CHAPTER 11

The Phoenix Mosque 凤凰寺, 凤凰清真寺

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Hangzhou’s History

The Phoenix Mosque, also known as The Phoenix Temple, is an historical testament to the rise of the political and economic fortunes of the Persians in late thirteenth–early fourteenth-century east Asia. Built in 1281 in Hangzhou, it served the growing Persian Muslim community who had moved to the coastal region as part of the Chinggisid absorption of the former Song lands. In its history, two episodes had drastically changed the political and cultural fortunes of the city. Sometime after 1127, the Southern Song made it their temporary capital (Xingzai) following their expulsion from the north by the Jurchen (Jin) dynasty, and in 1276, the city fell to the Chinggisids who, under the Mongol general Bayan Noyan, proceeded peacefully to occupy the city and open its gates to an influx of westerners:

In the Yuan period the Hui-hui (from Samarqand) spread over the whole of China . . . By the Yuan period the Muslims had spread to the four corners (of China), all preserving their religion without change. (Ming Shi)\(^1\)

Considering the extent and impact of this contained population explosion, surprisingly few artefacts and still fewer buildings or other traces from the Yuan period remain today. At least two religious buildings were constructed by foreigners in the first decade of Yuan rule. Almost all trace of one, the Nestorian church constructed in 1281 by Mar Sargis, has disappeared. However, the Phoenix Temple on Zhongshanlu Street still stands today. It was built in 1281 and remains a monument to the western, mainly Persian-speaking Muslims who flocked to Quinsai (Khansai-Hangzhou) in response to the needs of the

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1 Cited in Leslie, Islam in Traditional China, 79.
new Chinggisid administration. The five Chinese steles housed in the Phoenix Temple complex unanimously confirm the mosque's location:

Situated to the south of the Occidental Quarter of Silk Textiles (the Westerners’ Wen-Jin Fang 西文锦坊). Facing east, it is very high. (Hong Zhi 6th year, Ming Dynasty, 1493)

Since the construction of the temple of True Religion in the Wen-jin Fang (embroidered silk quarter) of the walled city of Hangzhou, a long time has gone by. (1743)

Then they [the Uighurs] chose the westerners’ Wen-jin Fang [quarter of brocade/embroidered silk] for their establishment, and wrote on its pediment: Fenghuang, the Phoenix (1892)

A local gazetteer affirms the address of the mosque but also refers to the existence of a nearby Uighur mosque and the long-gone Nestorian church.² Before the recent reconstruction of Imperial Street and in particular the rebuilding of the Phoenix Mosque's imposing Persian-style gateway, the mosque was not a building easily discovered without clear directions. These various historical references underline the continued importance of the mosque throughout the centuries.

The Shi Fang³ Temple is west of the Chunxi Bridge. It was founded by Nestorian Christians [Yelikewen Shi] during the Yuan dynasty.

The Temple of Worship [Li Bai Ssū] is south of the west Wen Jin Fang. It is the place where the Muslim [Huihui] masters of the Yuan dynasty called out to Buddha [presumably God is meant].

The Uyghur Temple [Weiwwuer Si] is west of the Qufu³ Bridge. It was founded by Uighurs during the Yuan dynasty. Now the placard above its entrance reads: ‘Longevity of the Spirit’ [Ling Shou ‘Immortality of the Soul’].⁴

Over the centuries, the mosque has been given a variety of very different names. It is referred to as the Li Bai Ssū (Temple of Ritual Salutations) on some steles

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² On the Nestorian church also built in 1281 see Sturton, “The Site of the Nestorian Monastery at Hangchow,” 82–85.
³ Shi Fang is used in Chinese Buddhism to mean ‘the ten directions’ (eight compass points plus up and down). It is possible that it is used here in error, instead of ‘Shi Zi’ = ‘Cross’.
⁴ Xia Shizheng (1475), Chenghua Hangzhoufu Zhi, juan 47, 13a; unpublished translation by Florence Hodous.