



An Interview with *Morris Rossabi*

EDITOR'S NOTE: We are grateful to Marleen Kassel and Zainab Mahmood of the Asia Society, as well as to our distinguished subject, for the following interview. City University of New York Professor Morris Rossabi is an internationally known expert on Central and Inner Asia, areas where Islam is a dominant religion. Please note that our interviewer, Zainab Mahmood, also provides a very useful introductory-level annotated list of recommended sources for educators interested in learning about Islam on page forty-six of the resources section.



Zainab: *Perhaps we can start by having you describe what attracted you to academia. What was the nature of the field at the beginning of your career? How have things changed both inside the classroom and in the realms of exchange between scholars today?*

Morris: Ever since my secondary school days in New York, where I had excellent instructors, I wanted to pursue a career in teaching. And my college and graduate school experiences, where I also had some excellent professors, motivated me to combine teaching with research and writing, particularly on foreign areas.

I was born in Egypt and thus had exposure to the Arab and Islamic worlds from a young age. Though as Jews we were perceived and probably conceived of ourselves as foreigners (actually ironic because my family had lived in Egypt since 1830, and before that had lived for centuries in Yemen), we resided in a multi-cultural community, with middle class Arabs, Armenians, Greeks, Spaniards, and Frenchmen and Englishmen. When I ventured out of my immediate neighborhood, I was naturally exposed to a mostly Arab world.

However, when I moved to the US and started graduate school, I thought the Arab world and Islam were too close to home and instead majored in Chinese studies. I had been exposed to East Asia through my uncle, who had left Egypt in the early 1930s and spent almost a decade in Japan before moving to the US in 1940. When he visited us in Egypt after the War, he regaled and fascinated us with stories about his adventures in Japan, Formosa, the Dutch East Indies, and China. In any event, as I was scouting around for a topic for my PhD dissertation, it struck me that I had an interest in and language skills that would be helpful in studies of both China and the Islamic world, and I joined them together in a dissertation on Ming China's relations with Central Asia. From that point on, along with my general interests in China and Mongolia, I have focused some of my research on the Islamic community in China as well as the neighboring regions in Central Asia.

When I received my PhD, there was little interest in Central Asia. It was regarded as neither here nor there, because the Soviet

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Union and China governed most of the region. No specific constituency had developed for the study of Central Asia. In most universities (except for one or two in the US), the study of Central Asia was a byproduct and a stepchild of Soviet and Chinese studies. Moreover, foreign scholars had only limited access to Central Asia and Xinjiang, which naturally imposed serious barriers to study and research. However, the post-Cultural Revolution era in China and the breakup of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s have offered greater opportunities for and have spurred interest in Central and Inner Asia.

Zainab: *You mentioned that there was little interest in Central Asia. Why has that now changed?*

Morris: At least four factors have inspired scholars and the general public to develop greater interest in Central Asia and Xinjiang. One is the opening of the region to researchers. Anthropologists have been permitted to conduct studies of the Central Asian pastoral nomads, oasis dwellers, and urban populations; historians have had greater access to written documentation and archival sources; and political scientists and economists have had greater freedom of movement and greater access to people and statistics. A second factor is the growing interest in global history and diffusion of technology, ideas, and artistic motifs, fields in which the Silk Roads played an important role. Quite a number of projects have been initiated, from such academic efforts as the Dunhuang project, based in England, to the more popular music festivals and concerts organized by

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saw the government change its policy. Red Guards damaged or destroyed numerous mosques; official propaganda disparaged Islam and the Turkic heritage of the population; and the government restricted the practice of Islam.

Yo-Yo Ma. A third factor is discovery of the region's abundant resources: Kazakhstan has significant petroleum reserves, Turkmenistan has abundant natural gas resources, and copper and gold have been found in other areas—all of which have elicited the interest of and led to the presence of Western corporations and governmental organizations in the region. A final factor is the recent establishment of US military bases in several of the Central Asian countries, which has, of necessity, generated US government interest in the region.

