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Introduction

"I'll never forgive myself," laments Professor Henry Jones Senior after hitting Junior with a large vase on the head. The subsequent scenes in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* clarify that the Professor's concern was not directed at his son – who had, after all, come to save him from Nazi captivity – but at the damage inflicted on what appeared to be a fine exemplar of blue-and-white Chinese porcelain.

The underglaze porcelain with blue decorations on a white background, often reproducing floral patterns, has come to identify an aesthetic that is quintessentially Chinese (especially characteristic of the Ming dynasty, 1368–1644), but in fact Chinese ware functioned as a vehicle for assimilation and transmission of aesthetic choices across Asia and was highly prized abroad from the fifteenth century. Within a century, European manufacturers had learned how to imitate the Chinese technique, giving form to several regional variations, from Tuscany's Medici porcelain to England's Wedgwood *chinoiserie* and the Dutch Delftware. Such transformation further dissipated and obfuscated the genesis of this form; the origins of what are commonly held to be the archetypal Chinese aesthetics are in fact primarily rooted in the history of China's trade with West Asia (the term used in this book to refer to the Middle East), and in Asia as a space of Islamized connections.

Exchanges between China, Persia, and West Asia had occurred for centuries along the Silk Road, the informal network of routes and peoples connecting the Mediterranean to eastern Asia across the Eurasian continent, with notable hubs in Samarkand (Uzbekistan) and Xi'an (China); these links were further reinforced as the Muslim Abbasid dynasty (750–1258), based in Damascus and Baghdad, expanded so far east that it brushed against Tang China (618–907) (see Map 1). Hence, Chinese earthenware had been both common and a continuous source of fascination and admiration. An Arab merchant, Sulayman, wrote of his amazement at looking through a Chinese bottle: "[They] have the transparency of glass bottles; water in these vases is visible through them–and yet they are made of clay!"[1] In fact, while the Islamic Empire had

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achieved great refinement in courtly and literary cultures, West Asian ceramics were of unsophisticated quality, their kilns being unable to reach the high temperatures needed for glazing.

A primary motor was the desire to acquire beautiful ceramics, but wealthy Arab, Persian, and Turkic Muslims were also drawn to these foreign luxury goods by a commitment to Islamic propriety, as the traditions of Muhammad (*ahadith*, or sayings of the Prophet) warned Muslims against eating and drinking from silver and gold vessels.[2]

But if West Asian Muslims marveled at the sophisticated technique of Chinese ceramics, the somber monochromatic aesthetic embraced by the Song dynasty (960–1279) was of little interest to them, as they had inherited a tradition of color and decoration. This disjuncture between Eastern and Western Asian ideals of beauty became increasingly aggravating as in the twelfth to thirteenth centuries power shifts in West Asia had swollen the demand for luxury items and thus the volume of trade across Asia. Supported by the Mongol founding of the port city of Hormuz on the Persian Gulf, direct relations between West Asia and China were established via South and Southeast Asia, within maritime routes connecting through the Indian Ocean and now complementing the long-established Silk Road.

Among the several towns along the southern coast of China, it was the Fujian port city of Quanzhou (known to the Arabs as Zaytun) that would emerge as the most important site of exchange. Capitalizing on the presence of Muslim residents in the region – attested by the steles and gazetteers of mosques since at least the tenth century – at the turn of the millennium the Song elected Quanzhou as their trade tax collection office. This not only resulted in an increase in the general presence of Muslims, but it also encouraged further interaction between China and West Asia in terms of trade, religion, and aesthetics (see Source 1.3).

So it was that Muslim merchants in Quanzhou embarked on an innovative enterprise, sponsoring kilners in nearby Jingdezhen to experiment with new colors and motifs. The most successful of these customizations was the reproduction of patterns found on metalwork, carpets, and textiles purchased in West Asia by using an application of "Persian cobalt." It was particularly hard for Chinese kilners to get hold of cobalt, as the lapis lazuli rock from which it was extracted could only be found in Ghazni (Afghanistan) and Asia Minor (today's Turkey);[3] but its importance in meeting the desires of West Asian buyers made the effort compelling.

