

## “Apoliticization”: One Facet of Chinese Islam

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### *Abstract*

*Islam, a tradition that both spans and transcends conventional notions of “East” and “West”, has adapted itself as the religion and culture of a sizable minority in China from imperial times down to the present day. For their survival, Muslims in China have often found it necessary to downplay the political (and sometimes militant) emphasis of “normative” Islam, even as they have participated in the political life of Chinese society. However, beyond merely reacting to social, political and cultural intimidation, the tendency to “apoliticize” Islam among Muslims in China is also a reflection of Chinese Muslims simultaneity, a sense of belonging to two civilizations at the same time, without disjunction. Responding to rival pressures to assimilate and to resist assimilation to assert a distinct identity, common to many diaspora communities, Chinese Muslims have exemplified a long history of accommodation of Islam to local contexts, showing Islam to be an evolving, multifaceted tradition.*

### **Introduction**

Islam is conventionally grouped together with Judaism and Christianity as part of the western family of monotheistic religions, yet the history of Islam in China is one of many examples of clear evidence that Islam also undeniably has deep roots in the East. Islam’s self-conscious occupation of a unique position between the proverbial poles of East and West calls into question this traditional geographic, demographic and cultural dichotomy. The academy has tried to classify religions by geographical origin and prevailing cultural characteristics, but these boundaries have proven permeable, vulnerable to the historical movement of peoples and syncretism of civilizations, making such definitions less definitive. Fixed ideas of Oriental and Occidental monoliths perpetuate old but persistent ideas of an eternal impasse, immortalized by Rudyard Kipling. Yet the idea that the “twain shall never meet” assumes a false polarity. It is not because East and West are fixed geographical realities that they do not meet, but because they are ethereal concepts chasing each other in an orbit shaped by human perceptions. As points on the compass, East and West may be constants, but as ideas they are ever shifting. To uphold the idea of an immutable polarity between an Occidental Self and Oriental Other (or *vice versa*) is to return to the paradigm of a flat Earth.

### **Historical Perspective**

Where then does Islam belong? The three Abrahamic faiths were all born in close proximity to one another, in what we call the Middle East. Yet, is any of the western religions truly western? It is by convention that we accept this notion, even if historically they are at best “westernized” traditions. Based upon geography and a shared cultural, intellectual

and theological heritage, we may include Islam in this grouping. However, these commonalities must not lead us to claim for Islam an exclusively occidental orientation. Positioned as it is in between the cultural spheres of East and West, Islam represents a valuable link among many civilizations. Islam's early expansion was multi-directional, and historians often marvel at the fact that, within a century of the Prophet's death, the faith had spread from the shores of the Atlantic in the West, to the frontiers of China in the East. Moreover, Islam has assimilated elements of local cultures wherever it has spread, and as Peter Awn observes, "the unity of the Islamic umma is based primarily on the ideals embedded in this abstract vision, not on any serious hope to impose cultural uniformity".<sup>1</sup> To label the unifying vision of the global Muslim community by a particular geographical designation is to fail to recognize the universal claims deeply ingrained in the tradition and its followers.

Demographic statistics support these claims. Islam originated in Arabia, but Arabs represent only a fraction of the world's Muslims today. Islam is today the most populous religion in Africa and the fastest-growing religion in the West, but the vast majority of Muslims live in South and Southeast Asia, where Islam has long had historical contact with Hinduism and Buddhism. Islam probably entered China in the eighth century, brought there by merchants and mercenaries along the Silk Road. The Chinese Muslim population that exists today thus has its roots in early Islamic history, descendants of Islam's extreme eastward expansion. Chinese Muslim scholars created a unique body of literature, known as the *Han Kitab*, in which they explained the teachings of Islam using Neo-Confucian classical Chinese. In so doing they also defended the presence of Islam so far from its Arabian origins, and looked beyond geographical distinctions, envisioning a universal and ubiquitous Truth taught by Sages from the East and the West.

### **The Meeting of the Twain**

The early Chinese Muslims affirmed that these geographical distinctions of East and West are relative and arbitrary in the context of God's universal dominion, consistent with the Quranic proclamation: "To Allah belong the East and the West, so wherever you turn, there is the face of Allah".<sup>2</sup> That is to say, compass points are merely perspectives, since a Chinese Muslim must face westward towards Mecca in prayer, while an American Muslim faces eastward. Islam belongs exclusively to neither direction, and, for the devout Muslim, the entire world belongs to God. Islam was born between East and West, and in its worldwide expansion has transcended both, so while the Islamic tradition may have a natural, genetic link to the Judeo-Christian tradition, opportunities also exist to build similar bridges between Islam and the civilizations of Asia, and other non-western cultural spheres. Hence, the increased need for research into Islam as an Asian religion, and of a discourse that recognizes Islam's global reach.

