Review Essays

Books Reviewed: Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light: Wang Tai-yu's "Great Learning of the Pure and Real" and Liu Chih's "Displaying the Concealment of the Real Realm."* Albany: SUNY Press, 2000; Maria Jaschok and Shui Jingjun, *The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam: A Mosque of Their Own.* Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 2000; Jean A. Berlie, *Islam in China: Hui and Uyghurs between Modernization and Sinicization.* Bangkok: White Lotus, 2004; Sheila Hollihan-Elliot, *Muslims in China.* Philadelphia: Mason Crest Publishers, 2006.

With a population conservatively estimated at 20 million (and, according to some sources, as high as 50 million), the Muslims of China remain one of the least studied and most misunderstood Muslim communities in the world. After decades of relative neglect, however, over the past few years several books have been published that seek to shed light on different aspects of the historic, religious, and contemporary lives of China's Muslims. This review essay will survey four recent works written by a wide range of scholars.

Research on Islam in China has been hindered by many factors, including the difficulty of gaining expertise in both Chinese studies and Islamic studies, learning both modern and classical Chinese and Arabic, the long-standing prejudices of Han Chinese scholars regarding the country's minority peoples, together with the similarly long-standing prejudices of many western scholars regarding Islam. The earliest major work on the Muslim communities of China was published in 1910, by Marshall Broomhall of the China Inland Mission. Titled *Islam in China: A Neglected Problem*, its main purpose was to educate Christian missionaries in China about the location, customs, and history of the indigenous Muslims in order to facilitate proselytization activities among them.

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Although the field has developed significantly since then, it is still hindered by the fact that most scholars writing on Islam in China are scholars of China and not of Islam. This lack of expertise on Islam (which is, unfortunately, not uncommon among scholars writing on Muslim peoples around the world) has perpetuated a wide range of misinterpretations and misunderstandings involving the community's beliefs and practices.

Of China's fifty-five officially recognized minority groups, ten are primarily Muslim. The two largest groups are the Hui, who are spread throughout China, and the Uighur, who are concentrated in the northwestern province of Xinjiang. Most of these works focus on the Hui, the group that has assimilated the most into the dominant Chinese culture; however, several also include the Uighur (also commonly spelled "Uyghur").

Much of the recent scholarship continues to be hindered by the assumption of many western scholars that Muslims in China have always lived in a state of constant tension about their Islamic and Chinese identities. In more than twenty years of research in the field of Islam in China, as well as in more than seven years of living in China, I have yet to encounter any Muslims who have expressed any doubt as to their identity as both Chinese and as Muslim. And yet the belief that these two identities are somehow mutually antagonistic, if not mutually exclusive, continues to be commonly held by many western scholars.

Perhaps the most important work that addresses this misunderstanding is Sachiko Murata's *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light.* By documenting the earliest tradition of Chinese Islamic scholars writing about Islam in Chinese, she reveals the extent to which these Muslims had adapted Chinese intellectual traditions to their understanding of Islam and how Islamic intellectual trends in China were influenced by trends in the rest of the Islamic world. Her work is primarily an annotated translation of the writings of Wang Daiyu (ca. 1584-1670) and Liu Zhi (ca. 1655-1745), two of the earliest-known Chinese Muslim scholars who wrote about Islam in Chinese. Unlike most other scholars in the West writing in this field, Murata brings with her an extraordinarily broad and sophisticated understanding of Islamic traditions and languages, and thus a new perspective on the role of Islam within Chinese intellectual and cultural history. By identifying the Neo-Confucian and Sufi influences in these two texts, Murata shows the importance of these two philosophical traditions in the development of Chinese Islamic thought.

These two works are major components of a body of texts that became known as the *Han Kitab* (or "Chinese books," a phrase that includes both Chinese and Arabic terms), which would subsequently serve as the basic curriculum for the study of Islam in China. Through a close textual analysis

of the Chinese terms used to describe Islamic principles, Murata shows how Chinese Muslim scholars were able to create ways of expressing basic Islamic principles fluently – and often strikingly – in the Chinese language. Although some scholars have assumed that these works were part of an apologist literature written for a non-Muslim Chinese audience, according to Murata they were written because

> … [t]he Islamic community had reached a point where the ulama perceived the danger that Muslims would no longer be able to understand the principles of their own faith and the rationale for their own practices ... Their primary concern is not to explain the Shariah or jurisprudence, or the contents of the Koran and Hadith in any direct way. Rather, the writings elaborate on the nature of the Islamic perception of God, the universe, and the soul, that is, the domain that is traditionally called "the principles of the religion" (*usul al-din*). (p. 4)

For those interested in the historical development of a scholarly Islamic tradition in China, this book is the ideal start. In addition, the "Foreword" by noted Confucian scholar Tu Wei-ming sheds light on the place of this Chinese Muslim intellectual project within the context of the Neo-Confucian intellectual developments of that time.

The History of Women's Mosques in Chinese Islam is an especially important contribution to the field, because it focuses on both Chinese Muslim women and the rare practice of separate mosques for women. Written as a joint project between a western non-Muslim woman (Jaschok), a Chinese Muslim woman (Shui), and two Han Chinese researchers, it analyzes Muslim communities in central China's Henan province. According to the authors, their work focuses on the following:

> We ask how unique and controversial innovations in organized Islam in China led to the historical emergence of *qingzhen nusi* (women's mosques) and the institution of *nu ahong* (female religious leader); we ask about initiators, initiatives, place and time of innovations, the structural and historical factors of its evolution. But also we ask what happened when Muslim women took over space situated outside their designated feminine sphere which was intended for their education and which became in the course of time a site of religious and social activities over which women had, and have, various degrees of control and influence, various degrees of dependence on, an independence from, men's mosques. (p. 4)

In addition to the above, the authors also address theoretical issues related to the role of gender within both the Chinese and the Islamic cultural traditions.

