Title: "Wherever He Goes, He Won't Keep Quiet"
Saʿid Muḥammad al-ʿAsali as a Missionary of Modernism in Northwest China

Short Title: "Wherever He Goes, He Won't Keep Quiet."

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Abstract: This article examines the activities of the Syrian hadith scholar Saʿid Muḥammad al-ʿAsali al-Ṭarabulsi al-Shami (1870–1932?), better known as Shami Damulla, as a window onto the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and the Muslims of Xinjiang, or Eastern Turkistan. Scholars of Islam in the Soviet Union have identified al-ʿAsali as an influential figure in Soviet Turkistan in the 1920s, but much remains to be clarified about his formative years, and his multiple sojourns in China prior to the Russian Revolution. Here I seek to fill some of these gaps by tracing al-ʿAsali's connections to modernist and revivalist scholarly circles in India and the Middle East, his activities in Xinjiang, and the strategies he adopted to insert himself into the relationship between the Ottoman court and China. These strategies were both political and intellectual. While moving within Muslim communities across Eurasia, al-ʿAsali also sought to engage the Chinese tradition on its own terms, authoring a 1905 study of Qing institutions entitled *The Law of China* (*Qanun al-Sin*), a rare example of intellectual exchange between late-Ottoman Islamic reformism, and the revitalised Confucianism of the late-Qing. From a diverse range of sources a picture emerges of a figure much more complicated, though no less controversial, than can be found in existing characterisations of al-ʿAsali.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Ottoman and Qing Empires had no relationship to speak of, though in certain circles there was a desire in that they should. The sultan now claimed for himself a leading role among the world's Muslims, with China commonly thought of as one of the world's most populous Muslim nations. Meanwhile, Chinese Muslims interested in communicating with the Islamic heartland—whether for spiritual or more mundane reasons—felt the difficulty of these communications keenly. In the case of the Qing province of Xinjiang, or Eastern Turkistan, identification with the Ottoman state was to some degree a lingering consequence of the emirate of Yaʿqub Beg, an independent regime centred on Kashgar that had formally submitted to Sultan ʿAbd al-ʿAziz (reigned 1861–76), and received some limited military support in return.[1] The fall of the emirate in 1877 and the region's reincorporation into the Qing Empire led to a growth of exile networks in Istanbul oriented on Kashgar, which occasionally claimed a representative role for themselves. Yet on the whole there is little evidence that in the late Qing, the Muslims of Eastern Turkistan were eager for a reprise of the Yaʿqub Beg experiment. Closer ties to the caliphate were equally, if not more often, envisaged as coming about through a

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[1] Hodong Kim, *Holy War in China: The Muslim Rebellion and State in Chinese Central Asia 1864–1877*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2004; Rana von Mende-Altaylı, *Die Beziehungen des Osmanischen Reiches zu Kashghar und seinem Herrscher Ya'qub Beg, 1873–1877*, Indiana University, Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, Bloomington, Ind., 1999; Kemal H. Karpat, 'Yakub Bey's Relations with the Ottoman Sultans: A Reinterpretation', *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1991, pp. 17–32.

strengthening of Ottoman-Qing relations. Diplomatic protection abroad, particularly on the hajj, was an issue of particular concern, and Xinjiang Muslims were well aware of the role of the British in India, and Russia in Central Asia, in facilitating the pilgrimage.[2] These expectations were too much for either the Qing or the Ottoman Empire to meet, but they created a space that individuals might exploit.

The late nineteenth century was a moment in which the increasing pace of transport and communications aided the spread of modernist and ideas across Muslim communities. Yet it has not been entirely straightforward to fit Qing China, still physically remote and politically disinterested in the politics of the Islamic world, into this paradigm of a globalising Islam. Certainly, the Qing Empire has not occupied the same position in the scholarly literature as Japan, which came to prominence in Muslim eyes thanks to its victory in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5, and has been the focus of almost all interest in ties between the Ottomans and Asia.[3] For a long time, scholarship has dwelt on the most eye-catching question that surrounds this conjuncture, the reality or otherwise of active Ottoman 'pan-Islamic' outreach to the world's Muslims, and in the case of China little evidence has emerged for this. One exception is the audience of patriotic Beijing imam Wang Haoran with Sultan ʿAbd al-Ḥamid in 1906, and the follow-up Ottoman mission to the Niujie mosque in the Qing capital, but this was not the spark for any ongoing exchange between Beijing and Istanbul. As a consequence, from the period of China's nineteenth-century Muslim uprisings, interest in Sino-Islamic ties has tended to skip ahead to the incipient national narratives that emerge with the fall of the Qing in 1912, be it that of Turkic nationalism (in the case of Xinjiang's Turkic-speaking Muslims, today's Uyghurs), or the role of patriotic Chinese-speaking Muslims (Hui) as intermediaries between the fledgling Chinese Republic and the inter-war Middle East.

Recent writing on pan-Islamism or pan-Turkism is sceptical towards a view of these ideologies as programs to redefine global political boundaries, and with good reason.[4] Yet while critiquing the idea of these trans-imperial solidarities as instruments of subversion, it is important not to lose sight of the innovative forms of political practice that they did inspire. Despite the difficulties, this period did see an increase in mobility between the centres of Islamic world and remote parts of China, which come into clearer view when we shift from a viewpoint of interstate interactions and a familiar cast of elite actors, to explore the role of enterprising, but less well known, individuals. This article explores one such case, that of Saʿid Muḥammad al-ʿAsali (1870–1932?), better known as Shami Damulla, as an example of someone who linked the Islamic region of northwest China with the Ottoman Empire in new ways. Although his activities in Xinjiang span some

[2] On the pilgrimage from Central Asia, see Eileen Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2015; Lâle Can, 'The Protection Question: Central Asians and Extraterritoriality in the Late Ottoman Empire', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, no. 48, 2016, pp. 679–99.

[3] Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2007; Selçuk Esenbel, 'Japan's Global Claim to Asia and the World of Islam: Transnational Nationalism and World Power, 1900-1945', *American Historical Review*, vol. 109, no. 4, 2004, pp. 1140–70.

[4] Michael A. Reynolds, 'Buffers, not Brethren: Young Turk Military Policy in the First World War and the Myth of Panturanism', *Past & Present*, vol. 203, no. 1, 2009, pp. 137–79; James H. Meyer, *Turks Across Empires: Marketing Muslim Identity in the Russian-Ottoman Borderlands, 1856-1914,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014; Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2017.

twenty years, al-ʿAsali has yet to be taken seriously as an actor in the region's history. This can in part be seen as the lingering effect of a series of controversies that emerged around him, but it also reflects a tendency to view any and all links between Xinjiang and Ottoman Empire as a prelude to the rise of Turkic nationalism—a story in which an Arab scholar such as al-ʿAsali has little role to play. Nevertheless, when a picture of his life is compiled from the wide variety of sources that make reference to him, he emerges clearly as the most significant figure to insert themselves into the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and the Muslims of Xinjiang in this period.

Although by no means an entirely obscure figure, for a long time al-ʿAsali's image was distorted by a series of weighty geopolitical narratives into which he was inserted. In his lifetime, as we will see, al-ʿAsali was suspected of involvement in wartime Ottoman conspiracies to destabilise Russian Turkistan. This tsarist paranoia subsequently came to inform the Soviet verdict on al-ʿAsali (a verdict in place by World War II if not earlier), which treated the Syrian as part of a 'Pan-Islamist – German conspiracy'.[5] A version of this discourse was then imported from the Soviet Union to the People's Republic of China, where al-ʿAsali was similarly identified as an envoy of pan-Islamism, though here Great Britain was identified as the imperial mastermind. The Tatar Burhan Shahidi, inaugural chairman of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, wrote in 1982 that 'Britain, through Turkey, sent an Arab called al-ʿAsali to visit various parts of Xinjiang and secretly organize Islamic societies… Afterwards al-ʿAsali was detained by [provincial governor] Yang Zengxin and expelled, but the poison that he had brought to Xinjiang continued to spread'.[6] Implausible though it may seem, this link to Britain was a necessary corollary to PRC scholars' efforts to indict the first East Turkistan Republic (sometimes referred to as an 'Islamic' Republic, and treated as pan-Islamic in inspiration) as a British plot. This has led to such distortions as the claim, in an authoritative volume on the history of Islam in Xinjiang, that al-ʿAsali was active in the province in the 1930s.[7]

To this day, the denunciatory mode of scholarship in the PRC has left little room for serious discussion of al-ʿAsali's activities in Chinese-language work. By contrast, the fall of the Soviet Union provided scholars with an opportunity to re-evaluate the early history of Islam in Soviet Central Asia, which led in turn to something of a rediscovery of al-ʿAsali. We owe this primarily to the groundbreaking work of Ashirbek Muminov, and more recently to that of Bakhtiyar Babajanov.[8] As these scholars describe it, al-ʿAsali arrived in the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Turkistan from China in 1919, and

[5] A. P. Savitskii, 'Sin'tszian kak platsdarm inostrannoi interventsii v Srednei Azii', Kandidatskaia dissertatsiia, Institut vostokovedeniia AN UzSSR, 1950, pp. 135, 164. Those who imagine, in a slightly earlier period, that Sultan ʿAbd al-Ḥamid (reigned 1876–1909) was directing a worldwide network of pan-Islamic emissaries have had little trouble fitting al-ʿAsali into this paradigm. For example, Ahmet Özel, 'Mübeşşir et-Tirâzî', in *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm ansiklopedisi*, Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, İslâm Ansiklopedisi Genel Müdürlüğü, Üsküdar, İstanbul, 2006, vol. 31, p. 434.

[6] Baoerhan [Burḥan Shahidi], 'Fan yisilan zhuyi he fan tuerqi zhuyi zai Xinjiang di xingmie' [The rise and fall of pan-Islamisn and pan-Turkism in Xinjiang], in *Wenshi ziliao hedingben*, vol. 27, 1982, p. 186.

[7] Chen Huisheng (ed.), *Zhongguo Xinjiang diqu Yisilanjiao shi* [A history of Islam in China's Xinjiang region], Xinjiang renmin chubanshe, Ürümchi, 2009, vol. 2, p. 308.