#### *Global "Islam" and Local "Islam(s)"*

The current topic responds to this need and is an outgrowth of two intersecting streams of thought. The first is inspired by the need to expand Islamic studies within the broader context of comparative religious studies. The second is rooted in research on the history of Islam in China. Teaching in this field has heightened my awareness of the need for a comparative framework in which to understand Islam as a global phenomenon—one that transcends such distinctions as "eastern" or "western". The meeting of civilizations,

resulting in a dichotomy of clashes on the one hand and syncretism on the other, is one of the patterns we frequently encounter in the study of religion, to which Islam is no exception. Like other world religions, Islam has adapted itself to a myriad of local contexts, China being one of them. So, even while we posit a global Islam that exists as an abstract ideal, we must at the same time be mindful of the regional variation that makes it impossible to reduce the tradition to a monolith. The idea of a “normative Islam” is a simplification that constantly requires modification and qualification when applied to the real situation on the ground wherever Muslims exist.

Yet, there are moments in which we catch a glimpse of universal expressions of global Islam. Images of the annual Hajj, where as many as two million pilgrims converge in Mecca to perform the ancient rites in unison, are stirring representations of both the breadth of diversity of the Islamic *Umma*, or community, and the overwhelming unity of Muslim faith and praxis. Similarly, when Muslims are united by what they perceive as a common threat, we are reminded of the *Hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad: “You will find all the Believers, in regard to mutual love and affection, to be like a single body, wherein if one part of the body aches then the other parts join it in fever”.<sup>3</sup> Worldwide Muslim protests of attacks on particular Muslim populations, or perceived injustices against the entire *Umma*, represent another aspect of Islamic solidarity, that of collective indignation. And with twenty-four-hour global satellite television and the Worldwide Web, images of such demonstrations are never far from our sight.

A case in point is the *Jyllands-Posten* Danish cartoon debacle of 2006. We watched as the media covered stories of violent protests in cities throughout the Muslim world. In extreme cases, we witnessed attacks on Western interests in Islamic countries. We saw demonstrations, civil but no less angry, among Muslims living in the West. In Europe, the hostility of Muslim protesters was often palpable, whereas here in the United States, demonstrations tended to be peaceful, appealing to values of mutual understanding and tolerance. The press both scrutinized and justified itself in exploring the rationale behind the clearly provocative publication and re-publication of the cartoons, leading to debate over freedom of the press and freedom of religion in open societies.

### **Self-Censorship and a Strategy of Silence and Prayer**

A few media outlets also covered an angle of the story hardly noticed amidst all the smoke and shouting: The response of Chinese Muslims to the cartoons. The *New York Times*, Reuters, and the Associated Press reported on Chinese Muslims’ role as passive spectators. These stories reveal an important aspect of Chinese Muslim identity and amplify the deafening poignancy of silent protest. These accounts speak volumes about a trained self-censorship on the part of many of China’s Muslims, which is the product of centuries of negotiation of their identity as a minority in an overwhelmingly non-Muslim environment. The diaspora of Islam in China has led to a split consciousness in which Chinese Muslims experience, to varying degrees, both separation from and solidarity with the larger Muslim *Umma* beyond China. When asked about the cartoons, Ma Ruxiong, a Chinese Muslim teacher from the religious enclave of Linxia, summed up both the reason and the rationale for the absence of public outcry in his community. He said:

Obviously, we’re different from Muslims in other parts of the world. We just can’t go into the streets and protest. You have to have permission from the government. But there are other things we can do. We pray to Allah to protect all Muslims in the world.<sup>4</sup>

In this and other cases, such as in their collective response to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, or ongoing conflicts in other Islamic countries, Chinese Muslims tacitly honor the sentiment expressed in the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad, who said:

When any of you sees an injustice, let him change it with his hand. If he cannot, then let him change it with his tongue. And if he cannot do even this, let him oppose it in his heart, for this is the weakest degree of faith.<sup>5</sup>

This observation is no way intended to impugn the faith of China's Muslims, but rather to acknowledge that Islamic tradition recognizes times and situations in which it is not possible to rise in action, or even give voice to social and political views that might otherwise be required by one's religious convictions. China's Muslims have traditionally not been "active participants in the protests and seminal debates roiling the larger Islamic world. In that world, they are almost invisible".<sup>6</sup> The exigencies of survival must sometimes take precedent over religious scruples. In present-day China, one could easily explain the self-restraint demonstrated by the country's Muslim population in terms of numbers. Jim Yardley, the *New York Times* reporter, writes: "With 1.3 billion people, China is so huge and Muslims constitute such a tiny minority (between twenty and forty million) that most Muslims intuitively learn to keep quiet".<sup>7</sup>

This "intuitive" self-censorship is no doubt a response to an authoritarian regime that has trained its citizens to toe the party line. However, Chinese Muslim socio-political reticence as a product of intimidation is only part of the story. Where there is a stick, one also finds a carrot. On the flip side of fear of reprisals for drawing negative attention, there is the incentive of being integrated into Chinese culture and a sense of belonging in the mainstream society, as well as constructing a coherent self-identity that is simultaneously Chinese and Muslim.

