China and the Islamic World

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The early Ch'ing period (1644-1912) marked a turning point in traditional China's views of the Islamic world. Until the seventeenth century, China was not overly concerned with the lands its chroniclers termed the "Western Regions" (hsi-yü). Since Chinese officials did not consider the Islamic religion a threat, they rarely imposed restrictions on the practice of the faith by Muslim visitors or residents. During the Ch'ing, these policies were reversed. The court did not condone exploitation of and discrimination against the Muslims, but it could not prevent its own officials from doing so. Some officials perceived the neighboring Islamic states as hostile to China and believed that they posed a threat to Chinese territory. Local governors and bureaucrats occasionally interfered with the practice of Islam and took advantage of the Muslims in their domains. Simultaneously, popular attitudes towards the Muslims also soured.

These changes were, in part, due to the expansion of the Ch'ing empire. In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the Manchu rulers of China annexed lands in Turkestan in which a sizeable majority of the population was composed of non-Chinese Muslims. Uncertain of the Muslims' loyalty and fearful of their developing into a fifth column, the Ch'ing court encouraged Chinese colonization of these areas. The Muslim reaction was predictable. Feeling pressed and occasionally abused by the newly arrived Chinese colonists, the Muslims became ever more steadfast in their devotion to their religion and doggedly maintained relations with their coreligionists in Central Asia, Persia, and the Middle East. New more zealous and xenophobic forms of Islam began to appeal to them. Bitterly resentful of the economic exploitation and religious
discrimination against them, the Muslims resisted, rioted, and rebelled against what they perceived to be their colonial oppressors.5

The Ch'ing court's relations with the Muslims in the empire clearly influenced its relations with and perceptions of the Islamic states to the west. Its domestic policy and attitudes cannot be separated from its international relations. Its experiences with the Muslims in China shaped its views of the Islamic world.

In the twentieth century, the reverse has been the case. China's relations with the Islamic states have influenced its perceptions, attitudes, and treatment of both the Chinese and non-Chinese Muslims in the country. The various Chinese governments have generally wanted to remain on good terms with the Islamic states. Discrimination against the Muslim minority in China would not serve their interests. Toleration of and even preferential treatment for the Muslims would certainly impress the Islamic community outside of China. In short, the indigenous Muslim communities must be considered in any study of China's views of the Islamic world.

When the Muslims started to arrive in China in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, they found a Confucian elite with a heightened sense of its own superiority. Chinese civilization was, to the officials, scholars, and landlords who constituted this elite, more advanced than any other culture. The Chinese language, the Confucian moral principles, and the splendidly planned capital cities could not, in this view, be matched elsewhere. Impressed by China's superiority, foreigners would come to be "transformed" or "civilized" (lai-hua). Their main objective should be to become more like the Chinese. If they were sincere in their desire to accept Chinese civilization, then good Confucians would instruct them in the five virtues and in the individual's duty to parents and ancestors. They would be transformed into proper Confucian gentlemen and would eventually abandon their own cultural or religious heritage.6 During this transformation, the Chinese would not actively proselytize. Foreigners would, of their own accord, accept and emulate Chinese practices.

Before their ultimate sinicization, a select number of envoys and merchants from foreign lands could come to China to offer tribute and to trade. They would need to abide by Chinese regulations and controls on diplomacy and on commerce. They would be required to adopt a subservient position in relations with the court. Most important, the Chinese would not tolerate any proselytization by Muslim emissaries and traders.

Most of the Muslims who reached China before the thirteenth century were merchants. They arrived both by land and by sea. The overland routes led them across northwestern China, and their sea journeys ended in such southeastern ports as Canton, Hang-chou, and Ch'ian-chou.7 As merchants, they encountered the biases of the Confucian elite who considered trade demeaning. Confucian scholars and officials were scornful of mercantile pursuits. Merchants were parasites who merely exchanged, rather than produced, goods. Since China was self-sufficient, there was no need, they reasoned, to deal with these Muslim traders. The Muslim merchants were permitted to trade only because of the court's compassion, not its need for foreign goods. This official view was inge-
nuous. During the T'ang (618-907) dynasty, "it was precisely those goods which the outlander most desired to take back to his own country which were most jealously watched by the mandarins lest the government lose its share of the profit." In the Sung dynasty (960-1279), "so valuable had this trade become . . . it [was] made a Government monopoly". This commerce was lucrative, but the government and its scholars and officials would not admit its value. There was also a demand for the rare and exotic products of the Middle East.

