# 1 Introduction

## Sino-Muslims and Their Heritage Literacy

Both the Islamic and Chinese civilisations might appear, to the casual onlooker, to be very distinct and with their own histories and propensities to grow and assimilate other peoples. What happens, though, when elements of both cultures converge over an extended period in a single location? And what kinds of semiotic phenomena might one discover in such a context? When it comes to harmonising their faith within an historically Confucianist and Taoist milieu, as well as more recent Sino-nationalist and even Sino-Marxist sensibilities, the non-Turkic and largely Sinophone Muslims[1] of China have, for many, come to demonstrate a process by which a community can adapt and integrate elements of very different cultural identities in their everyday practice with language and materiality.

In this Element, I examine how this kind of plurality is embodied in the semiotic practices of Sino-Muslim heritage literacy. The data I draw on are part of a corpus of images, interview transcripts, and literacy artefacts amassed as part of the 'Literacy and Harmony' project funded by the Leverhulme Trust and conducted with a team of researchers across China. It incorporates images from the linguistic landscape of Sino-Muslim life, including through the scriptural art of Sino-Islamic calligraphy[2] (or 'Sini Calligraphy'), food heritage practices (including restaurant signs and 'qingzhen'[3] food packaging), and narrative-focussed interviews with Sino-Muslims about heritage literacy in their lifespan and everyday lives. I examine how Islamo-Arabic textual qualities and material signifiers are integrated in these data as part of heritage praxis, and argue that this can add much to an understanding of Sino-Muslim heritage literacy and its expressive potential as a long-standing and ongoing confluence of cultures (namely Chinese and Islamic). I attempt to understand how both textual and visual signs of 'Muslimness' are displayed and manipulated in both covert and overt means to enter into a complex constitutive relation with other categories of social meaning, and how, as materiality, they construct ways to (re-)contour public spaces for Chinese Muslims, configure identity work in the face of censorship of religious expression, and

[1] Following Lipman (1997) I will continually refer to China's non-Turkic Sinophone Muslims as 'Sino-Muslims', though I will occasionally use the PRC minzu ethnonym 'Hui' when highlighting post-1950 contexts (see section titled 'A History of Vernacularisation' for a more detailed discussion). Prior to 1950, the term 'Huihui' was generally used to refer to all Muslims in China, and, during the Yuan and Ming dynasties, also used to refer to Persian Christians and Jews.

[2] Sometimes referred to as zhōngguó ālābó wén shūfǎ (中国阿拉伯文书法) or 'Sini Calligraphy'.

[3] This term relates to food that is not just 'halal' but that which is characteristically tied to Sino-Muslim heritage and ethics (see Section 3), and sometimes even colloquially referred to as 'Muslim food'.

provide an access point into better understanding everyday heritage literacy adaptation within China and beyond its shores.

The research is situated within the tradition of literacy studies, which conceptualises literacy primarily as a socially situated semiotic practice (Street 1984; Gee 2008). This necessitates a research process which foregrounds an understanding of the multiple dimensions that heritage literacy plays in the lives of Sino-Muslims, their religio-cultural history, and material culture. However, in a study such as this I must also recognise the complementary domains and sub-literatures with which I must converse in order to establish theoretical foundations. Given the multifaceted nature of ethnic heritage and religion in China, in the following subsections I orient the reader to the particularities of the Sino-Muslim context and history. Much of this research occurs within the fields of Hui Studies[4] (回族研究; huízú yánjiū), which exists under Sinology in many parts of the world, Ethnology (民族学; mínzú xué) within China, and also at the margins of the field of Islamic Studies.

This is then followed by a brief discussion about how I have conceptualised heritage literacy within the study, my deployment of theoretical tools from work in linguistic anthropology, and how this is complemented with ideas around the notion of *semiotic assemblage* (Pennycook 2018). That is to say, while this is a study of literacy, the kinds of practices I try to understand are accomplished through a coalescence of semiotic items rather than just language and texts that occur in public and, as shown in the latter part of the Element, within liminal spaces. These items in various ways *assemble* Muslimness, but in ways that must remain sensitive to the fluid negotiations of meaning-making across modes such as images, cuisine, attire, spatial distribution, artefacts, history, among other things, rather than at the level of individual linguistic actors.