The Chinese Muslim attitude toward government authority, and their reticence to show allegiance to the greater Islamic community for fear of seeming disloyal to the state, is centuries in the making. While Muslims have sometimes stood up for their rights, they have rarely taken on the government directly, and virtually never presented their grievances as an expression of Islam in a global sense. Over the past twelve hundred (or so) years since Islam first arrived in China, Muslims have, more often than not, found themselves in situations that required them to acquiesce to government authority. However, there have also been instances of Chinese Muslim protest, uprisings and even armed rebellion over the long history of Islam in China. And we shall have occasion to examine examples of these in both the imperial and modern eras, with the hope of contextualizing them, and distinguishing them from the more passive manifestations of Chinese Islam that are the main focus of this discussion. The fact that Chinese Muslims, both in the past and today, demonstrate a variety of social, political, and religious perspectives, which are largely determined by historical and geographical factors, serves to remind of the tremendous diversity within Islam, from one region to another, even within a single country.

### **From Islam in China to Chinese Islam**

In the case of Chinese Muslims, we see a familiar pattern of a minority's response to rival pressures. On the one hand there is the urge to assimilate in order to survive and be accepted into the mainstream society. On the other hand, there is an impulse to assert a distinct religious and cultural identity lest the community simply be flushed away into the mainstream. The intensity of these rival pressures has varied from period to

period, and from region to region, resulting in greater or lesser degrees of acquiescence or resistance to assimilation. Nevertheless, there is some continuity. We observe in China, both in rural and urban environments, an ethnically and linguistically Chinese Muslim minority that traces its roots back to various tides of Islamic migration and intermarriage with non-Muslim Chinese. These people, called the Hui and categorized officially by the Communist government as one of the People’s Republic’s minority nationalities, exhibit great diversity in terms of religious practice and integration into the cultural mainstream of Han Chinese society. Yet collectively they embody what we refer to as simultaneity, being both Chinese and Muslim at the same time. The historical development of various communities that would later be brought under the rubric of Hui ethnicity in modern times is the history of the naturalization of Islamic culture and religion, the process whereby Islam in China has been transformed into Chinese Islam.

### *The Historical Context of Cultural and Intellectual Trends*

We can trace this pattern of naturalization under the rival pressures of assimilation and distinction historically, which leads us back to the second stream of thought that informs the present topic: my research into the history of cultural and intellectual trends among the highly assimilated Chinese Muslim intellectual class of the late seventeenth to early eighteenth century, who attempted to express the teachings of Islam in the classical Chinese language of Neo-Confucian philosophy. These efforts are epitomized in the work of a scholar that I have studied quite closely, Liu Zhi (ca. 1660–ca. 1730).

Liu Zhi and his colleagues lived in interesting times. The Ming dynasty (1368–1644), a native Chinese regime, had been replaced by the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) that was originally established by Manchurian invaders from beyond China’s northern borders. During the reign of the second Manchu dynast, the Kangxi emperor (r. 1662–1722), the regime attempted to establish political hegemony over China and assert its cultural legitimacy as a Chinese dynasty, embracing the customs of the Chinese court, while never completely letting go of its Manchurian heritage. The Manchus strove to project an image of culturally coherent sovereignty, despite their foreign origins, over an ethnically diverse empire that was held together by traditional Confucian ideas of moral order. This political climate opened a window of opportunity for other communities to follow suit. Chinese Muslims took the opportunity to express their beliefs and collective identity as being not only unthreatening to Chinese culture and society, but, moreover, completely consonant with the values and doctrines of the dominant Confucian ideology. Thus, Chinese Islamic culture at this time experienced a cultural and intellectual flourishing.

The Chinese Muslim scholars produced a body of literature collectively called the *Han Kitab*, a name that combines the Chinese word *Han*, referring to the Chinese language, with the Arabic word *Kitab*, meaning “book”. Thus, quite aptly, the term refers to books about Islamic belief and practice written in classical Chinese, and therefore highly evocative of and influenced by Confucian thought. These writings reflect a tacit attempt by the Chinese Muslim literati to portray themselves, their community and their faith as “orthodox” in both Islamic and Confucian terms. Their purpose was to educate readers, both Sinicized Muslims and curious non-Muslim literati, about Islam. That they did so in the language of Neo-Confucianism reflects their dual heritage and history, in other words their “simultaneity”. Their integrated self-perception was transparently reflected in their self-representation as scholars of a learned tradition that recognized its dual lineage through the Sage Confucius and the Prophet Muhammad, whose roots ultimately lay in the same divine source of wisdom and moral order. Their almost

seamless integration of Islamic and Chinese religious and philosophical concepts shows the *Han Kitab* literature to be the heir of the rich literary traditions of both civilizations, just as their authors themselves were hybrid products of centuries of genetic interbreeding and cultural cross-pollination. Their writings therefore demonstrate a syncretism of diverse elements drawn from an eclectic array of sources.

