

# Islam in China

JungYeon Kim Cho<sup>1</sup>

When posed with a question concerning Islam, most people picture in their head a country from the Middle East, the land where Islam was born. However, they fail to realize that Islam is a widely followed religion across the world with rich traditions of their own. China certainly qualifies as one of those countries where Islam has had a major effect in forming her culture. Islam in China boasts a long history and a rich tradition, giving birth to an influential culture that has often times changed the course of Chinese history.

Islam was first introduced to China in the year of 650, only eighteen years after Muhammad's death, during the Tang Dynasty (618 - 907).<sup>2</sup> The Caliphate of Uthman ibn Affan, the third Caliph of Islam, sent a delegation led by Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas, the maternal uncle of Muhammad, who invited the Chinese Emperor to recognize Islam.<sup>3</sup> The emperor was generally pleased with the teachings of Muhammad, seeing that many aspects of the religion was compatible to the teachings of Confucius, and granted the "freedom to propagate their faith and expressed his admiration for Islam."<sup>4</sup> It was during this time that the first Mosque in the country, Huaisheng Mosque, was built in the city of Guangzhou to show respect to the delegation

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1 JungYeon Kim Cho is a Ph.D. Candidate. She serves as Researcher of Torch Trinity Center for Islamic Studies

2 BBC Team, "Islam in China (650-present)," BBC - Religion & Ethics, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/china\\_1.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/islam/history/china_1.shtml).

3 Lianmao Wang, *Return to the City of Light: Quanzhou, an eastern city shining with the splendour of medieval culture* (Fuzhou : Fujian ren min chu ban she, 2000), 99.

4 Dawood C. M. Ting, "Islamic Culture in China," in *Islam the Straight Path*, ed. Kenneth W. Morgan (New Dehli: Motilal Banarsidass Publications, 1987), 344.5

sent by the Caliph. Following the delegation, Muslim settlements started to sprout in China, mostly comprised of Arab and Persian merchants who came through the sea route.<sup>5</sup> The Tang Dynasty also saw the establishment of Arab embassies, to officially recognize the relations between the two powers. However, not all early contacts between Islam and China were respectable and friendly. In fact, the two powers of the region collided shortly after in 751 AD, resulting in Battle of Talas River over the control of the Syr Darya, a river in current day Kazakhstan. The Muslim forces, led by the Caliphate Abbasid, came out victorious over the Tang force, and succeeded in ceasing control over the region. Nevertheless, the relations between two powers did not aggravate, as the Abbasids never ceased to send embassies to the Tang Dynasty, and even progressed to aiding each other militarily as seen during the rebellion of An Lushan.

During this time, Arab and Persian traders steadily arrived in China traveling through the Silk Road and through naval routes. The settled traders built mosques within the Chinese border, most notably along the Canton River. It was these early settlers and their influences that ultimately pioneered the growth of Chinese Muslim population and ultimately the Hui ethnic group. They were also responsible for bringing various elements of the Muslim culture into the Chinese world; for example, the Arab and Persian traders introduced the game of polo, various Muslim cuisines, and their knowledge of medicine to China.

The Muslims continued to settle in China during the Song Dynasty (960 - 1279). In 1070, the Song emperor invited 5,300 men from Bukhara to settle within the Chinese cultural borders, to act as a buffer between the Han China and the Liao Empire. These men were led by Prince Amir Sayyid, who is currently regarded as the father of the Muslim community in China. It was also he who renamed the Islam to *Huihui Jiao* (the Religion of Huihui), from *Dashi fa* (law of the Arabs), further contributing to localization of Islam culture in China.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, in 1080, about 10,000 Arab men and women settled in northern and north-eastern provinces of China.<sup>7</sup>

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5 Raphael Israeli, *Islam in China* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2002), 291.

6 *Ibid.*, 284.

7 *Ibid.*, 283-284.

