Muslim China

14. Muslim man near the ruins at Gaochang, Turpan. An Uyghur kingdom was set up in Gaochang at the end of the 9th century CE, which continued to exist until the arrival of the Mongols in the 13th century.

The Land and Its People

There are altogether ten distinct Muslim minority groups in China. Some, such as the Hui, display a culture that has much in common with the dominant Han Chinese; others, namely the Uyghur, Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Salar and Tatar are closely related to the nations of Central Asia. Other minorities possess an even more distant ancestry; namely the Dongxiang and Bao’an who trace their origins to Mongolia and the Tajiks from Persia. Although Chinese Muslims are distributed in regions throughout the country, the majority are found in the north-west region; a vast area that encompasses a large part of the ancient Silk Road and serves as a crossroads of cultures from the Islamic West, European East, Northern Mongolia and the rest of China. There is also a Muslim quarter in the capital city of Beijing and a significant Muslim population in the south-western region of Yunnan, the latter whom are believed to have also migrated further south and settled in various areas of South-East Asia. The minorities that shall be discussed further, however, are predominantly concentrated in the Xinjiang Uyghur and Ningxia Hui Autonomous Regions and the provinces of Gansu and Qinghai.

Xinjiang, covering one sixth of China’s land mass, is a realm made up of contrasts: valleys and mountains, deserts and oases. The Tian Shan range (Heavenly Mountains) extends across its width, whilst the bleak and inhospitable Taklamakan Desert that derives its name from the Uyghur language, meaning ‘enter and never return’ lies to the south. The desert is surrounded by the Tarim Basin, where irrigation and natural water sources allow for a thriving agriculture-based economy. The Turpan Depression is the lowest region of China; an area of extreme temperatures and dry climate well suited for the cultivation of grapes.
The province of Gansu, intersected by the Yellow River and with the Mongolian Gobi Desert to its north, has for centuries been a passageway connecting Xinjiang with the rest of Central Asia and a route from Tibet to Mongolia. Its capital, Lanzhou, was an important trade and communications centre for the Silk Road, whilst the city of Linxia in Southern Gansu was known at one time as China’s Little Mecca.

The cities of Muslim China are instantly discernible from any other Chinese city due to the marked presence of mosques and the sound of the muezzin calling the faithful to prayer. Muslim architecture in China was created in the Chinese tradition, with mosques—known as qingzhansi or Temple of Pure Truth—built in the timber courtyard house style with pitched roofs and projecting eaves. Characteristic of most Islamic cities around the world, bazaars can be found in any Chinese Muslim town or city, teeming with bustling stalls and people peddling their wares and purchasing the material necessities for daily life. Teahouses, known as chaikhana, are also an ubiquitous sight.
THE MUSLIM MINORITIES OF CHINA

Hui

The Hui, numbering about nine million, are the largest and the most widely distributed Muslim minority in China. The word Hui hui, in fact, is the Chinese term commonly used to describe anyone of the Islamic faith. The Huis, unlike the other Muslim minorities of China, speak a Sino-Tibetan tongue, which is similar to Mandarin but includes a number of words from Arabic or Persian. They are mostly found in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous region, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region and the provinces of Gansu, Qinghai, Henan, Hebei, Shandong and Yunnan. In some areas of the country, the Hui have become greatly assimilated and their cultural practices are not that different from the majority Han population.
Like other Muslims throughout China, the Hui can usually be distinguished by their headdress; the men often wear white or black skullcaps, whilst the women cover their hair beneath white or black scarves. Younger girls often wear green patterned gauze scarves. The costumes of both sexes are relatively plain and unadorned, consisting of a shirt or coat and pants. Both men and women may wear simple sleeveless outer vests or jackets. Hui women of the Gansu province show some variation in their style of dress. They cover their hair with a turban-like headdress known as the ‘maggie flower’, and often wear short embroidered aprons over their bodice.

19. Hui Aluminium Tablet, Beijing, China. C. mid 20th century. Inscribed with the words Hui-hui and halal, the tablet is placed prominently at the front of shops and restaurants to denote them as Chinese Muslim establishments.

