China live, in relationship to one another, to non-Muslims, and to the broader Islamic world. Nonetheless, the general deterrent effect of the blacklisting of a generation of Western scholars has cast its shadow over the younger generation.<sup>2</sup> Seeds of distrust between Chinese and American scholars who study Islam have grown, thwarted collaboration, and tainted correspondence. The net effect has been nothing but detrimental to the study of Islam in China and has fostered mischaracterizations, stereotypes, and generalities of all stripes about Islam, fundamentalism, and "splittism" (territorial secession).

To restart the dialogue between Chinese and American scholars, we thought it paramount to collect leading scholars to examine, specifically, the everyday life of Islam in China.<sup>3</sup> This topic not only contributes to the growing literature on Islam in China but also complements the study of Muslim minorities in the West. Scholars were invited to provide contemporary ethnographic and historical analyses of the experience of prayer, pilgrimage, and ritual, legal, entrepreneurial, and familial modes of Chinese Muslims' everyday lives. The unifying aim of the workshop was to offer in-depth studies and accounts of the lives of Muslim minorities in the PRC, the conflicts confronted and contradictions surmounted.

For two days, on April 26 and April 27, 2012, scholars convened at Cornell University on the topic of “The Everyday Life of Islam: Focus on Islam in China.” The workshop featured a small group of international and interdisciplinary scholars from diverse academic backgrounds who are producing cutting-edge scholarship on Islam in China. Scholars came from the PRC, Taiwan, and throughout the United States. Furthermore, the workshop featured Hui, Han, and Uyghur scholars, both male and female. Additionally, scholars represented plural disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, history, political science, Islamic studies, and ethnic studies. The format of the workshop was designed to generate discussion around several themes, including “Politics and Sectarianism in Hui Communities,” “Shrines and Pilgrimages among the Uyghurs,” “Islam and Muslims in Yunnan: Anthropological Accounts,” “Intellectual Inheritance, Connections, and Controversies,” “Everyday Life in Multiple Orthodoxies: Sufism and Interculturation,” and “Constructing Islamic Knowledge in Chinese.” Each theme featured papers from Chinese and American scholars and a discussant from Cornell University. Professor Jonathan Lipman offered opening remarks and Professor Dru C. Gladney gave closing comments. The goal of the workshop was to enrich understanding of the everyday life of Islam in China and to improve the papers for future publication.

The papers thus represent incredible geographic and disciplinary breadth and are, at the same time, united around the flexible theme of the everyday. While the arguments put forward in the conference proceedings are still maturing, the articles in this special issue stand to make a significant contribution to the growing field of Chinese Islamic studies. At the same time, the collection is of value to those with a broader interest in Chinese history, religion, culture, and politics. In brief, while Muslims make up only a small percentage of the total Chinese population, they have long played a crucial role within China, and in particular stand out for the liminal space they occupy between the “Chinese” and the rest of the world. In this regard, Jonathan Lipman years ago deftly labeled the Chinese-speaking Muslims in eastern Gansu (including Ningxia) and northeastern Tibet (i.e., Amdo) as “familiar strangers” (Lipman 1997). In a similar vein, Dru Gladney convincingly demonstrated over two decades ago how the modern project of naming the “Hui” formed a central facet within contemporary Chinese efforts to categorize those who are part of China (Gladney 1987; [1991] 1996). In other words, part of the project of coming to terms with what China is and who Chinese are must involve a consideration of how and why the country’s Muslims fit within such constructs.

To date, however, the historical experiences and contemporary position of China's Muslim population are poorly understood by nonspecialists. While the articles in this special issue do not converge around any singular set of arguments about the Chinese Islamic experience, they do, collectively, demonstrate just how diverse, complex, and fluid the practice of Islam in China has been historically, and continues to be today. These articles reveal that Chinese Muslims defy easy categorization and encompass a stunning array of cultural, religious, and ethnic practices that are a product both of their own efforts and of interaction with historical influences, social and economic considerations, and state policies. The resulting dynamic weaves an evolving tapestry of Islam in China, and China in Islam.

Despite such diversity and particularities, a number of broad themes resonate across the collection, thus wedding many of the articles together. Perhaps the most prominent of these is the manner in which China's Muslims (whether elites or members of the broader population) have over time navigated cultural, linguistic, religious, and political paths between being Chinese and Muslim.

The historically oriented articles all show that following Islam and being part of the Chinese polity created both cleavages and points of intersection within Muslim communities, grounded the relationship of such groups with non-Muslims, and sustained points of intersection between them and the rest of the world. Such a dynamic was always tenuous and shifting, but following the collapse of dynastic China at the end of the Qing, it became even more turbulent and unpredictable, as establishing a place of belonging within the confines of a Chinese nation-state in the process of becoming has proven quite daunting for modern China's Islamic population.

Alongside this theme, and entwined with the challenges it poses to Muslims within China, many of the articles in this issue also take up a second theme, namely the issue of "authenticity" within this community. In other words, who has the right, and obligation, to represent such a group, define its boundaries, and determine which of its practices are deemed legitimate rather than heterodox? Much of this boils down to questions of practice, which adaptations and adjustments are permissible within the Chinese context, and to what degree they constitute an affront to the religion and its true believers.

The emergence of Islam is all the more complex within the Chinese cultural context, in which other religious traditions, most obviously Daoism, Buddhism, Confucian philosophy, had



already taken deep root. At the level of the *longue durée*, the story of Islam's rise in China is one of how those who followed the religion negotiated its grafting on and over preexisting modalities of thought, incorporating limited aspects of such traditions while preserving what were viewed as Islam's core elements. This dance of importation, preservation, promotion, translation, acculturation, and interpretation then stands as a third theme that can be found in various guises throughout all the articles in this special issue.

