

“Nine years in Egypt”: Al-Azhar University and the Arabization of Chinese Islam¹

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ABSTRACT

This essay presents and discusses aspects and notions of exile and exilic world view in Chinese Islam. This exilic world view emerged in early modern times in response to removal from the Muslim world and Islamic history. The paper discusses the transformation of this world view during the early twentieth century, a time when China integrated rapidly with global transportation and communication networks. I argue that the reintegration of Chinese Islam with the Muslim world gave rise, among other things, to a process of “Arabization” as a means to “return” to their original state before being “exiled” in China. In this regard, I contend that integration with the Islamic world did not simply remove the sense of exile among Chinese Muslims; rather, the sense of exile informed and shaped the ways in which Chinese Muslims understood the integration itself.

Illustrious guests

In 1945, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Section of Outreach to the Islamic World (*qism al-ittisāl bi al-’ālam al-Islāmī*) published a book that was to be a topic of excitement for quite some time.² With both Chinese and Arabic on its cover, the book was entitled *al-Sīn wal-Islām* or, in Chinese, *Zhongguo yu Huijiao*—China and Islam. Its author was one Muhammad Tawādu’ (Pang, 1902–1958). Pang/Tawādu’ was a functionary within the Brotherhood’s outreach section and identified himself as “Head of the Chinese Delegation to al-Azhar and a member of the Section of Outreach to the Islamic World” (*ra’is al-bi’tha al-Sīnīya bi al-Azhar wa ‘udu qism al-ittisāl bi al-’ālam al-Islāmī*; Tawādu’, 1945). The first few pages of Pang’s book featured an Arabic map of China and its provinces, alongside a picture of the Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek in full uniform.³ There was also a picture of the author, depicting a young-looking man in Western suit and tie, a tall Egyptian *tarbush* and traces of what appears to be a desperate attempt to grow a respectable beard (Tawādu’, 1945: *ayn*).

China and Islam, Pang's chosen title, could just as well serve as a banner for a fascinating if little known episode in Chinese Islamic history, a sixteen-year period in the 1930s and 1940s, during which a group of Chinese Muslim scholars made concerted efforts to establish (to their minds, to reestablish) a special relationship between China's Muslims and the Middle Eastern heartlands of Islam. This article introduces a few of the main figures involved in this project, gives an overview of this episode in Chinese-Islamic history and discusses the historical significance of the ties established in the period between a core group of Chinese Muslim scholars and one Middle Eastern scholarly milieu: Cairo's al-Azhar University.

The significant role played by al-Azhar in the history of modern Chinese Islamic education is almost entirely unknown. Within the still largely uncovered history of twentieth-century Chinese Islam, there is nothing much beyond occasional mention of the fact that Chinese students had sometimes studied at the Cairo institution (Gladney, 1991:54). Chinese scholarship has only relatively recently begun to pay limited attention to this important Islamic center.⁴ Thus, the purpose of this essay is in part to introduce this specific chapter in Chinese Islam, but also to situate it within a larger historical Islamic context.⁵ More importantly, this essay presents the Chinese sojourn in Cairo within the context of Chinese Islam's perceptions of the Middle East as its original "homeland." I shall suggest that the travel to Cairo was understood by Chinese Muslim elites not merely as a traditional travel in quest of knowledge (*Talab al-'ilm*). Much more than that, it was also understood as the first step in the "return" of Chinese Islam to its origins, enabled by the "renewal" of its long-lost contacts with its homeland in the modern period. In so doing, I wish to offer a rethinking of the notions of exiles and return that will allow us to expand their applicability beyond their known conceptualizations. More specifically, I wish to untie them from their conventional Judeo-Christian and Western (facing the "East") moorings and relocate them in an Eastern (facing the "West") and Islamic context as well.

Among the prefaces and introductions written for Pang's book was a short one by none other than Hassan al-Banna (1906–1949), the legendary founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. Al-Banna hailed the publication of *China and Islam* and the "kindliness" of its author, who had so generously agreed to write a book on China. He praised the young man in poetic terms: "virtuous brother, the diligent scholar, the illustrious guest, the honorable, the teacher shaykh Muhammad Tawādu' the Chinese of al-Azhar" (*al-akh al-fāḍil, al-'ālim al-'āmil, wal-nazīl al-jalīl fadīlat al-ustāz al-shaykh, Muhammad Tawādu' al-Sinī al-Azhari*). Al-Banna specified that this was one of the "Section's" first publications and thanked Pang profusely for having undertaken it (Tawādu', 1945:lam). The praise lavished on Pang was all the more noteworthy for the fact that his sole contribution to Islam, at least in the Arabic language, was this book.

Al-Sin wal-Islām marked the second time in less than ten years that a book on China and its Muslims, authored by a Chinese Muslim, had been published in Cairo. A decade earlier, in 1934, another Islamic organ, al-Fath, had published *Nazrah*