## A History of Vernacularisation

To understand the semiotics of Sino-Muslim heritage as it exists today requires an understanding of the community's history and how heritage practices have been shaped over several centuries of cultural production, much of which is impacted by conflict, assimilation, and mobility. Sino-Muslim history and heritage is marked by its continual indigenising impulse and, in Petersen's (2018) terms, forms of *vernacularisation*.[5] Building on arguments made by

[4] Hui Studies is an inter-disciplinary field that encompasses sociology, anthropology, and religious studies, and not solely focused on historical or ethnic studies. See Journal of Hui Muslim Minority Studies: https://oversea.cnki.net/knavi/JournalDetail?pcode=CJFD&pykm=HZYJ.

[5] One could argue that all forms of Muslim heritage are marked by an indigenising impulse, sustained by Islamic Law's doctrine of '*urf*, or the incorporation of local customs and norms into the framework of Sacred Law, though acknowledgement of this theological aspect is largely

Flueckiger in her book on gender and vernacular Islam in South Asia, Petersen argues that 'vernacularization points to modes of identification, interpretation, and dialogue that simultaneously advocate local frameworks while advancing universal ideals'. (Petersen 2018, p. 29)

For Sino-Muslims, how semiotic practice occurs today is tied to agentive forms of continual heritage adaptation through political climates in China's history which have not always been favourable to the community. Not only have Sino-Muslims had to respond to historical change and cultural norms imposed upon them, but their heritage practices are also far removed from what many might perceive as Islam's geographical and civilisational centres[6] and, therefore, susceptible to being deemed as syncretic or derivative. This subsection is a brief overview of some of the historical factors that have caused Sino-Muslim semiotic practices – occurring in and through a wider framing of heritage literacy – to become vernacularised as forms of self-fashioning and performative production shaped and expressed over changing circumstances. This is by no means a detailed historical outline of Sino-Muslim literary history. For such reviews one should consult the works of Petersen (2018), Leslie et al. (2006), and Lipman (1997), among others.

The earliest documentary evidence of Muslim interaction with the Chinese comes during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). In *The Old Book of Tang* it is recorded that in 651 a delegation of people from the nascent Arabian empire visited the Tang Court (Bai and Yang 2002). According to the renowned Sino-Muslim historian Bai Shouyi (in Bai and Yang 2002, p. 197), this visit marked the beginning of sustained diplomatic exchanges. As diplomatic and trade relationships solidified with further visits at the behest of various caliphs so too did Muslim social, religious, military, and linguistic connections with China (Yang 1981, pp. 53–4). Notably, Caliph al-Mansur promised a huge battalion of soldiers to support the Tang forces to re-capture the Tang Empire's twin capitals of Chang'an (now named Xi'an) and Luoyang. After the war, the soldiers remained at the behest of the Tang emperor, and inter-married and settled within the local communities. The descendants of these Arab warriors are thought to be the ancestors of a substantial demographic of Sino-Muslims in China's Northwest (Gladney 1998).

absent in much Western anthropological and historical work on Sino-Muslims. For more details see Abd-Allah's (2006) essay *Islam and the Cultural Imperative* and Murad's (2020) book *Travelling Home*.

[6] A salient example is within Vincent Monteil's book *Aux cinq couleurs de l'islam* (The Five Colors of Islam), in which he considers five Islamic civilisational centres, manifested in Turkey, Africa, the Malay Archipelago, Arabia, and the Indo-Persian regions. Despite being one of the oldest continuous Islamic cultures with roots stretching as far back as the first century of the Islamic period, Monteil makes no mention of a Sino-Islamic or East Asian Islamic culture.

