Book review: Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds: Cross-Cultural Exchange in Pre-Modern Asia, written by Hyunhee Park

Author: Tarek Ladjal
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Preview this article:
Hyunhee Park

"Mapping the Chinese and Islamic Worlds: Cross-Cultural Exchange in Pre-Modern Asia," published by Cambridge in 2012, and which was essentially her doctorate thesis, Hyunhee Park attempted to address the old assumption that the old world was a world without maps. Despite the scattered existence of maps here or there, in this culture or that, they were not largely circulated, and were often reserved in the coffers of kings alongside covenant decrees, international treaties, and the family tree of the royal lineage. In brief, maps were paper representations of the extent of their authority and the domain which they must strive to preserve.

It is with this in mind, along with the importance of maps and geography in the expression of self-consciousness and the relevance of the other that Hyunhee, a lecturer at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York City, specialising in Chinese history and cultural exchanges between East and West, approached her insightful work.

Hyunhee addressed the cultural exchange between the Chinese and Islamic worlds in five chapters according to the different phases of the relationship. The study covers a vast geographical area that includes a large part of Asia and the Indian Ocean for a period ranging eight centuries, starting from the year 130/750 and ending in 906/1500. Hyunhee began her study with the year 130/750 for several reasons, including the major event of the fall of the Umayyads and the subsequent rise of the Abbasids. One year after this major political change in the Muslim world, the Abbasids found themselves at war along their eastern border facing Central Asia and adjacent to Chinese territories. It is here that the first and last military confrontation between the two worlds took place, which only lasted one day and is recorded in Chinese and Muslim historical sources alike. This brief confrontation and the peace that followed marked the restoration of the Silk Road to former glories after having fallen to decay during the Roman and Byzantine eras. This event also signalled an emergence of an acculturation movement that was to last for many centuries in which a plethora of Chinese and a wide range of ethnicities under the banner of the Islamic caliphate, particularly from Central Asia, were to intersect and adapt elements of each other's culture.

The author addresses the major shifts in the relationship between the two worlds arising from a rebellion that lasted between 755 AD and 763 AD led by the military commander An Lushan against the Tang rule (618-907 AD). During