
 REVIEW: *CHINESE MUSLIMS AND THE GLOBAL UMMAH*

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Alexander Blair Stewart. 2017. *Chinese Muslims and the Global Ummah. Islamic Revival and Ethnic Identity among the Hui of Qinghai Province*. Routledge Contemporary China Series, London: Routledge, IX + 221. ISBN 978-1-138-64638-4 (hardcover 90£).

This monograph is an important contribution to the field of Islam studies in China and provides thought-provoking insights on the Islamic revival movement in twenty-first century Xining, the capital of Qinghai Province. It has a special focus on the contemporary Salafiyya and Tablighi Jama'at movements, which remain understudied in the context of China.

The anthropologist Stewart immersed himself in the Muslim community of Xining as participant observer for eleven months (apparently between 2012-2013¹). In eight chapters, he vividly describes different aspects of the Islamic revival movement based on individual examples. He examines how the younger generation of Muslims and new Muslim converts are especially attracted by Islamic revivalist ideas of the Salafiyya and Tablighi Jama'at and how they participate in these movements.

Chapter One provides a short, well-informed overview of contemporary Islam in China in general and more specifically, of the Islamic landscape in the greater Xining area. The chapter also addresses the ambiguity of the term Hui, which to most people in China denotes both an ethnicity and a religious group. According to Stewart, reaffirmed Muslims are often critical of ethnic Hui for whom being Muslim is merely an unexamined and unquestioned part of their identity. Some are neither very pious nor do they follow strict Islamic rules, for example, they might smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, and not

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¹ This is inferred from the dates that the author provides (e.g., page 184).

always fast during Ramadan. Consequently, many revivalists make a clear distinction between Hui as an ethnic term and *musilin* for those of Islamic faith and *xin musilin* for Muslim converts.

Chapter Two offers a glance at the historical development of the so-called Old and New Teachings in northwest China, which are described by the author as successive "tides" or "modes" of Islam. Apart from the Yihewani, who constitute the predominant Islamic group in Xining, and the Gedimu and Sufi groups, who dominate in the countryside, Stewart also introduces the Salafiyya and the Tablighi Jama'at movements in more detail. The author also describes how sectarian differences continue to create divisions among devout Muslims in northwest China despite their endeavor to present a façade of Muslim unity to outsiders.

Chapter Three deals with the central question of why a rising number of Muslims in China seek to reaffirm their Islamic faith. Two individual examples demonstrate how Islam is considered a modern, alternative non-Chinese way of living and how contact with Salafi study groups provided impetus to redefine a modern Islamic identity.

Chapter Four examines the role of *ahongs* 'Islamic teachers', and mosque communities and their attitudes towards Islamic revival movements. In addition, it further examines the motivation of *manla* 'religious students'.

The self-professed apolitical and non-sectarian movement of the Tablighi Jama'at is the focus of Chapter Five. Roughly translated as "society for spreading Faith," this movement originated in South Asia in the 1920s and lacks dedicated mosques, *ahongs*, and educational institutions. It proselytizes through study groups, "visits," and *jama'at* 'itinerating tours' of three, ten or forty days, or four months of length. The *da'wah* 'missionizing' work is done in groups of four to ten people and aims, first of all, at the renewal of the participant's own faith, which is thought to be more important than actual conversions. In contrast to study in the Salafiyya method, which is text-based and introverted, the Tablighi Jama'at is more extroverted and experimental, which draws criticism from Salafis and other

Muslims as unorthodox. While the Salafiyya appeal to better-educated Muslims, the Tablighis tend to attract the less well-educated.

In Chapter Six, the author describes and speculates about the motivations of Muslim converts and of those who alter their sectarian affiliation, for example, from Yihewani to Salafiyya. Again, Stewart provides several individual examples that illustrate his points.

