



(1) Breaking fast during Ramadan at the Niujie Mosque in Beijing. (2) A Muslim congregation at the Great Mosque of Xian, one of the oldest, largest and best-preserved Islamic mosques in China. (3) Hui Muslim female imam Yonghua Zheng sitting in front of worshippers as she prepares to lead prayers at the women's only Qingzhenshang Mosque in Sangpo, Henan Province, China.

The cultural heritage of China's Muslim community

HARIATI AZIZAN

In her bright head scarves and long, flowy dresses, Yonghua Zheng is a recognisable figure around Sangpo in Henan province, central China. This is because Zheng is an imam – or Ahong – of an all-women mosque in the hamlet.

More amazingly, Zheng is not alone in the province; becoming a female Ahong is a 400-year-old custom in the province where Islam has taken root for over 1,000 years. In the Muslim quarter of Sangpo, there are said to be six women-only mosques while in nearby town Kaifeng, there are reportedly 16.

This is one of the stories about Islam in China being eclipsed by the world's attention on the Uighur Muslims' conflict in Xinjiang, says writer and publisher PK Koya.

With a new pictorial book he edited, simply titled *Islam in China*, the Islamic book publisher, who is popularly known as Haji Koya in the local publishing circle, hopes to shed light on the long history of

According to Dr Maria Jaschok, director of the International Gender Studies Center at Oxford University, who has studied the phenomenon for over two decades, these female mosques serve as community centres for women while the female imams have the same responsibilities as their male counterparts, except for officiating weddings and funerals.

In many parts of the Muslim world, Haji Koya points out, the issue of female imams is still a source of controversy, if not novelty – one of the most well-known women's mosques outside China, which is in the United States, was only built in 2015.

"Muslims in China are the first ones to introduce a women-only mosque with a woman imam," he notes.

This long historical tradition, is specifically unique to the Hui Muslim community, the largest Muslim ethnic minority group, and the third largest

and Persian merchants through the Silk Routes. Their appearance, language, and other cultural characteristics are hence distinctly Chinese.

This can also be seen in the architecture of their older mosques such as the Niujie Mosque in Beijing and the Great Mosque of Xi'an which boast a brilliant blend of Islamic and Chinese designs.

According to scholars, Muslims in China have enjoyed relative religious freedom over the years, even in the first few years after the founding of the communist state in 1949. It was only during the chaotic early years of the Cultural Revolution that Muslims were prohibited from openly expressing their religious belief.

After the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, the Chinese government adopted more relaxed policies towards Muslim communities.

But tensions have been growing since

avoided politics in the book – to present a view beyond the geopolitical haze, he stresses.

"We looked only at the history, spread and culture of Islam in the country."

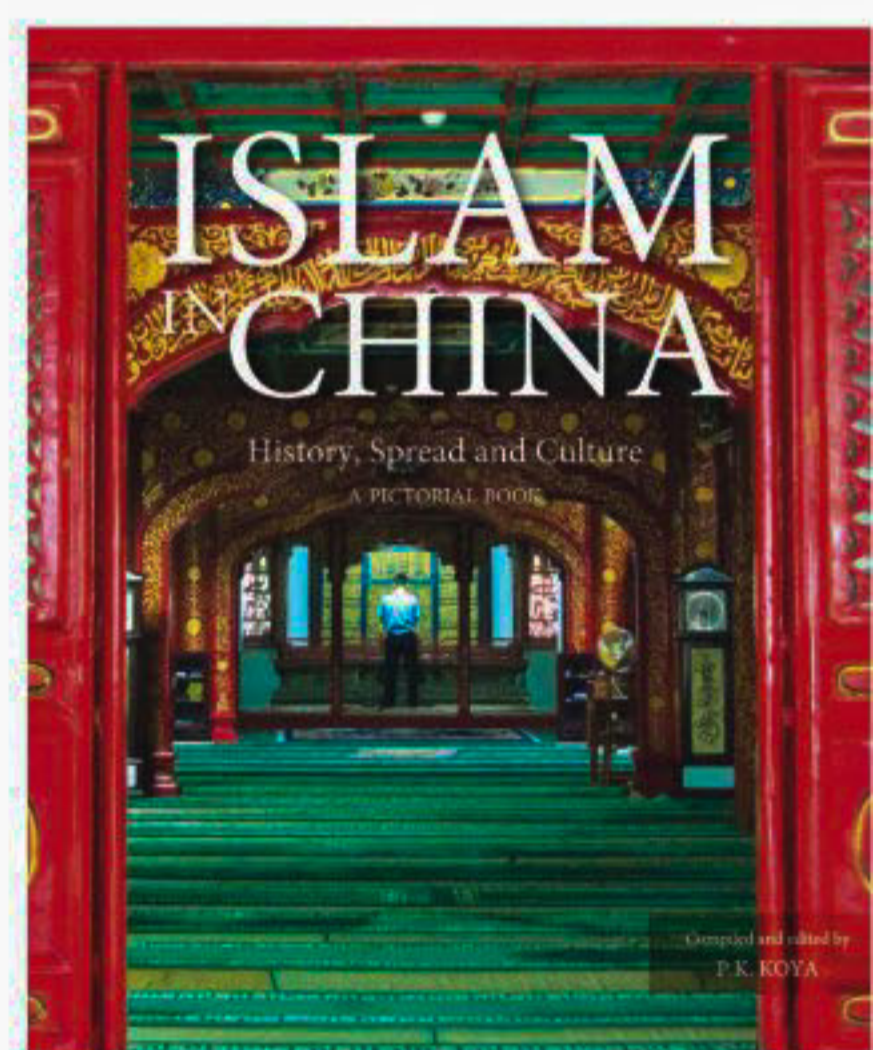
He adds, what many may not also realise is that Muslims were prominent and influential in the government and kingdom of China, starting from the Yuan dynasty through the Ming dynasty.