[8] Ashirbek Muminov, et al., 'Islamic Education in Soviet and Post-Soviet Uzbekistan', in *Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and Its Successor States*, Michael Kemper et al. (eds), Routledge, London, 2010, pp. 223–79; Bakhtiyar M. Babajanov, '"*Ulama*"-Orientalists: Madrasa Graduates at the Soviet Institute of Oriental Studies', in *Reassessing Orientalism: Interlocking Orientologies During the Cold War*, Michael Kemper and Artemy M. Kalinovsky (eds), Routledge, Abingdon, 2015, pp. 84–119.

soon attracted a circle of hadith students in the republic's capital of Tashkent, initiating an important intellectual lineage that survived the Soviet period. This new narrative surrounding al-ʿAsali differs in some important ways from the earlier Soviet discourse on him, although retaining certain of its assumptions; not least the idea that he was, in essence, the vehicle for someone else's political interests. Far from a subversive enemy of Moscow, these studies describe al-ʿAsali instead as a close collaborator with Soviet officials. His modernist criticisms of local Islamic practice coincided with Soviet modernization goals, and hence (in Muminov's view) were 'successfully utilized in the struggle against religion and local religious figures'.[9] Indeed, so compatible were his views with Soviet ideology that, according to Muminov, it was the Bolsheviks who in 1919 intervened to rescue the scholar from an anti-Ottoman crackdown in China, and deliberately brought him to the Soviet Union.[10]

These claims rest on a second important theme that runs through the literature on al-ʿAsali, an emphasis on his conservative scripturalism. While earlier terminology spoke of him as a 'pan-Islamist', it is more common these days to find discussion of his Salafist, or even 'Wahhabist' views. It was this puritanical approach to Islam that is said to have distinguished al-ʿAsali from Central Asia's native Sufi mystics and Jadidist intellectuals, and facilitated his collaboration with the Soviets. This intellectual gloss on al-ʿAsali positions him at the origin of two inter-linked genealogies, that of 'official Islam' in the Soviet Union, and of post-Soviet jihadism. In his day, al-ʿAsali's is said to have led a study circle known as the *ahl-i hadith* ('people of the hadith'). Although al-ʿAsali was himself persecuted and almost certainly shot in 1932, those among his following who survived the anti-religious campaigns and the Great Purge of 1937–38 went on to establish themselves in the Soviet Union's revived religious institutions. Most noteworthy among these was Żiyaʾuddin Babakhanov, who served as mufti of the Central Asian Spiritual Administration for Muslims (SADUM) from 1957 to 1982. Yet at the same time as influencing a pillar of the Soviet system such as Babakhanov (one of the 'red mullas', as they were known), al-ʿAsali's teachings have equally been seen to furnish an intellectual pedigree for Islamist militancy in today's Central Asia. Consistent with conventional definitions of 'Salafism', al-ʿAsali has been treated as planting the seed of foreign trends in Central Asian Islam which were purist to the point of archaizing, and determinedly hostile to the region's secular governments.[11]

One of the main reasons for the persistence of these, in my view simplistic and to some extent contradictory, characterisations of al-ʿAsali's political and intellectual loyalties is that fact that, for all its achievements, recent research has shed little light on his early life, his intellectual formation, and his activities in China. To fill some of these gaps is the primary goal of this article. In what follows I describe al-ʿAsali's efforts to mediate a

[9] Ashirbek Muminov, 'Fundamentalist Challenges to Local Islamic Traditions in Soviet and Post-Soviet Central Asia', in *Empire, Islam, and Politics in Central Eurasia*, Uyama Tomohiko (ed.), Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, Sapporo, 2007, pp. 254–255.

[10] Muminov, et al., 'Islamic Education', p. 247. Even more unlikely is Olcott's claim, that it was the Russian imperial consul in Kashgar who encouraged al-ʿAsali to go to Tashkent. See *In the Whirlwind of Jihad*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, 2012, p. 81.

[11] Sebastien Peyrouse, 'The Rise of Political Islam in Soviet Central Asia', in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 5, Hudson Institute, Washington, DC, 2007, pp. 40–54; Olcott, *In the Whirlwind of Jihad*. For a more popular synthesis of this narrative, see Amanda Erickson, 'How the USSR's effort to destroy Islam created a generation of radicals', *Washington Post*, 5 January 2017.

relationship between the Ottoman Empire and the Muslims of Xinjiang in two ways. One was in a practical sense; through his incessant travels al-ʿAsali served as a bridge across a divide that Muslims at opposite ends of Eurasia wished to see narrow. In seeking to play such a representative role he was not unique, though he was probably more successful at it than most. What renders al-ʿAsali unique, and of particular interest in my view, is that he also sought to act as a go-between in an intellectual sense. I explore this theme here by analysing al-ʿAsali's previously unknown scholarly contribution to the knowledge of China in the Arabic-speaking world, a study of Qing law published in Cairo in 1906. More than anything it this interest in China and its Confucian tradition that should give us pause in our intellectual characterization of al-ʿAsali. In his engagement with China, al-ʿAsali's interests were by no means limited to the state of Islamic piety in that country. On the contrary, in his writing and speaking he articulated a highly positive view of the Qing empire, and emphasized the compatibility of its institutions with Islam and the shariʿa. As I hope will become evident, al-ʿAsali's engagement with China can in many ways be seen a prelude for the role that he would come to play in the Soviet Union in the 1920s.

My objective here is not so much as to refute the various evaluations of al-ʿAsali made by scholars of Soviet Islam, but to identify the kernels of truth that inform them, and situate these within a wider portrait of his life and times. I find no evidence that al-ʿAsali's unstinting travels were in the service of anyone's interests but his own. At the same time, a capacity to present himself as in some way a representative of this or that state became an important part of his repertoire—and a source of a good deal of the controversy that came to surround him. While established narratives of his pan-Islamic activism seriously misconstrue the Syrian's relationship to the Ottoman court, for example, it is equally true that he did draw on visible associations with the court to enhance his status in China (and, as we will see, tried to do the reverse in Istanbul). Likewise, there is no doubt that a commitment to a scripture-centred religiosity was one of al-ʿAsali's intellectual calling cards. Yet al-ʿAsali's contemporaries were far less confident than recent scholars have been in assigning him a distinct, and consistent, intellectual orientation. Indeed, some went so far as to depict him as more of an irreligious free-thinker. Even making due allowance for the often hostile tone of these accounts, they require us to grapple with an individual who actively fashioned an intellectual profile for himself in a range of guises, an approach that is not captured by simply branding him with a label such as 'Salafist'.

Al-ʿAsali's early years

Sources on Saʿid Muḥammad al-ʿAsali's early life tend to concur on a few basic points: that he was born in Syrian (now Lebanese) Tripoli; that he spent time studying and teaching in India; that he fell out of favor in Ottoman Empire, and that his travels in Asia were to some extent a product of exile from the sultan's domains. The best source we have on his life is a 1906 biographical sketch by Ibrahim Dabbagh (1880–1946), editor of the Cairene journal *al-Insaniyya*.[12] Dabbagh records al-ʿAsali's year of birth as 1287/1870–71, and his native village as ʿAzqay, a short distance to the east of Tripoli. Following this he gives an account of al-ʿAsali's lengthy scholarly peregrinations in his teens and twenties, which

[12] Ibrahim al-Dabbagh, 'Tarjamat Ḥayat Mutarjim al-Kitab' [Biography of the translator], in Tunji Khangdi, *Qanun al-Ṣin*, Saʿid al-ʿAsali al-Ṭrablusi al-Shami (trans.), Maṭbuʿat Madrasat Walida ʿAbbas al-Awwal, Cairo, 1906, pp. iii–vii. The two men first met in Egypt in 1901, on the eve of al-ʿAsali's first trip to Xinjiang.

took him overland him from Syria to India. His first stops on this itinerary were Jerusalem and Nablus, and from there he travelled east to Baghdad. Here he is said to have made the acquaintance of such leading lights of Islamic modernism in Iraq as Shaykh Nuʿman al-Alusi (1839–1899), as well as associating with the shaykhs of the Qadiriyya Sufi order. From Iraq, he headed eastward to Iran, but on account of its Shiʿism 'the place did not agree with him', and so he pressed on to Afghanistan. In Kabul, for reasons left unexplained, he incurred the wrath of Mir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan (reigned 1880–1901), and was detained before being expelled him to India.

Dabbagh informs us that al-ʿAsali was nineteen by the time he set foot in India, which would place his arrival there around 1889. Initially he headed to centres of revivalist hadith scholarship in north India, first taking up residence in Saharanpur, where he studied the *Saḥiḥ* of al-Bukhari and Muslim—the two compendiums that were to become his speciality in years to come. Having excelled in an examination, he then went on to the ʿAliya Madrasa in Rampur, where he associated with members of the Naqshbandiyya Mujaddidiyya Sufi community. Further studies took him through Panipat, Bhopal, and to Delhi, where he sought out ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq al-Dihlavi, (author of the Urdu *Tafsir al-Ḥaqqani*), and enrolled in the Majidiyya medical school. While in Delhi, we read, al-ʿAsali also started work as a teacher in the Fatehpuri Madrasa. His final stop on this tour of India was Hyderabad, center of the Niẓam's domains in the Deccan, and something of a magnet for reform-minded Muslims in this period. Here he taught Arabic in the Madrasa al-Aʿizza, a private school established by the Niẓam.

The chief, possibly sole source of Dabbagh's information on al-ʿAsali was no doubt al-ʿAsali himself, and naturally some of its details would benefit from independent corroboration. It is unlikely, for example, that al-ʿAsali studied with the hadith scholar Aḥmad ʿAli Saharanpuri as he claims, since this eminent theologian died in 1880.[13] On the other hand, there is evidence that al-ʿAsali had acquired a reputation as a man of letters by the time he was teaching in Hyderabad. Upon the death of educational reformer Sir Syed Aḥmad Khan, al-ʿAsali wrote a commemorative ode that a local official found of sufficient literary worth to send to the journal *al-Hilal* in Cairo.[14] While parts of his itinerary require confirmation, therefore, it can be said that by the turn of the century, al-ʿAsali was an aspiring hadith scholar and poet, with some grounding in medicine, and could present himself as having imbibed the best in Islamic learning that India had to offer.

First sojourn in Xinjiang: 1901-1904

Following his tenure as a madrasa teacher in Hyderabad, al-ʿAsali returned to the Ottoman Empire, making his first trip to the capital of Istanbul. After a few years in the seat of the caliphate, he left for Cairo in 1901. If it is true, as al-ʿAsali was to subsequently maintain,

[13] Abu Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥman Kawthar Barni, *'Ulamaʾ Diyuband wa-Khidmatuhum fi 'Ilm al-Ḥadith* [The ʿulama of Deoband and their achievements in hadith scholarship], Akadimiyat Shaykh al-Hind, Deoband, 1998, pp. 75–78.

