In Focus
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Learning to be a Good Pilgrim before Going to Mecca: The Hui, the Hajj and the Local Imagination of the Global Ummah in Xi’an China

Dr Yang Yang, postdoctoral fellow of the Inter-Asia Engagements Cluster at Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore takes an ethnographic approach to understanding the ways Chinese Muslims engage in and envision a global Muslim world through local practices.

Dr Yang first detailed the official approach to the Hajj preparation. She argues that the Hajj is seen as a state-making project as the Islamic Association of China in 2018 stated that the Hajjis should use their experiences in Mecca to perfect their behaviours and improve their moral qualities including compassion. The Chineseness in the Hui Muslims is hence a mobilising resource for the Chinese government.

For the Hui community in Xian, Dr Yang states that there are informal Qur’an studies groups organised by Hui Muslim women who returned from the Hajj where the returned pilgrims and the convener of the group would share anecdotes of their experiences in Mecca. These study groups were set up to compensate for inadequate knowledge in religious practices. They were also to enhance closer connections with the Muslim world. They were also viewed as an alternative and inclusive space for Hui pilgrims who have less exposure to Islamic rituals prior to their trip to Mecca. Dr Yang also noted that the donning of the headscarves was a mandatory requirement for students who attended the class.

Dr Yang concludes that there are different interpretations of individuals’ “readiness” for the Hajj in the state and vernacular discourses. The Chinese government’s differentiated approaches to managing Muslim populations highlighted the use of mobility as a governing technique. The Hui pilgrims’ alternative approach to their trip to Mecca manifests how the politics of Hajj plays out as a part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) on the ground.

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