Though the Confucian elite derided the Muslim contribution to the Chinese economy, other Chinese did not. Chinese merchants, inn keepers, and even some officials profited from this foreign trade and were grateful for the goods brought by the Muslims. Eunuchs from the imperial court, who also took part in this commerce, did not minimize its value. Nor were they contemptuous of Muslim traders. Though they attempted to take advantage of the Muslims in commercial transactions, they and Chinese merchants did not share the official disdain for the Muslims. By the Sung dynasty, in fact, quite a few Muslims were found among the eunuchs. Voluntary castration apparently did not carry the same stigma among them as it did to the Chinese, particularly if becoming an eunuch offered profit and political power.

The Confucian literati, however, wrote the principal histories of the time, which included brief sections on the Islamic states. They feigned a lack of interest in foreign lands. Their descriptions emphasized what they believed to be bizarre or exotic or "uncivilized". They wished to portray foreign practices as infantile and "barbaric" so that the need for sinicization would be obvious. Yet they themselves needed reliable intelligence and occasionally wanted commercial information. Such reports on the Islamic lands were often sketchy. The principal reason is that few Chinese ventured to Central Asia and the Middle East. The court did not permit them to travel out of China. Only officially-dispatched envoys could leave the country, and precious few such emissaries were sent to the Muslim lands. When they were not condescending, the reports of these envoys often offered useful information on the lands they visited and the peoples they observed. Since these emissaries almost never went beyond Central Asia, however, their accounts of the Middle East were based upon second-hand information. Even the reports on Central Asia were occasionally imprecise and lacked sufficient detail. The reports circulated among a tiny fraction of the literati which itself constituted a minute portion of the population. As the translators of one of these reports admitted, "the knowledge of foreign countries was an obscure, unprofitable hobby, taken up only by a few officials whose special duties disposed them to make these researches, and which in no way appealed to the public fancy. Confucian philosophers actually threw discredit on what was then known of the geography of foreign parts . . . "

Semitic peoples are also represented in the art of the pre-Yuan (1279-1368) period. They appear as merchants, horse and camel grooms, and warriors, and their features are often repellent. Some have bulbous noses, bulging eyes, and distorted bodies. Numerous foreign dwarfs are portrayed in the stone and clay figurines of the T'ang. Though well-proportioned even handsome Muslim musicians, dancers, and acrobats are also depicted, their work as entertainers was, in
the eyes of Chinese officials, not quite respectable. In short, the Muslims are not depicted in a favorable light.

Despite these unflattering visual representations of the Muslims, the Chinese court did not persecute them. The government harassed neither the foreign Muslims nor the Chinese converts to the faith. The Muslims clustered together in self-governing communities, usually adjacent to a mosque or a makeshift house of worship. Having their own leadership, they rarely requested assistance from the Chinese, and Chinese officials almost never interfered in their affairs. The Confucian elite was confident that the Muslims would be so impressed by Chinese civilization that they would gradually assimilate. The court was willing to bide its time, but it could not always control its own people. There were a few isolated cases of persecution, notably the attacks of the rebel Huang Ch’ao against the Muslim and foreign communities of Canton in 879. These incidents can be traced to economic grievances against the Muslims rather than to religious discrimination. The Muslims’ practice of their faith did not trouble the Chinese: commercial disputes and economic exploitation did.

The Yuan dynasty brought China into closer touch with the Muslim world but simultaneously witnessed a growth in hostility between the Chinese and the Muslims. The Mongols, who conquered China and established the dynasty, did not have the administrative and financial skills to rule the country. Having only recently emerged from nomadic pastoralism, they lacked experience in governing a vast sedentary empire. They could not count on their subjects, the Chinese, to provide all the loyal managerial assistance they needed. Though they mostly recruited Chinese for important government positions, they were wary of solely depending on the people whom they had just subdued. The rebellion of the Chinese official Li T’an within two years after Khubilai Khan’s accession to the throne, together with the hostility of the Chinese in the regions south of the Yangtze, confirmed their suspicions. Moreover, some Chinese flatly refused to serve the Mongols. They could not work for “barbarians” whose ideology, politics, and customs they found repugnant.