[14] [Zaydan Jirji], 'al-Sayyid Aḥmad Khan', *al-Hilal* vol. 7, no. 1, 1898, p. 8. Dabbagh confirms that al-ʿAsali was an accomplished versifier, informing us that he wrote poetry 'in four languages of the east' (presumably Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Turkish), which he had compiled into a divan entitled *Sawaniḥ al-Afkar* [Auspicious thoughts]. Apart from this unpublished divan, Dabbagh also mentions a discourse on money-lending entitled *al-Tabṣirat fi al-Riba* [An elucidation on usury], and a collection of translations of wise sayings. See al-Dabbagh, 'Tarjamat Ḥayat', p. vii.

that he spent time at Cairo's Al-Azhar as a young man, then these studies must have occurred on this trip.[15] Any stay at this prestigious hub of scholarship must have been brief, however, as he we know that by the end of 1901 al-ʿAsali had already made his way via India to western China. By early 1902, he was said to be living in humble conditions close to a local shrine in the town of Kashgar, where he had assumed the duties of shrine-keeper.[16] He was also teaching the two hadith compendiums of al-Bukhari and Muslim to a class of twenty-five to thirty students.

Book learning was not the only thing that al-ʿAsali brought with him to Xinjiang. From the outset, his presence there was shrouded in political controversy. Ibrahim Dabbagh explains al-ʿAsali's departure from Istanbul for Cairo as a response to an invitation from Taufiq al-Bakri (1870–1932), who was impressed with the young man's poetry. Al-Bakri was the reform-minded leader of Egypt's Sufi orders and a major figure among that country's ʿulama. It is certainly plausible that al-ʿAsali received such an invitation, though by the time he reached Xinjiang he was hinting at more complicated reasons for his departure from Istanbul. Visiting Kashgar in 1902, the German Orientalist Martin Hartmann heard from the town's chief qadi that al-ʿAsali (whom the locals simply referred to as 'Sayyid Arab') was living there as an exile from the Ottoman Empire. With his interest thus piqued, Hartmann met and interviewed this local celebrity.[17] Al-ʿAsali was coy towards Hartmann's political inquires, but he confirmed his critical stance towards the Ottoman court by brandishing a copy of ʿAbd al-Raḥman al-Kawakibi's anti-Hamidian pamphlet *Ṭabaʾiʿ al-Istibdad* (*The Characteristics of Despotism*). Al-ʿAsali's identification with this key work of anti-Ottoman Arab nationalism was so strong, in fact, that he claimed it as his own composition. Far from an 'envoy' of Sultan ʿAbd al-Ḥamid to China, therefore, al-ʿAsali was positioning himself in Xinjiang as a victim of Hamidian repression.

Al-ʿAsali did not give Hartmann any insight into the reasons for his banishment, but he did mention that during his time in Istanbul he had served as an editor of the Arabic version of the Ottoman magazine *Maʿlumat* (*Information*). Founded by Baba Tahir Effendi, the Turkish edition of this popular illustrated magazine had been in print since 1895, with a weekly Arabic edition commencing in 1897. Jacob Landau describes the Arabic *al-Maʿlumat* as a pan-Islamist organ, with editorials railing against European aggression.[18] Unlike the Turkish edition, which seems to have avoided political controversy, the Arabic *al-Maʿlumat* did indeed run into trouble with Sultan ʿAbd al-Ḥamid's censors. One of its more prominent editors, the intellectual ʿAbd al-Ḥamid al-Zahrawi, was exiled to Damascus.[19] I have so far been unable to confirm whether al-ʿAsali was involved with this

[15] The claim appears in contemporary accounts such as Adil Hikmet Bey's *Asyaʾda Beş Türk* (Ötüken, Istanbul, 1998, p. 238), and has been incorporated into most scholarly depictions of him.

[16] Hartmann gives the name of this shrine as 'Paqaltschaq Mazar', a location that I have been unable to identify. Martin Hartmann, *Chinesisch-Turkestan: Geschichte, Verwaltung, Geistesleben, und Wirtschaft*, Gebauer-Schwetschke Druckerei und Verlag, Halle, 1908, p. 101.

[17] Ibid, pp. 37, 101–102.

[18] Jacob M. Landau, *The Politics of Pan-Islam: Ideology and Organization*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990, pp. 59–60.

[19] Ahmed Tarabein, ''ʿAbd al-Hamid al-Zahrawi: The Career and Thought of an Arab Nationalist' in *The Origins of Arab Nationalism*, Rashid Khalidi et al. (eds), Columbia University Press, New York, 1991, p. 98.

publication, but if he was, then he may similarly have fallen foul of Sultan ʿAbd al-Ḥamid's literary inquisition.[20]

Hartmann's account of his meeting with al-ʿAsali corroborates some elements of Dabbagh's biography of him. Al-ʿAsali told Hartmann, for example, that he that he had taught Arabic at an elite school in Hyderabad. He obviously considered poetry one of his specialties, discussing his research among manuscripts of Arabic poetry in Cairo, and showing the Orientalist some of his own work from a handwritten divan. As for his future plans, al-ʿAsali expressed a desire to proselytize among the non-believers of Tibet. Instead of heading into the Himalayas, however, al-ʿAsali's itinerary on this first sojourn in western China was eventually to take him north, traversing the province of Xinjiang, with hadith instruction evidently his main activity along the way. In a work that he wrote in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, al-ʿAsali says that between 1903 and 1904 he held a course of instruction in al-Bukhari's *al-Jamiʿ al-Saḥiḥ* in a location he refers to archaically as 'the capital of the land of the Uyghurs and the Toqquzghuz'—most likely a reference to Xinjiang's provincial capital of Ürümchi (known at the time as Dihua).[21] By late 1904 he was in Tarbaghatay (or Chöchäk), a treaty port in the north of Xinjiang, where he made the acquaintance of the imam of the local Russian Muslim expatriate community (primarily Tatars), Qurban ʿAli Khalidi.[22] He was now en route out of Qing territory, heading for Russian Turkistan. By his own account, in 1905 he taught Muslim's hadith compilation at the shrine of Imam al-Bukhari on the outskirts of Samarkand.[23] Soon, he was on his way back to Egypt.

Following a brief stay in Cairo, in early 1906 al-ʿAsali made the pilgrimage to Mecca. He then embarked on a scholarly tour of the region, seeking out a series of eminent individuals of early twentieth century modernist Islam. In Medina he paid a visit to the prominent Sanusi shaykh and mufti of the shafiʿi school, Faliḥ b. Muḥammad al-Zahiri al-Badawi and received instruction from him.[24] In March 1907 he spent a week at the Abdullah Pasha madrasa in Damascus, where he obtained a diploma (*ijāzat*) from the reformist scholar Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi (1866–1914).[25] According to an entry in ʿUmar Tadmuri's biographical dictionary, al-ʿAsali's also studied with the Damascene Shaykh ʿAbd al-Razzaq al-Biṭar (1837–1937).[26] Finally, there is evidence that al-ʿAsali studied at some point with the North African scholar Abu Shuʿayb al-Dukkali, a figure of similar

[20] These Istanbul-centred conflicts were not the only controversies to involve al-ʿAsali during his first visit to Kashgar: Hartmann also heard accusations levied by an Arab visitor that al-ʿAsali was a disciple of the self-styled revivalist Ghulam Aḥmad, leader of a heterodox movement that had emerged in north India in the late nineteenth century—and coinciding therefore with al-ʿAsali's period of study in India. Hartmann, *Chinesisch-Turkestan*, pp. 101–102. On the Aḥmadiyya, see Adil Hussain Khan, *From Sufism to Ahmadiyya: A Muslim Minority Movement in South Asia*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2015.

[21] B. M. Babadzhanov et al. (eds), *Disputy musul'manskikh religioznykh avtoritetov v Tsentral'noi Azii v XX veke*, Daik-Press, Almaty, 2007, p. 75.

[22] Qurban ʿAli Khalidi, *Tavarikh-i Khamsa-i Sharqi* [A quintet of oriental chronicles], Ürnäk Maṭbaʿasï, Kazan, 1910, p. 759.

[23] Babadzhanov, et al., *Disputy musul'manskikh religioznykh avtoritetov*, p. 75.

[24] Ibid, p. 84.

[25] Jamal al-Din Qasimi, *Imam al-Sham fi ʿAṣrihi Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi* [The imam of Syria in his age: Jamal al-Din al-Qasimi], Dar al-Basha'ir al-Islamiyya, Beirut, 2009, pp. 317–21.

[26] ʿUmar Tadmuri, *Mawsuʿat ʿUlamaʾ al-Muslimin fi Tarikh Lubnan al-Islami* [Encyclopedia of Muslim scholars in the Islamic history of Lebanon], al-Markaz al-Islami li-l-Iʿlam wa-l-Inmaʾ, Beirut, 1984, part 3, vol. 3, p. 261.

standing in the history of Islam in Morocco.[27] Al-ʿAsali's encounter with al-Dukkali is likely to have occurred on this trip to the Hijaz.

A Muslim modernist reads Confucius: *The Law of China*

These serial apprenticeships combine to give the impression of al-ʿAsali as an ambitious young man seeking to burnish his credentials in the religious sciences. Yet this was not the limit of his intellectual pursuits on this trip. While passing through Cairo in 1905, al-ʿAsali organized for the publication of a work that shows him in quite a different light: a translation of a handbook of Qing law. Al-ʿAsali's *Law of China* (*Qanun al-Ṣin*) ranks among the earliest and most sustained engagements with Chinese philosophy and law to emerge in Islamic modernist circles. According to the introduction, al-ʿAsali obtained the original book as a gift from a young Muslim in Kashgar who had received a Chinese education and was teaching in a Qing school (*xuetang*). Al-ʿAsali carried the volume with him on his trip through Xinjiang, which took him to the provincial capital Ürümchi, where he says that he intended to present a petition of some kind to the governor. Doing so brought him into contact with the governor's staff of translators, who engaged him in conversation about the work. So fulsome was their praise for the Tongzhi Emperor who had commissioned it that al-ʿAsali decided to translate it into his native Arabic.[28]

The book that al-ʿAsali had come into possession of has become known to the scholarly world as the *Li Kitabi* (the *Book of* Li, presumably referring to Chinese *li* 禮, i.e. ritual propriety). A bilingual Chinese-Turkic text, the *Book of* Li was itself the product of a complicated process of translation. Printed in the wake of Zuo Zongtang's reconquest of Xinjiang in the 1870s, its purpose was to inculcate Confucian ethical standards and knowledge of Qing law among Xinjiang's Muslims, an approach that reflected the territory's recent change in status, which had seen it become a full-blown province of the Qing Empire. The Chinese text of the *Book of* Li consists of the *Sixteen Sacred Maxims with Simple Explanations of the Code* (*Shengyu shiliutiao fu lü yijie*), by Xia Xin (1789–1871).[29] This is an 1868 redaction of the Kangxi emperor's Sacred Edict, various editions of which were recited publicly for moral edification throughout the empire every fortnight.[30] As well as homilies on the Sacred Edict's sixteen maxims, Xia Xin's work also contains a selection of articles from the Qing code (*Daqing lüli*). In the *Book of* Li, the Chinese original is interspersed with a Turkic text which provides a loose paraphrase of

[27] Muḥammad Riyaḍ, *Shaykh al-Islam Abu Shuʿayb al-Dukkali al-Ṣiddiqi wa-Juhuduhu fi al-ʿIlm wa-l-Iṣlaḥ wa-l-Waṭaniyya maʿa Dhikr Thulla min Talamidhatihi wa-Atharihi* [Shaykh al-Islam Abu Shuʿayb al-Dukkali al-Siddiqi and his efforts in scholarship, reform, and patriotism, with mention of some of his students and their works], Maṭbaʿat al-Najaḥ al-Jadida, Casablanca, 2009, pp. 219-20.