jāmi'ah ila ta'rīkh al-Islām fī al-Sin wa-ahwāl al-Muslimīn fīha, or in Chinese *Zhongguo Huijiao gaiguan* (*A Comprehensive Overview of the History of Islam in China and of the Conditions of the Muslims There*). By another Chinese Azharite, Muhammad Makin (1906–1978, Chinese name: Ma Jian), this anterior text did not draw as much praise as its successor, but it aroused similar interest among members of the al-Azhar community and wider Cairene scholarly society. Makin's book was based on a series of lectures on China and Chinese Islam that he had delivered in Cairo in July 1934 (Makin, 1934). The lectures, which drew a large audience of interested intellectuals and clerics, among them Islamic reformers and nationalists, inaugurated the founding of the Association for Mutual Islamic Acquaintance (*Jam'iyyat al-ta'āruf al-Islāmī*), established earlier that year. Specifically, the Association's organizers had wanted to stimulate an Islamic acquaintance between Cairo, a core Islamic center, and China, one of the most distant locations where Muslims lived. Makin, who had arrived in Cairo just over two years prior, was also known there for having translated the *Analects* (Chinese, *Lunyü*) of Confucius into Arabic (Makin al-Sinī, 1935). In his memoirs, he later wrote that he had translated this core text of Confucianism “during my first long break” from studies at al-Azhar; it had been published immediately by al-Fath (Li, 2000:69). The publication of such books was the literary highlight of the critical decades in the history of modern Chinese Islam that saw the deliberate reaching out of Chinese and Egyptian Muslims to one another.



On the face of it, the story is straightforward. In 1931, a group of four Chinese Muslim students traveled to al-Azhar, where they were to spend several years. This first detachment of four was followed by several additional students who arrived in Cairo in small delegations each year. Altogether, 35 students from China studied at al-Azhar between 1931 and 1947, when the final group returned to China. From the standpoint of Islamic history, this story is similar to an array of others involving Muslim students from around the Islamic world who migrated to al-Azhar, a millennium-old Islamic scholarly center. But from the Chinese Islamic historiographical standpoint, writing a history of al-Azhar and China is at first blush a peculiar starting point for the twentieth-century history of Chinese Islam, all the more so given that the twentieth-century intellectual and social history of Chinese Islam has not yet been fully articulated even programmatically. Thus, for instance, it is as yet premature to attempt to gauge the full impact of the “Azhar episode” on the modern history of Chinese Islam.

It is clear, however, that this episode was important in many respects. A glance at the major journals published by Chinese Muslims at the time, among them *Yuehua* (Crescent China), shows that they routinely included translations from al-Azhar’s various publications, such as *al-Manār* or the related *al-Fath* (*Yuehua*). These translations were undertaken by either Chinese Muslim students at al-Azhar or recent returnees (Li, 2000:23–41). At the present stage of research, it is still impossible to assess the value of these translations and to gauge their impact on the Chinese Muslim intellectual shifts of the time. What is clear, though, is that the al-Azhar episode is the first key to the fuller history of the impact of Middle Eastern Islamic shifts and changes on Chinese Islam. The cultural meaning of the encounter between Muslims from the Middle East, that is Arabs, and Muslims from China is also suggested most potently by the Al-Azhar decades, which reveals a longing not simply on the part of Chinese Muslims to be closer to the heartlands of Islam, but also on the part of Middle Eastern Muslims to have greater intimacy with Chinese Islam.

The interface between Chinese and Middle Eastern Muslims held special meaning to both parties because of the special—exilic—place that China, *al-Sīn*, and its Muslims held in Islamic historical and geographical imagination. Put briefly, China’s special place in Islamic history derived primarily from its position outside the “House of Islam” (*Dār al-Islām*). Unlike locations such as the Indian subcontinent, home to a large Muslim minority, China was never considered part of, or even an extension of, the Islamic world. In Islamic geographical imagination, China was separated from it by deserts, rivers and mountains, while culturally, too, it was a world apart (Ahmad, 1989, 1995). Unlike Andalusia (*al-Andalus*), once a Muslim territory, China had never been under Islamic rule and was never conquered by Islamic armies. Thus, China was outside Islamic history as well. Yet, though outside Islamic geography and history, China was nevertheless a special part of the Islamic *oikoumene* and was by tradition considered Islam’s true final frontier.⁶ As I have discussed elsewhere, this peculiar “intimate estrangement,” to use Edward

Said's term, is best expressed in the famous *hadith*, "Seek knowledge even unto China" (*utlubū al-'ilm walaw bi al-Sīn*), which casts China as the most remote place in the known (Islamic) world.⁷ The existence of Muslims in China, so far outside the pale, was in premodern periods a matter of curiosity to Muslims in the heartland, a curiosity stoked by the fact that information about these distant coreligionists was random and scarce (Ben-Dor, 2002/3: 95-100).

For their part, too, Chinese Muslims were shaped by China's position outside Islamic geography and history. I have shown elsewhere that one of the most important features of Chinese Islam, as it was articulated and coded in scholarly writings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, was a strong "diasporic" self-understanding derived from a powerfully *spatialized* understanding of Islam, an understanding that situated China's Muslims outside its boundaries. At work here was not only basic Islamic geography, but also Chinese notions of "China" that defined the space within its boundaries as something decidedly un-Islamic; this made the Chinese Islamic sense of dislocation even more acute. However, at the same time, Chinese Muslims insisted on being profoundly, if opaquely, linked to Islam's geographical center and its historical beginnings. Chinese Islamic diasporic self-understanding was compensated for by transcending historical time and geographical space through traditions that held China's Muslims to be uniquely tied to Islam's very origins (Ben-Dor Benite, 2005:12–18, 200–213).⁸

The geographical integrity of China, as well as of the Islamic world, was crucial in sustaining this particular self-perception of Chinese Islam, as it rested precisely on the separation of these two geographies. In this regard, then, the establishment of a concrete link between the Middle East, symbolized by al-Azhar, the quintessential educational center, and Chinese Islam carries a special meaning, which this essay will endeavor to tease out.

