

A China Scholar's Rendezvous with Islam

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Towards Atman and Brahman

AS A SCHOLAR, my mind has always run the risk of stretching towards and being torn apart by the two extremes of the abstraction ladder: towards a lower level of abstracting the finer analysis of the concrete; or, towards a grander generalization of the abstractus.¹ Within the teachings of Hinduism, a deeper look inwards into the mind may ultimately lead to a higher level of transcendence. Thus, Atman and Brahman, Self and Universe, come into one union; the individual nature of things or events, also lies in their interconnectedness.²



Jama Masjid, Delhi

Like many specialists on East Asia/China in the U.S., I started my professional journey as an area/region expert. And despite my age, I cannot believe that I must constantly reinvent myself, now looking into the relevancy of Islam to East Asia/China studies. Raised an atheist in Communist China and trained as a specialist on the West, during the first decade of my academic career I developed my research interests from Matthew Arnold's concept of Hellenism and Hebraism (knowing and doing).³

In order to have a more thorough understanding of the origin and essence of Western civilization, my research focus shifted clockwise, first to continental Europe (Roman era and modern/contemporary France), Great Britain, and then the U.S. This smooth journey, however, was interrupted by my departure for the U.S. in 1989, forced upon me by the Tiananmen Square Massacre. While in the West, becoming a "China specialist" was the new expectation of me, a new identity my six-year Ph.D. training was designed for, under the sponsorship of a caring and wise "China hand."

Since China itself constitutes a civilization, its history and language training often deters China specialists from stretching into other regions, and even into countries such as Japan and Korea. During the first fifteen years of my scholarly experiences in the U.S., my attention, culture-wise, was monocular. Under the pressure of the orthodox paradigm of positivism in American political science, the push to polish one's "quant" skills took precedence over diversifying cultural literacy. This normalcy, however, was punctured by the September 11 terrorist attacks.

In a new preface for the reprint of his book, *Jihad versus McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World*, political scientist Benjamin Barber wrote sarcastically that, "statistics may help us count the bodies, but it will do little to prevent the slaughter."⁴ Barber's clarion call though did not cause an immediate impact upon my research agenda. At the time, I had been straddling both comparative politics and international relations—Asian studies and international political economy. The academic logic of paying attention to the Middle East and Islamic Studies did not occur to me yet.

Islam, China, and the U.S.

Besides the ubiquitous talk of Islam and Muslims—reaching the level of Islamophobia—here in the U.S., three events have converged upon my purview that remind me of how, the issue of Islam, has been posing more questions to my understanding of China and the East.

The Chinese state-sponsored project of assimilating Muslims and Islam into “Chinese-ness” has become a source of contention in Chinese politics. Regarding how to treat Muslims, China and the U.S. share some similarities, despite the fact that the pair form a contrast of autocracy versus democracy. For example, the process of both “localization” and “nationalization” has created a strange phenomenon in China. Many Chinese (those who share basic ethnic features of the Han Chinese) are classified as non-Han “minority nationalities,” mainly due to their faith in Islam. Among fifty-five so-called “minority nationalities,” ten are Muslim, accounting for seventeen million people.

The third largest one, the “Hui nationality” (close to ten million), is scattered among the Han people. Using Islamic faith as the main foundation for classifying several such “minority nationalities” makes it difficult for Islam to spread among non-believer Han Chinese. To some extent, the U.S. has “naturalized” the Muslim American “into an ethnicity” in the same fashion.⁵

I am not certain whether this parallel can be attributed to an American degenerative imitation of China, or a common imperial logic from the center toward the periphery. However, the twentieth century concept of “Chinese nation” was constructed mostly from a Han Chinese (accounting for 92% of the total population) perspective to subsume all fifty-six nationalities under this category. Understandably, this umbrella concept for nation-building has been contested by major minority nationalities, mainly Tibetans, Uighurs and others living in China’s Far West.

Through the Lens of Islam

Under its entire course of communist rule, the Chinese central government in Beijing has had persistent tensions with Tibetans and Muslim minorities in the Far West. This drastic deterioration of relationships, however, only just happened recently within the new century, in particular, after 2008, where it reached its worst. Unfortunately, the securitization of Islamic affairs, and the ensuing demonization of Muslims in the U.S. under the guise of the global War on Terror, has offered a convenient pretext for the Chinese government to place Tibetans and Uighur Muslims under *de jure*, or *de facto* martial law (in 2008 and 2009 respectively).