Aside from diplomatic envoys and military personnel, Muslim merchants from Central Asia and Arabia also began to play an important role in China's commercial life, particularly along the 'Silk Road'[7] and at port cities on the country's southern coast (Lipman 1997). These foreign Muslim traders brought spices and cuisine, ivory, jewellery, and medicines from their home countries, as well as exported Chinese silk, tea, and porcelain (Yang 1981). They contributed significantly to the empire's tax revenues and benefitted from a generally friendly foreign policy during the Tang and Song dynasties. As with the newly settled Muslim soldiers, they were able to marry, have property, worship, and communicate in their native languages though within confined foreign quarters. They thus played an important role in the transmission of Islamic culture and learning to China, bringing Perso-Arabic script, infusing art and calligraphy with their own motifs, influencing architecture and attire, and planting the seeds of a new literate citizenry.

Over generations these communities became more and more assimilated into Chinese society with vernacularised systems of literacy emerging through religious education and the work of traders. For example, an orthographic exchange in form of 'xiaojing' (小经) emerged, a method of transliterating the Chinese language using Arabic script. This was an 'Arabized form of Chinese characters' or 'Pinyin with Arabic' (Qurratulain and Zunnorain 2015, p. 54) which is said to have been formed as Arab traders penned the names of places and people in Arabic, which later developed into a system used for purposes of community correspondence and religious learning. As settlement led to the development of an active literate Muslim culture, xiaojing became a method for students to take notes as mosque teachers elaborated upon Arabic and Persian literature in religious education (Qurratulain and Zunnorain 2015). Sino-Muslim literati were thus able to develop a linguistically flexible system of mosque education called 'scripture hall education' (经堂教育; jīng táng jiàoyù), which consisted of an Islamic curriculum of Arabic, Persian, and Chinese texts to teach Islamic religious subjects to Sino-Muslims who were exclusively Sinophone.

The Mongol invasions and subsequent Yuan dynasty rule (1271–1368) jettisoned Muslim soldiers and literati from the periphery and into an administrative class in Chinese society, which in turn resulted in their spread across the country. During this period, and into the subsequent Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Islamic calligraphy and Perso-Arabic inscription began to appear upon the iconic blue and white porcelain of the imperial court (Frankel 2018).

[7] A trans-Eurasian network of trade routes connecting East Asia to Central Asia, India, Southwest Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, though imagined quite differently by the West, Middle East, and China.

Craftsmen sometimes even imitated Islamic religious formulae for fashionable intent, and in ways that no longer yielded any meaning (Schimmel 1984). During the Yuan and very early Ming periods Muslim literati, communities, and religious activities were highly visible in China. Thus, scripture hall education and its resultant literature, as well as the teachers who produced and taught it, are valuable resources in understanding the origins of contemporary heritage literacy practices and for how intellectual networks and literary exchanges occurred in Sino-Muslim communities.

Under the later Ming dynasty, the status of Sino-Muslims began to change radically through imperial edicts which prohibited their social and cultural exclusivity. This resulted in their assimilation into wider Chinese society and culture, including increased adoption of Chinese surnames. By this time, Arabic and Persian had gradually and increasingly faded as languages of everyday spoken and written usage. Chinese was used to translate Islamic texts and to assist in teaching Arabic in Persian, often via transliteration using Chinese characters to approximate Arabic and Persian pronunciations (the inverse of xiaojing), with variance of characters used depending on local dialects and accents.

Further assimilation followed under the Qing dynasty (1636–1912). The Manchu rulers of Qing also preferred Confucian literati over their Muslim counterparts, and Sino-Muslim scholarship overall undertook a more assimilationist turn. This paved the way for the natively Chinese canon of Islamic literature known as the 'Han Kitab',[8] of which the publication of Liu Zhi's 1710 work on the 'Laws and Rites of Islam' (天方典礼; Tianfang Dianli) is considered to be a pivotal moment (Ben-Dor Benite 2005). In Tianfang Dianli, Liu Zhi outlines Islamic Law through a Neo-Confucian language of description. According to Petersen (2018), Sino-Muslim intellectual elites of the late Ming and early Qing dynasties, such as Liu Zhi, were driven to overcome the Sino-Muslim social and intellectual isolation of past generations and develop systems for combining their Islamic and Chinese heritages through the production of religious literature. Petersen goes on to state that 'It was through the inclusion of Chinese as a discursive Islamic language and the development of an official system to spread localized Islamic knowledge that the *Han Kitab* literature began to take shape'. (Petersen 2018, p. 34)

It is not the purpose of this Element to look closely at the Han Kitab corpus, though it is essential in understanding how a contemporary semiotics of Muslimness can take shape upon its shoulders and lingual power. The Han

[8] A bilingual coinage of the Chinese word 'Han', referring to Chinese, along with the Arabic word 'kitab' which means 'book', to together constitute a literary genre of Islamic texts in the Chinese language.