To al-Azhar: The Chinese and Chinese Islamic contexts

As is well known, educational reforms, aiming at "modernization" and taking different shapes and forms, were an essential feature of virtually all programs and visions articulated and proposed by Chinese modernizing elites from the second half of the nineteenth century. This is an important chapter of modern Chinese history of which the scope of this essay does not allow more than a general sketch.⁹ The central, but not sole, reasons behind the urge to reform the education system of China were the painful perception of Western scientific and technological superiority, and the perceived failure of Confucianism and the educational system based upon it.¹⁰ The Confucian-based educational system, which supplied the state's bureaucrats and was the backbone of China's gentry class, was finally abolished in 1905, opening up many new venues and options for seeking knowledge and education both within China and abroad. Another outcome of the abolition of the

Confucian examination system was the intensification of the search for intellectual renewal and for new ideas and ideologies, preferably Western, which might replace the now defunct Confucianism.¹¹

It is within this context of educational reform and intellectual renewal that modernizing Chinese Muslim elites began to emerge. Reform-minded Chinese Muslim intellectuals shared the sentiments of their non-Muslim Chinese counterparts and considered the project of Islamic modernization an integral part of Chinese modernization as a whole (Ben-Dor, 2003/4). Chinese Muslim modernizing elites did not distinguish between Islamic modernization and reform, on the one hand, and the modernization of the Chinese non-Islamic state, on the other. The two projects were understood to be one and the same. When Chinese Muslim reform began, in Tokyo in 1904, Chinese Muslim intellectuals called for Islamic educational reform, arguing that reformation of the traditional Chinese Islamic education system was an essential part of China's state-building efforts. The Japanese capital was home to many reform- and revolutionary-minded Chinese intellectuals, and it was there that the first call for Chinese Islamic awakening, as part of the general "awakening" of the nascent Chinese nation, was voiced.¹² A group of Tokyo-based Chinese Muslim students published the journal *Xing Hui Pian* ("Awakening of Islam"; in Arabic, *Istīqāz al-Islām*); five of its nine essays were dedicated to the issue of educational reform (Huang et al., 1904).¹³ Later Chinese Muslim thinkers followed the same line of thought. Contact with Islamic revivalist trends coming out of the Middle East that also stressed educational reform made the Chinese Muslim emphasis on the topic stronger still.¹⁴ Islamic educational reform in China was inspired by two powerful ideological trends that, far from being mutually exclusive, actually served to bolster one another. The first was the overall nationalist program and state-building project; the second, revivalist movements and ideas coming from the Muslim world itself.¹⁵

A third key element in this picture was the "opening" of China to the world and its integration into global networks of trade and communication. For Chinese youth generally, this integration brought more options for study abroad, first in Japan, but later in Europe and the United States as well. For Chinese Muslims, the transformation allowed for the establishment of connections with the Muslim world and particularly the Middle East heartlands. The significance and newness of these connections cannot be overstated. Indeed, over the course of the nineteenth century, only one Chinese Muslim traveler, the imam Ma Dexin (1794–1874), is recorded to have visited the Middle East. (Ma left his home in the southwestern province of Yunnan in 1841 and spent almost eight years in the Middle East, most of them in Mecca. He only passed through Damascus and Jerusalem, but spent about two years at al-Azhar, where he studied Arabic. See Ma, 1861.)

At the turn of the twentieth century, things changed rapidly and significantly, with exchange in both directions. In 1908, the London *Times* estimated that about 200 Chinese Muslims were going on the *hajj* to Mecca every year, and that "Turkish imams" were traveling to Beijing's old central mosque to teach and preach

(Broomhall, 1910:294). The *Times*' figures were probably inflated, but the emphasis on growing connections between Middle Eastern and Chinese Muslims was well placed.¹⁶ At work in this context was the Chinese Muslim thirst, after years of relative isolation, for Islamic knowledge drawn from the faith's original core lands. Another relevant factor was emerging pan-Islamist ideologies, which encouraged connections and encounters between Muslims from various regions of the world, mixed with and fed by anti-imperialist sentiments.

In 1907, Wang Haoran (1848–1919), a Chinese imam who served at Beijing's old mosque, returned to the Chinese capital after several years in the Middle East. Wang's itinerary was ambitious and meaningful, and it reflected the changes and transformations taking place within Chinese Islam at the time. Wang spent most of his time as the guest of Sultan Abdul-Hamid II (1842–1918), who hoped to win the alliance of the Chinese government which he (quite rightly) perceived to be in a predicament similar to that of the Ottomans.¹⁷ From Istanbul, Wang went on to Cairo, where he made the acquaintance of two teachers, Ali Ridah and Hasan Hafiz, whom the Ottoman Sultan ordered to accompany the Chinese imam to Beijing.¹⁸

The arrival of these teachers with Wang Haoran drew attention to the fact that contact between Chinese Muslims and al-Azhar was of increasing significance. Marshall Broomhall (1866–1937), a British missionary who was particularly interested in Chinese Islam, noted with alarm that:

Mohammedans at Peking seem to be making special efforts in the establishment of schools, and...Ali Riza Effendi...a graduate of Al Hazar [sic.] University, has for the last two years [successfully] been teaching in and organizing the Moslem schools of Peking (Broomhall, 1910:295).

The connection with al-Azhar established in the first decade of the twentieth century did not intensify dramatically over the years following Wang Haoran's return. It remained random and tied to the personal initiative of individuals who made the trip to the Middle East mostly for the purpose of pilgrimage to Mecca. Back in China, though, each of these individuals played a disproportionately significant role in the modernization of Chinese Islamic education.