The Chinese Party-state has charged these groups against three particular crimes: “extremism, terrorism, and splittism.” Ironically, these three charges are a perfect indictment of the Party-state itself which follows ideological extremism, implements state-sponsored terrorism, and drives centrifugal forces into accelerated splittism (as seen with Xinjiang, Tibet, Taiwan, and Hong Kong). China has become a significant part in the long fault line of conflicts between Islam, and all other major civilizations, as dramatized by political scientist Samuel P. Huntington. To fully understand the cruel nature of the Chinese stability-maintenance regime, depends upon your knowledge of Islam and the Muslims in China.

According to the Chinese government, there are “five anti-China poisons” overseas—namely, the Democracy Movement, Taiwan, Tibetans, Uighurs, and the Falun Gong. Naturally, China’s democratization must involve participants from all five forces. Being among this loose community in the West, I have been asked and pressured by some Uighur activists to address their grievances and needs, having been both scolded and helped by them, to understand the subtleties of Islamic religion and culture.

For example, Wu’er Kaixi, a legendary student leader in the 1989 Beijing Student Movement, and a Uighur himself, proposed that the National Committee of the China Democracy Party recognize and award, Ilham Tohti, a moderate Uighur economist imprisoned for life by the Chinese government. At numerous forums that I have organized, representatives from the Uighur American Association, Europe East Turkistan Union, and the Ilham Tohti Initiative in Europe, all have shed light upon the current crises

in China and its future projection from a Muslim perspective. As a Han Chinese, I have gradually adjusted myself by offering some accommodations to my Muslim colleagues, such as adding Halal food to conference refreshments; using East Turkistan/Xinjiang simultaneously; and developing a fuller understanding of Muslims' grievances and identity, respecting and being sympathetic to their endeavors.

The increasing frequency and fatality of violent clashes between the State and Uighurs—as a byproduct, the rising tensions between Han Chinese and Muslims beyond Xinjiang, between China and Islamic states (Turkey and Malaysia, for example)—offer a compelling reason to assess the rise, or the demise, of the Chinese Communist regime as a multiethnic empire through the lens of Islam.

Freedom from the Known

As China has shifted its standpoint away from an erstwhile outward-looking attitude toward universal values, into an atavistic China, concerned with exceptionalism and “the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” my anti-regime standpoint was sharpened further by my inadvertent involvement with an Oscar-nominated film, *China's Unnatural Disaster: The Tears of Sichuan Province*. This critical documentary covered the collapse of school buildings during the 2008 earthquake, and questioned construction standards which angered the government.

Due to the film, together with my old disloyalty to the Party-state in 1989, and my newfound friendship with His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, the Chinese government decided to place me on a blacklist, denying my entry to China. My oppositional standpoint gave me an unexpected vantage point to “see the reality ‘behind,’ ‘beneath’ and ‘from outside’ the oppressors’ institutionalized vision.”⁶

After the Chinese government slammed its China door on me, it unintentionally brought me a new gift: freedom from the known.⁷ After having secured my tenure and promotion to full professor, I plunged into Indo-Tibetan Studies, a vast field that has long entreated and intimidated me at the same time. To some degree, this big plunge was cushioned by my excursion into Southeast Asia. The more liberal and pluralistic Islamic culture, in both India and Southeast Asia, offered me a less culturally risky entry into Muslim lives and Islam.

During my first sabbatical in 2003-2004 at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars, I was invited for an exclusive lunch with Benazir Bhutto, the late former Prime Minister of Pakistan and the first woman to head a Muslim majority nation. This was the first time in my life that a Muslim woman in a hijab personally explained her points of view to me on global and regional affairs.

During the last third of my sabbatical at the National University of Singapore, ethnic and religious riots broke out from the provinces of Narathiwat, Yala and Pattani at the Thai-Malay borders, over the deaths of eighty Muslim protesters who suffocated during their detention and transport in overheated army trucks. To defuse tensions and re-build peace, the Thai Prime Minister at the time, Thaksin Shinawatra, ordered military airplanes to drop, not bombs, but instead, a hundred million paper origami cranes with peace messages.

Shinawatra's counterpart at the time, Lee Kuan Yew, and his attitudes on ethnic relationship, in particular between Chinese and Malay Muslims in Singapore, were noted against this big backdrop. Lee reflected that among his generation, Muslims and Chinese integrated well. Referring to his Muslim colleagues, Lee said: “We drank beer, we went canvassing, we went electioneering, we ate together. Now they say, ‘Are the plates clean?’ I said, ‘You know, same washing machine.’ Halal, non-Halal and so on, I mean, they are all divisive.”⁸

Former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir bin Mohamad, had harsh criticisms of political Islam. However, conservative influences from the Arab world upon Southeast Asia were increasing. For many countries in my East Asian and Southeast Asian Politics teaching, the Islamic angle and *The Qu'ran* have become a prerequisite for a comprehensive understanding of the political development and underdevelopment there (in addition to Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Burma, and the Philippines).