### **Political Agenda and Apolitical Portrayals of Chinese Islam**

We cannot in this paper delve deeply into the fascinating style and content of this literature, and must therefore be content to highlight one remarkable feature of it that is germane to the topic at hand. In the entire *Han Kitab* canon, we scarcely see any mention of the political and sometimes militant dimension that we often presume to be an aspect of “normative Islam”. Most of the books of the canon deal with matters of religious practice, religious doctrines presented in highly philosophical terms, theology presented as metaphysical cosmology, and the history of Islam and the Muslims of China. The *Han Kitab* presents Islam as an ethical and philosophical teaching, akin to the *Dao*, or Way, of Confucianism. The Prophet Muhammad is portrayed as a Sage, rather than as a prophet in the Semitic tradition, with the idea of divine revelation being downplayed.

Similarly absent is an extensive discussion of the *Shari’a*, the Sacred Law of Islam. From the classical period of Islam onwards, discourse on *Shari’a* has dominated scholarly literature throughout the Islamic world. Yet within the Chinese Muslim canon, only one major work devoted to the topic of Islamic law has survived. This is the *Tianfang dianli* by Liu Zhi, translated as “The Ritual Law of Islam”. The title indicates the author’s emphasis, Islamic orthopraxy, which he interprets through the lens of Confucian ethics. Why is it that the great flowering of Chinese Muslim scholarship of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries produced only this single example in a genre that dominated the literature of classical Islam? The answer to this question sheds light on the phenomenon of Chinese Muslim reticence with regard to their expression of overtly political views influenced by their religion.

The situation of Chinese Muslims is inherently different from that of their co-religionists in the central Islamic world. Unlike these other populations, Chinese Muslims have lived under foreign jurisdiction that has not allowed them to apply Islamic law beyond the usages of individual or communal religious practices. Muslims in China only enjoyed such rights to implement aspects of the *Shari’a* as imperial indulgence would grant. Thoughts of Islam as polity have been far from the minds of most Chinese Muslims, who see China as their home, and therefore follow the Chinese customs of reverence for State authority. There was therefore no motivation among the Chinese Muslim literati to discuss matters that had little or no bearing on daily life among their constituency, especially when such discussion could only cast a shadow of suspicion upon their community.

The *Han Kitab* scholars opted to focus on topics that could more easily be aligned with mainstream intellectual Chinese culture, and help dispel misconceptions about their beliefs to grant legitimacy to Islam. They focused on the origins of Islam in China, which they recounted in narratives that explained and justified the existence of their community. One such narrative, repeated with varying details in many sources, highlights the *Han Kitab* view of the position of Islam *vis-à-vis* imperial authority. As the story goes, the Emperor Taizong (r. 626–649) of the Tang dynasty (618–906) had a dream in which a monster (in some versions a demon or dragon) threatened to

destroy his realm. Some versions illustrate this threat with an image of the imperial palace shaking to its rafters, on the verge of crumbling. In the dream, the Emperor saw a bearded man wearing a turban who had the power to quell the monster. Upon waking, the Emperor asked his advisors to interpret the dream’s meaning, and they told him it depicted a great “Sage” who had recently appeared in the West. The Emperor dispatched emissaries to go and fetch this western Sage and bring him back to China. The Sage was none other than the Prophet Muhammad, who, upon receiving the Chinese delegation, declined to go to China himself, but sent a contingent led by his close Companion (and maternal uncle), Sa’d ibn Abi Waqqas. According to the Chinese Muslim tradition, the Prophet’s Companions remained in China, where they served the Emperor and helped restore peace and harmony to the Tang Empire.

The origin narratives found in the *Han Kitab* literature should in no way be confused with historiography in the strict sense of that word; the Sa’d ibn Abi Waqqas legend is historically implausible.<sup>8</sup> They are better described as religious myth. Yet, they are a rich source of important information about the community’s self-perception. The various accounts concur that the Prophet’s envoys settled in China and married Chinese women, thus making them the progenitors of today’s Hui Muslims. Anachronisms and other erroneous elements notwithstanding, narrative details that link Chinese Muslims to the genetic and spiritual lineage of Muhammad serve to give them a sense of legitimacy and importance. If the Prophet planted the seeds of Islam in Chinese soil then the existence of Muslims in China is divinely ordained. What’s more, the origin myth serves to confirm the role of Chinese Muslims as loyal subjects of the Chinese Empire and heirs to the saviors of the realm. The legendary emissaries of the Prophet did not come to proselytize or impose Muslim rule. But the moral force of their teaching was so great that it pacified the Empire. Islam was thus portrayed as a force for stability in the face of impending chaos, a blessing to China, but not a challenge to the political status quo.

