

Islam in China



Islam in China dates back to the days of the Caliphate of Uthman ibn Affan (radiAllahu anhu), the third Caliph of Islam. After triumphing over the Byzantine, Romans and the Persians, the Caliph sent a deputation to China in 29 AH (650 CE, eighteen years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (salAllahu alayhi wasalam). The Ancient Record of the Tang Dynasty describes a landmark visit to China by Saad ibn Abi Waqqas (radiAllahu anhu), one of the companions and maternal uncle of the Prophet Muhammad (salAllahu alayhi wasalam) in 650 C.E. This event is considered to be the birth of Islam in China.

Saad Ibn Waaqas (radiAllahu anhu) invited the Chinese Emperor Yung-Wei to embrace Islam. Although the emperor Yung-Wei, found Islam to be a bit too restrictive for his taste, he respected its teachings. To show his admiration for Islam, the emperor gave Saad (radiAllahu anhu) complete freedom to propagate Islam and approved the establishment of China's first mosque at Ch'ang-an. The magnificent Canton city mosque known to this day as the 'Memorial Mosque.' That mosque still stands today after fourteen centuries.

As time passed, relations between the Chinese and the Muslim heartland continued to improve. Many Muslim businessmen, visitors, and traders began to come to China for commercial and religious reasons. [Arabs had already established trade in the area before Prophet Muhammad (salAllahu alayhi wasalam).] The Umayyads and Abbasids sent six delegations to China, all of which were warmly received by the Chinese.

The Muslim presence was resented by the disbelievers. However, their scorn was replaced by respect when their provocation met with their resounding defeat at the hand of a small Muslim force in 133 AH (751 C.E.) This victory eventually led to

control over the entire Central Asia, and in 138 A.H. (756 C.E.), Caliph Mansur posted a unit of 4,000 troops to consolidate the Muslim influence.

These victories opened the doors of China for the Muslims to spread and propagate the faith. Over the years, many Muslims settled in China and they married Chinese women. They established mosques, schools and madrasas. Students from as far as Russia and India would attend these madrasas. It is reported that in the 1790's, there was as many as 30,000 Islamic students, and the city of Bukhara, - the birthplace of Imam Bukhari, one of the foremost compilers of hadith - which was then part of China, came to be known as the "Pillar of Islam."

The Muslims who immigrated to China eventually began to have a great economic impact and influence on the country. They virtually dominated the import/export business by the time of the Sung Dynasty (960 - 1279 CE). Indeed, the office of Director General of Shipping was consistently held by a Muslim during this period.

In spite of the economic successes the Muslims enjoyed during these and later times, they were recognized as being fair, law-abiding, and self-disciplined. Thus, there is no record of appreciable anti-Muslim sentiment on the part of the Han (Chinese) people.

By the beginning of the Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644 CE) Islam had been flourishing in China for 700 years. Up to this time, the Muslims had maintained a separate, alien status which had its own customs, language, and traditions and was never totally integrated with the Han people. Under the Ming Dynasty, generally considered to be the golden age of Islam in China, Muslims gradually became fully integrated into Han society.

The early Muslims in China faced oppression, and the tyrannical Manchu dynasty (1644-1911) was the harshest era. During this period, five wars were waged against the Muslims: Lanchu (1820-28), Che Kanio (1830), Sinkiang (1847), Yunan (1857) and Shansi (1861). In these destructive wars, the Muslims suffered inestimable losses. Countless Muslims were martyred. Half of Kansu's population, totalling 15 millions, was Muslim. Only 5 million could escape alive. Chinese Muslims sustained similar setbacks in several other small and big wars. During the past three centuries, the Muslim population has decreased at 30%.

The Manchus slaughtered Muslims and razed mosques. Led by determined leaders like Yaqoob Beg (1820-77), Muslims liberated the whole of Turkestan and set up an Islamic state that lasted from 1867 to 1877. The new Turkic-Chinese Muslim power in Central Asia, comprising of the provinces of Yunan, Szechawan, Shensi and Kansum, was seen with anxiety by the Russians and the British who had colonial designs of their own.

The Muslims, inspired by examples of leaders like Ma Mua-Ming-Hsin, scored many victories. In Yunan, the Muslims, under Tu Wenhsin, routed the emperor's troops. He assumed the name of Sultan Sulayman and rallied the Muslims of Tibet to rise up against the Chinese.

During the Mao Tse-tung's revolution in 1948 the Chinese Muslims supported him. The Muslims also joined his Red Army. However, at no stage of their cooperation with the great Chinese leader did the Muslims forsake their Islamic identity even for

a while. But at beginning of communist rule in China, the Muslims, as well as other ethnic minorities found themselves once again oppressed. They actively struggled against communists before and after the revolution. In fact, in 1953, the Muslims revolted twice in an effort to establish an independent Islamic state [in regions where Muslims were an overwhelming majority]. These revolts were brutally suppressed by Chinese military force followed by the liberal use of anti-Muslim propaganda.

At present, according to official statistics there are 28 million Muslim in China but in 1936 it was estimated that the Muslim population was 48 million. The government census of 1982, however, put the number much lower, at 15 million. By this time total population has increased 3-4 fold. So we can conclude that the total Muslim population has increased minimum by that same proportion. In 2000, the number of Muslims in China is estimated at 200 million (IINA). These Muslims represent ten distinct ethnic groups. The largest are the Chinese Hui, who comprise over half of China's Muslim population and are scattered throughout all of China. There is also a high concentration of Hui in the province of Ningxia in the north. Under the Communist pretext of unification of national education, Islamic schools were closed and their students transferred to other schools which taught only Marxism and Maoism. Other outrages included the closing of over 29,000 mosques, the widespread torture of imams, and executions of over 360,000 Muslims. There are approximately 3,500 mosques in China at present. Today the campaign for assimilation started during the Cultural Revolution has slowed somewhat and the Turkic Muslims have greater freedom to express their cultural identity. The government has, for instance,

Allowed the reinstatement of the Arabic alphabet for use with the Uygur language.

According to population statistics of 1936, the then Kuomintang Republic of China had an estimated 48,104,240 Muslims. After the introduction of Mao's policies, this number was reduced to ten million. No official Chinese explanation has ever been given for this apparent disappearance of around 38 million Muslims. The mass extermination and destruction of the Muslims of China pales before the much publicized plight of Tibetan monks or the democrats of Tiananmen Square.

Since religious freedom was declared in 1978, the Chinese Muslims have not wasted time in expressing their convictions. There are now some 28,000 mosques in the entire People's Republic of China, with 12,000 in the province of Xinjiang.

In addition, there is a large number of imams available to lead the Muslim community (in Xinjiang alone there are over 2,800). Islamic literature can be found quite easily and there are currently some eight different translations of the Qur'an in the Chinese language as well as translations in Uygur and the other Turkic languages. The Muslims of China have also been given almost unrestricted allowance to make the Hajj to Mecca. In 1986 there were some 2,300 Chinese Muslims at Hajj.