

*China and Islam: The Prophet, the Party, and Law.* By Matthew S. Erie. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. 447. \$38.45 (paper). ISBN: 978-1107670112.

As a historian of modern East Asia, I have a deep appreciation for Matthew Erie’s recent efforts to include an understanding of Islamic law into the discussion of the place of Islam in society under the current “Party-State” (3) system in China. His work is timely and contributes enormously to the growing body of work on Islam in Asia. With *China and Islam: The Prophet, the Party, and Law*, Erie focuses on the northwest region, which includes the predominantly Muslim parts of China. There are a number of nationally designated minorities (*xiaoshu minzu*) in China who practice Islam, including, but not limited to Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, and Salars. Engaged China observers will likely be familiar with the Uyghurs, who mostly live in the western province of Xinjiang and who speak a language more similar to Uzbek or Turkish than to Chinese. This book, however, is not about the Uyghurs. It is about the Hui, a relatively dispersed and well-integrated Muslim minority whose only real marker of distinction from the majority Han Chinese is their adherence to Islam. There are Hui Muslims all over China, but the majority are concentrated in the northwest, and Erie’s fieldwork focuses on a culturally and historically important Hui enclave in Linxia (formerly Hezhou), a county-level city in Gansu province.

At its core, Erie’s book is about the ability of the Chinese Party-State to adapt to Islam and vice-versa, and what that means for Hui Muslims living in China. Erie asks us to think about the meaning of the term “religious law.” He wants to understand both how the Hui practice Islamic law and under what conditions the state tolerates it (4). This is important because there are no Islamic courts in China and the state does not formally recognize Islamic law, yet, according to Erie, “the state uses law based on such faiths as Islam as a resource for its own rule” (22). Erie explores the juxtaposition of religious law (*jiaofa*) with state law (*guofa*) and the tensions this creates in everyday life. For the purposes of his book, Erie defines *jiaofa* as “something like an amalgamation of legalistic rules, ethical evaluations, moral commandments, and localized customs” (17). In essence, Erie is interested in exploring the space—or the *minjian*—between these two legal fields as he attempts to disentangle the meaning of what it means to practice *sharī’a* in a country that does not recognize it (7–8). *Minjian* is a Chinese word that translates to “between the people,” and that Erie uses to refer “to those institutions and norms that have not (necessarily) received the state’s imprimatur” (12–13). As an example, the “Hui can pray, fast, and give zakat, but marrying and dividing property in accordance with the Hanafi *fiqh* on *mu‘āmalāt* must be done in the realm of the *minjian*” (22), or outside of the institutionalized legal framework of the secular state. In other words, Erie is interested in how the Hui mediate their relationships to each other, to their religion, and to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) through the lens of both religious and state law.

The book is organized into seven chapters plus an introduction and a conclusion. Erie intersperses analytic content with anecdotal anthropological stories from his fieldwork. In chapter 1, as a means of contextualizing his argument, he explores the history of Islam in China dating back to the eighth century. As Erie explains, during the waning years of China’s last dynasty, the Qing (1644–1911) began tying Islamic law to newly emerging concepts of ethnicity imported from Japan. In the last years of the nineteenth century, Islamic law became what is now known as “customary law” (*xiguanfa*), divorcing it from its religious meaning at the state level. These Qing ideas were then reinforced but adapted during the Republican (1911–1949) and the PRC eras. By tying Islamic law to “customs” and “traditions,” the Qing, the Nationalists, and the Communists have been able to deny Islamic law institutional grounding in China. This also serves

to reinforce the idea that in China, “customs . . . [can] make explicit reference to Islamic rules, but the customs’ characterization of those rules are nonetheless muted or contradicted by Chinese preferences” (54). Simply put, Islam is reduced by the state from a religious practice with a set of laws to a custom, making the laws that accompany it customary, or traditional, rather than religious.

In chapter 3, Erie explores the intricacies of the various “schools” of Islamic thought in Linxia and how conflicts over authenticity to a “true” Islamic voice are hashed out in these communities (135). Erie prefers the term *schools* to *sects* as all the different groups are guided by their own set of regulations yet adhere to the Hanafi legal tradition, except the Salafiyya (136). Some of these schools, such as the Gedimu (from the Arabic *qadim*), the oldest and largest non-Sufi branch of Sunnis in China, practice “emphatically Chinese realizations of Islam” (137), whereas others, like the Yihewani (from the Arabic *ikhwan*) and Salafiyya are relatively new schools and can be seen as more “representatives of Islamic communities outside of China” (137). There are, of course, also important and active Sufi schools in China dating back from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In chapter 3, Erie shows how these “teaching schools interpret ritual matters not only as a means of establishing hermeneutical domination over rival schools but also as symbolic measures for gaining control over normative indeterminacy, particularly in areas of justice and equity that they find lacking in the official order” (40). In practical terms, this reviewer takes “normative indeterminacy” to mean such things as the ways particular schools in Linxia and their visions of *sharī’a* play out in daily life, for example who should—or if anyone should—recite the Qur’an at funerals or when and where incense should be burned (131). Erie wants to show that these “ritual matters” are important to the different schools and to the state regarding who has authority over Islamic practice. In chapters 4 through 7 Erie deals more specifically with the ways that these tensions—between both the state and Islam and within the different schools in Linxia—play out in madrasas and state-run ethnic schools, in family law, in business and banking, and within the “moral economy” (260) of daily life in Linxia. Within the realm of education in particular, the Party-State is working hard to support a “secular” vision of Islam at ethnic minority schools which actively divorce the learning of Arabic from Islam as a way to foster a bilingual, yet secular workforce. These objectives obviously differ from private madrasas, where deep theological training goes hand in hand with learning Arabic. For Erie, the particularities and peculiarities of Islamic law in China are deeply informed by both the historical context in which it developed alongside other legal traditions in imperial China and by the contemporary constraints of the ethnic minorities paradigm in the People’s Republic.

