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Islam In China Through the Centuries: A Review of a History of Islam in China

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ABSTRACT

This review looks at A History of Islam in China by Li Xinghua, Qin Huibin, Feng Jinyuan, and Sha Qiuzhen. The book is 855 pages long and provides a detailed account of how Islam grew in China from the Tang Dynasty to the years after 1949. In developing their argument, the authors use two main ideas: localization (bentuhua) and ethnic formation (minzuhua). Through these concepts, they explain how Islam changed to fit Chinese society while at the same time keeping its main beliefs and traditions. Furthermore, the review gives an outline of the book's five parts and shows that the authors use many historical records along with a clear method based on Chinese historiography. In addition, it praises the book for its careful research and strong structure, yet it also notes that it gives little attention to local Muslim life and regional differences. Overall, the review concludes that A History of Islam in China is an important work on the history of Islam in China. Ultimately, it provides a clear and steady story of how Islam adapted to Chinese life and demonstrates that change and continuity mattered more than conflict or separation.

Keywords: Islam in China; localization; ethnic formation; cultural adaptation; historiography

1.0 INTRODUCTION

A History of Islam in China [1], co-authored by Li Xinghua, Qin Huibin, Feng Jinyuan, and Sha Qiuzhen, stands as a comprehensive 855-page monograph. By tracing the evolution of Islam from its introduction during the Tang Dynasty to its contemporary developments post 1949, the authors present one of the most ambitious collective efforts to construct a continuous historical narrative integrating political, social, and cultural dimensions over more than a millennium.

To navigate this millennium long historical complexity, the authors anchor their narrative in a distinctive analytical framework grounded in two interrelated conceptual pillars. Specifically, they argue that the transmission and development of Islam in China involved a dual process, which includes the two key concepts of localization (bentuhua) and ethnic formation (minzuhua). Through these dual processes, Islam successfully adapted to the specific social and cultural conditions of China. This adaptation allowed the religion to form distinct Muslim ethnic identities while simultaneously preserving its essential faith and traditional practices [1, p. 7].

This conceptual focus on adaptation does not exist in a vacuum; rather, it is situated within a long-standing academic tradition that examines how foreign religions adapt into Chinese society. Building upon yet moving beyond this tradition, the authors propose a historically grounded and balanced framework for understanding Islam in China, avoiding earlier interpretive models that relied heavily on simplistic binaries such as “conflict” versus “over assimilation” [1, p. 9].

The credibility of this framework is further bolstered by the authors' methodological rigor. They emphasize careful historical verification based primarily on imperial records a hallmark of traditional Chinese historiography. A key example is their identification of 651 CE as Islam’s formal entry into China, marked by the arrival of an envoy from the khalifa [1, p. 34]. By prioritizing such empirical evidence, the work aligns with Morris Rossabi’s observation that the history of Islam in China challenges conventional portrayals of China as culturally homogeneous [2].

Given the book's ambitious scope and methodological depth, it warrants detailed critical engagement. This review seeks to bridge the gap between traditional Chinese historiography and modern international perspectives. To evaluate its claims, this review first provides a period-based summary, followed by an examination of its methodology, and finally, a comparative analysis that situates the work within broader academic debates regarding identity and regional diversity.

2.0 SYNOPSIS OF CONTENT

A History of Islam in China divides its narrative into five distinct periods. Each period shows how Islam evolved in China. The book traces processes of localization and ethnic formation [1, pp. 3-855].

2.1 First Period (Tang and Song Dynasties):

The first period examines the initial entry of Islam into China through diplomatic and commercial contacts. The authors describe early interactions between the Tang Empire and the Caliphate, highlighting the role of both overland and maritime Silk Road networks in facilitating trade and travel [1, pp. 3, 31, 35]. Tang dynasty sources, including Du You’s Tongdian (通典), provide evidence of Islamic legal practices under the term “Dashi Law,” reflecting early official recognition of Muslim communities [1, p. 57].

Following these early exchanges, the book notes that a number of Dashi soldiers remained in China after the An Lushan Rebellion (755 CE), marking the establishment of some of the earliest permanent Muslim communities [1, p. 93]. Their descendants later contributed to the emergence of the Hui ethnic group [1, p. 36]. The authors further trace the spread of Islam into the Western Regions, particularly under the Kara-Khanid Khanate, indicating a shift from coastal and imperial centers to frontier societies [1, pp. 137, 295].

2.2 Second Period (Yuan to Mid-Ming Dynasties):

According to the authors, the Yuan Dynasty witnessed a “Golden Age” of Islam, marked by its considerable growth and influence. During this period,the narrative begins by tracing how the Mongol Western Campaigns precipitated a significant eastward migration of Muslim populations[1, p. 173], [1, p. 367]. Once integrated into the Yuan social hierarchy, these arrivals, who were categorized as Huihui within the Semu (色目) class attained elevated social and political positions and received preferential treatment in the imperial examination system [1, p. 182]. Complementing this broader social ascent, the book traces the localized influence of prominent Central Asian lineages, such as the Hejia family. Their sustained political and religious activities between the 14th and 16th centuries served to consolidate Islamic authority and community stability within the region [1, p. 387].