### **Islam and the Chinese Concept of Political Authority**

The *locus classicus* for this origin narrative in the *Han Kitab* is in a work called the *Huihui Yuanlai*, or “The Origin of Islam”, attributed to Liu Sanjie, the father of Liu Zhi. It comes as little surprise that the younger Liu inherited from his father both his motivation for writing Islamic literature in Chinese, as well as his perspective on the relationship of Islam to Chinese political authority. This perspective was shared by most of the Chinese Muslim literati of the period. Though devout Muslims, many of them were also trained in the Confucian curriculum and took its lessons to heart, affirming its values alongside those of their Islamic heritage. This dual allegiance is manifested in the attitude towards the Chinese State reflected in their writings. They considered the ideals of the Confucian social hierarchy, including loyalty to the Sovereign, as being inseparable from the duties of being a good Muslim. The relationship between the conscientious ruler and the loyal subject is the first of the Five Cardinal Relationships that form the foundation of Confucian social order. Liu Zhi confirmed this position, in his *Tianfang dianli*, as he writes:

The Five Standard Relationships are namely the relationships between sovereign and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and between friends. This is the Teaching of the Five Ethical Relationships. In Islam, they are also called the “Five Accomplishments”. Now, the proper relationship between sovereign and subject completes the state; the

proper relationship between father and son completes the family; the proper relationship between husband and wife completes the household; the proper relationship between elder and younger brothers completes daily affairs; and the proper relationship between friends completes their virtue. All of them have an inevitable, immutable Ritual. When these Five Standards are completely cultivated the Way of Man is made complete.<sup>9</sup>

Liu Zhi thus showed himself to be dually orthodox as a Confucian and a Muslim. For the Muslim literati of China, an integral part of one's religious duties is obedience to the ruler, even if he was not a Muslim, provided that he abided by the principles of righteous government shared by Confucianism and Islam. According to this view, Chinese Muslims were obligated to show loyalty and obedience to the Emperor.

The *Han Kitab* scholars were guarded in expressing ideas with political implications. This was necessary because they lived as a minority amidst a majority that did not perceive them as fully Chinese. Popular prejudices maintained an undercurrent of anti-Muslim bias that exists in China even today. The views held by the government have tended to be more nuanced, but among Chinese officials there was always suspicion of sedition on the part of ethnic minorities, and even more so on the part of non-Confucian (or today non-Communist) religious communities, whose heterodox views were thought to be a threat to moral order and State authority. Thus, we may infer a political agenda in the writings of the Chinese Muslim scholars: To portray Islam as harmonious with Confucian orthodoxy and Muslims as peaceful subjects, whose presence was beneficial to the Chinese State. The *Han Kitab* scholars played a prominent role in promoting this positive image, thereby securing the rights of Muslims to practice Islam, *albeit* within the context of the dominant Confucian culture.

There is no hint in their writings of any internal conflict over the issue of loyalty to a non-Muslim regime, as we find in the writings of Muslims in other parts of the world, such as India, or other regions affected by the encroachment of western colonialism. The *Han Kitab* scholars did not demonstrate a mindset colored by the irreconcilable opposition of the *Dar al-Islam* ("Abode of Islam") and *Dar al-Harb* ("Abode of War"), which dominated Islamic discourse since the Crusades, and has resurged in the rhetoric of modern Islamist movements today. This view divides the world into two antithetical camps, one inside the fold of Islam, ruled by *Shari'a* law, and the other outside, ruled by man-made systems of government. According to Bernard Lewis, this dichotomous worldview was canonized by the jurists of early Islam:

Between the House of Islam and the House of War there was, according to the *shari'a*, the Holy Law as formulated by the classical jurists, a state of war religiously and legally obligatory, which could end only with the conversion or subjugation of all mankind. A treaty of peace between the Muslim state and a non-Muslim state was thus in theory juridically impossible. The war, which would end only with the universal triumph of Islam, could not be terminated; it could only be interrupted for reasons of necessity or of expediency by a truce.<sup>10</sup>

Extending this premise, Muslim ideologues have argued that it is the duty of all Muslims to live under an Islamic State governed by *Shari'a* law, and to seek to establish or spread the rule of such a state wherever and whenever possible. Some jurists have ruled that travel to the *Dar al-Harb* was legally reprehensible (i.e., falling under the legal category *makruh*, lit. "distasteful").<sup>11</sup> When trade was not considered by jurists a valid reason to live, even temporarily, outside the *Dar al-Islam*, how much more distasteful to these

purist sensibilities was the idea of settling in a foreign land for centuries? Some Muslims thus see living under a non-Islamic government as anathema to Islam.

Yet, others argue that this view is not in keeping with the foundations of Islam. After all, the Prophet Muhammad had not only permitted but also sent members of the nascent Muslim community to live abroad, whether for refuge from persecution or on diplomatic missions. So there is historical precedent to justify living in territories under non-Muslim jurisdiction, provided the non-Muslim authorities guarantee security, the ability to earn a livelihood, and the freedom to fulfill one’s essential religious duties. In China, for those who have seen themselves as seamlessly and simultaneously Chinese and Muslim, it was perfectly legitimate to live in their motherland, while simultaneously remaining faithful to the religion of their ancestors, so long as the regime under which they lived dealt with them justly and permitted them to fulfill their obligations to Allah. Chinese Muslims, in turn, are morally bound to obey the law of the land, as long as it has guaranteed them these basic rights.

