

## Interpreting Islam in China: Pilgrimage, Scripture, and Language in the Han Kitab

THIS excellent and eminently well-researched book systematically elucidates the contextual development of the fascinating Sino-Islamic philosophical tradition known as the Han Kitab. Oft-neglected within the field of Islamic Studies as a whole, the Han Kitab tradition represents a unique, Chinese-language reconceptualization of Islam set within the context of traditional Chinese thought. Focusing on three particularly prominent Han Kitab writers – Wang Daiyu (1590–1658), Liu Zhi (1670–1724), and Ma Dexin (1794–1874), the latter of whom has never been studied in depth before – Petersen seeks to not only facilitate a better understanding of this tradition, but also subvert conventional essentialized notions of Islam.

As Petersen outlines in his introduction, scholars of Islam, whether Muslim or non-Muslim, often work to a common assumption: that Islam exists (whether now or in the past) in a “true” or “pure” form represented by an authentic center (Arab Islam), around which a deviant periphery revolves. In consequence, Islamicists concerned with those Muslim communities resident at a distance, whether geographically or culturally, from this perceived center tend to speak in terms of divergence. Utilizing terminology like “syncretic,” they characterize their chosen communities as a product of the corruption of two or more original components (Islam and an indigenous non-Islamic culture) to form another (a “vernacularized” Islam). For Petersen, however, such essentialized notions of Islam are both simplistic and unrealistic; all Muslims are social actors who build upon prior narratives to produce a variety of Islams structured around specific geographic and cultural circumstances, which in turn serve to legitimate those

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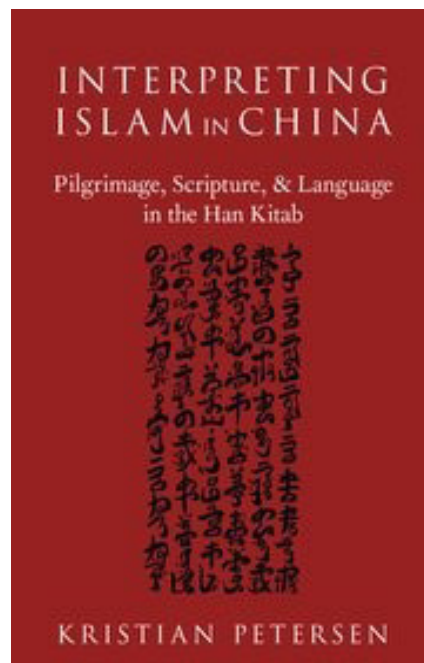
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communicate their locality within the larger Muslim community” (p. 7).

This preoccupation with human agency and the ability to re-express ideas permeates *Interpreting Islam in China*. Reading each of his three authors through the prism of their specific historical contexts, Petersen attempts to identify the stimuli underlying a series of discursive shifts that ultimately helped define a uniquely Chinese form of Islam. This historical context is the subject of the first two chapters of the book, which trace the establishment and development of the Sino-Muslim community in Imperial China (Chapter 1) and the Arabic and Persian literary networks underpinning the Han Kitab tradition (Chapter 2). While much of the information presented in these chapters will be well known to specialists, it lays a useful foundation for the subsequent and far more substantive discussion.

In Chapters 3 through 5, Petersen examines three broad issues identified by him as central to Han Kitab intellectual history: religious pilgrimage, the significance of scripture, and linguistic authority. Firmly grounding his discussion in the work of his chosen authors, Petersen attempts to establish that by “the nineteenth century, Sino-Muslims [had] fostered greater engagement with the broader Muslim world” by participating more fully in international travel, resulting in a desire to “incorporate themselves in cosmopolitan Muslim environments” (p. 22) by shifting toward a more “universal” form of Islam that stressed increased ritual observance, knowledge of scripture, and Arabic competency.

In Chapter 3, Petersen begins this analysis with an examination of shifting Sino-Muslim attitudes toward the Hajj. Although for all three chosen authors the Hajj “represented characteristics of



constructs in the eyes of their adherents. With regards to the Han Kitab, this “Sino-Islamic tradition is based on exchange, movement, conversation, negotiation, and dialogue” (p. 3) and ultimately functions as a means by which Sino-Muslims can “identify and

