Islam in China

Lena Scheen

Terrorism, war, refugees, niqab, Syria, ISIS or Daesh. It is hard to find a recent newspaper article on Islam that does not contain one of these words. But how often do we read about the twenty-five million Muslims living in China? Even since the first Muslim traders arrived in the Chinese Empire over 1400 years ago, Muslims have played an important role in Chinese history. For this first issue of China Connections – a series on China’s relation to the world and hosted by the Asia Research Center (ARC-FD) at Fudan University and the Global Asia Center (CGA) at NYU Shanghai – we invited four scholars to write about their research on Islam in China. Together they explore questions such as: Why did the Qianlong Emperor issue an imperial edict to conduct an empire-wide investigation of Hui Muslim communities in 1781? How did a small town in Yunnan Province become a center for Islamic learning? And how do its current residents deal with the haunting ghosts of 1600 Muslims killed in 1975? How does institutionalization play a role in the unification of the spatially dispersed and ethnically diverse Chinese Muslim communities? And how does a Chinese Muslim studying in Egypt experience the Arab Spring? It is through these stories of cultural exchange, conflict, and integration that we hope to provide a deeper, more layered understanding of Islam today.

Who were the Hui? The first empire-wide investigation of Hui communities in Qing China.

Meng WEI

ON 29 MAY 1781, the Qianlong emperor (r. 1736-95) of China issued an imperial edict to conduct an empire-wide investigation of Hui communities. The order was in response to the ‘FanHui’ rebellion (also known as the ‘Salar Rebellion’) by the Hui minority in Gansu province. It was immediately passed down to the lowest levels of Qing government and detailed reports were sent to the governors or governor-generals of the eighteen provinces (‘China proper’) for investigation and then made known to the Emperor. The results of the investigation provided the Qing state with a renewed understanding of the Hui landscape of its empire and constituted the basis for future policymaking towards the Hui.

The ‘FanHui’ rebellion was inspired by Ma Mingxin (1719-81), a native of Gansu and a Sufi leader who had introduced the ‘new teaching’ to the region following his return from several ‘headmen’ (xiangbao) selected by local officials and responsible for maintaining public safety as well as managing secular matters. Secret investigations into various Hui communities throughout the province were made afterwards to testify their testimonies. The main goal of the edict was to find out whether there existed any positions or titles such as ‘imam’ (zong zhangjiao) or ‘headman’ (zhangjiao) among the Hui community. In another instance, a Governor-general of Sichuan brought in for interrogation as many as nineteen senior Hui residents from the provincial capital and its suburbs and four ‘headmen’ (xiangbao) selected by local officials and responsible for maintaining public safety as well as managing secular matters.

The compilation of this nine-volume work was started in 1781 under the order of the Qianlong emperor. It contained analogous depictions of ethnic types within and without the Qing empire.

References
1. “Bojie was a system under which households were regimented into nested decimal groupings of ten, one hundred, and so on for purposes of assigning collective responsibility in public security and other matters and for fixing personal responsibility for the group on a single ‘headman’ at each level of the hierarchy.” Rowe, W.T. 2001.

Above left: “Salar man and woman in Hetian, Xinjiang province.” Source: Huiqiong Zhangqiu (Depictions of Tributaries of the August Qing), juan 5, pp. 6a-6b.

Above right: A memorial sent to the Qianlong emperor by the Provincial Governor of Standing province on 13 October 1781. Source: Grand Council Archives, National Palace Museum, Taipei.

Lena Scheen, Assistant Professor of Global China Studies at NYU Shanghai, and Regional Editor for ‘China Connections’ (lena.scheen@nyu.edu).