Already known as an important hub of international trade, Jingdezhen would eventually become the main center of "blue-and-white" ceramics

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in the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), when these products were almost exclusively made for the export markets of West and Southeast Asia; archaeological evidence has in fact been found in Iraq, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Indonesia, and the Southern Philippines. But by the early fifteenth century, the Xuande Ming emperor (r. 1426–1435) had himself abandoned the more somber Song monochromatic style and embraced this innovation, leading to "the Chinese adopt[ing] the traditional aesthetic values of the Middle East";[4] this came with a subtle but explicit acknowledgment of the impact of Islam on Chinese culture, as this specific shade of blue took the name of *sumawi qing* ("sky blue," from the Arabic) or *huihui qing*, i.e. "Muslim blue."

Let's take a few steps back and look at the bigger picture. The story of the origins of blue-and-white porcelain is not just one of intra-Asian connections, or of long-lasting Islamic influence on China. This is also a story of how Muslim merchants operating in East Asia, outside established networks of Islamic knowledge or authority, and even outside what is conventionally seen as the territorial purview of Islamic influence, intervened "as Muslims," solving a problem seemingly belonging to the "non-sacred" by applying their religious sensibility and identity.

It is this narrative that identifies and connects those historical moments when "Asia" came to be touched by Islam as a cultural phenomenon (not just as a religious system), and in which "Islam" came to be touched by peoples who originated from the *ma wara' an-nahr* – i.e. "that which is across the river," an Arabic figure of speech used to refer to the lands across the Oxus/Amu Darya, the river that today separates Turkmenistan from Uzbekistan – that constitutes the core of this book. Through these encounters, not only did Islam take root across Asia, manifesting contextualized orthodoxy and orthopraxy, but also the production of Islamic knowledge in Arabia received (and still receives) active and conscious contributions from the lands across the river.

Looking at Islam and Asia as two intersecting entities, the following chapters propose that the history of "Muslim Asia" is a narrative of how this continental and insular expanse emerged as an interconnected space, linking the Mediterranean to the Pacific; how the cultures and identities of its peoples became characterized, among other elements, by a shared sense of belonging to a community defined by religious commitment, an *umma* ("community"; see Box 0.1); and how Asia's Muslims did not passively practice "Islam" as a foreign religion, but actively contributed to its devotional practices and knowledge production.

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Box 0.1 The *Umma* in the Qur'an

Our Lord, make us devoted to You; make our descendants into a community [*umma*] devoted to You. Show us how to worship and accept our repentance, for You are the Ever Relenting, the Most Merciful. (Q 2:128)

With these words the Qur'an sanctions the *umma* as a community of believers whose piety is directed toward Allah, "The God." Initially a very localized community (in Mecca first and Medina next), this *umma* eventually reached East and West after the death of Muhammad. And even in their movements, shaping each other's worldviews, Muslims consolidated that sense of a self-aware community united in a common devotion.

But in the Qur'an the boundaries of this "community of believers" move, ranging from including the entire humankind (Q 10:19) to exclusively marking Muslims as "the best community" (Q 3:110). In order to make sense of these transformations – which are not exclusive to the term *umma*, incidentally – we ought to think about the Qur'an beyond its current textual form and as an oral narration that occurred through time, while the sociopolitical status of Muhammad and his followers changed, and as an oral tradition that was only later codified in a written text.

It is narrated that Muhammad had retired on Mount Hira to meditate, when he heard a voice, "*iqra*": "[1]Read! In the name of your Lord who created: [2]He created man from a clinging form. [3]Read! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One [4]who taught by [means of] the pen, [5]who taught man what he did not know" (Q 96: 1–5). This was the voice of the Archangel Gabriel, inviting Muhammad to read, or recite, God's message. It is thus that the revelation began in 610, only ending with Muhammad's death in 632.

These first words of the revelation are part of chapter (*sura*) 96, titled "The Clinging Form," showing how the Quranic text, as Muslims peruse it, is not arranged according to the chronology of the revelation. The official codex of the Qur'an was put together in the mid-seventh century, at the time of the third caliph, 'Uthman (r. 644–656), and the chapters were arranged by length, with the longest chapter at the beginning and the shortest one at the end. An exception was made for the "opening chapter," *sura al-fatiha*, which also includes the profession of faith (the *shahada*, see Box 1.2).

However, in the field of Quranic studies, much importance has been given to the chronological sequence of revelation, as newer verses are said to "abrogate" older ones on the same topic. Despite the "length" approach, then, each *sura* is also identified as either "Meccan" or "Medinan," referring to whether it was revealed during Muhammad's period in Mecca or after his migration (*hijra*, 622) to the oasis town of Yathrib (later known as Madina an-Nabi, i.e. City of the Prophet, and eventually just Medina). This change in location had a deep political and social undertone, as "Muslims" transitioned from being an oppressed minority in hiding to

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Box 0.1 (*cont.*)

constituting themselves as a self-ruling community in which Muhammad operated as political leader, military commander, spiritual guide, and religious teacher.