Desperate for assistance, the Mongols imported foreigners from various parts of their domains to help govern China. Muslims from Central Asia and Persia were the most numerous and probably the most influential of these foreign advisers and administrators. The Mongol Khans assigned them principally to positions in the financial ministries of the government though a few served in the Bureau of Astronomy and in the army. Many were employed as tax collectors, an occupation that did not endear them to the Chinese. Several supervised the government monopolies of salt, iron, tea, liquor, bamboo, and other vital commodities, and a few oversaw the foreign trade in the coastal cities of the southeast. These economic activities certainly harmed their image in the eyes of the Chinese.

Seeking to promote commerce within their domains, the Mongols encouraged Muslim merchants to trade in China. The Muslims, in turn, founded merchant associations, known as ortakh, to advance their interests. By means of the ortakh, they regulated prices, founded new enterprises, and loaned money to the Chinese, all of which generated the hostility of those with whom they
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Contemporary Chinese sources accused some of them of excesses, evasions, and exploitation. The Chinese histories claim that "some of the merchants commandeered soldiers to accompany and protect them on their travels; others illegally lodged at the official postal stations; and still others used improper methods to force borrowers to repay their loans promptly".\textsuperscript{18} It is difficult to tell how pervasive these excesses were. The number of complaints, whatever their validity, seems, however, to indicate the development of a negative image of the Muslims. The Chinese began to identify the Muslims with their Mongol oppressors: A debtor will not be overly fond of a moneylender, and a merchant will not look kindly upon competition from a foreign counterpart.

The Mongols' pressing need for additional revenue imposed burdens on their Muslim underlings. In the second half of the thirteenth century, the Yuan rulers embarked on several staggeringly expensive projects. They constructed a capital in Ta-tu (near modern Peking) and a summer residence for the Khan in Shang-tu (Marco Polo's and Samuel Coleridge's "Xanadu"), repaired and extended the Grand Canal, and built schools, postal stations, and observatories. Their far-flung military campaigns stretching from successful assaults against rebels in Mongolia and Central Asia (1260-1264; 1270s) to abortive expeditions against Japan (1274 and 1281) and Java (1292) were costly.\textsuperscript{19} The Mongol court turned to the Muslims to raise the required revenue.

The Muslims, in particular the finance minister Ahmad (in power from 1262 to 1282), were perhaps too effective. They were determined to satisfy their Mongol overlords' need for funds and thereby earned the wrath of the Chinese. Ahmad devised new taxes, added to the list of products monopolized by the court, and streamlined the collection of state revenues. His success provoked Chinese hostility. The Chinese sources denounced him for corruption, embezzlement, and nepotism. Whether these accusations were accurate is immaterial. The Chinese view of Ahmad and of the Muslims in general was more important. The Mongols were the principal beneficiaries of the obviously unsettled relationship between the Chinese and the Muslims. The Muslims were a convenient buffer. They diverted some of the Chinese hostility from the Mongols. The Chinese began to develop an image of Muslims that was to prove detrimental to both groups. They would portray the Muslims and their descendants as avaricious, unprincipled, and corruptible.\textsuperscript{20} The Muslims were viewed by many Chinese as miserly and manipulative.

Despite the Muslims' many positive contributions during the Yuan, their negative image colored the Chinese view of the whole Islamic world. Muslims in China had introduced new principles and techniques in astronomy, architecture, medicine, and music from Central Asia, Persia, and the Middle East. Though the Chinese prized these innovations, their appraisal of Muslim moneylenders and merchants did not improve. These attitudes undoubtedly spilled over onto their conceptions of the Islamic states. Relatively free access to China had led to exploitation by aliens. Chinese officials perceived of the Muslims as traders bent on enriching themselves, often through shady deals. They believed that when China regained its autonomy, it ought to limit the number of foreign Muslims
who had access to the country. With such controls, it could more readily protect its own people and pave the way for the sinicization of these foreigners.