During the Song Dynasty, the Muslims in China continued to be an integral part of the Chinese economy. The Muslims were perceived simply as skilled traders; however, they began to dominate the import and export industry to the south and the west. In fact, the office of Director of General of Shipping in Quanzhou, regarded as one of the largest seaports in China at the time, was held by a Muslim.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the cultural diffusion continued between the two cultures, as the Chinese *materia medica* was revised and improved to include about 200 medicines taken from Avicenna's *The Canon of Medicine*. Meanwhile, the famous literary work, *One Thousand and One Nights* otherwise known as *Arabian Nights*, was greatly influenced by Chinese storytelling of this time; also, a number of short stories were set in China, including "Tale of Qamar al-Zaman and Budur", "The Story of Prince Sayf al-Muluk", and "The Hunchback's Tale".<sup>9</sup>

Islamic influence in China grew rapidly during the Yuan Dynasty (1271 - 1368), ruled by the Mongols. When China was ruled by Han Chinese, the Muslims were regarded as important members of the society in terms of trading, but they were not entrusted with influential positions within the government due to the Han Chinese's aversion towards minor ethnic groups. However, such implications of Muslims within the society changed with the advent of the Mongol rulers. The Yuan Dynasty was ruled by Mongols, following the conquest of Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan, and to keep the Han Chinese in check, the Mongol rulers decided to elevate the status of many minor ethnic groups within China, among them the Muslims. Furthermore, to balance the numerical advantage the Han Chinese held, the Yuan Dynasty greatly encouraged Muslim immigration into China, including Arabs, Persians, and Turkish. The Mongols wanted an experienced group of people to govern the newly acquired territory, they started to entrust the governing positions to the newly migrated Muslims. For example, the Yuan territory was broken into twelve smaller districts, and Iranian historian Rashid-al-Din Hamadani argues that eight of the twelve smaller districts were governed by

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8 Yusuf Abdul Rahman, "ISLAM IN CHINA," Islamic-World.net, [http://islamic-world.net/islamic-state/islam\\_in\\_china.htm](http://islamic-world.net/islamic-state/islam_in_china.htm).

9 Ulrich Marzolph, *The Arabian Nights: An Encyclopedia* (Oxford: ABC-CLIO, 2004), 521-522.

a Muslim governor, while the remaining four districts had Muslims as the vice-governor.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the Muslim population within the borders of China greatly increased during this time, reaching four million by the fourteenth century.<sup>11</sup>

The Muslim influence in development of science in China during the Yuan Dynasty was impressive. Since the Mongol rulers aspired to promote science crucially related to agriculture, they turned to established Muslim scientists to assist in such efforts. Particularly, Kublai Khan brought Iranian scientists to Beijing to build observatories and make advances in calendar making and astronomy.<sup>12</sup> For example, Jamal ad-Din, a Persian astronomer, provided Kublai Khan with seven Persian astronomical instruments when called from Bukhara to help the Mongol government, considerably advancing the Chinese astronomical technology.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the results obtained by Islamic geographers were brought to China during the Yuan Dynasty, providing a source for the “Da Ming Hun Yi Tu”, the oldest surviving world map from the East Asian region. Also, Muslim culture made essential contributions concerning medicine, as various Arab medical texts in the field of anatomy, pharmacology, and ophthalmology were introduced to China during this time. One of the important medical texts translated into Chinese was Avicenna’s *The Canon of Medicine*, a book considered to be one of the most famous books in the history of medicine.<sup>14</sup>

The Muslims also continued to have a major impact on the economy of China during the Yuan Dynasty. They increased their influence on the economy, as numerous Muslims including Persians, Arabs, and Uyghurs held positions overseeing taxation and finance. It was also during this time that the port of Guangzhou met its demise while the port of Quanzhou received the torch for being the largest port in China. The port of Quanzhou, led by the Chinese Muslim Pu Shougeng, submitted to Mongol rulers, while the port of Guangzhou resisted the Mongol

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10 Ting, 348-349.

11 Israeli, 285.

12 Richard Bulliet et al., *The Earth and Its Peoples* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2005).

13 Walter Fuchs, *The “Mongol Atlas” of China* (Peiping: Fu Jen University, 1946).

14 Jing-Feng Cai, “Traditional Medicine in China Today,” in *Oriental Medicine*, ed. Jan Van Alphen et al. (Chicago: Serindia Publications, 1995), 201.

power, leading to the destruction of Guangzhou and the rise of Quanzhou as the new central port. The port of Quanzhou was even “extolled as the world’s greatest port in the travel accounts of Marco Polo and Ibn Battuta.”<sup>15</sup>

Other interesting aspects of Chinese culture were also formed during this era, influenced by Muslim culture at the time. It was during the Yuan Dynasty that the term “Huihui” became the standard word used to denote Muslims in Chinese documents, leading the way for the name of the Hui ethnic people. Furthermore, the capital city of Yuan Dynasty, Dadu, was constructed by a Muslim architect Amir al-Din.<sup>16</sup> Despite the Muslim architect, the buildings follow the taste of traditional Chinese architecture, and Dadu, located at present day northern Beijing, officially became the capital of Yuan Dynasty in the 1270s.