Chapter Seven deals with the attitudes of Chinese Muslims toward the Chinese state. The author claims that most Chinese Muslims are simultaneously critical of the CCP as an atheist party but nevertheless, are very patriotic toward the Chinese nation. The author also describes the difficulties experienced by Chinese Muslims in government service, who want to be devout in practice, but cannot overtly display their Islamic identity at their work place.

The author concludes in Chapter Eight that many, especially young, Chinese Muslims who are disillusioned with Chinese socialism and perceive a lack of morality in neocapitalist China reaffirm their Islamic identity as a conscious, individual choice. In this process and in the face of their marginalization by an atheist state in a predominantly Han nation, many Chinese Muslims prefer to imagine themselves as part of a global ummah with which they share the goal to "return" to a pure, authentic Islam. The Islamic revival movements of the Salafiyya and the Tablighi Jama'at both cater to this desire.

Throughout the book the author argues that the Islamic revival that he experienced in Xining is foremost an expression of individuality and modernity and is largely apolitical. The search for an "authentic" Islam should not be confused with radical Islam that seeks a violent jihad against non-believers. Although several experts on Islam in China agree with this assumption in general,¹ they also point to the changing political climate in which Salafism, worldwide and in China, has become increasingly associated with Islamic State radicalism and terrorism, especially after the terrorist attack allegedly staged by Uyghur Salafis in China's Yunnan Province in 2014. Meanwhile, Chinese Salafis, who are estimated to number from

¹ See Erie (2016) and Dru Gladney as quoted by Jonathan Kaiman in the *Los Angeles Times* (<https://goo.gl/wXOAcB>, accessed 14 December 2016).

thousands to tens of thousands, have come under close surveillance by the Chinese state, which has already closed several Salafi religious schools and detained a prominent Salafi cleric in Gansu Province in recent years. In this context, the monograph has already been outpaced by recent events and sadly, the author's assumptions about the alleged apoliticism of Chinese Salafis appear questionable if not naïve. In fact, the Tablighi Jama'at has also been eyed with suspicion in some Central Asian countries like Kazakhstan in recent years,¹ and most probably this movement has come under scrutiny by the Chinese state as well.

Therefore, the adherents of the revival movements should not be confused with mainstream Islam in northwest China or in China in general. Even in the urban setting of Xining, Salafis and Tablighis are small minorities within the Muslim communities and, as reported by Stewart, meet with substantial rejection and distrust from the established Muslim communities. Furthermore, the majority of Muslims in northwest China do not live in urban areas. They live in the countryside and mainly adhere to Gedimu, Yihewani, and Sufi teachings. The reader thus must be aware that the subtitle of the book is somewhat misleading and that its focus on the Salafiyya and the Tablighi Jama'at movements of urban Xining does not reflect typical Qinghai Muslim communities.

I would like to note that the recurrent use of the term "sect" for Muslim and other religious groups seems unsuitable in the context of this book because of its negative connotations. Furthermore, a glossary for Chinese and Arabic terms would have been desirable since explanations of Chinese and Arabic terms like *santai*, *da'wah*, and *manla* are not easily accessible through use of the index.

These latter points are, however, minor and do not diminish the overall achievements of this monograph. It is at once a plea and a tool for a better understanding of the internal complexities among Chinese Muslims. It is well-written and -structured and the many individual examples that are given are remarkable. Stewart skillfully highlights what it means to be 'Hui' or *musilin* in China from the point

¹ See, for example, <https://goo.gl/rjQBEi> (accessed 14 December 2016).

of view of Chinese Islamic revivalists. The book is outstanding in its pioneering study of the Tablighi Jama'at movement in China, which has largely escaped the attention of researchers until now.

The book is a must for those studying Islam in China and in northwest China specifically. It is also highly recommended for students of the global Islamic revival movement and those with a special interest in Salafism and the Tablighi Jama'at movement.

REFERENCE

Erie, Matthew S. 2016. *China and Islam. The Prophet, the Party, and Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.