20. A Hui family on the way to the bazaar, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region
Uyghur

The Uyghurs make up one of the largest Muslim populations of China. They are mostly found living in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region, of which they consider themselves to be indigenous. The name Uyghur means 'united' or 'allied' and the people have a long history, dating back to about 300 BCE according to Chinese records. They are a Turkic people and speak a Turko-Altaic language, which has been influenced by various other languages of Central Asia.

The Uyghurs are descendents of early nomadic Turkic tribes, who in the sixth century were situated in various areas around the Altai Mountains. By the seventh century, the tribes were divided into the Eastern and Western Turkic Khanates, which eventually gave rise to an Uyghur Empire in the eighth century. During this time, the Uyghurs played a part in the quelling of the An Shi rebellion that threatened the Tang Dynasty from 755-763. The Uyghurs soon moved further westward and eventually became important figures in trade along the Silk Road. By the
tenth century, many Uyghurs had given up their early Shamanist and Buddhist beliefs for Islam. In the fourteenth century, the Uyghurs of the Turpan district were converted to Islam under the rule of a Chagatai follower of Tamerlane, founder of the Timurid Empire. Not too far from Turpan, the ancient city and rest stop along the Silk Road, Hami, was ruled from 1697-1930 by a dynasty of Muslim Uyghur kings. Sven Hedin and Albert von Le Coq, the late 19th - early 20th century orientalists and archaeologists from Sweden and Germany respectively, both provided descriptions of their meeting with the last Hami king in 1930. According to the Europeans, they dined on Russian liqueurs and French champagne in the king's palace that was lavishly furnished with jade, porcelain, carpets and silk; the king also had a summer palace, built in a blend of both Persian and Chinese architectural styles.

The Uyghur culture is a vibrant one and the people have their own written language. During the Mongol established Yuan reign in China, the emperor Qubilai Khan attempted to introduce a new script to replace the Uyghur script which had, since the thirteenth century, been the basis of the official Mongol script. Drafted by a Tibetan monk, the new script was not well received however, and the Uyghur script persisted in use by the Mongolians and is still in use in modern times.

Uyghur dress is often colourful and vividly patterned. Traditional male Uyghur dress consists of a long robe or coat, over pants and boots. The women wear skirts and dresses, sometimes over pants and often with a sleeveless close-fitting jacket over the bodice. They also wear dresses made of a tied-dyed silk they call adilesi, woven in traditional motifs into brightly coloured garments. The Uyghurs have a variety of headaddresses for both men and women. These include fur caps; the quadrangular cap called a duopa, often embellished with embroidery and appliqué work; and others made of felt, satin or brocade. In addition to their colourful costumes, the Uyghurs also possess vibrant musical traditions. Cultural celebrations are always accompanied by folk songs and music played on traditional string and wind instruments.
Kazakh

Distributed in various provinces in the Xinjiang Autonomous region, the Kazakhs of China are ethnically similar to the people of Kazakhstan. They are descendants of the Wusun people, a Turkic-speaking tribe from the region of the Yili river valley, dating as far back as the second century BCE and who, according to Chinese historical records, had red hair and blue eyes. The Wusun were known in ancient times for the ‘heavenly horses’ that they reared, the object of desire of the Western Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE) for their fabled speed and grace.

Kazakhs today are still accomplished horsemen. The majority are still pastoralists, clinging on to their nomadic traditions. In the summertime, they can be found on the slopes of the foothills of the Tian Shan, where they bring their herds to graze. Families—and it is not uncommon to find up to three generations together—live in yurts, their nomadic tents. The Kazakhs hold outdoor festivals in both summer and autumn, where they participate in feasting, singing and dancing, horse-racing, wrestling and traditional horseback games such as gu’ niangzhui, which literally translates as ‘girl-running-after-boy’ and diaoyang, a game in which riders compete for a sheep which they toss from one person to another.

Due to their nomadic lifestyle and culture of horse-riding, the traditional costumes of the Kazakhs are practical and hardy. Men wear pants or riding breeches with high-collared shirts, whilst the women wear long dresses with ruffled skirts and sleeves. The women also wear cotton-padded vests and overcoats; embroidered leggings and silver jewellery. Both men and women wear leather boots. Women cover their heads with scarves, shawls and leather bonnets. The men wear fur-trimmed sheepskin or satin hats.
Kirghiz

The Kirghiz are related to the people of Kirghizstan and possess a culture similar to their Kazakh neighbours. Mostly found in the Xinjiang region, there is also a small Kirghiz population in the Heilongjiang province. The Kirghiz are a semi-nomadic tribe and have their own spoken and written Turko-Altaic language. A pastoral people, they keep flocks of sheep and camels and are skilled horsemen.