The Islam influence in China experienced a significant growth spurt during the Yuan Dynasty; however, “The Ming dynasty may be called the golden age of Muslims in China, for long years of peace and prosperity brought a flowering of art and culture in which the Muslims participated.”<sup>17</sup> To begin, the Muslims were heavily involved in the founding of the Ming Dynasty; in fact, many of the commanders who had a major role in overthrowing the Yuan government were Muslims. Furthermore, some scholars even argue that Hongwu Emperor, the founder and the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, was a Muslim, supported by the fact that his wife was a Muslim, that many of his trusted generals were Muslims, and that he forbade the drinking of wine.<sup>18</sup> The claim is still disputed; however, the existence of the argument itself is enough to show the deep relationship between the Muslims and the Ming Dynasty.

Muslims during the Ming Dynasty were marked by integration into Chinese society. Ming Dynasty pushed for isolationism, with immigrants and trades strictly controlled by the central government; as a result, the Chinese Muslims were iso-

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15 Anthony Garnaut, “The Islamic Heritage in China,” *China Heritage Newsletter*, no. 5 (2006), <http://www.chinaheritagenewsletter.org/editorial.php?issue=005>.

16 People’s Daily Online, “The Hui Ethnic Minority,” People’s Daily Online, <http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/data/minorities/Hui.html>.

17 Ting, 350.

18 Ibid.

lated from Muslim cultures from other regions of the world. Such phenomenon led to Sinicization, with Muslims assimilating their culture and language to those of Han Chinese. It was during this time that the Muslims adopted the Chinese language, dress, and surname. As a result, the integration led to Muslims being rather indistinguishable from Han Chinese, apart from their religion, rendering segregation practically impossible by looks.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Chinese Islamic method of writing began to develop during this era, “including the practice of writing Chinese using the Arabic script (xiaoqing) and distinctly Chinese forms of decorative calligraphy.”<sup>20</sup>

Muslims also occupied influential roles within the Ming government. Perhaps, this era saw the birth of the most famous Muslim from the Ming Dynasty, and perhaps in Chinese history, Zheng He. He was a mariner, an explorer, a diplomat, and a fleet admiral known for making the famous voyages around the globe. Particularly, his expeditions had a great impact in Southeast Asia, as the Indonesian Islamic scholar Hamka claimed in 1961 that “The development of Islam in Indonesia and Malaya is intimately related to a Chinese Muslim, Admiral Zheng He.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, as mentioned above, several of the closest generals to the Hongwu Emperor during his conquests were of Muslim origin, including Lan Yu and Mu Ying.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the Ming Dynasty saw the flowering of Islamic scholarship. In particular, the city of Nanjing became the center of Islamic study. The famous Islamic writers Wang Daiyu and Liu Zhi were from the city of Nanjing, whose works include *A Commentary on the Orthodox Faith (Zheng jiao zhen quan)*, *Islamic Philosophy (Tian fang xing li)*, and *The Last Prophet of Islam (Tian fang zhi sheng shi lu)*. Also, Hu Dengzhou, an Islamic scholar, started an Islamic school in Nanjing, which taught hadith, the Qur’an, and Islamic law. Furthermore, as

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19 Israeli, 292.

20 Anthony Garnaut, “Islamic Calligraphy in China,” *China Heritage Newsletter*, no. 5 (2006), [http://www.chinaheritageneewsletter.org/features.php?searchterm=005\\_calligraphy.inc&issue=005](http://www.chinaheritageneewsletter.org/features.php?searchterm=005_calligraphy.inc&issue=005).

21 Rosey Wang Ma, “*Chinese Muslims in Malaysia*,” Fruits for the Week, [http://210.0.141.99/eng/malaysia/ChineseMuslim\\_in\\_Malaysia.asp](http://210.0.141.99/eng/malaysia/ChineseMuslim_in_Malaysia.asp)

22 Dun Jen Li, *The Ageless Chinese: A History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), 276.

the integration of Muslim into Han Chinese progress advanced, the Hui people focused on showing the Han Chinese people that Islam was not inferior to the teachings of Confucius, and translated numerous Muslim literatures into Chinese to aid in this effort.