Zainab: *It occurs to me that not all of our audience will know that Islam is so important in China. Perhaps you can describe how Islam arrived in China and where the Muslim population is located.*

Morris: In the popular imagination, Islam is associated with West Asia or the Middle East. Yet Islam reached China within a hundred years after the Prophet's appearance. Muslims arrived in China, for the most part, as traders, though there were also several territorial struggles in Central Asia between Arab and Chinese armies in the eighth century. Many Muslim merchants came to China via the Silk Roads—the caravan routes that stretched from West through Central Asia to the oases in Xinjiang and finally reached the capital city of Changan (modern Xi'an). Other traders traveled by sea from Arabia and Persia to the ports of Southeast China. Eventually the port of Quanzhou became one of the important centers for the growing Muslim population. By the ninth century, Muslims traded with China, and a number of virtually self-governing Muslim communities were established in Northwest or Southeast China, though Muslims are now found throughout China. The Chinese tolerated Islam as long as the Muslims did not provoke unrest or strenuously proselytize among the Chinese population.

Zainab: *Could you sketch the history of the Muslim community? What impact did the establishment of the People's Republic of China have on the Muslim population?*

Morris: The Chinese initially adopted a policy of benign neglect or toleration toward the Muslim population. However, starting in the thirteenth century, tensions began to develop, particularly after the Mongol invasion of China. In order to rule China, the Mongols often used Muslim financial administrators and tax collectors, groups who obviously antagonized the Chinese population. The Qing dynasty's expansionism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries exacerbated tensions between the two communities. Qing forces attacked and occupied Xinjiang, and by 1760 had incorporated a sizable Muslim Turkic population into the empire. Qing officials placed restrictions upon the practice of Islam, and Chinese merchants took advantage of Muslims in Xinjiang. Predictably enough, violence erupted and culminated in a major

rebellion in Northwest China from 1862 to 1878. The ensuing violence was complex, as some Muslims sided with the government and some Chinese joined the Muslim cause. The Northwest remained unsettled for much of the nineteenth century. In other regions of China, tensions between the Hui (ethnic Chinese Muslims) and the Han (Chinese) provoked violence, but not on the same scale as in the Northwest.

The People's Liberation Army moved into Xinjiang in 1949 and 1950, but until the late 1950s the government generally adopted a conciliatory policy, with little sustained effort to undermine the practice of Islam. However, the Great Leap Forward of 1958 to 1962 and the Cultural Revolution saw the government change its policy. Red Guards damaged or destroyed numerous mosques; official propaganda disparaged Islam and the Turkic heritage of the population; and the government restricted the practice of Islam. Faced with such restrictions, some Muslim Uyghurs reacted by either passive or violent resistance. Xinjiang became as unsettled as it had been in the nineteenth century.

After the Cultural Revolution, the government attempted to win over Muslims and the Turkic communities in Xinjiang by moderating its anti-Islamic policies and by promoting policies of "affirmative action" in the economy and education. Tensions between the Uyghurs and the Han persisted, particularly as the Han population of Xinjiang increased. Moreover, Xinjiang did not benefit as much as the coastal provinces from the economic growth after the Cultural Revolution. In the 1990s, the government sought to remedy the area's relative economic backwardness by greater investment, but the region's Han population, rather than the Muslims, appears to be benefiting the most from these preferential policies. Tensions persist in Xinjiang and to lesser extent in other provinces with sizable Hui minorities.

Zainab: *Perhaps you can link Islam in China to the current situation in Central Asia.*

Morris: The breakup of the USSR and the establishment of five independent countries in Central Asia (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan) are clearly of concern to China. Some of the peoples in the Central Asian countries speak Turkic languages akin to the ones spoken in Xinjiang. The Chinese government knows that the newly independent Central Asian states could inspire Turkic peoples in Xinjiang to call for greater autonomy or perhaps independence. The tensions that were sparked by Qing dynasty rule have been exacerbated by the twentieth-century movement of large numbers of Han into Xinjiang—an area that was mostly Turkic and Muslim in 1949 is now almost evenly divided, with Han constituting about fifty percent of the population. In the early 1990s, the Chinese government feared that links would develop between the

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independent Central Asian states and Xinjiang, which might give rise to nationalist sentiments among Muslims within Chinese borders.

