

# ISLAM IN CHINA

by  
**Yusuf Abdul Rahman**

---

[The Ancient Record of the Tang Dynasty describes a landmark visit to China by Saad ibn Abi Waqqas (ra), one of the companions of Prophet Muhammad (s) in 650 C.E. This event is considered to be the birth of Islam in China. The Chinese emperor Yung-Wei respected the teachings of Islam and considered it to be compatible with the teachings of Confucius. To show his admiration for Islam, the emperor approved the establishment of China's first mosque at Ch'ang-an. That mosque still stands today after fourteen centuries.]

Muslims virtually dominated the import/export business in China during Sung Dynasty (960 - 1279 CE). The office of Director General of Shipping was consistently held by a Muslim during this period. During the Ming Dynasty (1368 - 1644 CE), a period considered to be the golden age of Islam in China, Muslims fully integrated into Han society by adopting their name and some customs while retaining their Islamic mode of dress and dietary restrictions.

Anti-Muslim sentiments took root in China during the Ch'ing Dynasty (1644 - 1911 CE), which was established by Manchus who were a minority in China. Muslims in China number more than 35 million, according to unofficial counts. They represent ten distinct ethnic groups. The largest are the Chinese Hui, who comprise over half of China's Muslim population. The largest of Turkic groups are the Uygurs who are most populous in the province of Xinjiang, where they were once an overwhelming majority.]

---

Although it may come as some surprise, Islam has survived in China for over 1300 [1400] years. It has done so despite such upheavals as the Cultural Revolution as well as regimes hostile to it.

Even though there are only sparse records of the event in Arab history, a brief one in Chinese history, *The Ancient Record of the Tang Dynasty* describes a landmark visit to China by an emissary from Arabia in the seventh century. *Saad ibn Abi Waqqas* (ra), one of the companions of Prophet [Muhammad (s)], led the delegation [in 650 C.E.], which brought gifts as well as the belief system of Islam to China. According to the traditions of Chinese Muslims, this event is considered to be the birth of Islam in China.

Although the emperor of the time, *Yung-Wei*, found Islam to be a bit too restrictive for his taste, he respected its teachings and considered it to be compatible with the teachings of *Confucius*. For this reason, he gave Saad complete freedom to propagate the faith among his people. To show his admiration for Islam, the emperor ordered the establishment of China's *first mosque* at Ch'ang-an. The mosque still stands today, after thirteen [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 (s).] The Umayyads and Abbasids sent six delegations to China, all of which were warmly received by the Chinese.

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.

An interesting example of this synthesis by Chinese Muslims was the process by which their *names* changed. Many Muslims who married Han women simply took on the name of the wife. Others took the Chinese surnames of Mo, Mai, and Mu - names adopted by Muslims who had the names Muhammad, Mustafa, and Masoud. Still others who could find no Chinese surname similar to their own adopted the Chinese character that most closely resembled their name - Ha for Hasan, Hu for Hussein, or Sai for Said, and so on.

In addition to names, Muslim *customs* of dress and food also underwent a synthesis with Chinese culture. The Islamic mode of dress and dietary restrictions were consistently maintained, however, and not compromised. In time, the Muslims began to speak Han dialects and to read in Chinese. Well into the Ming era, the Muslims could not be distinguished from other Chinese other than by their unique religious customs. For this reason, once again, there was little friction between Muslim and non-Muslim Chinese.

---

The rise of the *Ch'ing Dynasty (1644 - 1911 CE)*, though, changed this. The Ch'ing were *Manchu* (not Han) and were a minority in China. They employed tactics of divide-and-conquer to keep the Muslims, Han, Tibetans, and Mongolians in struggles against one another. In particular, they were responsible for inciting anti-Muslim sentiment throughout China, and used Han soldiers to suppress the Muslim regions of the country.

When the *Manchu Dynasty* fell in **1911**, the Republic of China was established by *Sun Yat Sen*, who immediately proclaimed that the country belonged equally to the Han, *Hui (Muslim)*, Man (Manchu), Meng (Mongol), and the Tsang (Tibetan) peoples. His policies led to some improvement in relations among these groups.

After *Mao Zedong's* revolution in **1948** and the 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.

---

Today, the Muslims of China number some *20 million*, according to unofficial counts. The government census of 1982, however, put the number much lower, at 15 million. 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 *Ningsha* in the north.