In 1923, imam Wang Jingzhai (1879–1949), another early visitor to the Middle East, returned to China after spending two years at al-Azhar as part of his *hajj* journey to the Middle East.¹⁹ Wang originally set out for Turkey, but having realized that the war-stricken country was not the place for study, he quickly redirected his itinerary to Cairo, where he studied at al-Azhar at his own expense.²⁰ Shortly thereafter, Wang began translating the Qur'an into Chinese. His translation of the Qur'an published in 1932, in classical Chinese was followed by another version in vernacular Chinese (*baihua*) translation published in 1946. The value of this project to the history of Chinese Islam as a whole, and particularly to its modern chapter, was immense. The publication of the Chinese translations made it possible for the

first time for the majority of the Chinese Muslims to actually read the entire Qur'an (Wang, 1932).²¹

The publication of the translated Qur'an came during a Chinese Islamic literary efflorescence, at a time when numerous new Chinese Islamic educational institutions and movements, organizations and associations flourished, and the Chinese Islamic press proliferated (Gladney, 1991:53–58; Lipman, 1998:204–211; Loewenthal, 1938). Both of these developments, which corresponded to general trends in rising literacy and increased access to education within Chinese society at the time, created a mass market for Islamic education and a wide readership for its output. Increasingly, this readership became more and more aware of the importance of al-Azhar as a center of learning, which in turn inspired other Chinese Muslims to travel there to study.

Soon, Cairo's al-Azhar was the place to be if one was a modernizing-minded Chinese Muslim. More than any single other individual, Wang was the person to popularize its image to a wide Chinese Muslim readership. In a short 1937 memoir recounting his "50 years in the pursuit of learning" (*Wushi nian qiuxue*), Wang wrote, "I profoundly believe that Cairo is the Islamic world's center of learning" (*wo yu yi shenxin Kailuo wei Huijiao shijie xuefu*). Alas, he lamented, at that time (in 1920) at al-Azhar, "[t]here were foreign students from all countries... *except Chinese* (*ge guo liuxuesheng...du Zhongguoren ze wu*, emphasis added; Wang, 1937:39). It was in the wake of Wang Jingzhai's reports upon his return to China that the first real delegation of four Chinese students, among them the aforementioned Ma Jian, was sent specifically to study at al-Azhar. The four young scholars, representing Islamic Normal School in Shanghai, left for Egypt in 1931, arriving in December of that year (Li, Qin, Feng and Sha, 1998:736–737).

At work here were not only the changing conditions and demands of Islamic education in China, but—equally important—the ability to embark on a boat from Shanghai to Alexandria, one outcome as China became more and more integrated into the world's transportation routes. With the second delegation, sent in 1932, an annual routine was established; each year for more than a decade, a group of several students left China for Cairo (Ma and Yang, 1988:125). All came from Chengda Normal School in Beijing (*Chengda Shifan Xuexiao*), China's crown Islamic institution, established in 1925 (Li et al., 1998:731–734). From 1936 on, the Chinese students enjoyed the sponsorship of King Farouq (1920–1965) himself. In 1936, Ma Songting (1895–1992), a leading Chinese imam and founder of the Chengda, visited Egypt and managed to secure several fellowships from the king for his students. King Farouq also donated a library (*Fude Tushuguan*) to the institution, named after his father, Fuad I (1868–1936) (Li et al., 1998:736–737). The last members of the final Chinese group returned to China in early 1947. Altogether, between 1931 and 1947, thirty five Chinese students studied at al-Azhar (Ma and Yang, 1988:124–125). Pang Shiqian (Muhammad Tawādu'), a central figure and a professor at Chengda, left for al-Azhar in 1938 and served officially as the head of the

delegation. He returned to China in 1947, after “nine years in Egypt,” the title he gave to the memoir he wrote about his time there (Pang, 1951).

The departure of the students for Egypt marked a turning point in the history told here. Earlier Chinese visitors to al-Azhar were clergy who included a short stay at the institution as part of their *hajj* itineraries. Their stay at al-Azhar could be seen as a version of what scholars sometimes call a “pilgrimage of learning,” a common phenomenon in Southeast Asia (Eliraz, 2004:46–48). The students of 1931 and those who followed them, however, were not clergy. They were sent specifically to study and reside at the institution for prolonged periods, and their educational mission had a large cultural component. As their biographies up to that point show, these Chinese Muslim students represented the best and the brightest at their home institutions. Their travel to Egypt was organized and sponsored by modern Chinese Islamic institutions which, unlike al-Azhar at the time, taught not only Islamic subjects, but also “secular” ones.²² A clerical track was not assumed. Na Zhong (b. 1910), for example, studied French and had already made a career as a writer in several Chinese Muslim journals in Yunnan and Beijing.²³ Pang Shiqian had served for a short while as imam in his native Henan province, but returned to school in Beijing and learned Arabic. He also published frequently in Chinese Islamic journals.²⁴ Ma Jian’s course of studies in the Islamic Normal School of Shanghai included math, history, geography, philosophy (probably both Chinese and European), English and Chinese. The Islamic subjects in the curriculum were collectively labeled as “Islamic culture” (*Huijiao wenhua*) and included Arabic and Persian language, Islamic history and Islamic “classics” (Li, 2000:21). With the exception of the specifically Islamic topics, Ma’s curriculum was typical of numerous normal schools and institutions all over China.

