MISSCELLANEA

ESTABLISHED ISLAM AND MARGINAL ISLAM IN CHINA FROM ECLECTICISM TO SYNCRETISM

When Islam came to China during the Tang Dynasty (7th-10th Centuries), and for a long period thereafter, there was no question of the Muslims Sinicizing or of the Chinese Islamizing. For Islam was brought to the Middle Kingdom by Persian and Arab traders who remained in constant contact, until the end of the Mongol rule in China (14th Cent.), with their countries of origin. Although they settled in China, they remained out of it, so to speak, because of the virtual extra-territorial rights accorded to them, together with the freedom to conduct their life as they wished. Neither did the Muslims in China attempt to spread their faith overtly, because they must have been aware, from the very outset, of the vitality of the Chinese system and of the strength of the unitarian Chinese state attached to that system, which would make any mass Islamization unlikely if not impossible. So, “Muslims in China” rather than “Chinese Muslims” would be the adequate way of defining the Muslim settlement in China until the Ming Reign (1368-1644). Under this dynasty, however, Chinese Islam, responding to vigorous local pressures, underwent a process of material acculturation into its Chinese environment. Arabic names, which were theretofore exclusive among the Muslims in China, gave way to Chinese names, or at best continued to survive along side with the newly adopted Chinese names; Arabic and Persian speech, which had been the lingua franca of Muslims in China, yielded before the irresistible sweep of the Chinese tongue, although some interspersed words of the previous languages remained in use. Similarly, Muslim traditional clothing gradually disappeared, leaving only the vestige of the turban, used by Chinese Muslims during prayer. Mosques, whose dominant architectural feature—the minaret—had been transplanted into China, also changed their shape during the Ming; not only did they adopt the Chinese pagoda shape, which made them outwardly indistinguishable from Buddhist or Taoist temples, but they were interspersed between regular dwelling houses so as not to attract much attention.

This low-profile stance adopted by the Muslims during the Ming and thereafter, had its intellectual manifestations as well. A Muslim author of the 18th Century 1), attempted a systematic reconciliation between Confucianism and Islam, designed in its style to placate Chinese literati. Still another Chinese Muslim treatise of the 19th Century 2), links Chinese mythology to Islamic history, in order to lend to Islam an historical depth which would be acceptable to the history-minded Chinese. It claims that Fu-hsi, the legendary first monarch of China 3), was a descendant of Adam:

1) Liu Chih in his treatise Wu-Kung Shih-i. This work is cited in A. Vissière, Etudes Sino-Mahométanes, Paris, 1911, I, p. 117.
2) Ch' u T'ien Ta-tsan Chi-chiec. Cited by Vissière, p. 120.
3) Fu-Hsi was canonized during the Han as the oldest of the Three Sovereigns. He came to be described as having a dragon's body and a man's head. His birth, like that of the founders of the Great Dynasties, was miraculous, his mother conceiving him by stepping
He came from the West and his offspring are the Chinese. The Doctrine of Islam, brought by Fu-hsi, was altered in the course of time, but Confucianism is derived from it, though it has lost the notion of God, which became confused with Heaven 4).

Ma An-li, the author of the treatise, argues:

Before the Three Dynasties 5), all literati were Muslim. After King Wu of the Chou, Chinese literati were still predominantly true literati: they had not yet turned their backs totally on Islam. But after the era of the Great Feudatories, Yang and Mo 6) brought about confusion of the doctrine. Fortunately, our Saint (Confucius) transmitted the Book of Change, presented a summary of the Book of Poetry and the Book of History, and preserved the tradition of Shang-ti in such a way that it was no longer interrupted. He did so remarkably, that the following generations were able to reassert the law of the literati and return to the Muslim cult 7).

The theory of the common origin of Islam and Confucianism, designed to reconcile the two cultures, was not merely a literary creation of an eccentric individual. The Sian Monument, which is extant in a mosque in Shensi 8), was written in Chinese characters and exhibited outside the mosque itself, so that it was exposed to scrutiny by the general literate public. The Monument too, bears witness to the same spirit of reconciliation and ostensible will of the Muslims to compromise with Confucianism:

Sages have one mind and the same truth, so they convince each other without leaving a shadow of doubt... In all parts of the world, sages arise who possess this uniformity of mind and Truth. Muhammad, the Great Sage of the West, lived in Arabia long after Confucius, the Sage of China. Though separated by ages and countries, they had the same mind and Truth. The Great Western Sage (Muhammad) passed away ages ago... His teachings were: to purify oneself by bathing, to nourish one’s mind by diminishing the wants, to restrict one’s passions by fastings, to eliminate one’s faults as the essential element in self-cultivation, to be true and honest as the basis for convincing others, to assist at marriages and to be present at funerals 9).

All these, are of course values that would be acceptable to Chinese. But, Chinese Muslims’ accommodating attitudes towards Confucianism, coupled with their material acculturation into their host culture, far from creating a new syncretic on the footprint of a giant. He invented the Eight Trigrams and nets for hunting and fishing. (See Watson, W. Early Civilization in China, London, 1966, p. 12).

4) Vissière, I, pp. 120-1.
5) The first three Chinese dynasties: Hsia, Shang, Chou (approx. 2200-200 B.C.).
6) These apparently refer to Yang Chu (a 4th Century B.C. Confucian philosopher and Mo-tzu (a 5th Century B.C. utilitarian philosopher).
7) Cited in Vissière, I, pp. 120-1.
8) The date of the monument is uncertain, but it goes back apparently to the late Ming. For details of this controversy and the full text of the inscription, see Broomhall, Marshall, Islam in China, London 1910, pp. 83-98.
9) Broomhall, pp. 84-5.