Religion in China was closely intertwined with intellectual life and with the political and social institutions of the nation. Confucianism was identified with scholarship and was deeply entrenched in the habits of thought, affections and loyalties of the educated people. The state was committed to the existing faiths, especially Confucianism. Confucian classics were the basis for education and for the examination system. Ceremonies were associated with Confucianism and maintained at public expense. Officials, including the Emperor, performed many of the duties usually assigned to priesthood in other cultures. The very political theory on which the state rested derived its authority from Confucian teachings. Religion also formed part of the village life. Temples were maintained by villagers, and festivals and ceremonies took place through general contribution. Guilds had patron-Gods and other religious features. Above all, the family, the strongest social unit, had as an integral part of its structure the honouring of ancestors by rites that were religious in origin and retained religious significance. ¹

The Muslim community in China, which numbered in the millions already in Imperial times, was out of place in this setting, since their social and religious norms were so different. They went their own ways in prayer and ceremonies, in their calendar and festivals, in their weddings and burial of the dead, in their socializing and eating habits, and in their travelling and dwelling. So, no matter how much the Muslims wished to put up an appearance of being Chinese, they were and remained Hui people, that is non-Chinese, in their own eyes and in the eyes of their Chinese hosts.

For the Chinese, attachment to the locale was part of the way of the ancestors. His life and death in the locale was irrevocably tied up with the local spirits whose protection he sought, and the geomancy he could not disturb. This deep identification with the locale was instrumental in the development not only of local patriotism, but also of the spirit of association (hui) among the Chinese. Ask any Chinese about his homeland, and he will most probably give you the name of his county and province. Chinese originating from the same city or province will find each other when they live or travel outside their province, within or outside China, and form associations on this basis. In Confucian China the link between the local and the universal was performed by the literatus who had provincial ties and local commitments, but was at the same time the bearer of the high culture that transcended the locale and encompassed T'ien-hsia (the universe), that is the entire civilized world. Chinese literati, the Gentry, played the double role of local and social leaders, and also of a trained, skilled, educated and indoctrinated pool of potential officials of the Empire. In both roles, the literati were acknowledged as superior men who knew how to manage society, knew the proper rules of conduct, and could apply the ethical tenets of Confucianism to both the operation of the state and the affairs of the people. In this capacity they provided the link between state and society. Thus, the gentry-officials, while serving the Emperor, were at the same time in opposition to him as champions of local interests. Local interests were not only economic (as landlords) but also social (as members of clans and lineages) and political (regional power).

Because of the prestige that their Confucian training gave them, which was sanctioned by the state examination system, they filled various social functions that reflected both their ethical commitment to the system, as Chün-tzu (superior men) and their local commitment as members of their clans and leaders of their communities. They acted as arbitrators in local conflicts, took care of the poor and the weak, organized charity and relief in times of calamity, and supervised education. In other words, their state-sponsored Confucian training gave them the knowledge of the moral code that was essential for the operation of society, while their function in society provided the state with the stability and continuity in local government. It was the balanced tension between these two poles which enabled the hierarchical system to function effectively.

It was precisely this balance that broke down in the relationship between the Confucian state and the Muslim community in China. The Muslim elite, i.e. the Ahungs and Imams, who handled the affairs of the Muslim community in the domains of social welfare, arbitration of disputes and education, were religious figures whose ideology, far from thriving on symbiotic existence with the state, was in many ways antithetical to it. Their commitment to the community was not ordained by a social status sanctioned by the state, but by an elective office they gained through their learning. Their knowledge of Islam, though universal in import, was acknowledged only by their local community. Since Chinese Islam, much like the Islamic world of the post-Abbasid era, was fragmented and inchoate, no hierarchy was present to make demands on the Chinese Empire or to impose uniform rules on the Muslim communities throughout the Empire. No Islamic hierarchy could have been allowed by the Confucian state in any case, since any non-Confucian hierarchy, being outside the state and independent of it, would be deemed heretical inasmuch as it would undermine the monolithic dominance of the Confucian order. Ira Lapidus has remarked that:

"While Chinese society was formed by tensions immanent in a hierarchy of institutions, Islamic society was held together by voluntary arrangements consecrated by religious conceptions and a prophetic and learned leadership."  

These different modes of social organization he attributes to the differences in cultural styles between the two civilizations, the Chinese having a hierarchical view of the world and society, and the network concept being consistent with the mental world of Islam. This analysis seems to obtain in Chinese Islam as well. Chinese Muslim society was under the control of a non-Islamic, centralized hierarchical system, and unable, under normal circumstances, to establish an independent government of its own. Therefore, short of rebellion and secession, Chinese Muslims had no way to express themselves politically within a system with which they could not identify and whose ideology they could not embrace. Thus, the Chinese Muslim community had to turn its cravings elsewhere.

We have mentioned that the Chinese Muslims deemed the local congregation as the framework of their life and the focus of their identity. But at the same time they realized that their community was part of the universal umma. Since the umma had, from its very inception by the Prophet Muhammad, a totalistic character, encompassing all of the social, political and religious endeavour of the Faithful, any part of that umma, i.e. any local congregation, was expected to provide the Muslim with all his needs and meet all his expectations. Hence the superior status of the Imam as the supreme authority to the members of the congregation.

In Chinese society the role of religion was determined by the dominance of diffused religions and the relative weakness of institutional religion. Diffused religion has its

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2 I. Lapidus, "Hierarchies and Networks: Some Relationships among Community Structures, Elites and Governments in the Ordering of the Ch'ing and of Islamic Societies Compared", in F. Wakeman & alia (eds.), Local Control and Social Protest during the Ch'ing, the Univ. of Calif. Press, 1974.