*Liu Sanjie’s Account of the Emperor’s Visit*

The *Han Kitab* scholars’ positive attitude towards imperial authority is evident in the literature. We can cite several examples of their favorable disposition towards the regime of the Kangxi emperor in particular. Liu Sanjie, who is credited with writing the authoritative original Chinese Muslim narrative (cited above) actually mentions the Emperor in his book. He frames the story of the Tang Emperor’s dream in another story about a meeting between the Kangxi emperor and a Muslim general named Ma Jinliang. As the story goes, the Emperor was returning from one of his imperial tours of inspection and stopped overnight at the general’s headquarters. The two men spent the evening discussing Confucian philosophy. The Emperor then questioned the general about his religion, asking him why his ancestors had first come to China. The general had to confess his ignorance of this history. The Emperor responded by handing the general a book about Islam.

Several details of this story stand out as indicators of the author’s agenda. First and foremost is the appearance of the Kangxi emperor as both cultured and learned in the Chinese tradition. We may infer from this the author’s tacit endorsement of State orthodoxy. The Emperor is also shown to be a leader concerned with the affairs of his people, and sensitive to the diversity of cultures among his subjects. The Emperor is shown to be generous, and, remarkably, even a champion of Islamic learning. The depiction of General Ma is also quite telling. This high-ranking military official was a loyal and obedient subject, well versed in orthodox ideology. However, the general’s glaring deficiency is his ignorance of Islam. This detail justifies the author’s purpose in writing the book. He has shown that assimilation, while helping Chinese Muslims to advance materially and socially, has left them bereft of their heritage. Hence the motivation for the book in the author’s own words:

Lest in years to come the future generations of Muslims should forget the origin of their religion and be unable to rediscover it. . . it is here set down in fair style that it may be handed down to the latest ages and not be forgotten.<sup>12</sup>

While the historicity of this encounter between the Emperor and General Ma is doubtful,<sup>13</sup> from a literary point of view, it is quite effective in promoting its agenda. The story’s portrayal of the Kangxi emperor, based on historical realities, flatters the throne while claiming the imperial imprimatur for the book and, by extension, for Islam itself.

*Ma Zhu's Guide to Islam*

Also in the generation preceding Liu Zhi, the scholar Ma Zhu (b. 1640) wrote a *Han Kitab* book titled *Qingzhen zhinan*, “The Guide to Islam”. He presented it to the throne of the Kangxi emperor with the specific hope of gaining imperial recognition of his own self-proclaimed status as a Muslim leader. Ma Zhu was a civil degree holder, who had served for a time as a government official in his native province of Yunnan before moving to Beijing to pursue a career in Islamic scholarship. With this background, his allegiance to imperial rule is clear. While living in the capital, Ma Zhu combined his fervor for Islam and his understanding of politics, realizing “how useful it would be if the new Qing imperium recognized the faith officially”.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, he had an “ambition to become the empire-wide leader of China’s Muslims by making himself an official, state-sanctioned *Sayyid* (a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad), thus making himself the Muslim analogue to the descendants of Confucius”.<sup>15</sup> He hoped thereby to secure a place for Islam in Chinese society and a position of honor for himself within the imperial system. And he attempted this by highlighting the virtues of Islam, while playing upon the mercy and generosity of the Emperor, as he writes:

If these words could be disseminated, it would benefit society, (for Islam would help) eradicate heterodoxy and lend support to Confucianism. Pray your August Majesty show lenience and spare your stern punishment for my foolishness, but grant your humble subject the favor of promulgating (this book) throughout the realm.<sup>16</sup>

Ma Zhu’s interest in promoting orthodoxy over heterodoxy was also demonstrated by his stance against Sufi Mystical orders from Central Asia that had taken root in Yunnan. Ma Zhu took legal action against his fellow Muslims, appealing to local officials and the imperial authorities to arrest the Sufis on charges of heresy. Here we see a clear historical example of Islamic protest in China, which, far from showing signs of Islamic solidarity, pitted Muslim against Muslim—not protest *against* the Chinese government but an appeal *to* the imperium to settle a dispute among Muslims.