However, as the Chinese economy has burgeoned in the 1990s, China has played an increasing role in the Central Asian economies. It is constructing a pipeline from Kazakhstan to Xinjiang to secure access to Kazakhstan's oil; it has constructed a road which links China directly to Tajikistan; it is investing in the Central Asian economies and is an important trading partner for several Central Asian states. Such economic leverage over Central Asian countries tends to minimize their potential support and contact with the Turkic peoples of Xinjiang.

Zainab: *Can you describe the arrival of Islam in Central Asia, and the role that Islam has played as these regions have pursued decolonization?*

Morris: Islam took root in Central Asia both through conquests and through voluntary conversions. Through the time of Tamerlane and the Timurid Empire (early sixteenth century), Central Asia remained autonomous. Several significant Central Asian empires arose, with some having strong identification with Islam while others were primarily secular states. Their control over the Silk Roads contributed to their prosperity, but the arrival of seaborne vessels from Europe to Asia witnessed a decline in Silk Roads trade and a concomitant decline in Central Asia. Tsarist Russia and Qing China capitalized on this deterioration to gain control over much of Central Asia. As I said earlier, China expanded into Xinjiang in the eighteenth century, and Russia annexed Central Asia by the early 1870s. The Central Asian peoples were no longer masters of their own fate.

The rise of the Soviet Union and its defeat of independence movements signaled the beginning of propaganda and education against Islam in Central Asia. Mosques and *madrasahs* were often used for social, educational, and recreational purposes, and there were severe restrictions on the practice of Islam. The population became increasingly secularized; they identified with Islam, but other identifications (ethnic, local, regional, etc.) became paramount.

The collapse of the USSR and the establishment of independent states in Central Asia have resulted, for the most part, in the creation of secular, oftentimes authoritarian governments. Though some Islamic political parties have been founded, secular governments have generally prevailed throughout the region. The Uzbek, Tajik, and, at various times, other governments have been concerned about the rise of fundamentalist Islam movements and have taken steps—occasionally repressive ones—to control such groups.

Zainab: *That is a tremendous amount of information you've given us in a very small amount of space!*

Morris: (laughing) Probably too much!

Zainab: *I'm sure the readers will find it helpful. What would also be*

helpful is a description of how you've brought this subject matter into the classroom, and some advice about your own teaching approach. You've also worked with high school level educators and high school level publishing efforts, so it would be great if you'd comment a bit on that.

Morris: Because much of the writing in the field is specialized, it is difficult to make specific recommendations. Still, the changing geopolitical and academic circumstances that I have described have generated interest in the study both of Central Asia and of Islam in general on the secondary school and collegiate levels. Until very recently, many secondary school history curricula and texts offered a brief description of some of the main tenets of Islam and mentioned the Silk Roads and Harun al-Rashid, the fifth Abbasid caliph. Then they skipped forward to the Crusades, which tended to focus on their impact on Europe, and the Islamic countries did not reappear until the nineteenth century with the rise of colonialism. Central Asia would scarcely be included, and, if it appeared, it was only in the context of the Great Game, the struggle between Great Britain and Russia for domination over the region in the nineteenth century. The history of Islam in China would not be mentioned.

Students would receive a distorted, if any, image of Central Asia and, I might add, of much of the Islamic world. However, the sudden interest in the Silk Roads, Central Asia, and Islam in general, due in large part to contemporary events, augurs well for the future. It is incumbent on academics and teachers to devise appropriate materials for secondary school studies of Central Asia. The American Forum for Global Education and China Institute have, over the past few years, produced fine curricula on Central Asia. As you know, the Asia Society has also been a pioneer in this area, with the production of a CD-ROM and with other projects on Islam in Central Asia and Southeast Asia currently underway. Another encouraging sign is that I would need to revamp the bibliography, adding many more scholarly works and pedagogical resources, for the article I wrote on "The Silk Roads: An Educational Resource" in the Spring of 1999 issue of *Education About Asia*. I hope that these materials will encourage teachers to incorporate more lessons and units on this vital part of the world.

Zainab: *You've really helped to illuminate a subject and part of the world so often misunderstood. The information and insight you've provided today will help educators bring the Islamic realms of China and Central Asia into their own classrooms. Thank you for your time and excellent input.*

Morris: Thank you, Zainab, it's been fun! ■