[28] Tunji Khangdi, *Qanun al-Ṣin*, Saʿid al-ʿAsali al-Ṭrablusi al-Shami (trans.), Maṭbuʿat Madrasat Walida ʿAbbas al-Awwal, Cairo, 1906, pp. 1-2. The name of the author, 'Tunji Khangdi', refers to the Tongzhi Emperor (Tongzhi Huangdi), who reigned from 1861 to 1875.

[29] Xia Xin, 'Shengyu shiliutiao fu lü yijie' [The sixteen sacred maxims with simple explications of the code], in *Zhongguo lüxue wenxian*, Yang Yifan (ed.), vol. 4 of Di-si ji, Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, Beijing, 2007, pp. 545–624.

[30] See Victor H. Mair, 'Language and Ideology in the Written Popularizations of the Sacred Edict', in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, David Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn S. Rawski (eds), University of California Press, Berkeley, 1985, pp. 325–59.

the emperor's maxims, and a more faithful translation of the various punishments that the Qing code prescribes.[31]

The *Book of* Li attracted the attention of a number of visitors to Xinjiang in the early twentieth century, but came to be treated primarily as an object of Turkological, i.e. linguistic interest.[32] By contrast, al-ʿAsali clearly intended his work as a contribution to the Islamic world's knowledge of China and its laws. In this sense, his work can be situated in a global tradition of using the Sacred Edict as a point of entry to the study of Qing institutions.[33] The publication of *The Law of China* was also an effort to establish the translator's standing in the Arabic literary milieu as a globe-trotting man of letters. On the book's cover his name was accompanied by a string of lofty epithets, announcing him as 'the renowned traveller and great hadith scholar and linguist' (*al-raḥḥālat al-shahīr al-muḥaddith al-lughawī al-kabīr*). To render it accessible to his audience, al-ʿAsali went to considerable lengths to give the terse translationese of the Turkic original a more satisfying literary form. The work succeeded in catching the eye of some of the leading Arab intellectuals of the day: Muḥammad Kurd ʿAli and Rashid Riḍa both gave the work positive reviews in *al-Muqtabas* in *al-Manar* respectively, and excerpted sections of it for their readership.[34]

For an Islamic audience, this was an innovative intellectual exercise, and al-ʿAsali's justification for the translation has a slightly apologetic ring to it. Situating himself within the genre of travel writing, he explains in his introduction that he was motivated by a desire to record the 'weird and wonderful things' (*ajāʾib wa-gharāʾib*) he had encountered abroad, a common defence for Muslim writers taking an interest in things non-Muslim. He also informs his readers that he anticipated questions upon returning home about the state of affairs in China. Given that the *The Law of China* represented the words of the Chinese

[31] Two copies of the *Book of* Li survive in the collection of the Al-Beruni Institute of Oriental Studies, Tashkent, accession nos Bosma 11721, 11867. Wolfram Eberhard was the first to point out that the Turkic text diverges considerably from Xia Xin's work. See 'Bemerkungen zum "Li Kitabi"', *Türk Hukuk Tarihi Dergisi*, vol. 1, 1941–42, pp. 193–99. The maxims are reduced to the simplest of moral exhortations (with the first, on filial piety, omitted entirely), and at times the text borrows from other works, including the Yuan-dynasty *Twenty-Four Exemplars of Filial Piety* (*Ershisi xiao*).

[32] Three of al-ʿAsali's contemporaries produced studies of the Turkic text of the *Li Kitabi*. The linguist Nikolai Katanov published a transcription and translation in 1902. In March-April of 1905, Prussian archaeologist Albert von le Coq read through the text in Turfan with the help of a translator, and eventually published a study on it in 1925. Finally, the Turkistani jadidist Ẓakirjan Furqat came across the book while living in Yarkand. He transmitted its contents to the organ of the tsarist administration in Tashkent, *Türkistan Vilayatining Gazeti* [Turkistan Provincial News], which printed a serialized edition of the Turkic text. See N. Katanov, 'Man'chzhursko-Kitaiskii "li" na narechii tiurkov Kitaiskago Turkestana', *Zapiski Vostochnogo Otdeleniia Imperatorskago Russkago Arkheologicheskago Obshchestva*, vol. 14, 1902, pp. 31–75; Albert von Le Coq, 'Das Lī-Kitābī', *Kőrősi Csoma-Arkhivum*, vol. 1, no. 6, 1925, pp. 439–79; Ẓakirjan Furqat, 'Qavaʿid-i Chin va Umurat-i Siyasi' [The laws of China and its political affairs], in *Asarlar Mazhmuasi*, Qo'lyozmalar Instituti, Tahrir va Nashriyot Bo'limi, Tashkent, 1991, pp. 262–80.

[33] This tradition could be said to begin with Aleksei Agafonov's translation of the Sacred Edict into Russian in 1788: *Manzhurskago i Kitaiskago Khana Kansiia kniga pridvornykh politicheskikh pouchenii i nravouchitel'nykh razsuzhdenii sobrannaia synom ego Khanom Iun-dzhinom,* Aleksei Agafonov (trans.), v Tipografii Vil'kovskago, Saint Petersburg, 1788. Nineteenth-century works include W. Milne, *The Sacred Edict: Containing Sixteen Maxims of the Emperor Kang-He, Amplified by His Son, the Emperor Yoong-Ching*, Black, Kingsbury, Parbury, and Allen, London, 1817; A. Théophile Piry, *Le saint édit: étude de littérature chinoise*, Bureau des statistiques, Inspectorat général des douanes, Shanghai, 1879.

[34] [Rashid Riḍa], 'Qanun al-Ṣin' [The *Law of China*], *al-Manar*, vol. 9, no. 12, 1907, p. 948.

emperor himself, a translation such as this would serve as a more reliable source on that country than the hearsay that one usually finds in an ordinary travelogue of the Orient.

Yet despite taking these steps to assume a critical distance from this handbook of Qing law, al-ʿAsali's work evinces a strong desire to present the text in a positive light. To a certain extent, *The Law of China* can be read as a response to European criticisms of Chinese law as backward and arbitrary. In the introduction, al-ʿAsali describes the Guangxu Emperor's recent abolition of forms of capital punishment that lay at the heart of the Western critique (i.e. *lingchi*, execution by slicing). This feature of the work caught the eye of Muḥammad Kurd ʿAli, who seized on it to defend Chinese law against its Western critics: 'This is a civilized code (*qānūn madanī*), without any signs of decadence (*inḥiṭāṭ*) in it'.[35] Yet al-ʿAsali was equally, if not more interested, I believe, in validating these Qing institutions in Islamic terms. This was not simply a question of comparative jurisprudence; in theory the Qing code now extended across the Muslims of Xinjiang province, who were classified as 'citizens' (*min*). How Islamic and Chinese law intersected in this part of the world was therefore an important question. Reaching the conclusion, al-ʿAsali expresses to his readers the hope that 'it may seem to you that most of this [code] is not outside the rulings of our pure sharīʿa'.[36] More tellingly, there are curious insertions throughout the text that identify the Qing emperor as a patron of Islam. The law that people must dismount when passing by a Temple of Confucius, for example, is interpreted as an injunction to show respect for all places of worship, including mosques. At this point, al-ʿAsali's translation then breaks into an imperial endorsement of the ḥajj, that Muslims should 'maintain the rites of their community (*millatihim*), and bind up their baggage for Mecca and Medina, and the other holy sites that they have'.[37] The book ends with a remarkable pledge by the emperor to uphold the sharīʿa, positioning Islamic law within the wider embrace of Qing imperial law: 'Oh Muslims! Respect your religion, and be faithful to that which your Prophet has brought you. If someone among you does something reprehensible, then it is up to the qadi to enforce the sharīʿa against them. Should [the qadi] refuse to do so, we have instituted a punishment of the *li* in terms of blows and chastisement. If any qadi makes a ruling, or mufti gives an opinion, in contradiction to the sharīʿa, they will be stripped of their office, and will be deemed to be falsifying the religion'.[38]

Al-ʿAsali's efforts here to depict a harmonious relationship between Qing law and sharīʿa mirror the prevailing Ottoman model of sultanic and religious law. Opening with the words: 'Thus spoke the emperor' (*qāla l-ḫāqān*) the *The Law of China* is in one sense clearly a body of imperial legislation, a *qanun* as the title identifies it. Yet the Ottoman Sultan was a Muslim, which according to some interpretations gave his rulings the status of religious law.[39] Obviously, the Qing emperor was not. To mitigate this obstacle, al-ʿAsali engages in his study with a second question: the doctrinal basis of Qing law. Here the *Law of China* intersects with a debate that had arisen among Muslim scholars of the time, as to whether or not religious traditions not mentioned in the Qurʾan could

[35] [Muḥammad Kurd ʿAli], 'Qanun al-Ṣin' [The *Law of China*], *al-Muqtabas*, vol. 1, no. 12, 1907, pp. 663–664.
[36] Tunji Khangdi, *Qanun al-Ṣin,* p. 58.
[37] Ibid, p. 24.
[38] Ibid, p. 58.
[39] Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2016, pp. 471–482.