In this regard, the Chinese Muslim intellectuals that made up the delegations to al-Azhar were loyal to the perspective formulated by earlier generations of Chinese Muslim modernizing thinkers, namely, that Chinese Islamic renewal was entirely consonant with Chinese nationalist objectives. Going to al-Azhar, then, was not simply a mission to replenish Chinese Islam with direct knowledge of such Islamic subjects as law and theology. Rather, it helped enrich the whole body of Chinese who were engaged in the national challenge of modernization.

The meaning of al-Azhar: The quest for “Arabic purity”

Virtually the first thing that Chinese Muslim students did upon arrival in Cairo was to change their names. Customarily, Chinese Muslims might adopt an Arab name before or after their *hajj*, but this was always only a first name. The Chinese Azharites, though, took a new family name as well. Ma Jian, who arrived in 1931, took the name Muhammad Makin. “Makin,” a fake Arabic-sounding surname, was simply a bad transliteration of his full Chinese name, Ma Jian.²⁵ Pang Shiqian was a

little more sophisticated, perhaps because he had a longer training period in Arabic prior to coming to Egypt. He adopted as his new surname the Arabic word, “Tawādu” (“humbleness,” “humility”), a translation of the last Chinese character (*qian*) in his original name. The rest of the Chinese students followed suit, taking names that carried great Islamic import and often played in some way upon their original Chinese name. Virtually all names carried great religious significance. Among them were Yūsuf, Muhammad Ibrāhīm, ‘Abd al-Rahman, Sa’īd, ‘Ali, Sa’d, Abu Bakr, Yūnis, Nūr Muhammad, Luqmān, Muhammad Nasr al-Dīn, ‘Othmān, Shu’ayb, Sulaymān, Ismā’īl and Dawūd (Makin, 1934:81–83).

Along with the new names came a new appearance, one attested to by the aforementioned picture of Pang/Tawādu’ featuring an Egyptian *tarbush* and a feeble beard. Makin/Ma Jian, among many others, underwent a similar transformation. In a photo taken just before their departure for Egypt, Ma Jian and his three companions are shown seated as a group, dressed in Western suits and clean-shaven (Tawādu’, 1945:’*ayn*). Later that year, as Ma Jian turned into Muhammad Makin, he appears in another picture with a not-too-shabby mustache (Makin, 1934:1). In a third picture, we see a group of Chinese students mounted on camels in front of the pyramids at Giza, all sporting a *tarbush* and a mustache (Li, 2000:38). At play here wasn’t necessarily the desire to “go native.” Rather, upon arrival in Cairo, the Chinese students apparently wanted to conform as much as possible to “Islamic” (that is, “Arab”) notions of how a good Muslim man should appear. The quest for knowledge was not the only dimension of their stay at al-Azhar; alongside it came a quest for cultural “authenticity.” So it is that, even as their Egyptian hosts were most interested in them precisely because of their “Chineseness,” and because of the “authentic” and “pure” form of Islam they were taken to represent, the Chinese Muslim visitors sought to look more like their “Arab” hosts, taking pains to emphasize the “Islamic” elements in their identity.²⁶

Again, the establishment of an educational relationship between the emerging new Chinese Islamic educational system and al-Azhar reflected China’s integration into global transportation routes and networks, and its cultural and geographic “opening up” to the world. At a more specifically communal level, the educational links forged between China’s Muslims and al-Azhar reflected the increasing need within the Chinese Muslim community for trained Islamic scholars—a need underscored by the institutional and financial support allocated for students traveling to Egypt. There was, however, significant cultural meaning attached to establishing a more permanent and viable link to al-Azhar, one felt by the Chinese Muslim visitors and their Egyptian hosts alike.

In 1936, Ma Songting of Chengda declared in a long programmatic essay that “Chinese Islamic culture in present-day China has the same needs as the [country’s] general [culture].” These stemmed from the “loss of the center of gravity”—a problem from which “Chinese culture” as a whole, in Ma’s account, had suffered for quite some time. Chinese Islamic culture, one part of it, was no different; it too had lost its “center of gravity.” Its restoration was at once a national and an Islamic

project. As Ma put it, “Chengda’s purpose is to bring prosperity through education and to save the country by religious instruction” (*Chengda zhi mudi ji zai jiaoyu xing jiao zongjiao jiuguo*). The essay was published in a special issue of the important Chinese journal, *Yu-Kung* (*Yugong*), which at the time was increasingly turning its attention to Chinese Muslims (Ma, 1936).

Ma’s rhetoric about “saving China” and his concerns about China’s loss of its center of cultural gravity echo the rhetoric prevalent among Chinese nationalists and patriots from at least the turn of the century (see, e.g., Huang, 1972; Levenson, 1967; Schneider, 1971). By the mid 1930s, there was a general feeling that the several cultural movements—even “revolutions”—launched by the Chinese intelligentsia since the 1910s had failed (see, e.g., Chow, 1967; Dolezelová-Velingerová and Král, 2001; Mao, 1997; Schwarcz, 1986). While China had done a rather good job of discarding its “old” and “traditional” culture, it had failed to find its new one. As was the case in numerous global contexts, the search for China’s new way was framed as a work of reconstruction, rather than of construction; as was commonly argued, China’s “national past” (*guogu*) or its “true essence” (*guocui*) had been buried beneath dynastic and colonial legacies, which had corrupted and altered them. In this regard, one of the main projects Chinese intellectuals faced on the cultural front was to “recover” these lost essences and the buried past (Hon, 2004a, 2004b). In his view of Chinese Islam, Ma Songting was replicating much the same perspective. Chinese Islam, too, had to reclaim its essence; to do so would be a solution not just for Chinese Islam, but also for China as a whole. In this view, Ma Songting followed closely the legacy of earlier Chinese Muslim intellectuals who, from the very outset, had understood Islamic reform in China as part of the Chinese national project.