Kitab established new horizons of authority in the development of Sino-Muslim heritage, and religious language used throughout the corpus is prevalent today in everyday heritage literacy practices.

As the Republic of China was created (1911–1949), Sino-Muslims, or the 'Hui', were accorded equal recognition as one of China's officially recognised four non-Han ethnic groups.[9] This allowed their socio-economic and cultural position to change and strengthen somewhat, leading to links with Muslim communities outside of China, and the resurgence of their literate culture.

After the Communist Party's victory in 1949, religion was no longer considered a criterion of social identification for China's Muslims. Instead, the new administration assigned fifty-five minority ethnic (少数民族; shǎoshù mínzú) identities upon all non-Han Chinese and promoted its new minzu paradigm through various means, including social incentives (Mullaney 2011). An ethno-religious identity was thus assumed for Sino-Muslims on account of historical ancestral commitment to Islam (Frankel 2021), resulting in religious identity and heritage being considered coterminous with ethnic group (minzu) identity. In particular, for those ethnic groups that identified themselves as 'Muslim' and/or who have a purported religio-cultural association with Islam. While theology was eschewed as an identity marker, a new pan-Hui identity was allowed to emerge within China for those who considered Mandarin (and/or their local *hanyu* dialect) as their primary language. Building on arguments from Gladney (2004), Bhatt and Wang (2023) outline:

> Among China's Muslim *minzu* were some communities who became identified through what was deemed their own language, and from which their PRC designated ethnonym was subsequently derived. These communities include the Uighur, Kzakh, and Tajik . . . The label *Hui*, therefore, became legitimated for those who were perhaps the most elusive to define . . . As Sinophone Muslims, or Sino-Muslims, they could not be identified by region or a separate language. (Bhatt and Wang 2023, p. 79)

The new Communist administration, initially, brought some favourable improvements for Sino-Muslims, including religious freedom guaranteed by law, and mosques being allowed to continue operating. Regional autonomy was even granted in some areas, most significantly the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. Ultimately, however, the regime, like its predecessors, found itself unable to tolerate what it saw as the self-regulating tendencies of the Hui minority, and so it pursued

[9] The *zhonghua minzu* policy was established during the early twentieth century to include Han people (the majority ethnic group) alongside four major non-Han ethnic groups: the Manchus, the Mongols, the Hui (ethnic groups of Islamic faith), and the Tibetans, under the notion of a republic of Five Peoples of China (五族共和; wǔzú gònghé) advocated by Sun Yat-sen and the Chinese Nationalist Party (see Gladney 2004, p. 15).

policies to stifle Hui cultural development, shutting down religious schools and Sufi orders, and imprisoning religious leaders in 're-education' camps. As eventually all religious activities were outlawed and institutions were disbanded during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), things only became worse. The assault upon Chinese Islam's material and literate culture was severe, and the religion overall had to respond by going underground (Lipman 1997; Frankel 2021).

The government softened its stance on religion after the Cultural Revolution. Today, while Sino-Muslims experience a form of religious freedom (i.e. of belief), this remains closely monitored and religious expression in public realms is rigorously censored and regulated. The liberalisation of economic policies has paved the way for Sino-Muslims to develop their own forms of 'ethnic entrepreneurialism' by leveraging their Muslim identity as a form of 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu 1986). Urban enclaves such as Muslim Street in Xi'an, the Chengdong District of Xining, and Litong in Wuzhong are awash with heritage-related businesses including food vendors selling 'Muslim food' (see Section 3). These Sino-Muslim areas have contributed to the cultural and economic expansion of Sino-Muslim cuisine and national brands which, according to Chinese anthropologist and sociologist Fei Xiaotong, as cited by Gladney (2004), is reminiscent of the community's origins who nurtured their skills of business and enterprise for centuries along the ancient Silk Road.