When I spent my second sabbatical in Singapore in 2011, I was given two books as gifts at a book fair: *Translation of the Meanings of The Noble Qu'ran in the English Language*, by Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan; and *Revelation, Rationality, Knowledge and Truth*, by Mirza Tahir Ahmad.⁹ Although I have read *The Qu'ran* in both Chinese and English, as well as other books on Islam before, these two books plus Manzooruddin Ahmed's *Islamic Political System in the Modern Age*¹⁰ boosted my confidence to venture into Muslim politics and to introduce such topics in my undergraduate teaching.

One unforgettable experience was when I wandered over to a mosque on top of a hill nearby the National University of Singapore faculty living compound during prayer time. The Imam invited me in, prepared me and guided me through the entire prayer process. The worshippers helped chant and pray in Arabic for me, and later I was invited to join their dinner. Although I had some reservations about Lee Kuan Yew's neo-authoritarian politics in Singapore, I appreciated his policy on multi-religious and cultural tolerance and integration. And so, as a non-Muslim, I was able to experience firsthand the whole process of Islamic worship.

Rendezvous – Asian and Islamic Studies

Circumstantial factors, serendipity and my own curiosity led me to embrace Islam, not as a believer, but as a scholar. For me, it has become a natural rendezvous for Asian Studies (even for China Studies) and Islamic Studies. It is worth pointing out that the concept of “the East” as defined by the Chinese orthodox scholarship, has become equivalent to Chinese-ness and China. However, the East constitutes a whole, only after we start treating China and the Sinic countries—Japan, ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) countries, India, and Islamic countries (Iran and Turkey, for example)—as legitimate parts of Asian Studies, a *Pancaskandha* under Pan-Asianism.



Ming Xia at the National Islamic Center of Malaysia

In 2013, while standing on Galata Koprusu gazing at the skyline of Istanbul and the sparkling water of the Bosphorus strait, I realized that my global intellectual journey had completed a full clockwise circle. Therefore, I do agree with Moustafa Bayoumi's proposition to include and recognize Islamic and Muslim Studies in Asian Studies, in order to expand its ontology and critically examine the epistemology practiced in the field. Elaborating on Bayoumi's argument on the subsumption of Asian Studies into the “National Security lens,” and the “opportunity and recognition” for scholars on Asia (myself, having already included Islamic and Muslim Studies), I can certainly see a connection between the two.¹¹

Under the American-centric National Security lens, traditional Area/Regional Studies can never rid itself of the auxiliary role in social sciences that privilege those disciplines and sub-disciplines on the U.S. Nor can it challenge the hegemonic status for a group of mostly American-born scholars, keeping “foreigners” off limits. A hierarchy exists in terms of nations and regions, which therefore pervades academic disciplines and scholarly subjects as well. I had the experience once of being told by a former coordinator that I was not qualified to teach “Comparative Human Rights,” after a retired professor had asked me to keep running the course. This coordinator's rationale was that I did not have the knowledge about the U.S. Constitution and civil rights, even though I trained for ten years as a comparativist of Western political systems in China, and took American Politics as one of my Ph.D. comprehensive exams.

A Politics of Transformation

How do we redress such a subtle racialized slight? I believe it is important to introduce a “fundamental politics of transformation” in Asian and Asian American Studies, not only for scholars like us to have a “more just and equitable society,” but also, as I feel, for people living in the ancestral/motherlands we have left behind, to be able to enjoy justice and equity.

But, how can we achieve such ambitious transformations? Differing from the common goal to redress “an internalized racial logic” as identified by Bayoumi,¹² I would like to replace such a defensive strategy, by forming a united front with an active and ambitious enterprise to succeed for the sake of its intrinsic value and importance. I also think that the increasingly complex regional conflicts in Asia (Zomia Studies)¹³ and the world (the “clash of civilizations,” the West vs. the rest—namely the Confucian-Islamic nexus identified by Samuel P. Huntington, of course is debatable)¹⁴ force us to identify the sources and solutions of these conflicts in the context of traditional Asian and Islamic Studies.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, led by China and Russia, has been offering an anti-West authoritarian bastion in the Eurasian continent, appealing especially to Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey. How can we Asian specialists offer some ideas for solving these fundamental challenges facing the U.S. and the world, including the conflicts arising from racial, religious, and ethnic factors? Huntington believed that, “Asia is the cauldron of civilizations. East Asia alone contains societies belonging to six civilizations—Japanese, Sinic, Orthodox, Buddhist, Muslim, and Western—and South Asia adds Hinduism.”¹⁵