nevertheless be considered as acts of revelation alongside Christianity and Judaism.[40] On this question, al-ʿAsali replies in the affirmative, making the Chinese unambiguously a people of the book. He achieves this in part through extensive editing, the effect of which is to emphasize Qing law's grounding in Confucian ethics. Abandoning its structure of sixteen maxims, al-ʿAsali extracts and puts at the head of the work all those sections relating to the Five Relationships of Confucianism. Following this, he compiles the exemplary stories of four individuals that occur at points throughout the work: Wen Xiang and Min Ziqian (models of filial piety), Fan Wenzheng (an upright official), as well as an account of Confucius nowhere to be found in the *Book of* Li. Confucius, as presented here, was not only a great moral teacher, but the bearer of a revelation, which he set down in a book entitled *Zhong* (Ar. *jūnk*). 'He was illiterate', al-ʿAsali explains, 'he did not study from anyone, or receive the *Zhong* from anyone. Nor did he make it up out of what he himself had learnt, as some have claimed'.[41] Depicting Confucius as an illiterate mouthpiece for the divine word turns the Chinese tradition on its head, but renders it immediately legible to those familiar with the model of Islamic prophecy. In an aside, al-ʿAsali observes that the term of respect applied to Confucius, i.e. 'sage' (Ch. *shengren*), is also the title given to Muḥammad, and that some (presumably Chinese Muslims) identified Confucius with earlier canonical prophets such as Adam or Nuḥ.[42]

We see here how al-ʿAsali's interest in the affairs of Muslims in China merged seamlessly with this idea of China as a distinct civilizational space, well administered in accordance with a canon of its own classical texts, and with which Muslims could in good conscience collaborate. Existing scholarship is aware of a move in pan-Islamic thinking in this period to incorporate such pan-Asianist themes. A notion of Chinese civilizational superiority to the West was in the air in circles in which al-ʿAsali moved; Rashid Riḍa, a luminary of the Cairo intellectual scene, had written on this topic in 1901. Yet this turn is often thought of as primarily a political calculation, a case of pragmatic alliance-building. I believe al-ʿAsali's work can be read, therefore, as an effort to place this Muslim modernist interest in the Far East on a more stable intellectual footing. At first glance this may seem difficult to reconcile with the image of al-ʿAsali as a strict scripturalist, but this background may in fact be the source of his interest in the *Book of* Li. As mentioned above, the *Book of* Li was the product of a revived school of activist Confucianism in the late Qing, which viewed the empire-wide consolidation of traditional ethical standards as key to China's survival in the modern world. For Arab dissidents of the Hamidian period, who sought the salvation of the Islamic lands by renewing the authority of Islam's classical texts, it is not hard to see how such a vision of China could well be attractive. A little more speculatively, we might even place al-ʿAsali's work in the storied tradition, going back to Leibniz, of authors using China as a foil for the criticism of their own society. *The Law of China*, in this reading, holds up a vision of a Confucian state as a measure by which to judge Sultan ʿAbd al-Ḥamid's corruption and tyranny.

The *sheikh ül-islam* of Kashgar?

[40] Umar Ryad, *Islamic Reformism and Christianity: A Critical Reading of the Works of Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā and His Associates (1898–1935)*, Brill, Leiden, 2009, pp. 194–195.
[41] Tunji Khangdi, *Qanun al-Ṣin*, p. 27. Clearly al-ʿAsali's grasp of the Confucian canon was imperfect, though by *Zhong* here he may have in mind the *Classic of the Mean* (*Zhongyong*).
[42] Ibid, pp. 26, 36.

Al-ʿAsali's stocks in the intellectual and literary scene were by now on the rise, thanks in no small part to his long-distance shuttling between remote parts of China and centers of the Islamic world. This modus operandi was not, it seems, oriented primarily towards the 'pan-Islamic' objective of Muslim political unity, but instead to bridging the gap between the Chinese and Islamic worlds. Having significantly enhanced his scholarly credentials on this tour through the Arab lands, al-ʿAsali now made his way back to Xinjiang for a second time. On this, as on all of his trips to China, we lack precise information as to his itinerary and means of transport. According to S. A. Kolokolov, Russian consul in Kashgar, al-ʿAsali arrived there via Ladakh and Yarkand in the autumn of 1907, meaning that his route must have again taken him through India. It seems possible that al-ʿAsali's decision to retrace his steps to Asia was motivated by the excitement that Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese war had inspired in the Muslim world. Kolokolov reports that on his way through Yarkand, al-ʿAsali had met the Japanese officer Hino Tsutomu (1866–1920), and received from him an invitation to visit Japan. In subsequent discussions with the Russian consul in Ürümchi, al-ʿAsali expressed his intention to do just that, though events were to draw him back to the Ottoman Empire before he could realize this ambition.[43]

During al-ʿAsali's absence from Kashgar, stirrings of constitutional reform in both the Russian and Qing empires had made themselves felt there, and al-ʿAsali now made a robust intervention into local cultural politics, positioning himself much more explicitly as a partisan of modernity. Upon arriving in Kashgar, he teamed up with Ḥusayn Musabayev, a wealthy entrepreneur from Artush (a village on the outskirts of Kashgar), to establish a charitable society for the promotion of New Method (*usūl-i jadīd*) schooling, along the lines of similar societies that existed in the Russian Empire. This patronage also gave the outsider the confidence to voice his criticisms of the local ʿulama. In conversations with the Russian consul he poured scorn on Kashgar's religious elite, and even went so far as to upbraid them publicly, with a speech in the city's main mosque on the need to combat backwardness and improve local schooling. This jarring speech created a scandal that went all the way to the Kashgar circuit commissioner's desk, and polarized local opinion towards the fledgling charitable society.[44]

Having failed in his efforts to convince the Kashgari locals of his vision of Islamic reform, al-ʿAsali again set off north around the Tarim Basin, following the same route through Xinjiang towards Russian territory that he took on this first trip. In September 1908 he reached Ürümchi, and then made his second visit to Tarbaghatay.[45] Along the way, al-ʿAsali evinced a marked interest in local Islamic history. The Kashgari historian Hajji Yusuf is known to have presented him with a copy of his recently completed work, the *Jamʿ al-Tawarikh* (Compilation of Chronicles).[46] In the town of Sayram, al-ʿAsali

[43] Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi imperii [AVPRI below], f. 188, op. 761, d. 768, ll. 56–57ob.

[44] AVPRI f. 188, op. 761, d. 768, ll. 12–13ob, 56–57ob. India Office Records [IOR below] L/PS/7/217, doc. 1234. I have discussed this episode at greater length in *Uyghur Nation: Reform and Revolution on the Russia-China Frontier*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2016, Chapter 3.

[45] In his biographical dictionary, Qurban ʿAli Khalidi records that al-ʿAsali visited Tarbaghatay twice in 1327/1909–10, while consular reports indicate that he had already been in Tarbaghatay once in 1908. A. J. Frank and Mirkasym A. Gosmanov (eds), *An Islamic Biographical Dictionary of the Eastern Kazakh Steppe, 1770–1912*, Brill, Leiden, 2005, p. 70.

[46] D. I. Tikhonov, 'Uigurskie istoricheskie rukopisi kontsa XIX i nachala XX v.', *Uchenye zapiski Instituta Vostokovedeniia*, vol. 9, 1954, p. 166.

spent five months as the guest of Mulla Musa Sayrami, author of the *Tarikh-i Ḥamidi* (A Hamidian History), a history of Qing Xinjiang. As Muminov has discussed, Sayrami incorporated into this work a tract penned by al-ʿAsali, in which he criticized the popular reverence for the 'Seven Sleepers shrine' in Tuyuq, in the Turfan oasis.[47] On his visit to Tarbaghatay, he showed Qurban ʿAli Khalidi a set of historical documents that he had obtained in Kashgar: a qadi's judgement in Arabic from the fourteenth century, and a decree of the Chaghatayid Muḥammad Khan, dating to 1605.[48] This research eventually culminated in a *History of Eastern Turkistan*, a manuscript of which is known to survive today in the library of the Xinjiang Academy of Social Sciences.[49] By the middle of 1910 al-ʿAsali was on his way back to Istanbul, stopping off again at the shrine of Imam al-Bukhari.

If al-ʿAsali's departure from the Ottoman capital in 1901 had been in some way a step into exile, then political change in the intervening period may well have been a factor in drawing him back. In 1908 the Young Turks had forced Sultan ʿAbd al-Ḥamid to reinstate the Ottoman constitution and relinquish his authority, before deposing him in 1909. The turn of events must have come as welcome news to al-ʿAsali; for the most part, dissident ʿulama of his ilk were supportive of the Young Turk revolution. Indeed, in the eyes of many outsiders there was not a sharp divide between these two factions (the British consul in Kashgar believed that al-ʿAsali had 'Jeune Turc' tendencies). Yet at the same time, the honeymoon between the secularizing Young Turks and the modernist ʿulama was only fleeting, and by late 1909 the ruling Committee on Union and Progress (CUP) was already taking repressive measures against the modernist ʿulama and Arab nationalists.[50]

Initially at least, al-ʿAsali was shielded from these tensions. When he arrived in Istanbul he presented himself not as an Arab scholar returning to the land of his upbringing, but as a representative of the Muslims of Chinese Turkistan—Kashgar's *sheikh ül-Islam* (chief religious official) no less. The earliest reports of al-ʿAsali's arrival in Istanbul were published in the middle of July 1910, explaining that the purpose of his visit was to congratulate the new sultan Mehmed V on his accession to the throne, and express the esteem in which the millions of Muslims of Chinese Turkistan held the Ottoman monarch. To this end, *Yeni Gazete* reported, al-ʿAsali had brought with him as gifts for the sultan a five-hundred-year-old copy of the Quran, as well as a sword that was once wielded by the Chinggisid Muḥammad Khan—referring most likely to the khan of that name who reigned in Yarkand in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Besides these gifts from the Muslims of Kashgar, he was also said to have been carrying an official letter of introduction from the Qing emperor, which the editors of *Yeni Gazete* interpreted as a sign

[47] Mulla Musa Sayrami, *Tarikhi Hämidi* [A Hamidian history], Änvär Baytur (ed.), Millätlär Näshriyati, Beijing, 1986, pp. 669–670.
[48] Khalidi, *Tavarikh-i Khamsa-i Sharqi*, pp. 759–70
[49] Some Chinese scholars have made limited use of a translation of this work. See, for example, citations in Li Jinxin, *Xinjiang yisilan hanchao shilüe* [A history of Xinjiang's Islamic dynasties], Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe, Beijing, 1999, pp. 120, 129.
[50] David Dean Commins, *Islamic Reform: Politics and Social Change in Late Ottoman Syria*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990, pp. 137–138.

of the rising prestige of the Ottoman court in the Far East.[51] Reports of the arrival of this eminent visitor were soon circulating in the Russian Muslim press.[52]

