

Cherishing Knowledge from Afar: Late Imperial China's Discovery and Rediscovery of Arabo-Persian Texts

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Abstract:

Since the late-13th century, as China was integrated into the wider Mongol Empire, knowledge from the Islamicate world played a role in China's official and private scholarly circles. Arabic and Persian texts on astronomy, medicine, as well as on theology, poetry, history and Islamic jurisprudence found their ways into the heart of China's intellectual hubs, introducing Western scholarly discourses to communities of interested readers in China. This little-studied channel of transmission connected China with the centers of scholarship throughout the Islamicated world, creating a space of shared ideas, texts and book culture.

Through contouring late imperial China's engagement with Arabo-Persian texts, the talk will address the issues of movement of knowledge across geographical and linguistic boundaries, and the eastward expansion of Western concepts. It will highlight the socio-political conditions and scholarly attitudes in China that shaped its reception of Arabo-Persian knowledge, and the methodologies that Chinese scholars applied to reading and interpreting texts in Arabic and Persian and to reconcile scholarly traditions.

The talk will demonstrate that Arabic and Persian texts constituted epistemic vehicles, introducing Western concepts, theories and methodologies to late imperial China. At the same time, it will suggest that China's Arabo-Persian scholarship served as a precursor to scholarly developments that took place in the larger Islamicate world during the Early Modern period.

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