After the Mongols had been expelled from China, the Ming (1368-1644) dynasty pursued precisely these policies. The court sought to restrict or at least regulate all relations with the Muslim states. Only officially-licensed envoys and merchants would be admitted into China, and even they would need to abide by Chinese regulations for commerce. More than a thousand embassies from the Islamic states reached China during the Ming. Most were from such nearby Central Asian towns and oases as Hami, Turfan, and Khotan, but quite a few arrived from as far away as the Timurid centers of Samarkand and Herat and the Safavid cities of Isfahan and Shiraz. As the Ming started to decline sometime around 1500, Muslims as well as other foreigners evaded the court’s regulations. Chinese officials attempted to reimpose controls and to institute stiff penalties for evasion. The more they emphasized restrictions, the more opposition they aroused from the Muslim states. This opposition did not result in wars, but it provoked several raids and battles between Chinese and Muslim forces. Similarly, the Ming court’s demand that foreign rulers accede to the superiority of the Chinese emperor grated on the sensibilities of the Muslim potentates. The Central Asian conqueror Temür (Tamerlane) resented such treatment, and at his death in 1405 was leading a punitive expedition against China.

Yet the Ming court was fairly successful in maintaining its isolation from the Islamic states. It received more Muslim embassies than it wanted, but the annual number (on the average, three a year) was tolerable. Moreover, Chinese officials generally managed to prevent the envoys from mingling with ordinary Chinese. A few Chinese merchants and eunuchs met with the Muslim emissaries, sometimes illegally. Such unofficial meetings were, however, relatively infrequent.

Though the court had access to at least two fine first-hand accounts of the Islamic lands, the vast majority of Chinese knew next to nothing about the geography, customs, and histories of the Muslim states. Both reports were written by official emissaries first sent abroad during the Yung-lo (1403-1424) period. Ma Huan, the author of the longer and more comprehensive report, accompanied the renowned Chinese Muslim eunuch Cheng Ho on his naval expeditions to Southeast Asia and Persia. He was himself a convert to Islam and knew either Arabic or Persian. Ch’en Ch’eng, who wrote the Hsi-yü fan-kuo chih, was an envoy on three separate occasions to the court of Shahrukh in Herat. Though his report was somewhat patronizing, it offered accurate information on the bazaars and bathhouses, marriages and funerals, and doctors and dervishes he came across. He was repelled by some of the habits and customs of the people. That they ate with their hands and that the women were freer and looser than Chinese women offended him. Yet he usually muted his own views and presented a straightforward account of his observations and experiences. The problem was that only a few court officials consulted his report. It was not widely circulated, and the original text was, in fact, lost and not recovered until the 1930s. It helped shape the perceptions of a part of the Confucian elite but scarcely affected popular conceptions of the Islamic world.

Much more critical in shaping Chinese views was their image of Muslim
residents in China. The court was tolerant of the Muslims. Though some Muslims had been perceived as the agents of the Mongol oppressors, the court did not discriminate against them. It employed a few as interpreters, astronomers, and eunuchs, and several even attained prominent positions in government. Chinese officials had sufficient faith in them to entrust them with delicate and difficult missions. The Muslims, particularly in the northwest and southwest, still resided in close-knit communities, generally ruled by their own secular and religious hierarchy. The court did not make a concerted effort to suppress the practice of Islam. Muslims freely performed the Five Pillars of the Faith. Few actually travelled to Mecca, but the court did not hinder them in worship or in their dietary habits.

The ultimate goal for the court remained the sinicization of the Muslims. But there was no need to compel or urge them to accept fully the tenets and practices of Confucianism. Proximity and close relations with the Chinese would result in the assimilation of the Muslims. Meanwhile the court could capitalize on their skills as interpreters, camel and horse grooms and breeders, and traders. It did not consider the Muslims a military threat. Its officials did not bother to move the large concentrations of Muslims living along the northwestern border into less vulnerable and more secure areas in the heart of the country.