Authenticity, therefore, is not only the product of elite maneuverings and scholastic interpretations of Islamic texts. It is also constructed via the everyday practices of Muslims living dispersed throughout China, and as such it is as variable, and fine grained, as the contrasting ritual practices that are to be found in these diverse locales. Islam in everyday life constitutes a fourth theme that resonates across this collection. Such a perspective reveals that practice in Xinjiang may be inconceivable to Muslims living in China's southwestern periphery, as explored by Kevin Caffrey, or vice versa. Yet, more surprisingly, the articles show that even within a single region, as in Lesley Turnbull's contribution, diversity more than uniformity rules the day. Each individual Chinese Muslim is thus faced with a dizzying array of practices and rituals from which to conform to past practices and reformist impulses.

Yet the papers all demonstrate that such choices, while local, are also transnational (see particularly the articles by Wang Jianping, Rian Thum, and Matthew Erie), as Islam itself is still understood as an import into the Chinese context, and Muslims in China thus occupy a dual space as Chinese and as members of the *umma*. Much rides on how terms and concepts are translated and transmitted between the two worlds, not only in regard to texts, but also in relationship to lived experiences, including travel to the Middle East and participation in the hajj. This process of translation and straddling constitutes a fifth major theme.

### **Individual Papers**

The workshop featured a total of twelve papers, five of which are included in this collection.

Kevin Caffrey, an anthropologist at Harvard University, writes in "The Case of the Disappearing Altar: Mysteries and Consequences of Revitalizing Chinese Muslims in Yunnan" of an account of Hui revitalization (Ch. *huifu jiaomen*) in one village in Yunnan. His narrative describes an instance of the complex relationship between Hui and other groups—in this case,

Naxi and Tibetan—along China’s southwestern frontier. In the contest between “born-again Muslims,” who seek to extinguish such local interpretations of Islam and replace them with “modernist” orthodoxy, and more traditional forms of practice, Caffrey views an encapsulation of the shift from empire to nation-state in China.

Also basing her fieldwork in Yunnan, Lesley Turnbull, a postdoctoral fellow at New York University, writes in her contribution, “In Pursuit of Islamic ‘Authenticity’: Localizing Muslim Identity on China’s Peripheries,” of the different modalities of identification with Islam between Kunming Hui and those in Shadian. Turnbull demonstrates the ways in which Hui-ness is produced locally: whereas for urban Hui, identity is divorced from practice and rooted in an imagined past, for Shadian Muslims, correct practice is central to faith.

Wang Jianping, a professor at Shanghai Normal University who has conducted decades of research on Islam in China, provides a detailed example of an historical doctrinal disagreement between Ma Dexin, one of the great intellectuals of Chinese Islam, and those of the Shi’a sect. In his article, “The Opposition of a Leading Akhund to Shi’a and Sufi Shaykhs in Mid-Nineteenth-Century China,” Wang envisions Ma Dexin’s denouncement of the Shi’a as a reflection of a larger ideological battle between Saudi Arabia and Iran for Islamic orthodoxy.

Rian Thum, a professor of history at Loyola University in New Orleans, uses rarely studied Turki manuscripts to explore the ways in which Altishahris, the ancestors of today’s Uyghurs, navigated their relationships to China and Central Asia. In “China in Islam: Turki Views from the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” Thum tackles head-on essentializations of “Islam” and “China” by illuminating the ways in which the Altishahris used *tazkirah* (local hagiography) and other written texts as productive of “networks of significance.” By reorienting the point of perspective from a Sinocentric world view to one that privileges the Altishahris, long seen as “peripheral” in Chinese and Islamic studies, Thum unsettles the Chinese imaginary.

Matthew Erie, a postdoctoral research associate at Princeton University, examines the relationship between the contemporary party-state and Islamic law. In his article, “Defining Shari’a in China: State, *Ahong*, and the Postsecular Turn,” Erie traces the major historical shifts in the Chinese state’s approach to the problem of shari’a. Whereas for much of the Communist period the state failed to recognize shari’a, since 2001, a watershed year for Muslims globally, the state has sought to identify laws from the revealed sources of shari’a that are congruent with socialist rule and Chinese nationalism. Through everyday practices like sermons, the party-state

speaks to the Muslim masses through a face most familiar to followers—their cleric. Erie argues that this “postsecular” turn is not unique to China, but its illustration in the Chinese case typifies some of the limitations of this strategy of rule.

Lastly, Professor Jonathan Lipman, a professor of Asian studies and professor of history at Mt. Holyoke College, provides an epilogue that reflects his opening comments for the workshop and elaborates themes and frames that both unify this collection and offer evidence for its diversity of thought, methodology, and perspective.

*Matthew S. Erie is a postdoctoral research associate at Princeton University and 2013 Henry Luce Foundation/ACLS China Studies Program postdoctoral fellow. Allen Carlson is associate professor in the government department at Cornell University.*

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**Notes**

- 1 Number compiled from the official 2010 census statistics.
- 2 In one of the few examples of Western scholarship resulting in the subsequent ban of scholars from China, the publication of the edited volume *Xinjiang: China's Muslim Borderland* in 2004 resulted in the denial of travel visas to many contributors to conduct further research in China.
- 3 It had been twenty-three years since Chinese and Western scholars met to convene in the United States on the topic of Islam in China (Gladney 1989). A slightly larger number of similarly themed conferences have been held in Austria and Japan in the interim.

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