Within this context, then, we see how *sura* 10 (the fifty-first chapter in chronological order, revealed in Mecca, and titled after the prophet Jonah), states: "[19]All people were originally one single community [*umma wahida*], but later they differed … [47]Every community is sent a messenger, and when their messenger comes, they will be judged justly; they will not be wronged" suggesting that the initial community was later differentiated through multiple – albeit equally valid – revelations. This was a core principle in identifying other followers of Abrahamic (monotheistic) beliefs as "people of the Book" and thus as "protected minorities" (see Box 1.1).

But *sura* 2 ("The Cow," chronologically no. 87, revealed in Medina) says: "[143]We have made you [believers] into a just community [*umma wasat*], so that you may bear witness [to the truth] before others and so that the Messenger may bear witness [to it] before you." And *sura* 3 ("The Family of 'Imran," no. 89, Medinan), hails: "[110][Believers], you are the best community [*khaira umma*] singled out for people: you order what is right, forbid what is wrong, and believe in God. If the People of the Book had also believed, it would have been better for them. For although some of them do believe, most of them are lawbreakers." And ultimately, *sura* 5, "The Feast" (no. 112, Medinan) recognizes multiple different communities, asserting this fact as a deliberate choice of not leaving all humankind as one community (concepts introduced in *sura* 10) and sanctioning the scripture sent to Muhammad (i.e. the Qur'an) as "the truth" (Q 5:48).

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The first lens deployed in this book, then, is one of intra-Asian connections, both in terms of physical unity and in terms of religious belonging. The philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome, as well as the early Arab geographers, thought of the continental and archipelagic expanse that reaches from the Mediterranean Sea to the Pacific Ocean as a space to be traversed and explored, as little was known of it. But by the tenth century, the Arab Muslim Abu Dulaf had traveled from Persia to Bukhara and (apparently) onwards to northwest China; from there, he supposedly returned to eastern Iran through the western coast of the Malay Peninsula and India. He might not actually have traveled as far as Southeast Asia, yet his acquaintances referred to him as a *jawwala*, "globe-trotter," and his itinerary connected places that had been known to Arab, Persian, Indian, and Chinese merchants for centuries.[5] This conception of physical unity was reinforced by the steady flow of peoples,

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goods, and ideas, as intra-Asian movements and exchanges were (and still are) fostered and facilitated by ever-evolving technologies of travel and communication (see especially Chapter 1, but see also Chapters 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8).

By the fifteenth century Islam had established itself across Asia. Islam had followed the movement of Muslim traders and conquerors, along both the continental Silk Road and the maritime trading networks of the Indian Ocean. Under Timur Lang (1336–1405), the Mongol empire favored intra-Muslim trade along the Silk Road for decades; Islam had become the primary referent across Bengal, and northern India was under the rule of the Islamized Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526); Ming China (1368–1644) relied on Muslims for scientific expertise and to assert legitimacy through its maritime expansion; and Islam was now prominent among littoral communities along the trading routes that connected Yemen to South Asia, the eastern ports of the Indo-Malay Archipelago, the Mekong River Delta, and the Fujian town of Quanzhou/Zaytun (Chapter 1).

"Asia" was thus gradually transformed in a cohesive space of Islamized interaction, and Muslims across Asia expressed their identity as members of a historically defined "community of believers" (*umma*). But the emergence of an interconnected "Asia" did not happen in a cultural vacuum: while many traditions flowed across this space (including Buddhism, Christianity, and Shamanism), it ought to be recognized that Islam came to play a crucial role in the imagination of community and belonging.

The dish featured on the cover of this book, for example, brings to life the second theme of the book, which focuses on the influence of Islam as cultures intersected across Asia, beyond the transfer of techniques or materials or wholesale conversion to a new religion. In the center of the dish two peacocks stand beneath a blossoming flower: a classic Chinese trope, but one that could also be suitable for the Muslim taste. On the lip, four Chinese landscape vignettes (one can see the silhouette of a pagoda-like roof) alternate four medallions inscribed in simple, stylized Arabic calligraphy enunciating the Islamic profession of faith (*shahada*): "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is His Prophet." This object brings together an undisputable element of Islamic identity (the *shahada*), while deploying explicitly Chinese iconography, indicating that the two were not in contradiction with each other, but rather the outcome of processes of "transculturation" which retained a strong commitment to Islamic sensibilities.[6]

Objects, then, can fulfill Islamic paradigms of propriety while also incorporating non-Islamic elements. Such forms of negotiation between

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Islamic and non-Islamic cultural elements can be found in the decorative arts, architecture, sciences, literature, and conceptions of power and bureaucracy, but also in elaborations of Islamic law and other religious texts (Chapter 2).