The Muslims responded well to this tolerant policy. They continued to practice their faith but in a way that did not offend the Chinese. They did not actively proselytize nor were they aggressive or ostentatious in the performance of their religious duties. Some adopted Chinese dress, erected tablets near their mosques proclaiming their allegiance to the Chinese emperor, and learned to speak Chinese. A peaceful and stable relationship developed between Chinese officialdom and the Muslims.

But the Ming court was to be sorely disappointed in its hopes for their gradual assimilation. The Muslims instead became stronger and more numerous. They were more organized than the Buddhists, Taoists, and other religious groups in China. The Muslim communities maintained their cohesion because they had their own leaders, their own educational system, and a strong feeling of their own distinctiveness. Their religious leaders often knew Persian or Arabic, and most of the towns in which Muslims resided had at least one mosque—all of which contributed to their sense of identity. Their faith was also supported by their frequent associations with their coreligionists in Central Asia and Persia. In their work as merchants, interpreters, and camel and horse grooms, they had numerous opportunities to meet with Muslims from beyond the Chinese border. Such meetings kept them in touch with the wider Muslim world, enabling them more readily to maintain their faith in a non-Islamic environment.

Their economic roles as intermediaries reinforced the popular stereotypes about them among the common people. Ordinary Chinese did not resent the Muslims' religious views or customs. They found some of the Muslims' practices (e.g. fasting during Ramadan, abstaining from liquor) strange, but they were unfazed by these "unusual" habits. They were so uninterested in investigating these Islamic practices that they failed to distinguish between the Muslims and other religious groups, notably the Jews. They frequently lumped the Muslims...
and the Jews together because both wrote in “peculiar” scripts and refused to eat pork. Most of their unpleasant images of the Muslims centered around trade. They described Muslim merchants as not only shrewd but conniving. Muslim traders could not be trusted. Their avariciousness on occasion led to deception and fraud. They did not even unswervingly carry out their own religious practices. If a specific belief interfered with commercial gain, it would be ignored as they pursued their profits. Chinese anecdotes emphasizing the Muslims’ hypocrisy and deception began cropping up during this time. Such disagreeable epithets as hui-t’ (“Muslim barbarians”) and hui-tse (“Muslim bandits”) started to be applied to the Muslims. The Chinese character for “Muslims” was often prefixed with the “dog” radical, implying that the Muslims were somehow less than human.

The late Ming and early Ch’ing witnessed a deterioration in the economic conditions of the Muslims of northwest and southwest China. The previously profitable caravan trade across Central Asia faced stiff competition from the ocean-going vessels from Europe; several of the Islamic countries which had earlier participated in trade had declined; the expansion of the Russian empire into Central Asia disrupted commerce in that area; and the northwest had suffered from severe droughts. This economic distress encouraged disturbances. Dissatisfaction with Chinese and Manchu rule began to surface in demonstrations and riots.

The Ch’ing exacerbated these difficulties with its policies. Contrary to its expectations, the Muslims had not assimilated. They survived as a minority group and, through intermarriage with the Chinese, had prospered and increased in number. Together with their coreligionists in Central Asia, they had proved troublesome in the last years of the previous dynasty. The Ch’ing decided to resolve these problems through an expansionist policy in Central Asia. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Ch’ing troops had conquered the region now known as Sinkiang. Shortly thereafter, the court began to encourage Chinese colonists to immigrate into predominantly Muslim lands. To its credit, the court “maintained a policy of non-interference, allowing the East Turkestanis to live by the Islamic calendar, dress in their traditional fashion, and . . . go without the queu”. But its own officials made onerous demands on the Muslims, and some of the ordinary Chinese also took advantage of the local population. By the early nineteenth century, “every overtaxed peasant and artisan, every disadvantaged merchant, every beg who regretted the revenues that he passed along to the Manchus believed in the ultimate illegitimacy and impermanence of the idolaters’ dominion”.29

Not surprisingly, the tensions that had lain beneath the surface now erupted. A Muslim religious brotherhood descended from the White Mountain Khojas of Kashgar organized popular discontent into actual rebellions. The Khojas took the concept of jihad seriously. They wanted to establish an autonomous Muslim state in Uighuristan and Altishahr; the two main regions in Sinkiang. This new state would enable them to revert to a purer form of Islam undiluted by Chinese and other foreign ideologies. A theocracy which they dominated would be created in Sinkiang. The Khojas would act like messiahs and would have a great mystical...