What, however, did Ma Songting mean by finding Chinese Islam’s “center of gravity”? What was its “lost essence”? And what was it that was to be “recovered”? A partial answer to these questions appears in a short unpublished paper focusing on twentieth-century Chinese Islamic calligraphy, written by the late, great scholar of Central Asia and China, Joseph Fletcher, in collaboration with art scholars Wasma’a Chorbachi and Mary Ellen Alonso. The authors make the interesting observation that, during the twentieth century, Chinese Islamic calligraphy markedly changed styles. It turned away from its traditional pattern, which had been influenced by “Turco-Iranian” styles, in favor of a style of “Arabic purity.” The three link this change to the general turning away from “Turco-Iranian practices” then underway in the Middle East amongst modernizing elites. The authors also point out that the shift in calligraphic style was linked to the desire on the part of Chinese Muslims not to be lumped together with China’s other Muslims, the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs (Fletcher, Alonso and Chorbachi, 1989:825–927). An emphasis on Arab purity was, in essence, a way to emphasize Chinese purity as well.

What Fletcher and his co-authors noticed in the realm of calligraphy is part of what was a much broader phenomenon. Their insight about the quest for “Arabic purity,” as identified in twentieth-century Chinese Islamic calligraphy, is parallel to

the quest for (an imagined) “Arabic purity” that propelled the Chinese students to go to al-Azhar. Within this new framework, “Arab” was equated with “purely Islamic.” Elsewhere I have shown that the fear of being categorized as Uyghur, and therefore outside the Chinese “nation/civilization,” was one of the central thrusts behind Chinese Muslim modernizing thought (Ben-Dor, 2003/4:90–94). Indeed, for centuries Chinese Muslim thinkers had labored to come up with a historical narrative for themselves by which they could “bypass” centuries of direct contact—exchanges, migrations, ideas—between the concrete Turco-Iranian Islamic world and China. They could thus present themselves as a “pure” Arab/Chinese group, untainted and untrammelled by “hybrid” Islamic forms. Creation myths written into the Chinese Islamic canon during the early 1700s, for example, explicitly link the Chinese Muslims to “Arabia” (*Tianfang*), by claiming that they were the direct descendants of Arab men sent personally by Muhammad to China, where they had married Chinese women and remained.²⁷ The purpose of such traditions was to assert that Arab Muslims were the ethnic group to which Chinese Muslims were most closely tied. Again, it is this insistence on a direct link to Islam’s original geography that marks one of the strongest expressions of Chinese Muslim “diasporic,” or exilic, self-consciousness: a profound sense of being displaced and removed from the Islamic world and from Islamic history (Ben-Dor, 2002/3, 2003/4:100–105).

The twentieth century not only brought with it crises for Chinese and Chinese Muslims, but also presented the possibility for (re)connection with the Islamic world. It is in this light that we should read the Arabic-centered cultural projects initiated by Chinese Muslims in the period. By the twentieth century, the quest for “Arabic purity” had emerged as a powerful feature of Chinese Islam. A few years before Wang Jingzhai completed his translation of the Qur’an, for example, two other translations were released in China. The Muslim public rejected them, however, on the grounds that they had been taken from an English version of the holy text rather than directly from the Arabic (Jin, 1982). Of course, religious as well as cultural issues were at play, but with this move, not only was the English language rejected, but the Persian one was, too. Numerous Chinese Islamic texts in Persian were in circulation and had until recently been regarded as sufficiently authentically Islamic to pass muster. The quest for “Arabic purity” meant not only turning away from the Persian language, but also “Arabizing” parts of the Persian heritage of Chinese Islam, cutting out its Persian links to Islamic history and reasserting the Arabic ones. Chinese Muslim intellectuals made an array of efforts to rewrite key issues, particularly pertaining to cultural themes, so as to link them directly to the specifically Arab Muslim past.

In 1936, two years before he left for Egypt, Pang Shiqian published the first-ever study of the history of Islamic education in China. In his narrative, Pang insisted that the founding of the system in the mid-1500s, as with every “major stage” (*da wei jinbu*) in its development, had been precipitated by Chinese Muslim teachers making the trek to “Arabia” (Pang, 1937). Pang thus bypassed the entirety

of Turco-Iranian space and history, through which Islam in China had been filtered over generations. An even more blatant expression of “Arabization” was the list Pang provided of the books used in premodern Chinese Islamic schools, all of which Pang defined as “Arabic books” (*Ahlabo keben*), although many were in fact Persian and had originated in the Persian-speaking world. Pang also omitted in its entirety the collection of texts written in Chinese by scholars produced by this educational system, the majority of which drew heavily on Persian Sufi literature (Pang, 1937).²⁸ These scholars, most of whom had flourished during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, fashioned themselves as Confucian Chinese literati, the prevailing scholarly model of the time. In the twentieth century, however, they were “Arabized.” In a similar historiographical move, historian Bai Shouyi (1909–2000), later one of China’s most prominent national historians, then still young and unknown, turned many of these scholars into *‘ulama* (*alin*), despite the fact that the word *‘alim* had never been used in a Chinese Islamic context (Bai, 1992). Both Pang and Bai thus replicated and concretized in their histories of Chinese Islamic education and scholarship the same assertion of a direct link between Chinese Islam and Arabia or the Arabic language.

