Islam in China

Hui and Uyghurs
Between Modernization and Sinicization

Jean A. Berlie

White Lotus

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For my family, the living and the dead

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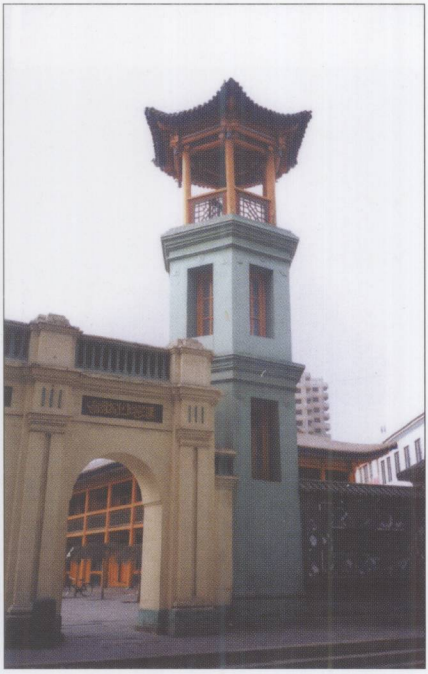
1. Fellow Hui travelers in a bus between Linxia, Gansu, and Xining (January 2003)

2. Koranic students in Xining Great Mosque, Qinghai



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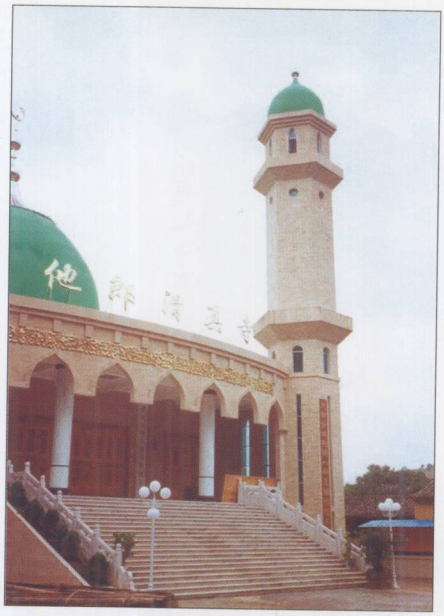

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Introduction

"China is the safest and the best region on earth for the traveler."
Ibn Battuta

The world population includes approximately a billion and a half Muslims, among who are approximately 50 million citizens of the People's Republic of China (officially 20 million). Islam plays a significant role in the country, even if it concerns only ten of China's fifty-six official nationalities. There were nearly 400 million Chinese Buddhists at the beginning of the twentieth century, and there are currently 100 million. Catholics and Protestants would, respectively, be 4–5 million, and Taoists 2–5 million.

The Han Chinese control decision-making, but in order to communicate with the Middle East and other Islamic countries, the Hui (called "Ho" in Thailand and "Panthays" in Burma) are useful. Another major group researched here, the Uyghurs, occupy northwestern China, a part of Central Asia. These Muslims are not well known, and it is crucial to understand the role current Chinese modernization plays among them. This study attempts to explain the role of Sinicization or cultural change as a result of direct interethnic contact between the Han and Muslims in China.

According to an analysis furnished by the Islamic Summit of Doha, Qatar, on 12 November 2000, peace and development are the main problems of contemporary Islam. Modernization is necessary to achieve this goal. It seems useful to understand Islam and the Muslims from different viewpoints in order to find peaceful solutions between Islam and the world. The search for a durable peace, in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, concerns not only the government in Beijing but also Muslims in Central Asia.

Based on fieldwork in China between 1986 and 2004, the book details two Muslim groups among different Muslim minorities in China, Northern Thailand, and Burma (Myanmar) and seeks to promote a better understanding and knowledge of

Muslim communities in their host societies. Two in-depth studies of the Hui in Yunnan and the Uyghurs in Xinjiang Autonomous Region explain the history, society, and religion of these minorities. Chapter 5, based on research during 1990–2004, deals with the Hui of northern Thailand locally called "Ho," Panthays from Yunnan in Mandalay, and Burmese Muslims in Ruili, Kunming, and Jinghong. Its main point is to evaluate the impact of modernization and Sinicization. The lack of influence of Sinicization on the Burmese Muslims in Yunnan is explained.

Modernity is conveyed via the acculturating filter of Sinicization. The Hui and other Muslims in China do not consider themselves as *dhimmi* (in Arabic, a minority) and generally accept their condition as a Chinese minority (*minzu*). Sinicization is a question of acculturation of the "others" by Chinese civilization. It creates an impression of public order for the majority and unites (*tuanjie*) all Chinese citizens.

Beijing's cardinal principle is safeguarding unity. The law aims to enforce the national basic concept of *Juguo Tuanjie*, national unification or the unity of the whole nation. This principle is valid everywhere in the national territory, in particular in Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan. Similarly, China wants a unity or union (*tuanjie*) of all minorities, and this also concerns two "nationalities," the Hui and the Uyghgurs studied here. This principle of unification is not unique. In May 1754, Benjamin Franklin published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* a cartoon entitled "Join, or Die" preaching unity for the emergent American polity.