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appeal. The results of their efforts were predictable. Starting in 1815, rebellions often led by the Khojas flared up repeatedly until the major outbreak of 1862-1878.30

Chinese views of the native and foreign Muslims became increasingly unfavorable: The anecdotes about the Muslims began to have a harsher tone. These mostly apocryphal stories portrayed them as profiteering, insincere, and faintly sinister. The moral of many of these stories was that Muslim merchants could not be trusted. They were greedy and crafty, crafty to the point of dishonesty. They were false Hui ("Muslims"), practicing their faith only when it suited them. They often ignored the taboos on pork and liquor, finding incredible rationalizations for their transgressions. Stories such as the following manifested the Muslims’ “cruel, evil natures”.

_During the season of the Chinese New Year, Muslims, who do not observe the same festival, invited the Chinese in their caravan to make merry, while they would stand the night watch. After the Chinese were drunk, the Muslims rose up, pulled their tent down on them and beat them to death under it. Then, they threw the bodies into a dry well and made off with the silver._31

The Muslims' intermarriages with Chinese and their adoption of Chinese boys perturbed both officials and the common people. In cases of intermarriage, Muslim males usually were betrothed to Chinese women who would then reside in the Islamic community. Their children would be reared as Muslims. Prosperous Muslim families who needed a male heir would occasionally adopt infants from poor Chinese households and bring them up in the Islamic faith. The growing number of Muslims alarmed the Chinese. They had counted on the gradual assimilation of foreigners and foreign ideologies. Here they faced a group that not only refused to abandon its religious heritage but also gained a following among native Chinese as well.

Their unfavorable image of the Muslims in China was not tempered by a more appealing view of the Islamic states: During the Ch'ing, few foreign Muslims reached China, and the court scarcely dealt with Islamic governments. Europeans had replaced the Arabs and Persians in the sea trade to East Asia. Most of the Islamic lands were influenced, if not dominated, by the European states. Central Asia, which had maintained relations with China at least since the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220), was conquered by Tsarist Russia in the mid-nineteenth century. Relations between the Central Asian Muslims and China had to be filtered through Russian intermediaries. The paucity of direct relations contributed to China's ignorance of the Islamic countries. Even the Chinese literati knew virtually nothing about the customs and political and economic conditions, not to mention the locations, of the Islamic lands. Their perceptions of the Muslim world were almost exclusively based upon their knowledge of and experiences with the Muslims residing in China. The negative image they had developed as a result of the rebellions in northwest and southwest China shaped their conceptions of all Muslims.
In the twentieth century, new political considerations have compelled China to alter its attitudes toward the Islamic world. The conception of the Chinese as a superior civilization is no longer tenable. China is one among the countries of the world, not the central or middle state. It cannot expect other peoples to flock to China to become sinicized, attracted by the glory of Chinese culture and society. The Muslim states, for example, will not accept Chinese supremacy. They need to be treated as equals, and they have become increasingly important in world politics. Relations with the Islamic world have not been as vital to China as its contacts with the Great Powers of the twentieth century. Yet a good relationship with the Muslim lands offered “leverage vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and the United States” and the other countries with which the Chinese dealt. Both the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek and the Communist government of Mao Tse-tung and his successors have recognized the value of solid links with the Islamic world. One way of forging such links was the establishment of good relations with the Muslims in China.

The Nationalists paid lip service to the ideals of equality for the Muslims within the Chinese domains. In fact, their policies did not vary significantly from those of earlier Chinese governments. They still did not respect the Muslims’ differences and uniqueness. But they also did not admit that their ultimate goal was the sinicization of the Muslims. Instead the government proclaimed the Muslims to be one of the five “great peoples” of China, the others being the Han (ethnic Chinese), the Mongols, the Tibetans, and the Manchus. A national flag composed of five symmetrical stripes represented the equality of the five different peoples in Chinese territory. The Nationalists did not distinguish between the Chinese Muslims and the foreign adherents of Islam living in China. Thus they sought, in theory, to appeal to the Muslims of China on religious, not ethnic, grounds. Their main objective was to gain the allegiance of the Chinese and foreign Muslims who resided along the Sino-Soviet border. From the 1920s on, the Soviet Union attempted to sway the Turkic and Iranian Muslims of China including the Uighurs, Kazakhs, Tajiks, and Salars. The Nationalist government attempted to counter such Soviet influence, but its policies and attitudes alienated the Muslims.

