

General theories, and general statements, are often reductionist. This is perhaps a natural compromise one has to make in order to rise above the complexity and gain a broader view. The drawback is that the loss of detail could lead to imprecision, or even outright errors in the interpretation. Fact-checking the many claims of the book is not the aim of this review. Rather, it is to bring attention to a book that provokes thought, regardless of whether the reader agrees or disagrees with its ideas.

From the European perspective of this book review's author, these critiques have a familiar ring—stagnation and polarization are major current pain-points in many EU Member States and the EU as a whole. Examples abound: President Macron's unpopular but arguably needed push to reform French labour rules; the UK's Brexit, which was widely influenced by the (perceived) foreigner "freeloaders" who live in the UK and exploit state benefits; even in Germany—the brewing discontent about the generous welfare system is being misused by some (asylum seekers and migrants from poorer EU Member States pointed as the main culprits, naturally). *A General Theory* might not show all angles of the wide debate it engages in, but it speaks frankly about big societal problems and defends clearly its viewpoint on the solutions it proposes.

#### REFERENCE

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#### Islam in China

Matthew S. Erie, *China and Islam: The Prophet, the Party, and Law* (New York/Cambridge University Press, 2016) pp 472. Paperback: \$41.99.

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As an anthropologist-lawyer, Matthew S. Erie, in his book *China and Islam: The Prophet, the Party, and Law*, observes, records, and translates the negotiation and accommodations of three forces—China, Islam, and law. He significantly distinguishes the state law and non-state law by describing ways of how sovereign China has managed Islamic law (*Shari'a*) in organizing chronologically, following the historical arc of Islamic law in China. He brings us through a remarkable ethnographic journey, which provides extensive primary sources based on his fieldwork at Linxia—an important Islamic centre in Gansu Province, also known as “Little Mecca.”

Erie's study brings together for the first time the rich, complicated, and overlapping worlds of Chinese law and Islamic law in Northwest China that moved beyond the stereotypes that often dominate accounts of Islam and China. This book enables us to see these forces in

their complexity, as he was there to carefully investigate, explain, and analyze the life, politics, and law of China's Muslim minority. He follows Hui Chinese clerics, youthful translators on the "New Silk Road," female educators who reform traditional *madrasas*, and party cadres as they reconcile Islamic and socialist laws in the course of the everyday. The Hui Chinese have constructed forms of Islamic education and practice in a long-term historical space shaped by the party-state and by shifting ideas of Islamic orthodoxy. He brings the Hui experience into dialogue with contemporary ethnographic work on Islamic ritual, knowledge, and governance.

In this fascinating account of Chinese Muslim law and its encounters with the state, he demonstrates that the two manage to work together, predominantly through the middle ground of informal mediation and by ignoring sharp edges. Whether in marriage, Islamic banking, or property matters, we see in this unique and highly circumstantial analysis that the absence of state recognition belies an intriguingly complex, well-told story. The contribution of Erie's study is timely, especially when Islamic law has not been central to studies of Islam in China. It often receives no mention at all, despite its import for scholars of other parts of the Muslim world and its undoubted importance to Muslims everywhere. China and Islam bring to life many of the processes and practices that probably produced the histories of Chinese Islam's textual traditions. In the case of the Hui Chinese, Islam is a political, social, cultural, and ideological force that commands loyalty and defines their identity. The combination of all these elements is infused with a sacral meaning that intensifies Islam's impact and inhibits both analysis and public discussion of its content and its role.