The breadth and depth of Erie’s research and fieldwork are commendable, undertaken with tenacity and care for his subjects who live in a politically tense and sensitive part of China. The language abilities needed to undertake this project are also admirable, as Erie works not only in Persian and Arabic but also in standard Mandarin and the local Linxia dialect. Often overlooked by scholars of the history of Islam in Asia, Erie’s work joins an important and growing body of literature on the relationship between Islamic law, society, and the secular state (for example, see Paolo Sartori’s recent work *Visions of Justice: Sharī’a and Cultural Change in Russian Central Asia* [Leiden: Brill, 2016]). Erie’s book also complicates what he sees as the “irreducible antagonism” between *sharī’a* and state law, which is well trodden by pundits in the west (3, 6). It is also worth reinforcing the important contribution that a growing number of scholars *beyond* the Middle East are making to our understanding of the interactions between secular states and religious law. Here, Erie shows the malleability of Islamic law and helps to further our understanding of how local contexts—in this case “Chinese customs”—“either enhance certain rules of Islamic law or transform them” (21).

In the post-Mao era of openness and reform, the tensions between religion and the ideology of the Communist Party have started to dissipate. As the state figures out how to deal with the vacuum left in the absence of communism that is often filled by virulent nationalism and patriotism, individual citizens return to religion. The context of Erie's research is deeply informed by both this situation and by the post-9/11 world order. He draws attention to the ways that the Party-State has used the rhetoric of the global war on terror to vilify the Uyghurs while at the same time promoting the Hui as model minorities who are sometimes seen as secularizing Islam in favor of economic development and growth. However, in some places in the book, economic considerations are perhaps overshadowed by the notion that religiosity and Islam is the central guiding force in the lives of Muslims in Northwest China. For instance, Erie claims that there has been a religious revival in the post-1979 Reform Era, but he fails to mention that the increase in the numbers of mosques being built has a great deal to do with growing wealth and mobility, as well as connections to overseas Muslims communities, rather than to religiosity alone. In another section, Erie attempts to correlate religiosity with low divorce rates. But divorce rates are lowest in the poorer provinces of Shanxi, Gansu, and Tibet, with only one of these provinces having a substantial Muslim population (242–43).

Erie invites generalists to read his book, although it might be very difficult for them to do so. The book is dense and complex and speaks to a highly specialized audience who are very familiar with the history and historiography of *both* China and Islamic law. The book also contains a number of complex theoretical frameworks mentioned only in passing from Talal Asad to Michel Foucault to William Skinner. It really requires a very special type of training to be able to engage with the book in a critical way. Although it is recently available in paperback, I doubt I would assign it for my graduate seminar on *Islam in Asia* given how complex and almost impenetrable the book is on both a historical and historiographical level. In part, this is an issue that extends beyond Erie's work into the growing subfield of works on Islam in China, which often seems to have its proverbial finger in a number of different pies. This, however, should not detract from the importance of Erie's contribution to the field, and researchers like myself will no doubt repeatedly return to *China and Islam* for reference.

Erie indicates to his readers that he accessed governmental archives in Linxia and Urumqi, and the Gansu Provincial Archives for his project (37–38). As restrictions become increasingly tight on foreign researchers in the PRC, it becomes more relevant for those of us who study sensitive topics, such as Islam in China, to provide more detailed information to our readers about when these places were visited and how access was gained. As someone who has been denied, without any explanation, access to both local and provincial level archives regardless of my paperwork, I am curious to know more about the ways that Erie went about his research and it is directly relevant to his argument. For example, if he accessed the Linxia archives at the beginning of his fieldwork but was unable to gain access in later years as restrictions became tighter, this would be helpful to share with fellow researchers.

As the prestige of Islamic clerics in China decreases and more Muslim students learn the Arabic language for the purpose of becoming translators for corporations overseas and in the coastal—predominantly Han—regions, the long-term effects of the above-mentioned secularization will continue to be felt. China's "One Belt and One Road" initiative requires Arabic speakers, and the Hui are at the forefront of this strategy to drive economic development between China and the Middle East and beyond. However, these relationships are very fragile (3). The fragility of these relationships, cultivated and maintained by the state, is clear to anyone who travels to Northwest China, where the state security apparatus is tight and highly visible and people are often wary of outsiders. At the heart of it, this book is about the ways that the Party-State uses

and objectifies Islam and Muslims for its own purposes and deploys “proper” Muslims in the service of the state while disenfranchising those who refuse to participate in its empire-building projects. Whether or not the Hui will simply accept this role in an era of increased crackdowns on Uyghurs both in China and abroad along with an increasingly heavy-handed security apparatus remains to be seen. In the end, the “Party-State’s concern over non-state law suggests anxieties about its own ethical standards,” and, according to Erie, these “judgments . . . often reflect agitations the ruler has over his own ethical standards as prerequisite to govern, a theme with a very long history in China” (352).

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