This display of devotion from a far-flung Muslim community must have been music to the ears of the late-Ottoman court, and gave al-ʿAsali a shortcut to prominence. While in Istanbul, he met the Ottoman Empire's grand vizier and Sheikh ül-Islam, and eventually obtained an audience with Sultan Mehmed himself. Evidently impressed with the visitor, the sultan organized for the dispatch to the Muslims of Chinese Turkistan of a collection of religious texts and a hair from the beard of the Prophet Muhammad, as well as a jewelled wristwatch for al-ʿAsali himself. At the end of July, al-ʿAsali was the guest of honour at a meeting of the Ulama Association, and delivered a speech which was published in Arabic and Turkish translation in the association's journal, *Beyan'ül-Hak*.[53] In it, al-ʿAsali reprised some of the themes has had sounded in *The Law of China*. He described the advance of enlightenment among the Muslims of China, and presented the state of learning in late-Qing Xinjiang in an extremely positive light, praising the Guangxu emperor's dedication to the cause of educational reform. The Ulama Association also published a letter from al-ʿAsali to the Muslims of Kashgar, praising the organization and recommending to them its organ *Beyan'ül-Hak*.[54]

Al-ʿAsali's visit to Istanbul seems to have aroused most interest in these ʿulama circles, but his audience was not limited to them. According to the Russian ambassador, he also delivered a speech to the CUP, and received from them a letter to the Muslims of Xinjiang.[55] His venture only came unstuck when a Kashgari in Istanbul queried his status as the *sheikh ül-Islam* of Kashgar—a non-existent position. Tatar intellectuals living in Istanbul then took up this line of attack with gusto. Only a few days after the Istanbul dailies announced the presence in the city of Kashgar's highest religious authority, the Tatar journal *Tearüf-i Müslimin* was casting serious doubt on al-ʿAsali's identity:

A *sheikh ül-Islam* of Kashgar? That title doesn't exist! For a couple of months now we've been hearing about this position that we've never heard of before. It was only a few months ago that someone called ʿAbd al-Qadir arrived from Kashgar. The daily papers introduced him to the nation as the *sheikh ül-Islam* of Kashgar, and he was admitted into the august presence and showered in imperial beneficence… In the last few days another *sheikh ül-Islam* of Kashgar has turned up. What is the office of *sheikh ül-Islam* in this country? In Turkey, the seat of the caliph, there's only one

[51] 'ʿAseli-zade Şeyh Saʿid Efendinin Der-Saʿadete Mevasileti Vesilesiyle' [On the occasion of Shaykh Saʿid Effendi's Arrival in the Capital], *Yeni Gazete*, 11 Receb 1328 (19 July 1910), p. 1. The fate of Muḥammad Khan's sword is unknown.

[52] Ōishi Shinichiro, 'Kashugaru ni okeru jadīdo undō: Mūsā Bayofu ke to shinhōshiki kyōiku' [The Jadidist movement in Kashgar: The Musabayev family and new-method education], *Tōyō Gakuhō*, vol. 78, no. 1, 1996, p. 8.

[53] 'Misafir-i Fazılımızın Nutku [Our learned guest's speech], *Beyan'ül-Hak*, vol. 2, no. 71, 25 Recep 1328 (2 August 1910), pp. 1393–1396; 'Said Efendi Hazretlerinin Nutku Beliğlerinin Tercümesi' [Translation of the honourable Saʿid Effendi's eloquent speech], Hüseyin Hazım (trans.), *Beyan'ül-Hak*, 2 Şaban 1328/August 9, 1910, pp. 1409–12.

[54] Saʿid el-ʿAseli, 'Kaşğara Açık Mektub' [An open letter to Kashgar], *Beyan'ül-Hak*, vol. 2, no. 72, 2 Şabʿan 1328/August 9, 1910, pp. 1414–15.

[55] Michael A. Reynolds, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908–1918*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. 93.

sheikh ül-Islam. But it seems that in Kashgar, in a far-off corner of China, there's a *sheikh ül-Islam* produced every month![56]

The article continued in this satyrical vein, correctly identifying the mysterious visitor as Saʿid Muḥammad al-ʿAsali from Tripoli, and bringing up his association with the editor of *Maʿlumat*, Baba Tahir, who was by now a discredited figure on the Ottoman literary scene.[57] Although unsigned, the article's author may well have been the journal's editor, the Tatar publicist Abdürreşid Ibrahim, who like al-ʿAsali had made a name for himself as a traveller to the Far East. Ibrahim's antipathy towards the Syrian al-ʿAsali may have been a case of professional rivalry, or it may have had something to do with the strong Turkist line that Ibrahim was pushing through his journal. The Tatar would remain a critic of al-ʿAsali for years to come, penning pieces denouncing him as a fraud well into the 1920s.[58]

A sultanic envoy in exile

There are conflicting accounts of what happened next. The Russian ambassador in Istanbul reports that in the wake of the exposure, an investigation of sorts was carried out, and al-ʿAsali again found himself expelled from Ottoman territory.[59] Yet there is also evidence to the contrary, that al-ʿAsali left Istanbul on good terms, at least with the court. According to the British ambassador, al-ʿAsali was 'returning… to the Moslems of China as a missionary delegated by the caliphate'.[60] Instead of trying to adjudicate between these two contradictory accounts, we might instead entertain the possibility that both were true: that al-ʿAsali left Istanbul with the Ottoman court's blessing, but was out of favour with the ruling Young Turk party. The fact that al-ʿAsali was able to take with him to Kashgar the sultan's gifts would seem to support this interpretation. Such was the fractious state of Ottoman politics at the time that it was seemingly possible to wield the symbols of an imperial state in which one was persona non grata.

As for al-ʿAsali's original claim in Istanbul—that he was there as a representative of the Kashgaris—this may not have been entirely groundless. Whether or not the position of *sheikh ül-Islam* actually existed in Kashgar, there were no doubt some who felt that an Ottoman-style clerical hierarchy, with a *sheikh ül-Islam* at its pinnacle, *should* exist in China, and al-ʿAsali had as good a claim as any to be the most qualified Muslim for the job. After returning to Kashgar (now for a third time) in April 1911, al-ʿAsali fired back at his enemies in Istanbul, in the form of a letter to the Ottoman sultan signed by a hundred and sixty five Kashgari locals, refuting the accusations against him. Thanking the court for its gifts, they explained that 'in 1910 we sent Mavlana Sayyid Shami Damulla as our

[56] 'Kaşgar Şeyhü'l-İslam Mı, Baba Tahir'in Refik-i Sabıkı Mı?' [The *sheikh ül-Islam* of Kashgar, or Baba Tahir's former colleague?], *Tearüf-i Müslimin*, vol. 1, no. 8, 14 Receb 1328/July 22, 1910, pp. 136–37. The ʿAbd al-Qadir mentioned here may refer to Kashgar's chief qadi ʿAbd al-Qadir, or to the reformist scholar ʿAbd al-Qadir Damulla, who is known to have visited the Ottoman Empire in this period.

[57] In 1903 Sultan ʿAbd al-Ḥamid exiled Baba Tahir to North Africa for fraud. See Hatice Aynur, 'II Abdülhamid Dönemi Basın Yayın Dünyasının Kötü Adamı Malumatçı Baba Tahir' [A villain of the printing world in the age of ʿAbd al-Ḥamid II: The *Information*ist Baba Tahir], *Toplumsal Tarih*, vol. 20, no. 128, 2004, pp. 62–65.

[58] For example, Abdürreşid İbrahim, 'Çin'de İslam ve Hakan-ı Çin Tang Vang' [Islam in China and the emperor Tang Wang], *Sebilürreşad*, vol. 22, nos 547–48, 1923, pp. 11–13.

[59] Reynolds, *Shattering Empires*, p. 93.

[60] Foreign Office Records, FO 371/1016, p. 156.

plenipotentiary representative to the Holy Kingdom. . . . We have greatly benefited from his teaching, and honestly consider him to be a progressive member of society. Recently we hear that a reckless group has made accusations against him. We sincerely hope you will not pay heed to this wild talk'.[61]

Now positioning himself firmly as an Ottoman loyalist, al-ʿAsali made effective use of the sultan's prestigious gifts, and set about raising local donations for the Ottoman war effort. To the Muslims who contributed he may have held out some vague possibility of thereby becoming an Ottoman subject. In the treaty-port environment of early twentieth-century Xinjiang, where it was common for locals to pass themselves off as subjects of either Russia or Great Britain, the idea of taking up Ottoman subjecthood may not have seemed such an unlikely proposition. (Kaiser Wilhelm had recently announced his intention to represent the interests of Ottoman subjects in China, meaning that someone who obtained this status might have held out hope of becoming a protégé of Germany.) Kashgar's commercial and clerical elite were sceptical of al-ʿAsali's bona fides, and sent off a letter of complaint to Istanbul.[62] His activities naturally also raised eyebrows among Chinese officials. He finally ran into serious trouble in 1913, when a party of Arabs informed on him to local authorities the oasis of Khotan. These officials confiscated his donations and receipt books, as well as the hair of Muhammad's beard. In response, al-ʿAsali wrote again to the Ottoman sultan, asking him to request the Russian consul to intervene.[63] On his travels between Istanbul and Kashgar, al-ʿAsali explained, he had benefited from the assistance of Russian officials, and was confident that the consul would be able to restore his lost property and defend him against further attacks. Al-ʿAsali's allies in Kashgar also sent a letter to Istanbul, this time with eighty signatures. While they complained that some unscrupulous individuals were indeed collecting bogus donations for the Ottomans, al-ʿAsali himself was no fraud. On the contrary, they explained, Al-ʿAsali 'is a great and learned man. For fourteen years he has been spreading knowledge in our land, and is much loved by all'.[64]

It was this incident that finally prompted the Ottoman court to look more closely into the question of al-ʿAsali's identity. In response they received, via the ambassador in Saint Petersburg, a lengthy report from an Ottoman official in the Caspian Sea port of Baku. There he had interviewed a Muslim from Erzerum who was widely travelled in Central Asia and was familiar with al-ʿAsali's activities. According to this testimony, upon first arriving in Xinjiang, al-ʿAsali had presented himself not as an expert in hadith, but a Sufi shaykh of the Qadiriyya order. From the sceptical viewpoint of the report's author, this was simply a means for al-ʿAsali to ingratiate himself locally, but it is in fact consistent with Ibrahim Dabbagh's information that al-ʿAsali had spent time with the Qadiriyya in

[61] Archive of the Institute of Modern History, Academia Sinica (IMH below), 03-32-103-02-001.
[62] Cem Çetin and Kenan Göçer, 'Türk Havacılığının Kuruluşunda İane Kampanyaları' [Donation campaigns in the establishment of the Turkish airforce], in *Proceedings of International Balkan and Near Eastern Social Sciences Congress Series-Kırklareli*, Dimitar Kirilov Dimitrov et al. (eds), 2017, pp. 199–207. See also 'Şuun', *Sebilürreşad*, vol. 8, no. 188, 1912, p. 110.
[63] Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Babıali Evrak Odası (BOA BEO below), 4204/315286, p. 5. IMH 03-36-044-03-043. Note that Ghabdullah Bubi's account contradicts this version of events: he says that it was the Kashgar ʿulama who stripped al-ʿAsali of the hair, and that they installed it in a local mosque, on display to the public. See 'Shäekh Saʿid ʿAsäli Kem Ol?' [Who is Shaykh Saʿid ʿAsali?], in *Öch Tomlïq Saylanma Äsärlär*, MS Nikolai Lobachevsky Scientific Library, Kazan, vol. 2, fols 131a–132b.
[64] BOA BEO, 4204/315286, p. 6.