While Sino-Muslim commercial place-making (see Section 3) and consumption patterns seem to flourish, other heritage-related domains such as religious education can be subject to different sets of conditions. This contradictory nature of Chinese–Muslim hybridity – or as I prefer to call it herein, *simultaneity* – defines how their heritage literacy practices have emerged historically and where, and how, they manifest today. China's Sino-Muslims thus present a complex entry point into understanding the intricacies of identity and how a semiotics of religion can manifest in the face of historical turbulence and censorship on religious expression. Much has been written about the Hui as a Sino-Muslim minority in China and their cultural and literary history (some of which is referenced earlier). How Muslimness is encoded within the semiotic features of their unique heritage literacy is an important line of inquiry which adds to the body of work.

## Islam and Chinese Publics Today

How the religious heritage of Sino-Muslims is manifested in public has become a major political issue in China in the years since the imperative to 'sinicise'[10]

[10] 'Sinicisation' is the official Chinese English translation of the term 'zhōngguó huà' (中国化).

religion was announced in May 2015, and then formally inserted as nationwide policy in April 2016 (Madsen 2020). This meant that all parts of Chinese culture (including religion, academia, and the arts) must align with the Chinese characteristics of a socialist society. A particular component of the policy to sinicise religion has been surrounding the design of mosques, public displays of religious signage (which, for Sino-Muslims, are sometimes Perso-Arabic in format), and bans on prayer inscription on Muslim houses in some areas (Gan 2018; Ridgeon 2020).

Pressure imposed on Sino-Muslim communities to conform to the requirements of the state, particularly for those located in the outer provinces of Yunnan, Ningxia, and Qinghai, is not at the same level as that which has been exerted on Uighur communities in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. Nevertheless, all Muslim communities in China have had to constantly adapt to evolving forms of sinicisation in public spheres, as well as evolving digital infrastructures of censorship and surveillance in more private spheres (Ho 2018; Wang 2022). This policy has, of course, impacted how heritage manifests in public spaces where long-standing practices have come into direct conflict with state-enforced measures to sinicise religion. It is thus an important question to investigate how Sino-Muslims adapt and attempt to maintain their day-to-day heritage practices and how a semiotics of Muslimness continues to manifest in such a climate.

## Theoretical Orientations

The study of how language manifests in public spaces and through material culture, and how it is a window into a community's ethnolinguistic vitality, is largely attributable to theoretical and methodological approaches developed in the work on linguistic landscaping. The early work of Landry and Bourhis (1997) drew attention to the signage in particular locales. Later work (see Shohamy and Gorter 2009; Shohamy et al. 2010) began to incorporate material objects and sounds, in addition to the collection of locally based signage, to construct an understanding of how public spaces are linguistically, and thereby symbolically, constructed.

Studies in linguistic anthropology in different contexts have further shown that religiosity can be expressed through multiple manifestations that often shift over time, place, and across linguistic systems (e.g. Shandler 2006; Ahmad 2011; Avni 2014). Work on religious linguistic landscapes has shown that members of a religious community can utilise a script normally used for a different language, such as Urdu written in Devanagari rather than its usual Perso-Arabic script (see Ahmad 2011). Group members can also engage in

'bivalency', the deployment of linguistic elements that belong within two named languages at the same time (see Benor 2020). In each case these are facets of 'translingual practice' (Canagarajah 2013), where group members will strategically navigate use of multiple languages and codes as one complete repertoire. *Heritage literacy*, as I attempt to define it, must therefore be seen as a linguistically dynamic social practice rather than based on a static linguistic system.