Its own prejudices and the activities it sanctioned undermined its efforts to win over the Muslims. Many in the Nationalist government regarded themselves as superior to the ethnic minorities on the northwestern border. These non-Chinese peoples were, according to an article which reflected much Nationalist thinking, “lazy”, “slow”, and “inexact”. The Nationalists wanted to civilize the “barbarians”. To accomplish that mission, they encouraged Chinese colonization of the northwest. But it was not until World War Two that they could implement their policies in Sinkiang. Until then, two warlords, Yang Tseng-hsin (1911-1928) and Sheng Shih-ts’ai (1933-1944), dominated the region. When the Nationalists gained authority in Sinkiang, they neither treated the Muslims equitably nor respected their unique cultural traits (e.g. language, customs, dietary habits). Similarly, they were not successful in gaining support among the Chinese Muslims, most of whom resided in the northwestern provinces of Kansu, Ninghsia, and Ch’inghai. Only when the Japanese began to subvert Chinese
control through exploitation of anti-Han sentiments did the Nationalists adopt a more conciliatory policy toward the Hui. By that time, it was too late.

The Nationalists had lost their chance of securing the loyalties of the Hui and the Muslim ethnic minorities. Without the allegiance of the Muslims in their own domains, they could not hope to sway the Islamic lands.

Like the Nationalists, the Communists have been eager to maintain good relations with and perhaps influence the Islamic world. Some of the Islamic lands had vast petroleum reserves, were located on the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe, and could prove troublesome if they allied themselves with powers hostile to China. A few of their leaders (e.g. Nasser of Egypt; Sukarno of Indonesia) frequently acted as spokesmen for the Third World, a bloc of countries which the Chinese hoped to affect. Influence on the Muslim Middle East might also translate into similar effects on parts of Africa. Finally, as the Sino-Soviet dispute developed in the late 1950s, fine relations with the Muslims would give the Chinese an advantage in their struggle with the Communist state across the border.

Despite the obvious importance of the Muslim states, the Chinese Communists were still condescending toward the Islamic faith. The traditional Chinese literati had believed they possessed a unique ideology, Confucianism, and a sophisticated civilization superior to any other in the world. Like their forebears, the Communists have until recently asserted that their unique form of Marxism would enable them to be a more productive and, by implication, superior civilization. Islam was, from this viewpoint, a conservative ideology which could not compete with Marxism. Like the "barbarians" of old, the Muslim states needed instruction. The communists could not, of course, afford to be too blunt about their views. Except for a period during the Cultural Revolution, they willingly dealt with unrepentantly anti-Communist Islamic governments. The hope was that the Muslim states would eventually be transformed into the kind of Marxist societies advocated by the Chinese. Until that time, the Chinese sought, save for the years of the Cultural Revolution, to cultivate sound relations with the Islamic states.

One way of establishing good relations was to ensure proper treatment of the Muslims in China. The Communists' ultimate goal for the Muslims still appears to be sinicization. It is instructive to note the fate of two other minorities in China in the twentieth century. The Manchus, whose leaders ruled China during the Ch'ing dynasty, have almost totally assimilated. The Manchu language is no longer spoken, and Manchu culture is virtually extinct in the three provinces of Manchuria. The Inner Mongolian Autonomous Region has about eight Chinese to every Mongol. With intermarriage and assimilation, it appears unlikely that the Mongols will survive as a distinct ethnic group. The Communists have scarcely attempted to preserve the unique cultures of the Manchus and the Mongols. Their policies and attitudes toward the Muslims, however, have been different. Since the Muslims constituted a majority in some areas, sinicization would in any case prove difficult.