By the early twentieth century, this Arabization was utterly dominant in Chinese Muslim circles. A survey of hundreds of books and texts published by the Islamic press in China from the 1920s on shows that the only Islamic language represented was Arabic. While numerous Arabic grammar books, dictionaries and manuals were published, none were published in Persian or Turkish—languages that a century before had been regarded on equal footing with Arabic. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the term “Islamic languages” had clearly meant Persian as well as Arabic, and in many cases a mixture of both was used on the printed page. Translations into Chinese were made almost exclusively from Persian originals.²⁹ By the early twentieth century, bilingual texts containing Chinese were coupled only with Arabic. In the same period, numerous translations from original Arabic texts were made. Virtually all books published by the Islamic press of the republican period were in Arabic, or translated from Arabic.

This turn to Arabic was not only a matter of studying the holy language of the Qur’an, access to which was traditionally the central reason to learn Arabic. It was also part of a deliberate reorientation of Chinese Islam’s position within emerging global Islam and within the project of Chinese modernization. Instead of looking for sources of rejuvenation in the Turco-Iranian world, Chinese Muslims intellectuals sought links to their mythical source, Arab Islam.³⁰

The integration of China with modern global communication and transportation networks posed another threat to Chinese Islam’s mythical link to “Arabia.” Yet, at the same time, it offered an opportunity. In this context we should understand the meaning of al-Azhar for modernizing Chinese Muslim elites. The Chinese Muslim students who traveled to al-Azhar in the 1930s and 1940s considered their time in Egypt to offer something far more significant than mere Islamic training. It was part of nothing less than a mission to find and reestablish Chinese Islam’s true links to

Islam's core Arab geography. The Chinese Azharites of the first half of the twentieth century were emissaries in the project of Chinese and Chinese Islamic recovery, modernization and "return" to purity.

Exile and return

In her study of contemporary urban Chinese Muslim material culture and consumption, anthropologist Maris Gillette dedicates a lengthy chapter to what she calls "Arabization" (Gillette, 2000:68–113). Its most prominent feature is "an intense concern with replicating Middle Eastern models," a concern that "intensified during the 1980s and 1990s" (Gillette, 2000:108). Gillette defines Arabization as "a cluster of ideas about Muslim development." The phenomenon, however, is, in her view, understood by Chinese Muslims as "a return, rather than a movement forward" (Gillette, 2000:75–76).

The various manifestations of Gillette's Arabization, and the context within which it takes place, are of course very different than the context with which this essay has been concerned. Its contemporary form is multifaceted and involves several aspects of Islamic life, while its earlier, elite version focused on the textual traditions of Chinese Islam. But the two phenomena share important features. First, just as Gillette notes of the contemporary movement that it is "a return, rather than movement forward," so, too, was Arabization of the 1930s and 1940s. Second, as we have seen, the earlier Arabization occurred against the backdrop of intensive reconfigurations of China's global positioning. The 1980s and 1990s, as Gillette notes, "can be explained in part by the increased contacts that Chinese Muslims [have] had with the Middle East since the early 1980s" (Gillette, 2000:108). That is to say, contemporary Arabization surfaces at a high point of China's (re)integration with global economic and communication networks, after decades of relative—at times almost complete—isolation during the Maoist period. In this respect, the second Arabization reinforces, and further exposes, the "exilic" peculiarities of Chinese Islam suggested here. In both cases, *spatial* reconfigurations, and movements across spaces, triggered a (re)connection between Chinese Muslims and the Islamic heartlands in the Middle East. Chinese Muslims understood this as "a return"—the end of a sort of exile.

I have suggested that the Chinese Muslim sense of exile emerged as a response to their geographic remove from the greater Islamic world. This sense of exile was quintessentially expressed by the yearning to establish links (imagined or real) to the core (Arab) lands of Islam. Modernity brought with it the ability to transcend space—to quite literally traverse the distances that had been bridged in earlier periods through mythic tales of origin. While Chinese Muslims of the early modern period bridged the gap between their world and the Islamic heartlands through genealogical tales, their twentieth-century contemporaries did so through travel. The

historical teleology embedded in the meta-narrative of exile and return is one that we associate most potently with the West—and particularly with the “Judeo-Christian” longing for “return” to Palestine (or the entire Middle East). But perhaps the meta-narrative of exile and return, and of the end of exile, is not so much a Judeo-Christian tale as a modernist one, a tale told by many, the literal instantiation of which was made possible only in the last century.

NOTES

¹ I would like to thank the participants of the conference on “Exile and Displacement in the Modern Middle East,” at Ben Gurion University, and the anonymous readers for *HAGAR* for their helpful comments and criticisms.

² Richard Mitchell’s study of the structure of the organization at this stage gives a different translation for this office: Section for Liaison with The Islamic World (Mitchell, 1969:172). Mitchell’s remains the most thorough study of the Brotherhood’s structure in English. For a more recent history of the Brotherhood, see Brynjar (1998).

³ Throughout this essay I will be using the pinyin transliteration system for Chinese names and words, except when a name such as Chiang Kai-shek (Jiang Jieshi) is known by a different transliteration.

⁴ Two Chinese Muslim scholars published in 1988 a small history of al-Azhar, in which they included a short chapter on the Chinese students there (Ma and Yang, 1988:123–131).

⁵ Chinese historiography has only recently begun paying attention to the republican era, as this period is still fraught politically. So far, most of this historiography has focused on publishing collections of documents from the republican period. Japanese scholarship on Chinese Islam, which flourished during the first half of the twentieth century, focuses almost exclusively on the premodern period (see Tazaka, 1964). Jonathan Lipman’s (1998) excellent political and social history of the Muslims in northwest China provides important information about intellectual trends, but is far from a complete intellectual history of modern Chinese Islam. So is the case with Gladney (1991).

