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## Muslim Printing in Late Imperial China: Woodblocks, Networks, and Creation of Chinese Islamic Knowledge

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### Abstract

When books existed mainly as manuscripts in the Islamic world, Muslims in late imperial China were making use of woodblock printing to publish their Islamic translations and treatises written in the Chinese language. In that way, they developed their own Chinese Islamic canon of texts—Han Kitab. Contemporary scholars have been exploring how Han Kitab reconciled Confucian and Buddhist ideas with Islamic teachings. Nonetheless, the social aspect—whether and how those works made real impact among Muslims in Chinese society—is yet to be examined. This paper argues that it was owing to Muslims' active participation in the burgeoning Chinese print culture that Han Kitab was able to be widely published and circulated across the Chinese territory. Through networks of Muslim authors, publishers, merchants, and officials, etc., many Han Kitab were printed, reprinted, and carried around. Some were gradually received as authoritative, serving as the cornerstone on which particular "Chinese Islamic" knowledge was established. Printing thus allowed dispersed Muslims in China proper to have shared knowledge, discourse, and memory, and contributed to a rising sense of collectivity among them.

**Keywords:** Muslim printing; late imperial China; Islamic knowledge

### 1. Introduction

Scholars in the field of Muslim printing generally agree that print began to be established in the Islamic world and was adopted to produce books by Muslims since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They also contend that print brought about significant religious, social, cultural, and political changes in those regions, which could be deemed "revolutionary".<sup>1</sup> There is still one crucial question which has been perplexing scholars for long—Why did print begin so late in the Islamic world? They have proposed different interpretations, such as religious ban of printing, technical difficulty regarding the cursive style of Arabic writing, social opposition from scribes and Islamic scholars, and incompatibility with the Islamic system of knowledge transmission founded on recitation and personal impartation.<sup>2</sup> None, however, seems totally satisfactory. Some scholars also argue that print with wooden and metal blocks was indeed adopted by Muslims in Arabic script in the medieval era to produce amulets with quotations from the Quran, lists of the names of God, and other religious texts.<sup>3</sup> However, it was not found to be used to produce books, and thus did not play a role in knowledge dissemination. Posi-

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JILLALI EL ADNANI

## Hu Dengzhou

Typical of Chinese-speaking Muslims in the Ming period, **Hu Dengzhou** (胡登洲, courtesy name Mingpu 明普, Muslim name Muḥammad 'Abdallāh Ilyās; 1522–97) received two kinds of education, one Confucian (in Chinese) and the other Islamic (including some instruction in Arabic). The knowledge and books he acquired on a long voyage through Central Asia to Mecca became the basis of Hu's pioneering reform of Chinese Muslim education and a new tradition of Islamic scholarship in late imperial China.

Dengzhou came from an affluent merchant family in Xianyang, Shaanxi province. The Hu family were pious Muslims but in no way extraordinary in their religious devotion. They attended the local mosque, and the young Dengzhou studied in the adjoining school. He received a standard Islamic primary education, which included memorising parts of the Qur'ān and some reports from the prophet Muḥammad (*ḥadīths*), as well as instruction from the presiding ahong (*imām*) in basic ritual and doctrine. In addition to rudimentary Arabic for reading and reciting the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*, he probably studied Persian. He also learnt to read and write Chinese, based on the Confucian classics, just as did Han Chinese

students. Hu was thus typical of urban, middle-class Muslims in the China of the late Ming dynasty (c. 1368–1644).

By the sixteenth century, many Muslim families sent their children away to receive a classical Confucian education to prepare them to sit for the official examination, one of the surest means of advancing socially in Ming China. Most Sinicised Muslims spoke Chinese as their mother tongue, and the better educated were proficient in literary Chinese. By contrast, proficiency in Arabic and Persian had declined so far that few Muslims in China still used them, apart from the modicum of Arabic necessary for daily prayers and other rituals. Some Muslims worried that assimilation, which allowed their communities to survive in an overwhelmingly non-Muslim environment, might also lead to the loss of Islamic knowledge and identity in China.

Although Hu was groomed to follow in the family business, his parents tried to give him every advantage to succeed in mainstream Chinese society. Yet, he had a strong desire to go beyond the basic religious education he received at the mosque school and to delve deeper into his study of Islam, Arabic, and Persian. During a business trip, a chance encounter on the road from Xi'an to Beijing with an Arab traveller introduced him to more advanced topics in the traditional Islamic sciences—theology, law, philosophy—and a touch of the Ṣūfī tradition. Hu was driven to seek out greater knowledge at its source: He knew that he could not find what he was seeking in China; that sort of knowledge was mostly lost, and access to it was blocked by the social and political climate of the times. Foreign travel was not encouraged for ordinary subjects of the Ming empire and was not an easy undertaking.