

# Foreword

When most people think of China and its massive population of 1.4 billion, few take account of Islam as a part of the Chinese multicultural landscape. Nevertheless, China's Islamic community numbers roughly twenty-five to thirty millions according to many estimates: a sizeable community by any measure. Ten of China's fifty-five recognized minority communities are majority Sunni Muslim.

Islam came early to western China thanks to the famous Silk Road. This route had been established during the Han dynasty (206 BC–AD 220) and stretched from the area covered by the present day city of Xi'an in the East to Rome in the West. It wound its way through the rugged terrain of Central Asia, to Persia, the Fertile Crescent, leading to the shores of Asia Minor and on to various points in the Roman Empire.

Early contacts via the Silk Road were made during the period of the Tang Dynasty (618–907). This period encompassed the Arab Umayyad dynasty (661–750), which sent seventeen envoys to the Tang Dynasty court. In all, there were more than thirty visits between 651 and 798 by Arab envoys.

Trade and diplomatic contacts inevitably led to the establishment of new communities. Indeed, Chinese cities witnessed the emergence over time of communities of Arabs and Persians. Relations were not always cordial; military clashes between Muslim armies from the Middle East and the Tang dynasty led to the defeat of the Tangs at Talas in 751 CE. Shortly after that, widespread destruction resulted from sectarian conflict between Chinese and the Arab and Persian communities in Guangdong in 758.

By the late Tang Dynasty, much of the overseas trade of China was in the hands of Muslim Persians and Arabs. There is evidence that Muslim merchants from the Southeast Asian Hindu-Buddhist kingdom of Srivijaya visited China in the tenth and eleventh centuries. By the time of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368), Islam had cemented its place in China and was in an important phase of consolidation, benefiting from the growth of

religious establishments which were granted exemption from taxation by the authorities.

This important study by Dr. David Lee picks up the story of Islam in China from this point. He sets the scene with an overview of the Yuan Dynasty, the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) and the Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), arguing for their key role in shaping Chinese Islam as we know it today. Dr. Lee then moves to his central focus: the figure of Liu Zhi and his contextualization during the early Qing period of Sufi spirituality in China.

There is an abundance of originality in this study as it opens fresh, new windows into understanding the story of Islam in China, applying principles taken from the broader study of contextualization to classical Islamic texts, thereby unearthing new information of some considerable significance.

Dr. Lee's research is important for a range of reasons. First, it adds to the extensive body of literature devoted to the study of contextualization. This literature is already rich in studies of contextualization by Christians, but there is a dearth of quality research available on the study of contextualization by Muslims. This has particular ramifications for the modern day when Muslim groups engaged in *da'wa* (mission) in China and, indeed, across the world, are becoming increasingly adept at contextualizing their missionary message. Dr. Lee's book shows that this contemporary process has deep roots.

Second, there has been much research into Christian mission in China, but the understanding of the history and methods of Muslim Mission in China is much less known, especially in terms of English-language scholarship. China is a dynamic country that will play a major role on the world stage in the twenty-first century, and the place of Islam in that nation will assume increasing importance in decades to come. David Lee's book fills an important gap for those who will increasingly study Islam in China.

Third, Dr. Lee's book has important things to say about the process of transmission from source texts to target texts. The writings of the scholar in focus, Liu Zhi, served as a bridge for Chinese Muslims to access the rich heritage of classical Islamic writings from other regions. This process of transmission represents an important piece in the puzzle of the history of Islam in China.

Fourth, Dr Lee's book considers in detail a set of writings by his chosen scholar which still have circulation among Chinese Muslims today. A visit to Islamic bookshops in China will reveal that Liu Zhi's writings are still stocked on shelves for sale. Therefore this study provides a direct window into the thoughts and teachings that shape Chinese Muslims today.

Dr David Lee's new book represents an important contribution to the study of Islam, both in China and beyond, and adds another piece to the puzzle of the history of Islamic thought in the world's most populous nation.

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