Despite all the social, economical, and political progress the Chinese Muslims made within the society during the Yuan and the Ming period, the social treatment of Chinese Muslims took a sharp turn during the Qing Dynasty. Qing Dynasty was founded by Manchu people, a minor ethnic group, and in order to keep all the ethnic groups in check, the Manchu rulers adopted a tactic to divide the ethnic groups and keep them at bay.<sup>23</sup> The Manchu especially used brute force on the Muslim community, for their support for the previous Ming Dynasty.<sup>24</sup> The government even went as far as forbidding constructions of new mosques and pilgrimage to Mecca, confronting the Muslim interests directly.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the relationship between the Qing government and the Muslims deteriorated rapidly, ultimately leading to rebellions.

The Qing Dynasty witnessed five Muslim rebellions, perhaps Panthay Rebellion among the better known. Panthay Rebellion occurred in the Yunnan region, a region spanning current day Myanmar and southern China. Coming out as losers of the Opium War, the Qing government was forced to pay huge compensation to the western powers, and the government turned to the Yunnan region, imposing heavy taxes on its people. Most of the taxpayers in the Yunnan region were Muslims, and combined with the Qing government's aggressive policies toward the Hui people and the numerous casualties during the previous revolts, the Muslims grew more and more dissatisfied with the government.<sup>26</sup> Finally, Muslims began to revolt against the government, but none were really threaten-

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23 BBC Team.

24 Ahmad Lutfi, "China's Islamic Awakening," Asiamedia, <http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=11135>

25 Jean Kaim, "Les Musulmans Chinois," *France Asie*, X (1954): 605.

26 Alexander Berzin, "Historical Sketch of the Hui Muslims of China," The Berzin Archives, [http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/study/islam/historical\\_interaction/overviews/history\\_hui\\_muslims\\_china.html](http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/study/islam/historical_interaction/overviews/history_hui_muslims_china.html).

ing. However, as a response, the Qing government organized a massacre of Muslims in the region, only fueling the political unrest, and the minor revolts became extremely well-organized, growing into a full blown rebellion by 1856. The rebellion was quelled by 1873, but by then, up to a million people, mostly Muslims, had fallen in the Yunnan region. The government, still unsatisfied with the Muslims, ordered massacre of Yunnanese Muslims as a punishment of the rebellion, causing many Muslims in the region to flee and take refuge.<sup>27</sup> As in the case of Panthay Rebellion, the Qing government did not hold back in committing massacre or even genocide as some scholars argue, as a million Muslims died in the Panthay Rebellion, several million in the Dungan Revolt, and five million during the suppression of Miao people in Guizhou.

It was among these hardships that the interaction between Muslims in China and outside world became active again, due in part to advancements in transportation, and in part to the forced abandonment of isolationism. In particular, Sufism was introduced to China during this era. Sufism spread throughout the Northwestern China during the earlier part of Qing Dynasty, creating many Sufi orders including the Qadiriyya, the Khufiyya and the Jahriyya.

The Qing Dynasty fell in 1911, and with the fall, the policy of brutality towards the Muslims finished. Sun Yat Sen established the Republic of China, who asserted that the country equally belonged to the Han, the Hui (Muslim), and the Tsang (Tibetan) people. With the establishment of the new modern government, Sino-foreign interactions increased, helping Chinese Muslims to reach Middle East and study Islam at a more formal environment such as Al-Azhar University in Cairo. Academic activities also flourished domestically around Beijing as there were more than a hundred Muslim periodicals at the time before the Sino-Japanese War of 1937.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, after experiencing extreme hardships during the Qing Dynasty, the Chinese Muslims felt the need for unity among Muslims, leading to the founding of Chinese Muslim Federation in Nanjing in 1912, and similar

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27 Mark Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State: Volume 2: The Rise of the West and Coming Genocide* (London: I. B. Tauris Co. & Ltd., 2005), 288.