In the early centuries of Islam, then, Asia was transformed in an area in which conceptions of space and flows of peoples and ideas conflated in the emergence of local and foreign Muslim communities, giving life to imaginations of community congruent with a shared commitment to Islam. And despite the fact that "Islam in Asia" as an object of study has been constructed as syncretic and exotic, as a thin veneer on the pre-Islamic Hindu-Buddhist past of the region (see Chapter 9), these conceptions and imaginations that tied the Asian continent together as a Muslim space were also articulated within a commitment to normativistic forms of Islam.

Aspirations and commitment to orthodoxy – whether expressed through adherence to contextualized re-elaborations of "the right path" (Chapter 2) or purification of devotional practices (Chapter 3) – should not be seen as rejections of local identities. This had not been the case when Islam had first taken root in Asia, and it would not be the case in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the late colonial period, during the emergence of independent nation-states, and again in the second half of the twentieth century when post-colonial nation-states failed their promises of development and "progress," Islam became an important element in the push back against established authority, but not at the expense of local priorities. Muslim nation-states emerged as independent entities (rather than as members of a transnational Caliphate, for example) (Chapter 4). Muslim populations made sense of "the nation" on their own terms (Chapter 5), and eventually developed "hyper-national" responses to the failure of post-colonial states, even though these processes of "re-imaginations of piety" had been inspired and stimulated by flourishing transnational networks (Chapter 6).

The third core theme of this book revolves around the contribution of Asia's Muslims to configurations of Islamic ideals of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Mecca and Medina, where Muhammad received the message of Islam, continued to function as physical hubs for the *umma*, but most notably, the intellectual genealogies of some of the most influential scholars there connected them to Bukhara, Delhi, and other places across Asia.

Shaykhs and jurists from Java, Sumatra, and Patani (on the Malay Peninsula) led study circles in Mecca and Medina;[7] the vision of the Arab ʻAbd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) was deeply informed by his studying with the South Asian scholar of *hadith* Muhammad Hayya al-Sindi

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(d. 1750); in the late nineteenth century "the great majority of the students come [to Mecca] from abroad," including Java, Malaya, Malabar, and Dagestan;[8] and the Naqshbandi mystical order (*tariqa*) – one of the most far-reaching, penetrating, and popular spiritual movements calling for a closer alignment of devotional practices with the demands of legal thought – had its roots in Central Asia and its greenest branches in South Asia, before expanding further east (China) and west (Arabia and Turkey) (Chapter 3).

Awareness of Islamic orthopraxy, and concerns over keeping Muslims on "the right path" (the *al-sirat al-mustaqim* of the opening chapter of the Qur'an), continued to be widespread across Asia and to flow back to "the heartlands" of Islam: debates on how to rescue the fate of the Caliphate in the early twentieth century were most active in British India, Tsarist and Soviet Central Asia, and the Dutch East Indies (Chapter 4); Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood leader Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) was deeply influenced by the writings of the South Asian Islamist ideologue Abu A'la Mawdudi (Chapter 5); the Afghan *jihad* against the 1979 Soviet invasion became a symbolic site of resistance for Muslims the world over in the latter part of the twentieth century (Chapter 7); and Southeast Asian reconfigurations of religious authority – whether in the realms of *halal* certification or feminist interpretations of the scriptures – are asserting themselves on the global scene today (Chapter 8).

This book, then, directly challenges the assumption of an Arab-centric paradigm of Islamic authenticity and authority, presenting an alternative narrative that delineates the impact (on Islam) of Muslims who inhabit(ed) the *ma wara' an-nahr*; it discusses how Islam became an integral part of Asia, influencing local conceptions of power as well as the sciences, the arts, and bureaucracy, converting individuals and influencing societies; and it ultimately concludes that the very existence of an intra-Asian space of interaction allowed for multidirectional influences on Islamic practices and understandings at the "center" as well as the "peripheries" of the "Muslim world."

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