the origins of the cosmos and exemplified features of the collective memory of the Muslim community, thus communicating a sense of communal identification” (p. 121), Petersen detects fluctuating understandings of precisely how the Hajj should be fulfilled. For Wang Daiyu, the Hajj was primarily a symbolic act geared toward “understanding one’s place in the cosmos” (p. 121); rather than feeling obliged to physically complete the journey, Muslims need only appreciate its spiritual significance. While Liu Zhi largely reiterated this position, he also expended considerable effort on delineating the physical act of pilgrimage, encouraging his readers to undertake it. More than Wang, therefore, he emphasized the importance of physically completing the Hajj. It was only with Ma Dexin, however, that this emphasis morphed into an obligation; for Ma, the Hajj was as “an example of a religious duty to be performed by all Muslims” (p. 122) without exception, provided circumstances allowed. Indeed, unlike Wang and Liu, Ma successfully accomplished the Hajj, leaving a detailed account of his journey. Petersen interprets these varying interpretations as evidence of a gradual intellectual evolution prompted by technological innovation; as steamships and railways began to facilitate international travel over the course of the nineteenth century, Sino-Muslims came to understand the Hajj as not merely a symbolically important ritual, but a realizable physical objective.

In Chapter 4, Petersen expands his discussion to consider each author’s approach to the utilization and reproduction of the Qur’anic text. For Wang, rendering the underlying spiritual meaning of individual Qur’anic verses was more important than any attempt at literal translation. This prompted him to eschew faithful renderings in favor of loose translations capable of expressing the inner complexity of specific verses. While Liu subsequently reproduced this approach in his mystical texts, when explicating religious

praxis, he transitioned toward more precise and accurate translations. This approach was then perfected by Ma, who attempted the first complete and faithful Chinese-language translation of the entire Qur’anic text (interrupted by his death). For Petersen, these shifting approaches belie how “each author built atop the foundation of his intellectual ancestors, thus creating a dynamic tradition . . .” (p. 156). Once again, Petersen sets this development within the context of increased connectivity with the wider Islamic world. This, he argues, created within the Sino-Muslim community a desire to better understand the Qur’an in its entirety in order to facilitate engagement with other Muslim communities.

In his fifth and final chapter, Petersen outlines the increasing role of Arabic in the work of each author. After arguing that Wang and Liu utilized Arabic primarily as “a source of personal inspiration and authority” (p. 196), Petersen establishes a far more central role for the language within Ma’s discourse; unlike his predecessors, Ma wrote original works in Arabic and actively encouraged Arabic proficiency amongst his students. According to Petersen, this shift evinces how over the nineteenth century greater international connectivity meant “networks of knowledge were beginning to be created between Muslims in China and those living in the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia,” creating a need for a “discursive space where Arabic was central” (p. 197).

Throughout the above chapters, Petersen systematically contextualizes Sino-Muslim thought to a degree not seen before, allowing him to effectively and insightfully illuminate the process of tradition creation within the Han Kitab while, simultaneously, demonstrating the value of localized interpretations of Islam. Petersen’s comparative treatment of his three authors is also a refreshing innovation; by allowing three prominent but very different Han Kitab writers to be laid out and analyzed side by side for the first

time, Petersen deepens our understanding of how Sino-Islamic thought evolved. For these reasons alone, Petersen is to be applauded for his efforts. For the sake of a rounded picture, however, let me conclude this review with consideration of several limitations to his approach. Rather than detracting from the overall value of *Interpreting Islam in China*, these should be seen as possible avenues for future research, capable of extending the advances Petersen has already made.

As we have seen, for the most part Petersen rests his reconstruction of Han Kitab intellectual evolution on a single supposition: as Sino-Muslim participation in a globalized Muslim world increased, a desire evolved to understand Islam in more orthodox terms, increasing levels of ritual observance, scriptural awareness, and Arabic competency. While there can be little doubt that Petersen adequately demonstrates this shift toward orthodoxy over the stated period (at least outwardly and among the selected authors), when identifying the cause of that shift he arguably underplays the degree of connectivity pre-nineteenth-century Sino-Muslims enjoyed with the wider Islamic world. For instance, Petersen seemingly underestimates pre-modern Sino-Muslim participation in the Hajj. Although he readily acknowledges the existence of a long Sino-Muslim Hajji tradition, he confines his reconstruction of that phenomenon to a brief description of just two eighteenth-century pilgrims, Ma Laichi (c.1681–1766) and Ma Mingxin (1719–1781) (p. 94). By contrast, he pays scant attention to all earlier Sino-Muslim Hajjis, most notably Hu Dengzhou (c.1522–1597). A formative figure in Sino-Islamic thought, Hu established the Chinese-language Islamic education system responsible for producing many Han Kitab writers; his experience of the Hajj, including how it informed his worldview and impacted upon those who learnt under him, has obvious implications here but, sadly, is not considered beyond a few lines (p. 44).\*

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