28 *Ibid.*, 458.



establishments followed in Beijing (1912), Shanghai (1925), and Jinan (1934).<sup>29</sup> It has been estimated that right before the Communist Revolution, that the Muslim population in China proper, a region excluding Mongolia and Xinjiang, exceeded 48 million, the number of mosques exceeded 42,000.<sup>30</sup>

However, the prosperity of Muslim culture in China did not last long as the Communist government took control and founded the People's Republic of China in 1949. Under the Cultural Revolution, the minority cultures were devastated, and Hui people were not an exception. The Shadian Incident claimed more than 1,600 Muslim lives while in Xinjiang, copies of Qur'an were burned and Muslim imams were killed.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the Communist government strongly believed that power emanated from one center, the traditional belief of Mandate of Heaven, and frequently accused Muslims along with other followers of religions "for harboring separatistic ambitions."<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, in 1979, Deng Xiaoping seized control of the government, and the government began to liberalize its policies toward Muslims and the practice of Islam.

Since then the Muslims were largely unhindered in their practice of Islam in China. However, the political unrest in Xinjiang among the Uyghur Muslims still poses a threat to the government's belief of national unity, and Muslim activities are restricted in the region. Nevertheless, the government is largely respectful for the religion as seen by the policy taken by the government toward treatment of pigs during the year of the pig, as the government ordered advertising agencies to resist using pig images, cartoons, or slogans.<sup>33</sup> Currently, around 25 million people are estimated to be of Muslim faith, accounting about two percent of the entire population, and the Muslim population is experiencing a modest growth,

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29 Dru C. Gladney, "The Salafiyya Movement in Northwest China: Islamic Fundamentalism among the Muslim Chinese?" in *Muslim Diversity: Local Islam in Global Contexts*, ed. Leif O. Manger (Surrey: Curzon, 1999), 457.

30 Vergilius Ferm, ed., *An Encyclopedia of Religion* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976), 145.

31 Merle Goldman, "Religion in Post-Mao China," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 483 (1986): 145-156.

32 Israeli, 253.

33 Louisa Lim, "Ban Thwarts 'Year of the Big' Ads in China," National Public Radio, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7480083>.

estimated at 0.9% per year.<sup>34</sup>

China is not known for its Muslim population or history. However, the role that Islam has played in the history in China is rather significant. Islam was introduced to China only eighteen years after Muhammad died, accounting for the length of history of Islam in China. Furthermore, Muslims were crucial in the development of early Chinese culture, as they were responsible for trade, calendar making, astronomy, and advanced medicine. The Muslims enjoyed a great deal of success and prosperity during the Yuan Dynasty and Ming Dynasty, even claiming blood relationship to the founder of Ming Dynasty. However, such success turned into the very reason for the demise of Chinese Muslims, as the Qing Dynasty massacred the supporters of previous dynasty, leaving millions of Muslims dead. The modern history was not free of radical changes either, as the Muslims once again enjoyed religious freedom under Sun Yat Sen and his Republic of China, but experienced painstaking persecution under the Communist Party and the People's Republic of China. However, with the advent of Deng Xiaoping, the Muslims were granted a right to their religion and lifestyle, which still continues to today. Currently, the Muslim population is centered around Ningxia and Gansu, and they enjoy a relatively free lifestyle, practicing their religion freely.

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34 Patrick Johnstone and Jason Mandryk, *Operation World* (Carlisle: Paternoster Lifestyle, 2001), 160.

## **Abstract**

### **Background**

Muslim population in China accounts for only of the total population; however, because of China's immense population, even such low population represents a large number of people, a number certainly not to be overlooked. In reaching any population, a study of their historical background and their culture is essential, and the Chinese Muslims boast a unique history and culture, distinguished from fellow Muslims in other regions as well as other ethnic groups in China. A research into the historical and cultural backgrounds of Muslims in China is reported here.

### **Results**

Islam was first introduced in 650 AD, only eighteen years after Muhammad's death. The religion was generally accepted with respect in China, because of its compatibility with Confucianism. Through trading with the Middle East, the birthplace of Islam, Muslim influence in the Chinese region grew, particularly in the fields of trading, astronomy, and medicine. However, the Islam in China experienced a radical change in their standing within the Chinese society during the changes in the dynasties, a rapid growth during the Yuan and Ming Dynasty, but a brutal oppression during the Qing Dynasty. Such altercation in their status was continued through modern history, as the democratic Republic of China protected the rights to freedom of religious practice, while the communist People's Republic of China viewed Muslims as a dissonant element of the society. Such treatment went through a modest amendment as the Muslims were granted freedom to practice their religion.

### **Conclusions**

This research indicates that the history of China is one of the oldest in the world, and that the cultural influence of Islam in China throughout her history is too vital to be overlooked in discussion of current Chinese culture.

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