⁶ Such perceptions still exist. For example, in 1989, a Saudi cleric published his travelogue in China under the title “China and Gog and Magog: An Unknown World.” The invocation of Gog and Magog next to China goes back to days when Arab/Islamic geography was positioned behind the legendary gates of Gog and Magog built by Alexander the Great (Musnad, 1989).

⁷ See my treatment of this *hadith*, its versions, origins and geographical implications (Ben-Dor, 2002/3:93–94).

⁸ Elsewhere (Ben-Dor, 2002/3), I have elaborated on various aspects of this point. See also a treatment of the modern fate of this story (Ben-Dor, 2003/4; Ben-Dor Benite, 2006).

⁹ For reason of space, I refrain from flooding the notes with numerous references to this subject and mention the most general studies. See Bastid (1988); Hayhoe (1992); Hayhoe and Bastid (1987); Pepper (1996); and Peterson, Hayhoe and Lu (2001).

¹⁰ For related studies on this subject, see Elman (2000, 2005).

¹¹ For a history of education in the premodern period, see the gigantic Lee (2000). See also Elman and Woodside (1994).

¹² For a study of the centrality of the notion of “awakening” in Chinese modern history, see Fitzgerald (1996).

¹³ For a study of the Confucian-oriented Islamic education system, see Ben-Dor Benite (2005). The conditions and history of Chinese Islamic education in the first half of the twentieth century are still seriously under-researched. For a sketch of this subject, see Ben-Dor (2000:24–48).

¹⁴ Again, this slice of history is still waiting for unearthing.

¹⁵ For a collection of modernist/revivalist Islamic ideas in global context, including the East/Southeast Asian regions, see Kurzman (2002).

¹⁶ The Reverend Claude Pickens (1900–1985), a missionary who dedicated most of his career in China to missionary work among Chinese Muslims, records that, between 1923 and 1937, 834 Chinese Muslims made the *hajj*. In 1937, it was lauded in the Shanghai press that over 170 Muslims boarded a boat on their way to Mecca. See Gladney (1991:53–54).

¹⁷ On the relationships between China and Turkey in that period, see Karl (2002:177–193).

¹⁸ I am unable to identify these teachers in Middle Eastern sources. On Wang Haoran, see Yi (1985) and Ma (1985).

¹⁹ For a short biography of Wang in English and a translation of his ideas concerning Islamic reform, see Ben-Dor (2002).

²⁰ Wang initially passed by al-Azhar, then went to Turkey, but realized that he would not find knowledge there. In Wang’s beautiful prose, “I realized that Turkey at war was not the place for me to seek knowledge” (*zhishi nai zhanhou zhi Tuguo fei wo qiuzhi zhi di*). See Wang (1937:37), reprinted in Li and Feng (1985:627).

²¹ Only partial translations of the Qur’an were made by Muslims in earlier periods. Wang ended up publishing over the years other versions of his translation, also in vernacular Chinese.

²² Al-Azhar added secular subjects to its curriculum only in 1961 (Dodge, 1961).

²³ Na Zhong’s biography is in *Zhongguo Yisilan Baike Quanshu* (1994:417). In October 2001, Na Zhong was named co-winner of the first “Sharjah Prize for Arab

Culture” for his life-long research of Arab culture and history. The other winner was Abdulaziz al-Makalah of Yemen.

²⁴ Pang Shiqian’s biography is in the *Zhongguo Yisilan Baike Quanshu* (1994:435–436).

²⁵ While “Makin” appears to be a simple transliteration of the name Ma Jian, which in older transliteration system is written “Ma Kian,” it is possible that Ma Jian chose “Makin” because of its meaning in Arabic: having strong (spiritual or physical) foundations. I am grateful to Yair Huri for suggesting this to me.

²⁶ The idea that intellectuals, such as Rashid Ridah and Shakib Arslan (and others at al-Azhar), viewed the Chinese Muslims as custodians of Islamic “purity” precisely because of their remove from the core Islamic lands is the other side of the story told here. I hope to discuss it elsewhere soon.

²⁷ Recently I have suggested that, even during the 1700s, when the myth was written, its authors aimed at disassociating the Chinese Muslims from the Uyghurs, who were at the time incorporated into the Qing Empire. Of course, at that time the meaning of “Arabic purity” was different. See Ben-Dor Benite (2006:160–162).

²⁸ The strong Persian, writ large, dimension of the early Chinese Islamic education network is revealed in Ben-Dor Benite (2005:75–78, 125–133; see also Leslie and Wassel, 1982). There was also a rather urgent need to discard the Chinese Sufi written tradition which these texts represented, but the scope of this paper does not allow dwelling on this point.

²⁹ A bibliography of such texts does not exist in one location or in one catalogue. However, the Claude L. Pickens collection at Harvard’s Yen-ching Institute, upon which I base my conclusion, is considered the largest in the world. For a list of translations, see Yu and Yang (1993).

³⁰ An overview of the conditions of the major “players” in the Islamic world at the time lends much support to this insight. Central Asian and Indian Islam, historically strongly linked to Chinese Islam, were under non-Islamic rule. Iran, whose cultural heritage was the strongest element in Chinese Islam in premodern times, was now a westernizing monarchy, and its Muslims were Shi’i. The Ottoman Empire, and the caliphate, had ceased to exist.

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