*After the Hui*, the remainder of the Muslim population belong to *Turkic language groups* and are racially Turks (except for the *Mongol Salars* and *Aryan Tajiks*). The Turkic group is further divided between the *Uygurs*, *Uzbeks*, *Kazakhs*, *Kirgiz*, *Tatars* and *Dongshiang*. *Nearly all of the Turkic Muslims are found in the western provinces of Kansu and Xinjiang*. The largest of these Muslim groups are the Uygurs.

The *Uygurs* are most populous in the province of *Xinjiang*, where they make up some 60% of the total population. This relatively small percentage is due to the massive influx of non-Muslim Chinese into the province in recent times, a situation that has brought problems of assimilation and raised concerns about the de-Islamization of one of China's predominantly Muslim regions. [Muslims in Central Asia, under the USSR, were subjected to a similar population management, [Russification of Central Asia](#)].

Muslims, and the *Uygur* in particular, suffered tremendously under the regime of *Mao Zedong* and his "*Cultural Revolution*." During the communist reign of terror, there was a violent campaign to eradicate all traces of Islam and of the ethnic identity of all non-Chinese. The *Uygur language*, which had for centuries used Arabic script, was forced to adopt the *Latin* alphabet. The Uygurs, as with most believing Muslims, were subjected to *forced labor* in the some 30,000 communes set up in the predominantly Muslim provinces. The imams and akhunds were singled out for humiliating punishments and tortures....[and were forced to] tend to pig farms, which were sometimes kept in government-closed mosques.

Under the 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.

---

*Since the death of Mao* and the end of his hard-line Marxist outlook nearly fifteen years ago, the communist government has greatly liberalized its policies toward Islam and Muslims. And despite the horrors of the Cultural Revolution, Islam has continued to thrive in China.

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. There is, however, continued discrimination against the Turkic Muslims by the immigrant Chinese (favored by the government) who have settled in the far western province of Xinjiang. This immigration has posed a problem as Han Chinese are migrating to Muslim areas at the rate of 200,000 a year. In many places where Muslims once were a majority, they are now a minority.

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).

There has been an increased upsurge in Islamic expression in China, and many nationwide Islamic

associations have been organized to coordinate inter-ethnic activities among Muslims. 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 [[Reflections from the Hajj](#)]. In 1986 there were some 2,300 Chinese Muslims at Hajj. (Compared to the 30 Soviet Muslims allowed to make the same pilgrimage, this number seems quite generous, considering that the Soviet Muslim population outnumbers China's by nearly four times).

China's Muslims have also been active in the country's internal politics. As always, the Muslims have refused to be silenced. Several large demonstrations have been staged by Muslims to protest intrusions on Muslim life. Last year, for instance, Muslims staged a massive protest rally in Beijing to demand the removal of anti-Islamic literature from China's bookstores. The Turkic [group] Muslims have also held demonstrations for a greater voice in the running of their own affairs and *against the continued large-scale immigration of non-Muslims* into their provinces. In the news this spring are more reports of demonstrations and struggles by Chinese Muslims to regain their rights. Insha'Allah they will be successful.

Another Article: [China's Islamic Connection](#)

---

**Allah:** Allah is the proper name in Arabic for The One and Only God, The Creator and Sustainer of the universe. It is used by the Arab Christians and Jews for the God (Eloh-im in Hebrew; 'Allaha' in Aramaic, the mother tongue of Jesus, pbuh). The word [Allah](#) does not have a plural or gender. Allah does not have any associate or partner, and He does not beget nor was He begotten. SWT is an abbreviation of Arabic words that mean 'Glory Be To Him.'

**s or pbuh:** Peace Be Upon Him. This expression is used for all [Prophets of Allah](#).

**ra:** Radiallahu Anhu (May Allah be pleased with him).

---

Copyright © *Al-Basheer*, Vol. III, No. 1.

Copyright © 1997 Web version prepared by Dr. A. Zahoor.

---

[Islam in Peninsular Malaysia](#)

[Quotations on Islamic Civilization](#)

[Biography of Prophet Muhammad \(pbuh\)](#)

[What Non-Muslims Say About Prophet Muhammad \(pbuh\)](#)

[Muslims in China and South-East Asia](#)

[Back to Home Page](#)

**(<http://users.erols.com/zenithco/islchina.htm>)**

