MUSLIMS IN CHINA
THE INCOMPATIBILITY BETWEEN ISLAM
AND THE CHINESE ORDER

BY

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Muslim presence in China, which dates back to the T'ang Dynasty, has always posed a challenge, at times even a threat, to the Chinese establishment. This was due to that Islam, far from willing to acculturate into Chinese society, on the contrary nurtured its distinctive traits and stressed its own superiority, something almost unheard of in other minority cultures in the Middle Kingdom.

Islam in China had its ups and downs from its initial settlement in China in the 8th Century through the Ming Dynasty (17th Cent.). But it was during the rule of the Ch'ing (1644-1912) that the head-on collision between Islam and the Confucian Order brought about a series of Muslim rebellions which threw most of the Northwest and the Southwest into chaos for a generation (1850's-1870's). Under the Ch'ing, the energetic policy of sinicization begun in the 1720's, was directed against the un-Chinese ethnic groups who constituted a majority of the population in a number of mountainous enclaves in the Southwest of China and in Hunan and Hupei 1). The core of the policy was to replace the native tribal system with Chinese local administration, and to promote an educational system that would encourage a gradual cultural assimilation of these groups. Some aborigines were picked out and sent for indoctrination to the Capital; they then returned as local officials in their native places to carry out the work of assimilation, being themselves converted to the Chinese feeling of superiority of what they had learned over their former tribal ways. For instance, they substituted Confucian and state approved Buddhist festivals for native observances, so that the aborigines would be drawn into the orbit of Chinese symbolism 2).

During this period, limitations were put on Muslims' freedom of worship. More specifically, in 1731 the ritual slaughtering of animals was forbidden, and under the Ch’ien-lung Emperor construction of new mosques and the pilgrimage to Mecca were prohibited. This emphasis on acculturation was even more pronounced with sizable minorities which were attached to particular territorial areas, such as the Mongols and the Tibetans. For example, in Inner Mongolia, the Manchus threw open large tracts of land to cultivation, thus doing violence to Mongol traditions that the earth is sacred, and to ancient tribal laws that forbid the plowing of more than the necessary minimum amount of land for two years in succession. As a result the Mongols have completely forgotten the Mongol speech and, except for differences in their dress, are almost indistinguishable from the Chinese.

The Muslims differed, nonetheless, from all other minority groups in that, although they were concentrated mainly in marginal areas of the Empire, they were present in virtually every province and every sizable urban agglomeration throughout the country, and their presence was not merely statistical. They had large communities in the Capitals (Nanking and Peking), they handled some trades in many places, and left their impact (though more as individuals than as a collective) all over the place. This may explain the ubiquitous nature of the hatred, jealousy and contempt in which they were held by the Chinese at large. Conversely, from the authorities' point of view, no crash program in a certain territory could force all the Hui to acculturate, since there was no such single territory. For this reason, while the other major minorities were handled under the Ch’ing by the Li Fan Yuan, which controlled them by controlling their territory, the Hui were free from such control.

Secondly, since the Muslims could not accept the principle of filial piety and participate in the ceremonies of the Ancestral Shrines in the Court, through which the Chinese attempted to “civilize” non-Chinese barbarians, they chose to remain outside the pale of the sought-for “refinement and virtue”. Neither was the stratagem that the Ch’ing used with un-Chinese aborigines workable.

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5) This office controlled Manchuria, Mongolia, Tibet and Sinkiang (Uighur-Muslim minority as compared with the Hui Muslims in China proper).