"The Chinese Muslims are loyal, they are quite proud to be Chinese. And at the same time, they're quite proud to be Muslim," says Haji Koya.

The book took two years to complete since it was first conceived, he tells.

"There are few books that bring together the whole picture of Islam in China, so that's why we decided to collect and compile the different articles, photos and documents to illustrate it."

Architecture is only one area explored in the pictorial book to trace the historical ancestry of Islam in China.



Islam in China, compiled by P.K. Koya, offers a glimpse of the generational shifts and continuities of Islam in the region.

(Chinese name Mi Guang Jiang) has given the Chinese-Muslim calligraphy a global boost with his unique style. He even has a permanent piece in the British Museum called "The 99 Beautiful Names Of God".

As he describes it, the Sini script is not constrained to the rules of Arabic calligraphy, thus allowing the calligrapher more freedom of expression.

"Imagine Arabic calligraphy shaped into a Chinese character, or Chinese characters shaped into Arabic Quranic verses, and you will get some idea of the intricacy and the brilliance of the Sini calligraphic style," he says.

For Haji Koya, this is another example of cultural osmosis that Malaysia can "find affinity" with.

China's experience in the spread and adaptation of Islamic cultural civilisation reflects our experience in South-East Asia in many ways, he says, "where diverse religious faiths have intermingled for centuries as we interact and assimilate each other's socio-cultural practices and heritage."

This is what he hopes people will take from the book – that Islam is not a monolithic religion and can co-exist peacefully and even blend harmoniously with others.

"I wanted to highlight with this book that there are many different groups of Muslims in the world. It's a religion all over the world with diverse cultures, and not a monopoly of the Malays or Arabs or Iranians.

"And crucially, by interacting with Islam or being a Muslim, it does not mean that you will lose your culture and heritage... By being Muslim, you are not going to lose your 'Chineseness', look at the Muslims in China, they are still part of China, the Chinese are still Chinese," he says.

Ironically, this seems to be something that even contemporary China might need to be reminded of, he concedes.

Recently, it was reported that authorities in Beijing ordered for halal restaurants and food stalls to remove Arabic script and symbols associated with Islam from their signs, alleged to be part of an expanding national effort to "Sinicize" its Muslim population.

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The Huasi Mosque was built during the Ming Dynasty. The mausoleum of Ma Laichi, a Chinese Sufi master, who brought the Khufiyya movement to China, lies next to it.



Huaisheng Mosque in Canton is one of the oldest mosques in the world. It was originally built over 1,300 years ago.

the religion across vast China, as well as its rich, diverse legacy.

"We want to introduce Malaysians to the history of Islam in China and show that there are numerous Muslim communities in the world's most populous country – and there are strong Muslims there," he says.

Writings by experts in the field – including Yusuf Liu Baojin, Alexander Wain, John Lawton and Aaliyah Green – are framed by a trove of photos, charts and maps to paint the fascinating landscape created by the interaction and intersection of these two great civilisations.

As Haji Koya puts it, Islam has not only peacefully co-existed within Chinese society for over 1,400 years but in many parts of the country, its practice has also interwoven into the mainstream culture and even thrived with distinctive Chinese characteristics.

The female imams and women-only mosques are merely starting points, he says.

ethnic group, in China.

The Muslim population in China can be divided into 10 ethnic minority groups (out of 55), making up some 22 million people or 1.6 percent of its total population.

These ethnic communities practise various Muslim schools of thought from Sunni to Shia, Sufi and Chinese-Islamic teachings such as Xidaotang and Yihewani. While many live in the rugged mountains and desert basins of the northwest (Xinjiang, Ningxia, Gansu and Qinghai provinces), the Hui live in compact communities scattered throughout China – with one of the largest enclaves in Beijing.

And while most of the Muslim minority groups are descendants of the Turkic or Central Asian peoples, the Hui are descendants of Chinese Muslim converts or of Chinese intermarriages with Muslim immigrants – Arab warriors who came to China to help various emperors fight their enemies or Arab

the 9/11 attacks in the United States, escalating in 2009 with ethnic riots between the Uighurs and Han Chinese in Xinjiang. In the past year, these tensions have heightened according to news reports.

Haji Koya believes that is a political issue, not religious or cultural.

"The Uighurs in the Xinjiang province, which borders other Muslim countries, want their own separate state like Aceh, Kashmir and Punjab.

"But you also have to see it from the Chinese government point of view. They own the border and their security is important. They want to keep China as one country."

He also thinks the reports, to some extent, are a backlash towards China's meteoric rise in the world.

"China's now coming up and may take over America in a few years time. So, all of a sudden the West is going on and on about how China is oppressing the Muslims." This is why he deliberately

Other areas looked at are the Chinese-Muslim cultural heritage in food, arts and craft, literature and traditional medicine. Then there are famous Chinese Muslims including ancient astronomer Ma Yize, architect Amir al-Din and Admiral Zheng He.

The tome is also peppered with various quirky "Islamic relics" of China: a Muslim wushu grandmaster dubbed the Shaolin Sheikh and the Han Kitab, which contains a collection of Chinese-language Islamic texts.

One point of interest is the Sini script, which is an "intermingling of Chinese artisan craftsmanship and Islamic design" – believed to have been created at the end of the Yuan dynasty (circa 1368).

It is said that in the 17th and 18th centuries, many pieces inscribed with Sini, crafted by the Chinese, were commissioned from the Middle East.

Today, a master calligrapher from the Shandong province, Haji Noor Deen