The Communists have ostensibly granted the Muslims the freedom to practice their faith. They have differentiated between the Chinese Muslims and
the Muslims of diverse, primarily Turkic, ethnic groups. Though the Chinese Muslims are scattered throughout the country, they are concentrated in the northwest. The government has thus established a Ninghsia Hui Autonomous Region for them in this area. It has also created the Sinkiang Uighur Autonomous Region for the largest single Muslim ethnic minority and autonomous districts for the less numerous groups. The Hui are, to most observers, indistinguishable from other Chinese. They speak Chinese, have adopted Chinese surnames, and wear the same kinds of clothing as the Han peoples. What differentiates them from the Han are their abstention from pork and their practice of endogamy. The government has permitted them to live together in the villages of northwest China. In the cities, they appear to cluster in their own neighborhoods, frequently around a mosque. They often have their own restaurants and "products stores", and factories occasionally provide them with separate canteens.\(^38\) Similarly, the ethnic minorities have generally been permitted to perform their religious obligations as Muslims. As late as 1957, an official account noted that there were 40,000 mosques in China. The government has also moved more slowly in implementing its policies on land, marriage, and family planning in the northwest, taking into account Muslim sensibilities. In short, the "Muslims appear to have received better treatment during the past three decades than other religious groups".\(^39\)

But there have been negative sides to Chinese policy. Communist cadres have replaced the traditional Muslim leadership and have sometimes displayed scant consideration for Islam. The central government has dominated the so-called "Autonomous Regions" founded in Muslim areas. Some mosques have been closed or converted to other uses. The government has insisted that the Chinese language be adopted in the schools of Sinkiang. A Chinese Islamic Association, which was founded in the 1950s as a quasigovernmental agency, supervises the mosques, decides how many copies of the Koran are printed, and, in effect, controls the religious hierarchy. Most important, the Communists have encouraged and, in fact, demanded that Chinese move into Sinkiang, hoping in this way eventually to outnumber the Muslims in the northwest.\(^40\)

Some recent visitors to China have reported that the Chinese they have met have negative images of the Muslims. These Chinese assert that only the elderly actually worship in the mosques. They state, with glee, that religious Muslims sometimes do not abide by the dictates of their faith (e.g. evading the taboo on liquor). Like the officials of the Ch'ing and earlier dynasties, they believe that the Muslims will assimilate. Time is on their side, and they have not compelled the Muslims to adopt Chinese ways for fear of alienating the Islamic states. In sum, political and economic considerations will, and have throughout Chinese history, shaped Chinese views of the Islamic world and of the Muslims residing in the Middle Kingdom.


11. This view is strikingly similar to the one attributed by Edward W. Said to Europeans concerning Orientals. He notes in Orientalism (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 103 that "The Orient is watched, since its almost (but never quite) offensive behavior issues out of a reservoir of infinite peculiarity; the European, whose sensibility tours the Orient, is a watcher, never involved, always detached, always ready for new examples of what the Description de l'Egypte called 'bizarre jouissance!' The Orient becomes a living tableau of querness." Earlier in his book, he argues that "the Orientalist makes it his work to be always converting the Orient from something into something else" (p. 67).


17. For an interesting study of the bamboo monopoly, see Takaoki Inosaki, "Gendai no take no sembai to sono shikō suru igi," Toyōshi kenkyū XVI:2 (September, 1957), pp. 29-47.

18. Rossabi, "The Muslims in the Early Yuan . . ." p. 283. One of Khubilai Khan's grandsons named Ananda became a fervent Muslim. He was eventually executed, partly because of his efforts on behalf of his adopted faith. I am preparing a brief biography of this rather interesting character.

19. See Morris Rossabi, Khubilai Khan: His Life and Times (forthcoming, University of California Press) for bibliographical citations on these campaigns and public works projects.


22. Ma Huan's account, the Ying-yai sheng-lan, has been translated as The Overall Survey of the Ocean's Shores by J.V.G. Mills (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).
23. The best edition of the work is found in the Shan-pen ts'ung-shu, a collection of rare texts issued by the National Library of Peiping in 1937.


34. Dreyer, China's Forty Million, p. 23.