Like the Kazakhs, the Kirghiz have a long history in and around the Yili river valley region. They observe many of the same cultural past-times and traditions and have similar costumes. Men wear round-collared, embroidered shirts, under coats or jackets, with pants and leather boots. They wear hats made of fur or corduroy; the most common headgear is a black and white felt hat with a square crown and up-turned brim. The women wear dresses—often red—with black or purple overcoats, sometimes with a sleeveless buttoned jacket worn over their upper bodice. Although Kirghiz women all wear scarves, velvet caps and fur hats, they do not completely cover their hair, usually wearing it in long single or double braids. Brides adorn their double braids with silver ornaments and chains.
Dongxiang

The Dongxiang people are named after the region from which they were believed to have originated, Dongxiang, in Hezhou, now known as the Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture. The name dongxiang literally translates as 'eastern village', and amongst themselves the people are known as the Santa. Today, the majority of the population is concentrated in the southern Gansu province. Only having been recognised as a distinct ethnic minority since 1949, there are varying theories as to the ancestry of the Dongxiang. One theory states that they are descendents of the Mongol troops of Chingiz Khan who were stationed in Hezhou in the early thirteenth century and converted to Islam in the sixteenth century. Other scholars believe that they are the descendents of the Sarts or Sardars, brought into China by the Mongols.

Their language is an Altaic Mongolian tongue, influenced by the Chinese, Arabic, Persian and Turkic languages. It also shares some similarities with the Bao'an language. Most Dongxiangs can speak and write Chinese and the Arabic script is also in use.

The Dongxiang of today dress very similarly to their conservative Hui neighbours, however, traditional Dongxiang costume was far more elaborate. The men used to wear long gowns, belted at the waist, and leather shoes with upturned toes. The women used to wear dresses, jackets and pants with elaborately embroidered hems and cuffs, which they coupled with silver jewellery. Whilst today, they mostly wear the same black, green or white scarves as worn by the Hui, their traditional headdress was a pill-box shaped hat with green or blue tassels, which served as a symbol of their marital status.
Salar

Living predominantly in the Qinghai and Gansu provinces, the Salar are a Turkic people, who are said to have migrated to China during the Ming dynasty (1368-1677). According to legend, two brothers are said to have left Samargand in the face of Mongol invasions, and travelled eastward along the Silk Road to find a new home. They took with them water, soil from their homeland and a copy of the Quran, laden on the back of a white camel. When the camel arrived in Xunhua in the Qinghai province, it refused to go any further. The brothers thus decided to settle in this land, which, although viewed as rather barren and inhospitable by the Chinese, was similar to their native land in Central Asia. A variation of the story states that the Salar were considered troublemakers by the other Turkic tribes who encouraged them to leave Samargand in self-imposed exile. When they arrived in Xunhua their camel turned to stone, whereupon the Salar discovered that the earth and water of their homeland matched that of the newly discovered land, prompting them to settle down in that region.

The Salar inter-married with other Muslim minorities in the region, but maintained aspects of their Central Asian past. They speak a Turko-Altaic language and are considered a hardy people. The early settlers engaged in trade along the rivers or desert plains; today, agriculture and horticulture are major sources of income for the Salar.

Salar men and women wear costumes similar to the Hui. Both sexes wear pants with shirts and sleeveless jackets. Whilst the male costume is relatively plain and in somber colours of white, black and blue, the women often embellish their clothing with embroidery. It is a Salar custom to dress their children in a patchwork jacket called the baajiayi, made of colourful scraps of cloth collected from a hundred families as a symbol of longevity.
Tajik

The Tajiks are mostly found in the Tashkorgan region of the Pamir Plateau in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. Tashkorgan in the Tajik language means "stone city" in reference to a stone fort north of the town dating back to the sixth century, and was an important stop along the Silk Road. The Tajiks are closely related to the Persians, speaking an Indo-European language belonging to the Persian group and practicing the Shi'ite form of Islam as their Persian counterparts and in contrast to the other Muslim groups of China who follow the Sunni teachings.

