Book Reviews


A unified yet ethnically diverse Muslim community that makes up just about 3 percent of the total population in Hong Kong has collectively maintained a “unique Islamic frontier” in the Far East, which subsequently facilitates the city’s transformation into a new trade broker between the Middle East and China, further strengthening its importance as the link between the West and the East. This compelling argument laid out in Wai-Yip Ho’s Islam and China’s Hong Kong: Ethnic Identity, Muslim Networks, and the New Silk Road is no less than a revelation to readers who are unfamiliar with the historical and contemporary Islamic and Muslim constituencies in the Chinese-speaking world. Ho’s decade-long research combining meticulously collected ethnographic data and historiographical sources makes a significant contribution to scholarship on Islam and Muslims in the Chinese context and on the social, cultural, and political changes in postcolonial Hong Kong. In the midst of detailed ethnographic narratives, Ho skillfully addresses larger topics such as postcolonial development, global political economy, nationalism, religious freedom, and the global “war on terror.” His insightful analysis of the unique status of Hong Kong on the new Silk Road will inspire more studies on the growing Muslim presence in Hong Kong.

Prior to this book, Ho published a number of articles on Islam and Muslims in Hong Kong, addressing the situation of Muslims following the end of British colonial rule, the colonial and postcolonial experiences of Muslim entrepreneurs, the collective behavior of the community in response to the Danish Cartoon controversy, and multicultural education in Hong Kong. These articles were revised and incorporated into the present book. To complete the book, Ho added an extended preface, an introduction, and three additional chapters. Some chapters may seem to be disconnected from the rest of the book, yet
Islam and China’s Hong Kong should not be dismissed as a collection of essays. The preface, introduction, and conclusion successfully bind the otherwise disparate topics together into a single story and make it easy for readers to navigate the impressive amount of ethnographic data.

In the introduction, Ho paints a broad picture of a unified Muslim community with a tripartite heritage. Then, in the two chapters of part 1, he elaborates on the challenges Muslims face as an ethnic and religious minority in Hong Kong, especially after Hong Kong’s transition from a British colony to a Special Administrative Region under China’s “one nation, two systems” policy. For Ho, although Muslims are a small minority in Hong Kong, they must have a voice in the dialogue on constructing multiculturalism in this global city in the Far East. In particular, his detailed interviews with South Asian Muslim migrants suggest new directions for future studies of South Asian diaspora.

In part 2, the author shifts his attention to the role of digital media in mobilizing Muslims toward greater participation in Hong Kong’s public square. While juxtaposing the “invisible” Muslims in mainland China and the active Muslim community in Hong Kong, Ho argues that the latter’s sense of unity is reinforced through participation in public protests against Islamophobia. Hong Kong’s laissez-faire attitude toward religious communities and activities fosters a vibrant virtual Chinese Muslim community, which in turn helps to preserve and revive Chinese Islam. Hong Kong thus demonstrates its great potential to become the intermediary between China and the Islamic world.

Finally, in part 3 Ho points to two specific areas where Hong Kong has already demonstrated its ability to cultivate a cosmopolitan attitude toward diverse cultures and traditions, and therefore can play an active role in repairing the scarred relationship between Islam and the West. He traces the root causes of Islamophobia to the lack of an alternative framework for teaching Islam in the post-9/11 era. Drawing on personal observations and his experience of teaching Islam in Hong Kong, Ho proposes a pedagogical reform that advocates recognition of the multiethnic and multicultural nature of Chinese society.

The idea that Hong Kong is en route to become a new hub of Islamic finance may be far-fetched. Yet, Ho is convinced that Hong Kong is truly a place where the East meets the West. The city harbors both Western capitalism and Eastern philosophy. It is also willing to position itself as the middleman yet again on the new Silk Road connecting East and Southeast Asia with the Middle East. Hong Kong’s mature financial infrastructure prepares the city to compete in the evolving territory of Islamic finance.

In the concluding chapter, Ho finds inspiration in the spiritual and mercantile legacy of Prophet Muhammad and offers his prescription for a better