In the field of literacy studies (Heath 1983; Street 1984; Barton 2007; Gee 2008), which has links to linguistic anthropology (Gumperz and Hymes 1972) and linguistic ethnography (Tusting 2013), literacy is conceptualised as embedded within social and cultural activity. Important early work in the field, as the analytic paradigm evolved, focussed heavily on the literacy practices within particular religious communities. For example, studies such as Scribner and Cole's (1981) on the literacy practices of the Vai in Liberia, and Street's (1984) fieldwork in Iran both investigated how Quranic literacy is transmitted in various social and cultural contexts alongside other literacies prevalent in the lives of group members. Further studies have also shown how religious literacies can be used to socialise group members into moral value systems (e.g. Baquedano-López 2016), mediate boundaries between, for example, the mosque, school, and the home (e.g. Sarroub 2002), and be differentiated according to language (Martin-Jones and Jones 2000).

I attempt to build on this scholarship, but frame my sphere of concern as heritage literacy, which I consider to encompass, in Sino-Muslim contexts, as 'goal-directed practices of literacy in which heritage and religion have a role' (Bhatt and Wang 2023, p. 85). This allows me a wide scope of practice which can encompass not just religious activities – rooted in heritage knowledge – but also informal and mundane practices of heritage literacy which may be outside the purview of religious institutions, formal education, and state-defined minzu parameters. In a Chinese context, these kinds of heritage practices can be described as occurring within a 'minjian' (民间) or 'among-the-people' sphere of activity. According to Erie (2016) in his extensive study of Sino-Muslims in Linxia in Northwest China, minjian can be considered a middle ground between the Party-State and the Hui community. Here, heritage as cultural material is conventionalised and shoehorned into an 'ideal' (and sometimes policed) Sino-Muslim identity. According to Veg (2019), however, minjian also includes organic and 'grassroots' values, practices, and behaviours which may be neither imposed nor ritualistic. It is here where Sino-Muslims will engage in divergent practices as part of heritage, and invoke personae and semiotic ideologies that are more hybrid than official spaces (be they political or religious) might permit. I thus define the scope of my interest in the heritage literacy of China's

Sino-Muslims as encompassing both individual affective qualities and the politics of representation and difference. This perspective also aligns with a reframing of heritage as presented in the work of Harrison (2013).

Additionally, knowledge that is conveyed and bequeathed via practices of heritage literacy will integrate oral, written, and other (e.g. visual) modes (Rumsey 2010; Bhatt and Wang 2023). It is thus based on embodied semiotic practices, tied to much more than text, and can encompass human performance, history, identity, and place-making. Investigating and theorising heritage literacy and its multi-semiotic reality must therefore be 'from the ground up', and at the level of *everyday practice*.

It is at this level of the *everyday* through which individuals present themselves (Goffman 1959), and 'give off' (Goffman 1959, p. 4) impressions of their identity through various kinds of semiotic work. What becomes important, therefore, in a study such as this is the agency and awareness of Sino-Muslims to create, interpret, emplace, and/or valorise signs that are constitutive of heritage. The notion of 'semiotic ideology' thus lies at the heart of this research, and is defined by anthropologist Webb Keane as 'people's underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions signs do or do not serve, and what consequences they might or might not produce' (Keane 2018, p. 65). A semiotic ideology is a system of meanings, norms, and values, whether consciously recognised or not, associated with particular modes of signification. According to Keane (2007, 2018), semiotic ideologies are not just abstract ideas, but, rather, they are deeply embedded in everyday language practices and material culture. When Sino-Muslims draw attention to practices of heritage literacy, regardless of its mode of practice or form, they do so because they perceive these practices as having a bearing on something, be it ritual, ideas, consciousness, agency, or the relationships among these. Heritage literacy practices thus function within what Keane calls 'representational economies'. In addition to language, material objects themselves can also serve as vehicles for semiotic ideologies (see Ivanič et al. 2019). For instance, in Keane's (2007) book *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter*, he examines how Christian missionaries in Indonesia promoted a particular semiotic ideology which was also expressed through material objects, such as the Bible, and thereby served as a tangible symbol of the Christian worldview.

My focus on Sino-Muslim heritage literacy in everyday action is thus meant to revive and foreground that which is lost through the institutionalisation of literacy under two dominant paradigms exerting influence upon the lives of contemporary Sino-Muslims. The first is one which ties literacy knowledge and mass-literacy policy exclusively to Standard Mandarin as a key enabler of gaining economic advantage (see Xinhua 2019). Since Sino-Muslims are