Leveraging this dual foundation of institutional support and influential leadership, the Huihui made transformative contributions to Chinese science and culture. In the realms of astronomy and calendrical studies, Muslim scholars not only held key positions in the Huihui Astronomical Bureau (回回司天监) but also facilitated a massive knowledge transfer. This is evidenced by the importation of "Huihui books" from Central Asia, including seminal works such as Ptolemy's Almagest, which directly informed the innovations of Chinese astronomers like Yelü Chucai and Guo Shoujing [1, p. 299].

This intellectual vitality extended beyond the sciences into the humanities. Yuan era Muslim poets and scholars such as Gao Kegong, Sadushi, and Ma Jiugao produced works in Chinese that were celebrated for their stylistic innovation and thematic depth [1, p. 325]. By mastering traditional Chinese forms like sanqu, these figures demonstrated a high degree of cultural integration, ensuring that the Islamic "Golden Age" left a permanent imprint on the broader Chinese literary canon.

2.3 Third Period (Mid Ming to Late Qing Dynasties):

This period examines the institutional consolidation of Chinese Islam through the evolution of local lineages, educational systems, and Sufi organizations. The narrative begins by tracing the political ascendance of the Khoja family in Kashgar. Originating from the Nakshbandiyya order in Central Asia, this lineage transformed Sufi spiritual authority into a potent social and political force, eventually leading to the sectarian rivalry between the "White Mountain" (Yishikeye) and "Black Mountain" (Isihakye) factions [1, pp. 387, 396].

Parallel to these political developments in the frontier, a pedagogical revolution occurred in the Chinese heartland to counter the decline of Islamic learning. The book details the rise of Jingtang Jiaoyu (Scripture Hall Education), pioneered by Hu Dengzhou during the Ming Dynasty. To bridge the linguistic gap, this system developed "Jingtang Language" a hybrid linguistic form that preserved Islamic terminology within a Chinese grammatical structure and utilized Xiao'erjin (Arabic script Chinese) to ensure the transmission of faith among the Hui people [1, pp. 505, 516].

The structural maturation of this period culminated in the formation of menhuan (Sufi lineages) in Northwest China. The study contrasts the organizational and ritual characteristics of the two primary systems: the Khufiyya, characterized by the "silent" or "low voice" recitation of dhikr, and the Jahriyya, known for its "vocal" or "loud" chanting [1, pp. 641, 657]. By analyzing these distinct ritual modes, the authors illustrate how Sufism adapted its mystical traditions into formalized, localized social structures that defined Muslim communal life in the late Qing period.

2.4 Fourth Period (Republican Era):

This section examines the modernization and sociopolitical adaptation of Chinese Islam during the Republican era, a period characterized by intense national transformation and the emergence of modern ethnic consciousness. The narrative begins by situating Chinese Muslims within the new political framework of "Five Races Under One Union." Under the impetus of national equality, Muslim intellectuals initiated a cultural revival in the Chinese heartland, seeking to reconcile Islamic values with the requirements of a modern nation state and responding to the broader intellectual currents of the time [1, p. 717].

Central to this period was a pedagogical revolution that transitioned from traditional mosque based schooling to a formalized modern education system. The book identifies the Chengda Normal School as the definitive institutional model of this era. Founded by visionary leaders like Ma Songting, the school aimed to produce a new generation of "dual literate" (Jing Han Jiantong) elites. By integrating rigorous Islamic theology with modern secular curriculum, this movement sought to empower the Muslim community with the intellectual tools necessary for social mobility and national participation [1, p. 731].

The institutional development of this era culminated in the institutionalization of academic societies and the intensification of internal ideological debates. Beyond the confines of the mosque, new social organizations emerged to promote a "triple mission" of saving the faith, the ethnic group, and the nation, marking a shift toward socially engaged scholarship [1, p. 738]. Furthermore, the period witnessed complex internal dynamics, particularly the friction between the reformist Yihewani groups and traditional Menhuan communities. These sectarian developments illustrate how Chinese Islam navigated the tensions between religious orthodoxy and the rapid sociopolitical changes of the early 20th century [1, p. 779].

2.5 Fifth Period (Post PRC Period):

The final section examines the revitalization and institutional reorganization of Chinese Muslim communities following the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. The authors first delineate the legal framework established to safeguard religious freedom and ethnic equality, particularly highlighting how the Common Program guaranteed the rights of ethnic minorities [1, p. 809]. This institutional foundation was further solidified by a series of proactive early policies, such as the designation of public holidays for major Islamic festivals and the granting of slaughter tax exemptions, which reflected the government’s efforts to accommodate religious practices within the new political order [1, p. 811].