My favorite section is chapter 12, which is a collection of biographies and autobiographies of Chinese Muslim women who played an active role in religious affairs. By focusing on the individual lives lived, decisions made, and influences, one can more easily imagine the dynamic nature of Islam in China. Perhaps most interestingly, the traditions of women's mosques and women religious leaders have been spreading across China in recent years. This is due to two factors: women from central China establishing girls' schools and mosques in other regions, and women from other regions attending Islamic studies schools in areas where female mosques are popular and then introducing the custom upon their return to their home regions.

Those interested specifically in Muslim women in China should consult, in addition to the four related articles in the first volume of the *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, "Narratives Engendering Survival: How the Muslims of Southwest China Remember the Massacres of 1873," *Traces: An International Journal of Comparative Cultural Theory* 1, no. 2 (2001).

Jean Berlie's *Islam in China: Hui and Uyghurs between Modernization and Sinicization* is an ambitious work that attempts to incorporate information gathered through extensive travel in China's Muslim regions, as well as visits to Chinese Muslim communities in northern Thailand and Burma/Myanmar. An honorary research fellow at the University of Hong Kong's Centre of Asian Studies, Berlie is not an Islamic studies scholar. However, he clearly has long-standing research interests related to China in general and to Islam in China in particular. The book focuses on the Hui communities in Yunnan (southwestern China), Thailand, and Burma/Myanmar, as well as the Uyghur community in Xinjiang, and is based on fieldwork carried out during numerous trips to China between 1986 and 2004. According to the author, "[t]his study attempts to explain the role of Sinicization or cultural change as a result of direct interethnic contact between the Han and Muslims in China" (p. ix).

Although ostensibly divided into seven distinct chapters ("The Setting," "Islam's Ubiquity in China," "Hui Identity and Modernity," "Hui in Yunnan," "The Hui in Northern Thailand and Burma and Burmese Muslims in Yunnan," "Uyghurs in Xinjiang," and "Perspectives on Islam's Future in China"), each chapter is, in fact, a veritable jumble of anecdotes (some more directly relevant than others). While interesting, the all-too-often uncited references to secondary historical sources, platitudes regarding both Islam and Chinese culture, and non-sequiturs are serious defects. Useful information is frequently followed by information that is flat-out wrong, such as "The character for 'religion' does not exist in Chinese" (p. xi), or by such stereotypes as "there is a basic incompatibility between modernity and Islam" (p. 143),

that hinder any degree of understanding Islam's role in China today. At the same time, a wealth of interesting information is intermixed throughout the book. Unfortunately, the lack of organization, combined with the lack of footnotes or citations, makes it extremely difficult for a non-specialist to sift through the chaff to find the worthwhile grains.

The final book to be considered here is perhaps the least ambitious but the most useful. Written as part of the series "The Growth and Influence of Islam in the Nations of Asia and Central Asia" and sponsored by the Foreign Policy Research Institute (a conservative think tank based in Philadelphia), it is geared toward secondary school students and teachers. Despite its sponsorship, it is an excellent overview of the history and present-day conditions of China's main Muslim groups. Beginning with background information on both traditional Islamic and Chinese civilizations, the author makes a point of noting several of the similarities between the two cultural traditions, including their focus on education and the pursuit of knowledge in general, calligraphy as a primary art form, and the importance of the role of religious rituals in daily life.

The overview is followed by chapters on "Islam Comes to the Middle Kingdom," "The Influence of Islam on China," "Muslim Ethnic Minorities in China," "Muslims in Modern China," and "Muslims in Reforming China." The early history of Islam in China and the expansion of both the Chinese and the Islamic empires across Asia, until they met due to both trade networks along the Silk Road and then military conflict, are well covered. There is also a section on the importance of the Mongol's rule of China (the Yuan dynasty, 1271-1368), which was characterized by the large-scale settlement of Central Asian Muslims in China.

In addition to recruiting Muslim administrators to serve as officials throughout the Chinese empire, the Mongols also used Muslim architects in building their new capital: present-day Beijing. Muslim contributions to other aspects of Chinese culture are noted, including paper-making, cloisonné, porcelain production, music, and cuisine. The accomplishments of Zheng He, the Chinese Muslim maritime explorer who led several massive trade expeditions throughout Southeast Asia and as far west as the Red Sea and the east coast of Africa, are also recounted.

Another strength is its descriptions of several smaller and lesser known Muslim minority groups, including the Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tatars, Dongxiang, Salar, and Bonan. The history of each group is described, as are their unique characteristics and present-day conditions in China.

The concluding chapter, "The Uyghur Separatist Movement," focuses on the most recent events affecting Muslims in China: the aftermath of Septem-

ber 11, China's participation in the American-led "war on terror," and the Bush administration's subsequent decision to bow to Chinese pressure by labeling an obscure Uyghur separatist group a "terrorist organization." As the author notes, many experts have speculated that this decision was based on a desire to secure Beijing's support at the United Nations for the United States' military action in Iraq. However, regardless of why this decision was made, "the official designation gives the Chinese government a pretext to quash dissent among the Uyghurs of Xinjiang; all dissenters can now be lumped together as 'terrorists' and persecuted by the state" (pp. 103-04).

Despite the high-quality images included and the overall excellent design, the text is marred by several striking spelling errors: the Qur'an is repeatedly spelled Qu'ran, the author's name is misspelled on the cover, and Genghis Khan is renamed Genghis Kahn. But these are minor errors. In essence, the book is refreshing in its lack of essentialized views of Islam or Muslims and its concise and accurate overview of the history and present-day conditions of Islam in China.

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