### **The State as Mediator and Protector**

Muslims appealed to the State to arbitrate disputes against both non-Muslims and Muslims, showing themselves to be participants in the political life of Chinese society. Even the infamous Muslim rebellions against the Qing dynasty of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that occurred in northwestern China were largely based on local disputes, sometimes among Muslims and sometimes between Muslims and non-Muslims. When Muslims rose up against imperial authority, it was generally because they felt that local officials had not redressed their grievances adequately, or sided with local non-Muslims in their anti-Islamic bias. In these conflicts, Muslims could often be found siding with the authorities against other Muslims. So we must not accept the picture painted by some sources of a unified Islamic front against the regime. Nor should we imagine a religious war, as most of the disputes at the heart of the rebellions were based on local economic and civil issues. As Jonathan Lipman points out, Muslim rebels

... reacted against state or militia violence with violence of their own and thus became rebels in the eyes of the state without any plan to seize territory or set up an antistate or proclaim a *jihad*. In short, we see ‘rebel’ as a

state-created category in most of these cases, not as a description of what the Muslims intended to do.<sup>17</sup>

### *The Legacy of Apoliticized Islam in the People's Republic*

Whether the extremely Sinicized communities of eastern China, or the less assimilated solidarities of the northwest, and whether in imperial times or under the Communist regime, Chinese Muslims have never thought of toppling the central government to set up an Islamic state. Such ideas are beyond the purview of a minority that knows that, even without the overt threat of suppression, their survival depends on maintaining good relations and a peaceful, positive image in the eyes of the mainstream authorities and their non-Muslim neighbors. We should note carefully the absence of a pan-Islamic notion of *jihād* in the Chinese Muslim context. As Lipman explains concerning this hot-button term and its usage in Chinese Muslim history:

The idea of a war to convert Qing territory into Islamic territory could almost never be entertained by a Sino-Muslim leader, as compared to the Turkic-speaking Muslims in Xinjiang, who often did declare *jihād* against the Qing. Indeed, virtually all of the . . . Sino-Muslims . . . shared a strong sense of *belonging* in China and of the Qing state's legitimacy".<sup>18</sup>

The same situation prevails today. Like their ancestors under imperial rule, Muslims in the People's Republic of China represent a diversity of local views and characteristics. The Uighur people of Xinjiang, bordering the former Soviet Central Asian republics, are still a thorn in the side of Beijing, as they include a number of separatist factions, some purely nationalist and secular, but others who invoke *jihād* and religious unity with Muslims abroad in their struggle for independence. When we have heard of foreign fighters in Afghanistan coming from China, or being detained at Guantanamo Bay, they are invariably of Uighur ethnicity. The ethnic-Chinese Hui constantly try to distinguish themselves from these Turkic-speaking Muslims, whom they see as unruly, and un-Chinese. On this, Hui Muslims and non-Muslim Han Chinese tend to agree.

In fact, Hui and Han, who live side by side in most Chinese cities, tend to share many common values and lifestyle. Among modern, urban Muslims, the greatest difference between them and their Han neighbors tends to focus on who eats pork and who does not. In modern China, as in imperial times, most Muslims understand that their fortunes are inextricably bound to those of the mainstream society. And they rely on the promise of the Chinese constitution that: "No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. The state protects normal religious activities". It has therefore behooved Chinese Muslims to make sure that their customs be perceived as "normal religious activities", which precludes pan-Islamic political aspirations.

### *Patriotism Demonstrated in Protest*

When Muslims in China do on occasion protest in the People's Republic of China, as in imperial times, it has tended to be on the local level, addressing specific grievances among regional communities. Yet there have been instances where ethnic tensions have spread and taken on a national, or even pan-Islamic, tenor. One example that garnered much attention in the Chinese media was the 1989 protest of a book called

*Xing fengsu*, or “Sexual Customs”, which was presented to the Chinese public as an anthropological study of sexual practices in different cultures. The book profaned some sacred symbols and rites of Islam, likening the minaret to a phallus and the dome to “the mound of Venus”, and the pilgrimage to Mecca to an orgy that included sodomy with camels. Upon hearing of the book, Muslims all over the country staged small protests, but in Beijing, a protest of approximately 3,000 students and local Muslim residents took to the streets, from the University district of Haidian, to the Hui neighborhood of Niujie, before culminating at Tian’anmen Square. Most of the marchers were Hui Muslims, but along the way, the march attracted students of other Muslim ethnicities, and even some non-Muslim Han sympathizers.

It is significant that this march took place during the so-called “Beijing Spring” of 1989, just as the student-led pro-democracy protest was gaining momentum, and weeks before the government crackdown at Tian’anmen. The Muslim protests should be viewed in the context of the larger movement, as people across Beijing and elsewhere in the country were testing the limits of the government’s policies that had opened China to the world. Chinese students had seen the loosening of the Communist grip in Eastern Europe, and timed their protest to coincide with a state visit by Michael Gorbachev. That the Muslims were similarly inspired and emboldened by events abroad in airing their grievances against the publication of *Xing fengsu* was evident in the slogans they shouted and banners they wielded. The Muslims appealed to the government to punish the publishers of the book for their offense against Islam, and to ban the book that they called “China’s *Satanic Verses*”.<sup>19</sup> Chinese Muslims aligned themselves with worldwide Islamic protests against Rushdie’s book the previous year, and in this way attached themselves to global Islam. Islamic leaders in turn lent their support to the Chinese Muslim cause, as then Iranian President Ali Khomeini expressed his full solidarity with the protesters on a state visit to Beijing on 11 May 1989.