Modern China is unique in a globalizing world, and the Muslims of the People's Republic of China (PRC) are no exception. From the eighth century onward, Muslims were authorized to settle and to practice their religion in Chinese territory. Even if turbulent periods in the nineteenth century have shaken the Northwest and Yunnan, Chinese Muslims (Hui) always adjusted to Chinese society. In 1957, Yang, author of *Islam in China*, thought that the goal of the Chinese government was to "destroy all religions." This was partly true in the past, but Islam in China as well as Taoism (Daoism), Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism are well defined by Document 19 of March 1982 and the new constitution.

Islam in China is not well known. Guangzhou (Canton), "the South Gateway of China," is an ancient historical point of departure for the study of religions. The missionaries followed the seasonal winds in the Indian Ocean and China Seas. Arab pilots, and later Portuguese navigators, knew how to use the monsoon winds. Marco Polo (1254–1324) and Ibn Battuta (1304–77) described Canton's religions and Islam, in particular. In 1345, Abu Abdullah Mohammed Ibn Battuta mentioned the practice

of cremation for Chinese and Hindu funeral rites. During that period an important Muslim community resided in western Guangzhou. A distant relative of the Prophet is buried there. It also shows that the Hui-everywhere resident in China-live in cities with close contact in many regions (Canton is linked to central and northern China). Muslims reside on the main axis of communication. Guangzhou lies at the confluence of the Dong and Bei Rivers of the Pearl River system, China's third largest. Canton was also one of the first cities marked by religious syncretism and by global business linked to Macao. In fact, the proliferation of religions existed in Guangzhou well before the establishment of a Portuguese settlement in Macao (c.1555), handed over as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China in December 1999.

One can ask if religion is a well-defined concept in China. The character for "religion" does not exist in Chinese; one should rather speak of "teaching" or "school." Is the personality cult devoted to Mao Zedong also a religion? In Shaoshan, the Great Leader's native city in the southern province of Hunan, I was able to discover the existence of effigies of him, jointly worshipped on domestic altars, with Guanyin, the Goddess of Mercy (*Avalokiteshvara*). For Li Hongzhi, its founder, the Falungong ("The Wheel of the Law") is a religion. Confucianism, not an institutional religion, is indirectly studied here. Confucianism influences Sinicization, which transforms the minorities via Chinese culture. Religion requires reexamination. Religion is a part of Chinese civilization, even if it does not occupy the first place as in India. No other civilization has, during so many centuries, served as a bond for so many people. The place occupied by religion in the society and its acceptance by the State has varied according to period. China does not give autonomy to religions, but freedom of religious belief has been inscribed in the constitution since 1954. Despite this, between 1958 and 1962, and during the Cultural Revolution of 1966–76, there was intensive repression of all religion.

The People's Republic of China recognizes only five religions. In theory, no other religion is officially accepted aside from Islam, Taoism, Buddhism, Catholicism, and Protestantism. A spectacular return of religious belief is noticeable in the post-1980s modernization that drastically transformed China. Sinicization, the cultural contact with the Chinese, continues to produce an acculturation of all the minorities enforced for two millennia. Chinese Muslims, called Hui, did not escape this acculturating process during the last thousand years.

After thirteen years of total suppression, religious practices were re-authorized in December 1978. Churches, mosques, and temples began to reopen the following

year. Atheism does not figure anymore in the constitution. The Marxist-Leninist postulate of religion as "opium of the people" is completely forgotten. The reforms of Deng Xiaoping (*gaige kaifang*) have brought profound changes, thus improving social life. The opening of the country and the multiplication of exchanges with other countries have supported an interest in religion. These have profited from the widening of the governmental religious policy to regain life and develop beyond the provisions of the Party. The development of religious liberty is in a way parallel to economic growth: both depend upon reforms. Without them, Muslims would never have marched in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. The position of the Bureau of Religious Affairs has remained rather neutral since the 1980s. In 1989, Muslim pilgrims trained in Beijing since the beginning of June were not prevented from going to Mecca. In recent years, numerous books on religion have appeared and new institutes have done research on the fashionable theme, "culture and religion." In an attempt to harmonize the relations of Lamaism with the Chinese government at the highest level, the Dalai Lama's brother was officially invited to the Autonomous Region of Tibet in September 2002.

This work is based on a long study which began in 1986 with the help of many Muslim and Chinese friends in the provinces of Yunnan, Guangxi, Guangdong, and Sichuan, as well as in Beijing. From 1987 to 2003, fieldwork included long interviews with Hui and Uyghurs, conferences on Islam, and the publication of articles on Chinese Islam. In 1992, beginning in Pakistan (Lahore and Gilgit), other provinces and autonomous regions were visited: Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region, Gansu, and Sichuan. The Hui Autonomous Region of Ningxia was studied for the first time in 2003. In Beijing, imams were interviewed on their community and on current questions such as terrorism and *jihad*. In January 2003, a long trip brought the author to numerous mosques to meet imams from Beijing to Ningxia, in Gansu, Qinghai, Xinjiang (Urumchi *[Wulumuqi]*, Kashgar, and Aksu), Sichuan, and Yunnan.

This study uses the Chinese *pinyin* transcription system. A glossary of Chinese characters is included. Scholarly transcriptions of Turkic and Arabic languages are not strictly followed, nor does this work always follow a chronological order.

The maps are by Philippe Raggi, who is warmly thanked. This book has greatly benefited from the readings and re-readings of many friends, and I particularly wish to thank James Archer.

Jean A. Berlie
Bangkok, August 2004

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