

## *Al-Wasatiyya* and the Emerging Discourse of Islamic Revival in the People's Republic of China

Over the past two decades, the concept of *Al-Wasatiyya*, meaning “middle way” or “centrism,” has emerged as an important element of Islamic discourse across the world. The salience of *Wasatiyya* owes much to the efforts of the prominent Qatar-based Sunni ‘*alim* Yusuf al-Qaradawi, whose considerable intellectual influence and media presence have both popularized the term and elevated it as a compelling conception of Islamic identity and civilization—though it is critical to note that Qaradawi is by no means its only interpreter or champion. Recent scholarship has explored the “phenomenon” of Qaradawi and the development and dissemination of his *Wasati* thought (*al-fikri al-wasati*). This article continues this exploration in the People's Republic of China (PRC), where a host of academics, bureaucrats, and officials have expounded *Wasatiyya* while changing its meaning according to their particular intellectual, political and security concerns.

I begin by describing what I call the three “forums” of legitimate Islamic discourse in China: the official (the government), the semi-official (the non-governmental China Islamic Association, its schools and publications), and the unofficial (academics and private authors). As I will show, while all three forums are constrained by the PRC's ideological and security requirements (e.g. one cannot legally publish a call for jihad against the atheist state), they differ in their degrees of latitude, with the official forum having the least latitude in terms of what can be said about Islam, the unofficial forum having considerably more latitude, and the semi-official forum lying somewhere in between. We can thus think of legitimate Islamic discourse in the PRC as a pyramid, narrow and tightly constrained at the top and somewhat broader with more relaxed constraints at the base.

These widening contours have led to some surprising consequences; concepts that are legitimated at the peak of the pyramid in the official discourse can be creatively reinterpreted lower down to express additional and even divergent views of Islam. As we will see, while the government has endorsed and touted *al-Wasatiyya* (Ch. 中道 or 中道主义) in the official forum as exemplary of Islam's emphasis on moderation and compatibility with traditional Chinese thought, the content of the nominally sanctioned concept has expanded as it has traveled down the pyramid. In some cases, Chinese Muslim scholars have interpreted the concept of *Wasatiyya* as an example of the compatibility but also the essential difference between Islam and other religious and philosophical traditions in the Chinese cultural field. Most strikingly, at the unofficial base of the pyramid, the concept has been used to promote the writings of Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who elaborates it as a principle for reviving and empowering Islamic civilization—certainly not something the PRC government is eager to promote. These Chinese Muslim scholars thus use the sanctioned language of *Wasatiyya* to subvert official restrictions on Islamic discourse, articulating a Muslim identity independent of their Chinese one, advocating a revival of Islam in China, and affirming their ties to the larger Muslim world.