Remarkably, the Communist government not only met the Muslims’ demands to ban the book in question, but also overlooked some of the laws broken by Muslims during the protests around the country. Then again, before 4 June, the government had been lenient with the students gathering in Tian’anmen generally. It would seem that the timing of the Muslim protest, including Khomeini’s state visit and China’s wish to appear solicitous of its Muslim citizens, had something to do with its success and the lack of government reprisals. But the nature of the protest was also a factor in this. Looking at some of the other slogans of the march, we see that the Muslims never turned their anger against the government itself. Instead, they urged government and citizen alike to “Respect China’s Freedom of Religion!” “Uphold the Constitution!” “Uphold the Party’s Nationality and Religion Policies!” “Preserve National Unity!” They also enjoined Muslims to “Love Our Country, Love Our Religion”, while at the same time declaring “*Allahu Akbar*” (“God is Great”).<sup>20</sup> Even as they proclaimed Islamic unity, the protestors simultaneously demonstrated their patriotism. Like Ma Zhu’s petitions to the imperial throne in the seventeenth century, the demonstrators in 1989 made sure to “protest to the government, rather than *against* it” the “difference, from the Chinese state’s standpoint” being “one of order versus disorder, rationality versus confusion, law versus criminality, and reward versus punishment”.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, in the aftermath of the 4 June 1989, crackdown at Tian’anmen, these conditions have utterly changed and it is now difficult to imagine such bold demonstrations erupting again. By the same token, the government’s commitment to maintaining order and avoiding divisiveness, especially in ethnic minority affairs, makes it less likely that an inflammatory book like *Xing fengsu* could be published. The events of 11 September

2001 have also contributed to making such a demonstration less likely, as toleration of any kind of organized Islamic movement has been severely curtailed in China as elsewhere.

### *Era of Heightened Tensions*

In 2004, in Henan province, a Hui taxi driver struck and killed a six-year-old Han girl, sparking anti-Muslim riots and Muslim counter-riots that left seven dead and dozens wounded. Muslims from other provinces also came to Henan to join in protests against the treatment of their brethren. Yet, despite this show of unity, the case never took on religious overtones, rather escalating into a national ethnic controversy in which disadvantaged groups sought redress from the authorities and some turned to violence when they felt that the government was not responding to their satisfaction. In the view of Chinese social justice expert Hu Xingdou, the incident showed China to be “at a crossroads, where problems like those of farmers, laid-off workers and ethnic tension all blend together”.<sup>22</sup> According to Professor Hu, “the lack of a mechanism for disadvantaged groups to pursue justice was a factor in the mounting unrest”.<sup>23</sup> Religious politics did not provoke the Henan riots, but rather local social and economic woes that bubbled over into a larger movement. No spirit of global Islam was invoked, no *jihad* declared against an infidel regime. Rather, this set of events must be understood, in much the same light as the nineteenth century Muslim rebellions against the Qing government, as an expression of communal solidarity and identity negotiation.

### **Conclusion**

While they pursue the path of seeking communal solidarity and identity negotiation, Muslims in China do have a sense of their place in and a connection with the global Islamic *Umma*. Sentiments expressed quietly by some Chinese Muslims in the wake of the Danish cartoons controversy suggest this. With access to international media, via the Internet and satellite television, one young Muslim said, “We knew about the cartoons and felt furious”, adding rhetorically, “But how could we go and demonstrate?”<sup>24</sup> The *imams* around the country and the government-sanctioned China Islamic Association in Beijing urged calm among their constituencies, as they did at the outbreak of the Iraq war in 2003. Muslim acquiescence is summed up in the words of Ma Huiyun, director of an Islamic school in Linxia, who said that the cartoons infuriated him and other local Muslims. But, as he said, “we have to cooperate with the government . . . They asked us to be calm. They said they would speak on our behalf and express our unhappiness”.<sup>25</sup>

So, as in past centuries, Muslims have cast their lot with the government by downplaying the political implications of their religion. As Dru Gladney said of Muslims in China today, “They don’t tend to get too involved in international Islamic conflict”, because “They don’t want to be branded as radical Muslims”.<sup>26</sup> It is with this sentiment in mind that I came up with the title of this article. In our world, we are constantly bombarded with stories of the politicization of religion. For Muslims in China, this is not an option, nor has it been a preferred perspective historically. And so it is not so much that Muslims feel the need to de-politicize their religion. Rather, they affirm its apolitical nature, even though they are constantly involved in politics. Their ongoing adaptation, first to the norms of imperial Chinese society, and now to the restrictions of Communist China, have required Muslims actively to assert this identity—to “apoliticize” Islam.

This notion demonstrates an important idea that bears constant repetition; there is no single, normative Islam, anymore than any other religious tradition. Rather there are many faces and visions of Islam, and this particular Chinese manifestation is just one of those – one with many facets.

## NOTES

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