Rahim Raza

**THE IMAGE OF CHINA IN INDO-PERSIAN CULTURES: THE TRADITION OF GREAT POETS**

اطلبو العلم و لو بالصين

*Seek knowledge, were it even in China*

The Muslims of the Indo-Persian cultural areas have always cherished many endearing memories, impressions and motifs related to the Chinese.

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* The present article is prepared in the context of Projects related to Interdisciplinary Researches on Emotions and States of Mind in History and Literature. For the sake of uniformity and to avoid confusion, original terms and expressions, selected from different periods, are recorded according to their pronunciation of modern standard Persian. The same criterion is applied to names of persons and places. The transcription adopted here is the simplest possible system, a combination of English alphabet and Italian phonetic values, with a few adaptations for sounds peculiar to Indo-Iranian languages. Thus, long vowels are indicated by ą, ı and ā, velar sounds (א, י, צ) are represented by kh, gh and q while glottal stops stops (ך, צ) by (') and ('') respectively.

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China has been considered a far-off place, difficult to reach but still capable of offering knowledge and help in time of need. The above quoted hadīs or saying of the Prophet is generally cited to indicate the necessity of the Muslims to acquire knowledge or 'elm. This hadīs may not be authentic but it does indicate the spirit of the age and the high esteem the Muslims feel for the Chinese. Probably they have inherited their image of China from the people who inhabited the area before the advent of Islam in seventh century A.D.

In addition to famous fine Chinese silk and fine Chinese porcelain there were many other objects which China, as a superior civilisation, could offer to the rest of the world. The Muslim countries of the area have always maintained or tried to keep contact with China, even when others had lost.

This is one of a series of articles intended to highlight important aspects related to the image of China, present in Islamic cultures. We will begin with Islamic literature, followed by a survey of important reports, travel-accounts and research works dealing with the history of China, mainly in Persian and in Urdu. We will examine in brief how authors of classical Persian literature used to value Chinese objects and qualities. In fact, they have recorded the state of mind of the generations that they were writing for. The choice of Persian classical literature is for the sake of convenience. Moreover, the literature of this selected period, from Ferdousī of Tūs¹ to Amīr Khosrov of Delhi² and 'Abdor Rahmān of Jām represents, excluding Arabic works, almost the entire literary production of the Islamic world of that time.

¹ Abol Qāsem Mansūr Ferdousī (c. 940-c.1026), the author of the Shāh-Nāme, was born near Tūs, near Mashhad in the northeast Iran. It took him 30 to 35 years to compose his epic work of nearly 60.000 couplets, containing the history of Iran from mythical times to the conquest of the country by the Muslim Arabs in the middle of 7th century. Since its completion in 1010, the Shāh-Nāme (Book of Kings) has continued to be one of the most popular books in Iran. People have continued to read, recite or listen to the stories and events recorded in forceful language of Ferdousī. It has inspired poets to compose other Shāh-Nāmes not only in Persian but also in other languages of the area. One of the works worth mentioning is Shāh-Nāme-ye Islam (The Book of Kings of Islam) composed by Hafiz of Jālandhar (born 1900) in Urdu language. For complete translation with text see: J. Mohl, 1838-78. For a selected English translation: Reuben Levy, 1967. For general and very useful information see: Th. Noldeke, 1920. For research works and bibliographical information: J. Rypka, 1968.

² Yaminod-dīn Amīr Khosrov Dehlavī (1253-1325). He is India's greatest Persian-language writer of prose and poetry. He is attributed to have composed 400,000 verses. He is called the parrot of India or Tūti-e Hind for the eloquence and beauty of his ghazals (lyric songs) popular in India and Central Asia. In addition to five dīvāns (poetic collections), he is also the author of