Baghdad during his early studies. It may also shed light on what al-ʿAsali was doing when Martin Hartmann found him maintaining a saintly shrine in Kashgar in 1902. The report went on: 'In a short space of time he came to have several thousand followers… Throughout the whole of Chinese Turkistan his name came to be regarded with extraordinary respect, and he obtained the status of a celebrated Sufi master (*pir*)'.[65] Not for the last time, the report aired the accusation that al-ʿAsali was exploiting his venerable status to procure young wives for himself: 'The wealthy and notable paid visits to him, and competed for the honour of obtaining his prayers by offering him their daughters'. Whether or not such scandalous claims influenced the response to al-ʿAsali's entreaties, the court chose not to intervene in his case, and the ultimate fate of the strand of the holy beard is unknown.

Of course, the Ottoman Empire was now on the verge of entering the First World War, and its officials no doubt had more important things on their mind. Although remote from the fighting, the tensions raised by the war would eventually come to touch Xinjiang, and put al-ʿAsali in an awkward position. While he was a loud advocate of Ottoman victory in the global conflict, the Young Turks who visited the region during the war were unanimously hostile to him, and sceptical of any contribution he might make to the Ottoman war effort. The CUP schoolteacher Ahmed Kemal considered his fundraising activities 'a stain on the name of Turkey'.[66] In his memoirs Adil Hikmet Bey, one of a party of *Teşkilat-i Mahsusa* spies who detoured through China in 1915, likewise portrays al-ʿAsali as a fraud and lecher, and also as a religious shape-shifter, who would opportunistically present himself as either shiʿa or sunni as the occasion required.[67] Muslims from Russia with pro-Ottoman proclivities took a similarly dim view of him. Ghabdullah Bubi, a Tatar theologian who spent the war years in Ghulja in exile from tsarist empire, encountered al-ʿAsali there in 1915.[68] Bubi believed he had seen through al-ʿAsali, supposing him not an Arab at all, but a clever Kashgari swindler, and was confident that his wristwatch from the Ottoman Sultan was a fake.[69] It seems the only man with a good word for al-ʿAsali in this period was Werner Otto von Hentig, the German officer who accompanied Oskar von Niedermeyer on a wartime mission to Afghanistan, and escaped into China when their mission failed. By September 1916, when von Hentig was being escorted out of the province, al-ʿAsali had set himself up as a teacher in the town of Kucha. There he treated von Hentig to an impressive dinner party, concluding it with a passionate invocation for the victory of Germany and Turkey in the Great War.[70]

Although he was disconnected from any efforts by the Central Powers to gain a foothold in Xinjiang, as British and Russian eyes grew increasingly paranoid toward pro-Ottoman intrigues in China it was inevitable that they would fall on al-ʿAsali. Responding to British

[65] BOA BEO, 4204/315286, p. 2.
[66] Ahmed Kemal Habibzade, *Çin-Türkistan Hatiraları* [Memoirs of Chinese Turkistan], Kitabevi, İstanbul, 1996, p. 160.
[67] Adil Hikmet Bey, *Asya'da Beş Türk* [Five Turks in Asia], Ötüken, Istanbul, 1998, pp. 238–40.
[68] On al-ʿAsali's intervention into conflict around school reform in Ghulja, see Mai-ha-mai-te-han Ka-ma-li, 'Yili xueye zhi zhong de xinjiu jiaoxuefa zhi zheng' [The struggle between old and new teaching methods in education in Ili], *Yili wenshi ziliao*, vol. 1, 1984, p. 79.
[69] Bubi, 'Shäekh Saʿid ʿAsäli Kem Ol?'
[70] Werner Otto von Hentig, *Von Kabul nach Shanghai: Bericht über die Afghanistan-Mission 1915/16 und die Rückkehr über das Dach des Welt und durch die Wüsten Chinas*, (ed.), second ed., Libelle Verlag, Konstanz, 2009, pp. 180–81.

and Russian pressure, governor Yang Zengxin first prohibited Ottoman subjects from working as teachers in Xinjiang, then decreed that they be expelled from the province. In the Spring of 1917, a hundred local Muslims of Kucha turned out to give al-ʿAsali a tearful farewell, as he was escorted by guard to the provincial capital of Ürümchi.[71] In April, Yang Zengxin telegraphed the Foreign Ministry in Beijing, informing them that al-ʿAsali wished to make his way back to Ottoman territory by sea, and asking permission to transport him eastwards. As Beijing weighed its response to Yang's request, the governor's communications became increasingly insistent: 'As long as this al-ʿAsali does not leave', he wrote in June, 'Xinjiang will not have a day of peace!'[72]

Eventually al-ʿAsali left Ürümchi en route to Shanghai in a party that included Adil Hikmet Bey and his companions from the *Teşkilat-i Mahsusa*. It was an unlikely combination of travelling companions, and one not destined to last for long. From the oasis of Barköl in eastern Xinjiang, al-ʿAsali made off on his own, heading to Beijing instead of accompanying the Turks to Shanghai.[73] From Beijing, he must have made his way either through Manchuria or Mongolia into Russia. The next reference we have to him occurs in the memoirs of a Turkish prisoner of war, who was on his way south from a POW camp in Siberia to Russian Turkistan, and met al-ʿAsali in Semipalatinsk, in what is now eastern Kazakhstan.[74] The Russian revolution and incipient civil war had made this dangerous territory to travel through, but al-ʿAsali's extensive contacts in Kashgari commercial networks eased the way for them. The two men entered Chinese territory in November 1918, heading south to Ghulja before crossing into Bolshevik-held Semirech'e. In February 1919, al-ʿAsali arrived in Tashkent, and by the middle of the year he had set himself up there as a hadith teacher.[75]

Discussion of al-ʿAsali's subsequent activities in Soviet Turkistan falls outside the scope of this article, but I do with to highlight a consistency to his methodology which can be identified across this period of transition. Just as he had earlier made a name for himself by touting the compatibility of Qing law with Islamic, al-ʿAsali rose to prominence in Tashkent in part by seeking to mediate the relationship between two very different social systems. As Paolo Sartori has discussed, in the early 1920s al-ʿAsali was recruited to juridical commissions that aimed to reconcile Islamic law with Soviet.[76] This interest in promoting concord between shariʿa and the Soviet system also informed al-ʿAsali's writings for the Soviet press, in which he sounded 'Islamic socialist' themes.[77] Until the middle of the decade, this approach seems to have paid off, even allowing him to continue to play the role of international go-between. In a report submitted in 1926 to the Eastern Bureau of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, the Uyghur

[71] Xie Bin, *Xinjiang youji* [A Travelogue of Xinjiang], Wenhai chubanshe, Taibei, 1974, p. 183.
[72] IMH 03-36-044-03-043.
[73] İsa Yusuf Alptekin, *Esir Doğu Türkistan için* [For captive Eastern Turkistan], Doğu Türkistan Neşriyat Merkezi, Istanbul, 1985, p. 134.
[74] Ziya Yergök, *Sarıkamış'tan Esarete (1915–1920): Tuğgeneral Ziya Yergök'ün Anıları* [From Sarikamish to exile: The memoirs of Brigadier Ziya Yergök], Remzi, Istanbul, 2005, pp. 188–91.
[75] Muminov, 'Fundamentalist Challenges to Local Islamic Traditions', p. 254.
[76] Paolo Sartori, 'What Went Wrong? The Failure of Soviet Policy on *sharīʿa* Courts in Turkestan, 1917-1923', *Die Welt des Islams*, vol. 50, nos 3–4, 2010, pp. 397–434.
[77] Al-Shami, 'Abu Zarr Ghifari (*radiya llahu ʿanhu*) va Sotsiyalizm' [Abu Dharr Ghifari and socialism], *Qizil Bayraq*, 20 July 1922, p. 3, cited in Ashirbek Muminov, 'Shami-damulla i ego rol' v formirovanii "sovetskogo islama"', *Kazanskii federalist*, no. 1, 2005, p. 237.

revolutionary Abdullah Rozibaqiev wrote that in 1925 the Tashkent plenipotentiary for the People's Commissariat for Foreign Affairs had permitted al-ʿAsali to undertake a trip to Kashgar, where (by this account) he was well received by local Chinese officials.[78] Rozibaqiev was unimpressed with this decision, to say the least. In his view, al-ʿAsali was 'without question dangerous for the interests of the healthy development of the revolutionary movement in Xinjiang'. Yet if the Soviets were looking for an envoy with standing among the local Muslim population in Xinjiang, they could hardly have done better than the Syrian scholar.

Before concluding this article, I must also briefly take up the question of what mark, if any, al-ʿAsali left on Islam in Western China. At first glance, there would seem to be some truth to the verdict that the local scholar Sabit Damulla is said to have delivered on him in 1918: 'Because he never stayed in one place for any length of time, he hasn't trained any students, and he's not going to'.[79] There is no identifiable *ahl-i hadith* in Xinjiang to compare with his following in Soviet Turkistan in the 1920s.[80] One of very few known pupils of al-ʿAsali was Muḥammad Ibrahim al-Khutani (1896–1969), a native of Qaraqash in the Khotan oasis, who studied with him in Kashgar some time around 1913. Khutani then continued his studies in Bukhara, before spending the rest of his life as a hadith scholar in the Hijaz, never again to set foot in Xinjiang.[81] The only figure described as a disciple of al-ʿAsali who was active in political life in Xinjiang is ʿAbd al-Karim Khan ʿIsazada.[82] ʿIsazada played a leading role in Kashgar politics in the 1930s; he served in the short-lived East Turkistan Republic, and became secretary of Waqf Administration and the Education Council in the Ürümchi-aligned administration that succeeded it, before succumbing to the provincial warlord Sheng Shicai's purge of 1937.