With reference to Islam, the current rise in the amount of "Islamophobia" is somewhat striking and hence it is essential to understand the law of contemporary Islamic polemics and learn about the origins and basic doctrines of Islam. Eric's study provides an explanation on the foundations of Islamic law, transformation of Islamic law in the Chinese Empire, and customization of Islamic law. One crucial factor that Erie raises as well is the fear of institutional recognition of some aspect of Islamic law in China. One has to understand that, while Islam's theological doctrines assert its absolute and unchanging "Truth," its believers in China must make that "Truth" meaningful and adapt their faith to the changing circumstances of their daily lives. While Islam's theological doctrines may claim absolute and eternal "Truth," the practice of religion is a collaborative human endeavour—the ultimate form of the collective creation of the Chinese culture and of a civilization based on inspiration from religious beliefs. In the matter of personal behaviour and private law, the Islamic law establishes a very elaborate and detailed set of rules. A Hui Chinese is subject to dietary restrictions (no meat from pigs or from defiled animals and a prohibition of consumption of alcoholic liquors), rules of personal hygiene, rules for prayers and mosque attendance, rules governing fasting, rules of interpersonal conduct, rules for interpersonal conduct, rules for courtship, rules for marriage and responsibilities of family members (men may take up to four wives under certain restrictive conditions), rules governing sexual intercourse, rules of divorce, rights of women, laws of inheritance, and rules governing charitable and Islamic trusts. These aspects of private and personal Islamic law concern the state and become a matter of political concern and controversy because, under Islamic rule, the state has a role in the interpretation and enforcement of these rules. Which rules require public enforcement and which should be left to persuasion and individual commitment can be a matter of dispute. An over-commitment to enforcement of all aspects of private Islamic law can overload the administrative and judicial system with police oversight and law-enforcement

responsibilities. Where Islamic law is relaxed, public responsibility for these personal and private aspects of Islamic duties are left largely to personal commitment and through private legal actions, such as in the matters of marriage, divorce, wills, and inheritance.

On that note, Erie could further indicate that, despite the political differences and cultural diversity found with China, there remained a commonality based on Islamic law. These features of Islamic law created patterns of uniformity across the diversity of peoples and cultures that became part of China. Because Islamic law is supposed to be derived directly from God (Allah), there was an assumption that it should be fixed and eternal. He could discuss that, over time, with the emergence of different juridical schools, greater diversity of interpretations had become apparent. This diversity was attributed to independent interpretations or juristic reasoning (*ijtihad*). In the tenth century, a majority of Muslim jurists, not all however, came to a general consensus that the Islamic law had become fully delineated and that therefore juristic reasoning was neither necessary nor appropriate and would no longer be accepted. This principle made Islamic law much more rigid, relying on strict and literal interpretations of the Quran and previous interpretations of law and doctrine. While this principle of restricted interpretation had significant consequences for the development of Islamic law, in practice, there remained other techniques for the adaptation of Islamic law to diverse cultures and political systems for the Hui Chinese, at least.

Erie clearly examines the intersection of Islamic revival and an assertive China, seeking to unsettle perceptions of extremist Islam and authoritarian China and to question the assumption that Islamic law is incompatible with state law. As a practical matter, the Quran proved to be an incomplete and enigmatic source for a legal, social, and economic system. The Quran reads more like poetry than law and, in content, it tends to take the form of a sermon, with powerful and repeated arguments to reinforce persuasion, but often without legal precision. Not all parts of the Quran appear to be entirely consistent. To complicate matters further, some verses of the Quran abrogated or modified earlier verses and, when the Quran was compiled after the Prophet's death, both "abrogating" and "abrogated" verses were included in the final text.

Given the sensitivity of Islamic subjects in China, related to perceived or claimed separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism in Xinjiang, Erie deserves praise for his decade of persistent navigation of the constraints and obstacles of the PRC. Beyond the already impressive task of conducting the first ethnographic study of Muslim practice of Islamic law in contemporary China, Erie has produced a volume of considerable subtlety and breadth, contributing both general claims and detailed ethnography, answering many questions, and successfully setting a baseline for further research. In short, his study examines the interaction of politics, society, culture, and law, and will appeal to researchers, scholars, students, and readers from the perspectives of social and political studies, law and society, education, sociocultural studies, Asian studies, comparative legal studies, and Islamic studies. This fascinating book is a must-read for comparative legal scholars and legal anthropologists alike, illuminating paradoxes and struggles in the operation of religious law under reform-era Chinese socialism.

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