Subsequently, the text evaluates the Democratic Reform of the Religious System initiated in the mid1950s, analyzing the necessity of dismantling feudal religious privileges to align with the country's socialist transition [1, pp. 837-840]. The authors note that this period of reform eventually paved the way for a scholarly renaissance in the 1980s. During this era, academic research on Islam reached a new peak, characterized by a series of national symposiums and a flourishing of intellectual discourse that effectively reinvigorated the study of Islamic history, culture, and philosophy in China [1, p. 852].

3.0 METHODOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

The methodological rigor of A History of Islam in China is rooted in its exhaustive synthesis of historical materials. The authors employ a multidimensional approach, blending traditional historiography with ethnographic insights to track long term social changes. However, a critical examination of their methodology reveals a distinct epistemological preference for Sinitic sources over non sinitic ones, which shapes the overall narrative.

For instance, regarding the founding date of the Qingjing Mosque in Quanzhou, the authors confront a discrepancy between an Arabic inscription (1009-1010 CE) and later Chinese records (1131 CE) [1, pp. 110, 243]. Their decision to prioritize the latter as “most trustworthy” [1, p. 245] illustrates a characteristic trait of late 20th century Chinese scholarship: the reliance on imperial textual authority to maintain internal narrative consistency. While this method provides a clear and continuous timeline, it creates a methodological tension between "textual history" and "material culture." By situating Islam within the framework of Chinese dynastic records, the authors successfully integrate Islamic history into the broader "national history" of China, but at the potential cost of marginalizing the autonomous religious perspectives preserved in original Arabic or Persian documents.

4.0 CRITICAL REVIEW

The primary contribution of A History of Islam in China lies in its systemic documentation of the long-term integration of Muslim communities into Chinese society. By framing the narrative around the dual processes of localization (bentuhua) and ethnic formation (minzuhua), the authors offer a cohesive structural analysis of Islamic history. Their detailed examination of early institutions, such as the Fanfang (foreign quarters) and Fanxue (foreign schools), effectively illustrates the initial stages of cultural synthesis [1, pp. 42, 203].

However, the work’s heavy reliance on a top down, institutional framework tends to overlook the multifaceted nature of local Muslim experiences. By prioritizing a unified narrative of "ethnic

formation," the authors occasionally flatten the regional diversities and internal complexities that characterize the history of Islam in China.

In this context, Jonathan Lipman's Familiar Strangers [6] offers a particularly valuable comparison. While Li et al. describe a steady process of integration, Lipman emphasizes that Muslim identity in China was never monolithic. He argues that Muslims often lived in a state of "ambivalence" being culturally Chinese in many ways, yet maintaining a distinct religious identity that connected them to a wider world. By focusing mainly on the successful results of integration, Li et al. miss some of the inner tensions and the fragmented nature of these communities that Lipman describes so well.

W. Y. Ho [8] further complicates this picture by identifying a "tripartite" Islamic tradition in coastal regions. Ho's research identifies a complex network of South Asian, Hui, and Southeast Asian influences that resist reduction to a single, monolithic ethnic narrative. By engaging with both Lipman and Ho, it becomes clear that "Chinese Islam" is a collection of diverse, regional identities rather than a uniform entity. This comparison highlights a significant gap in the authors' institutional focus, which tends to prioritize cohesion over diversity.

Furthermore, the book's treatment of the Qing period conflicts could benefit from a more granular analysis. While major events are recorded, they are often framed as disruptions to a broader trend of integration. However, contemporary scholarship by Atwill [3] suggests that these conflicts were often driven by local socioeconomic dynamics rather than purely ethnic factors. Similarly, the account of the Kara Khanid period privileges elite driven conversion [1, p. 305], while giving limited attention to the grassroots Sufi networks that subsequent research has identified as primary drivers of religious transmission.

Finally, while the book excels at documenting formal institutions, it leaves room for a more "bottom up" historical approach. Applying a framework such as An Na'im's [7], one can see that religious life involves a constant negotiation between institutional norms and personal belief systems. Incorporating non elite sources such as local genealogies and private mosque documents would provide a more nuanced and human-centered perspective on the historical Muslim experience in the Chinese heartland.

5.0 CONCLUSION

In summary, A History of Islam in China by Li et al. provides a clear, five period overview of Islamic development within the Chinese context. The authors demonstrate that the continuity of Islam in China depends on two fundamental processes: localization (bentuhua) and ethnic formation (minzuhua). This review argues that the book provides a well substantiated account of the gradual and adaptive incorporation of Islam into Chinese society. It highlights that the persistence of Islam in China is rooted in its capacity to respond flexibly to local social and cultural conditions. By tracing these developments over time, the book emerges as a significant and enduring contribution to the study of Islam in China.

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