Yet a proviso is necessary here. It is hard to trace any intellectual chain of transmission through the political turbulence of the 1930s and 1940s in Xinjiang, and into the Communist period. Given this, the lack today of a distinct *silsila* originating with al-ʿAsali may not be all that surprising. There is some reason to believe that al-ʿAsali's influence was widespread, if not necessarily deep. We can derive some sense of this from an anecdote in the travelogue of Zhao Zhenwu (1895–1938), an important Sinophone Muslim intellectual who led the first party of Hui students to Cairo's al-Azhar in 1932. While passing through Medina, Zhao encountered there a Turfani by the name of ʿAbd al-Ghafur, a one-time pupil of al-ʿAsali. ʿAbd al-Ghafur had studied in Bukhara, but had fled the anti-

[78] Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii, f. 514, op. 1, d. 181, ll. 31ob–32. Note that the catalogue of the Yanbian Prefectural Archive (online at time of writing, but now unavailable) describes a document dating to January 1927, entitled 'Order of the Governor of Jilin Province on the Turk Shami Damulla (*Xia-mi Da-mao-la*) spreading his pan-Islamic ideology (*da Huiguo zongjiao zhuyi*)'. If this is indeed a reference to al-ʿAsali, then his trip to China evidently took him all the way to Manchuria and must be considered a significant part of his activities in the 1920s.

[79] Yergök, *Sarıkamış'tan Esarete*, p. 205.

[80] Note, though, that Paolo Sartori and Bakhtiyar Babajanov have recently questioned the existence of this circle and argued that al-ʿAsali's intellectual influence in Soviet Turkistan may have been exaggerated. "Being Soviet, Muslim, Modernist, and Fundamentalist in 1950s Central Asia," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 62 (2019), p. 137

[81] Ibrahim ibn ʿAbd Allah Ḥazimi, *Mawsuʿat Aʿlam al-Qarn al-Rabiʿ ʿAshar wa-l-Khamis ʿAshar al-Hijri fi al-ʿAlam al-ʿArabi wa-l-Islami: min 1301–1417 H* [Encyclopaedia of luminaries of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries AH in the Arabic and Islamic world: 1301–1417 AH], Dar al-Sharif, Riyad, 1998, vol. 1, p. 70.

[82] Baoerhan, 'Fan yisilan zhuyi he fan tuerqi zhuyi', p. 186.

religious policies of the Bolsheviks, and was now living in the Bukharan lodge in Medina. Zhao Zhenwu, it turned out, had also had an opportunity to study with al-ʿAsali, while the Syrian was on the run in Beijing in 1917–18, making the two men scholarly peers.[83] ʿAbd al-Ghafur had sad news to relate: al-ʿAsali, he told Zhao, had gone blind from crying for forty days and forty nights at Soviet oppression of the religion. Sending the party of budding Azharites on their way, the Turfani presented Zhao with some of his Arabic verse as a farewell gift, and Zhao recognized the style of his one-time teacher: 'some of them were indeed worthy of the inheritance of Mr ʿAsali'. Here in the holy land of Islam, these two Muslims from China had found a bond in their shared respect for their Syrian master, Saʿid Muḥammad al-ʿAsali.

Conclusion

This article has clarified a number of aspects of al-ʿAsali's life, and shed light on what was already an eventful career prior to his arrival in Soviet Turkistan. Counting his initial study tour through India, we have followed him on a total of four major expeditions spanning the Ottoman Empire and Asia. These activities raise a series of questions of interpretation, not all of which are easily solved. What was it that drove him on his almost ceaseless travels? The young al-ʿAsali was reasonably well educated and probably ambitious, but any thought of conventional scholarly progression must have been stymied when he was caught up in the controversy surrounding *al-Maʿlumat*. At this point al-ʿAsali seems to have sensed an alternative in the growing climate of Muslim interest in Asia. Taking advantage of this this opportunity, he used his mobility between Kashgar and Istanbul to gradually enhance his own status. In this seems to fit quite well David Commins's notion of the Islamic modernists as 'middle-status ulama', who sought an alternative to advancement through Ottoman institutions of learning.[84] No doubt, this was an unorthodox path to prominence, and not without its risks, but the strategy paid off to a degree, raising al-ʿAsali up from the position of humble shrine-keeper in Kashgar to an audience with the Ottoman sultan. Unfortunately for al-ʿAsali, the conditions of possibility for this freelance go-between role would only last as long as the empires that created them. By the end of the First World War, they no longer pertained, although by now he had constructed a template for activity that could equally serve him the new environment of the Soviet Union.

The evidence presented here warrants a considerable rethinking of the political role that has traditionally been assigned to al-ʿAsali. Far from an envoy of the Ottoman sultan to China (let alone one backed by European imperial interests), al-ʿAsali in fact spent much of his time in Xinjiang as an exile from the sultan's domains. It was only with the Young Turk revolution that he was able to re-establish himself in Ottoman circles, by approaching the sultan as a representative of the Muslims of Kashgar. There was clearly a transaction to be had here—a public gesture of foreign support for the new sultan to boost the court's flagging prestige, in return for investing al-ʿAsali with symbols of Ottoman authority. Clearly, though, the court had little notion of who they were actually dealing with. Cultivating good relations with imperial officials, be they Russian, British, Chinese, or

[83] Zhao Zhenwu, *Xixing riji* [Diary of a journey to the west], Chengda shifan chubanbu, Beijing, 1933, pp. 294–295, 299–300. Zhao's statement here that he studied with al-ʿAsali in the eighth year of the Chinese Republic (i.e. 1919) must be corrected in light of what we know of al-ʿAsali's itinerary through this period.
[84] Commins, *Islamic Reform*, 5.

Ottoman (and eventually, Soviet) was simply part of al-ʿAsali's modus operandi. For some, playing the Ottoman missionary in Kashgar, and the Kashgari representative in Istanbul, was prima facie evidence of fraud. Yet at the same time, we should acknowledge that al-ʿAsali was offering here a practical solution to a genuine challenge facing Muslims in China at this time: how to forge links across state boundaries when the states in question were unwilling, or unable to do so? There is no denying that he enjoyed a significant degree of local support, support which quite likely derived from sections of Xinjiang society whose voice is not well represented in other sources from this period.

Something similar can be said for the question of 'pan-Islamism'. While al-ʿAsali had no mandate as the kind of pan-Islamic envoy that earlier scholarship cast him as, his approach was oriented towards many of the same putative goals of such activity. As late as 1915, while his critics inveighed against him and denounced his fund-raising activities to Istanbul, al-ʿAsali was continuing to lobby the Ottoman court for the appointment of a consul in western China, and for the investiture of a *sheikh ül-Islam*. In these letters he dramatised the Great War as a conflict between the 'Islamic world' (*bütün Islam alemi*) and the infidels, and even his most hostile critics had to grudgingly admit that he was obtaining thousands of signatures for such petitions.[85] Without question, therefore, al-ʿAsali's do-it-yourself form of pan-Islamism served to promote the symbols of Ottoman authority, and cultivate the idea of the sultan as patron of Islam, in this remote region of Asia. In terms of popular views of an 'Islamic world' in a place like Xinjiang, his activities were much more meaningful than any official outreach on Istanbul's part. I believe therefore we can still salvage a notion of pan-Islamism from the critique that it has undergone, if we accustom ourselves to treating it as something that arose not at the metropoles, but in the space between them.

The final, and most difficult question, involves al-ʿAsali's positioning as an intellectual.[86] His formation was clearly diverse: he studied with hadith experts as well as Sufis, applied himself to medicine as much as to belles lettres. This background set him up for a life that would seem to defy easy categorization in terms of fixed political or religious identities. He brought to Xinjiang associations with some of the leading modernist scholars of his day, and while there proselytised loudly, disruptively even, in favor of new pedagogies and the restructuring of religious institutions. Yet it seems he was also not

[85] 'Umum Türkistan-i Çini ve Moğolistan-i Çini ahali-i müslimesi tarafından, hilafet-i İslamiyye merkezi İstanbulda bulunan *wa-amrahum shūrá baynahum* kavl-i keriminin mısdakı meclis-i mebʿusanda okulmaq içün bir arıza' [A petition from the entire Muslim population of Chinese Turkistan and Chinese (Inner?) Mongolia to be read in Istanbul, at the centre of the Islamic caliphate of Istanbul, in the parliament which represents confirmation of the noble words 'whose affair is (determined by) consultation among themselves'], in Ghabdullah Bubi, in *Öch Tomlïq Saylanma Äsärlär*, vol. 2, fols 127a–130b.

[86] More of al-ʿAsali's own writings may yet come to light and give us greater purchase on this question. Apart from al-ʿAsali's history of Eastern Turkistan mentioned above (n. 49), we also have evidence that he wrote a travelogue of his time in China. Al-ʿAsali mentioned this work, titled *al-Raḥl wa-l-Naql*, in his speech to the Ulama Association in Istanbul in 1910 (see n. 53), and its existence is confirmed by the Russian archaeologist S. F. Ol'denburg, who met al-ʿAsali in 1910, and noted in his diary that he was the author of "a simple *sayaḥatnama*." S. F. Ol'denburg, "Dnevnik Turkestanskoi ekspeditsii, sniariazhennoi po Vysochaishemy poveleniiu Russkim komitetom po izucheniiu Srednei i Vostochnoi Azii (dnevnik podgotovlen k pechati M. D. Bukharinym i A. K. Kamalovym)," in M. D. Bukharin (ed.), *Vostochnyi Turkestan i Mongoliia: Istoriia izucheniia v kontse XIX – pervoi treti XX veka* (Moscow: Pamiatniki istoricheskoi mysli, 2018), vol. 2, pp. 556, 568. My thanks to Ablet Kamalov for bringing this reference to my attention.

averse to adapting to prevailing local models of religious authority in Xinjiang, e.g. in playing the part of Sufi shaykh. This was not necessarily untypical for his time. Recent critiques have divested terms such as 'Jadidism' of the sense of distinct factional loyalties that they once had in the scholarly literature, and directed our attention towards rhetorical and political strategies that might alternate and/or combine 'traditionalist' or 'modernist' standpoints. Furthermore, as Henri Lauzière's work has shown, standard definitions of 'Salafism' as a purist prescription for all of life's questions look anachronistic when applied to an earlier cohort of modernists, who nonetheless accorded strict theological priority to the founding texts of Islam.[87] In this period, those who, like al-ʿAsali, may have been 'Salafi in creed', exhibited a wide range of intellectual interests—not least among them a curiosity towards foreign religions, something that al-ʿAsali had in common with scholars such as Rashid Riḍa. Indeed, some of the evident confusion surrounding the question of al-ʿAsali's religious affiliations may well be attributable not so much to his opportunism, but to his consistency in applying this modernist outlook, one feature of which was to downplay the significance of *madhhab* distinctions within the Islamic community. The irony is that it was probably his secularising, nationalist critics who were more interested in policing such boundaries than he himself was.

[87] Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2016.