Turning away from the Judeo-Christian bias lurking in Huntington’s writings, towards a positive attitude, if we can realize that Asia has offered many social laboratories, and therefore, opportunities to understand and resolve the grand clash of civilizations, we can then easily transcend the Bermuda triangle of conflicts among the three Abrahamic monotheistic religions that thwart many promising plans for peace. We must move away from the Western-centric zero-sum solution and try to contribute a non-zero sum remedy from the Asian repertoire of wisdom for conducting war and building peace.

The relationship between Islam and other religions, at least in monsoon Asia, had not been part of the Western discourse on national security. Therefore, it did not have the antagonism of absolute ideologies. The most impressive, and, for many Western observers, unthinkable fact, is that India has had three Muslim presidents, a Sikh prime minister, an Italian Catholic president of the National Congress Party, and a Christian defense minister in the cabinet. The “Father of the Indian Constitution,” B.R. Ambedkar, converted to Buddhism. As a Hindu, philosopher Sri Ramakrishna “experimented with different faiths,” studying Christianity and meditating on *The Qu’ran*.¹⁶ According to Ramakrishna, “I have practiced all religions—Hinduism, Islam, Christianity—and I have also followed the paths of the different Hindu sects. I have found that it is the same God toward whom all are directing their steps, though along different paths.”¹⁷

This inclusive embrace of all religions influenced Mahatma Gandhi, who said: “In the morning I used to read the Gita and at noon, mostly the Qu’ran. In the evening I taught the Bible.”¹⁸ “I consider myself a Hindu, Christian, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, and Confucian.”¹⁹ Both Hinduism and Buddhism (see the Dalai Lama’s *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World*),²⁰ share a common understanding of “secularism,” which philosopher S. Radhakrishnan explains: “It does not mean opposition to religion. It does not mean disrespect to religion. It only means that the State as such is not identified with any particular religion but tolerates every religion, appreciates every religion, respects all religions—Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, etc.”²¹

If we can somehow inherit this Hindu-Buddhist solution and its version of secularism, we may possibly do away with the crusading spirit against Islam and non-Abrahamic religions, and offer an Asian solution to global conflict. If we are able to accomplish such a collective success through the cross-fertilization of combining Asian with Islamic Studies, it will surely elevate the standing of Asian Studies, enhancing the respect it enjoys in the social sciences and humanities.

“Transformation” can be seen and understood in terms of Asian Americans, the U.S. and the world, especially the ancestral/motherlands of researchers in Area/Regional Studies. Most importantly, this success may be a precursor for the coming of an Asian Renaissance under a liberal, democratic, and cosmopolitan framework—a goal for which many Asian specialists (at least this author) have aspired. This may be the highest politics of transformation.

AAARI Lecture Video (September 29, 2017): www.aaari.info/17-09-29Xia.htm

Notes

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- 2 Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism* (Boston: Shambhala, 2010); Fritjof Capra, *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living System* (New York: Anchor Books, 1997).
- 3 Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955): Chap. 4.
- 4 Benjamin Barber, *Jihad versus McWorld* (New York: Ballantine, 2001): XXV.
- 5 Moustafa Bayoumi, “Asian American Studies, the War on Terror, and the Changing University: A Call to Respond,” *Asian American Matters: A New York Anthology* (AAARI-CUNY, 2017): 21.
- 6 Sandra Hardin, “Philosophy and Standpoint Theory,” in George Steinmetz, ed., *The Politics of Method in the Human Science* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005): 355.
- 7 J. Krishnamurti, *Total Freedom: The Essential Krishnamurti* (New York: HarperOne, 1996): 109.
- 8 Lee Kuan Yew, *Hard Truths: To Keep Singapore Going* (Singapore: Strait Times, 2011): 228–229.
- 9 Mirza Tahir Ahmad, *Revelation, Rationality, Knowledge and Truth* (UK: Islam International Publications Limited, 1998).
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- 11 Bayoumi, *Asian American Matters*: 23.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 James Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).
- 14 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1996).
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- 16 S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010 [1940]).
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- 18 *Wikisource*, https://en.m.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Speeches_And_Writings_MKGandhi.djvu/251 (accessed February 18, 2017).
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- 20 Dalai Lama, *Beyond Religion: Ethics for a Whole World* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).
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