Like the Kirghiz and Kazakh, the Tajiks are skillful horse-riders. Unlike the other two groups, however, the Tajiks are not nomadic people, but live in settlements in the valleys of the Pamir. They live in houses of stone and wood in the springtime, cultivating wheat, barley and vegetables; in the summer they move with their herds of sheep and goats to the hills, where they live in yurt-like houses called zhanfang.

Tajik men wear belted shirts and pants and cylindrical shaped lambskin hats with a brim that can be turned down to protect their ears and cheeks from the cold. Women wear dresses with flared skirts and cuffed sleeves, often worn over an inner skirt. Both male and female costumes are often embellished with embroidery around the collars and cuffs. The women wear cylindrical caps which they cover with an outer scarf and sometimes adorn with beads, silver chains and ornaments. The scarves are usually in bright colours such as red and yellow or white. Both men and women wear leather boots made of goatskin with yakhide soles, over embroidered felt stockings.
Uzbek

The Uzbeks of China are similar ethnically to the people of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. They are settled in the Xinjiang region and are believed to have migrated there around the eighteenth century. The Uzbeks are closely related in culture and language to their Uyghur neighbours and can often speak the Uyghur language which is a Turko-Altaic language like their own.

Uzbek men and women both wear a similar type of headgear, a type of four-pointed skullcap, heavily decorated with embroidery or beads. The men wear round collared shirts, belted, over pants. The women favour loose, pleated dresses, often in bright colours. Older women cover their hair with scarves.
Bao'an

The Bao’ans, like the Dongxiang, are of Mongolian descent and are mostly found in the Gansu and Qinghai provinces. They are believed to have firstly settled in the town of Tongren in the Qinghai province during the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368). Their language is Altaic-Mongolian with Chinese influences. The Bao’an people have assimilated greatly with their Hui neighbours but display Tibetan influences in some aspects of their culture through their close relationship with the Tibetan community of the region.

The Bao’ans are known to be skilled makers of knives with handles of bone, horn, inlaid brass or copper, a craft learnt from the Tibetans. Traditional Bao’an dances have also incorporated moves that are Tibetan in origin. The Bao’an costume was once comparable with the garments of Mongolians and Tibetans, however, over time they became increasingly similar to the simple clothing of the Hui. Men wear white shirts under coats and jackets, with pants. On festivals, they wear their traditional knives tucked in their belts and tall boots. The women used to wear long gowns with colourful borders; today, they usually wear long shirts with a sleeveless overcoat, worn over pants; these would normally be in rather austere dark colours. Men wear white skullcaps, whilst women cover their hair with white caps and scarves, usually green or black.
Tatar

The Tatars are one of the smallest ethnic minorities of China and make up the smallest portion of the Muslim minorities at less than 5,000. Mostly urban dwellers, they are distributed around the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. The Tatars speak a language belonging to the Hungarian group of the Turko-Altai languages, which is also used by the Tatars of Russia and Eastern Europe. Although only a small community in China, significant Tatar populations can be found scattered amongst the regions of the former Soviet Union.

The term 'Tatar' has been used throughout history to describe the Mongols, both by the Chinese prior to the Mongol invasion of China and by the countries of Europe that came into contact with the Mongol aggressors. The early Mongols were divided into several nomadic tribes, of which the Turkic Tatars were one of the strongest and most prominent. They were subjected by the great Chinghiz Khan, who succeeded in uniting the Mongols under a single empire and who himself came from the Mangkhol tribe, from whence the name 'Mongol' is derived.

Following the disintegration of the Mongol empire, the Tatars mostly became settled in the western regions of China, in the areas once dominated by the Golden Horde, the army led by Batu, that brought Mongol expansions further through Central Asia into Russia. The rulers of the Golden Horde maintained relationships with the Middle East and Egypt and in 1257, Berke, brother of Batu, converted to Islam, the first significant Mongol ruler to do so. Widespread acceptance of the faith was achieved throughout the Golden Horde by the time of the 9th Khan, Ozbeg, in the early 14th century.

Like the Uzbeks, the style of dress of the Tatars is rather European in appearance. The men traditionally wear embroidered shirts under collarless coats or jackets, with black pants. The women wear long dresses with pleated or ruffled skirts. The men wear skullcaps, often decorated, similar to the varieties worn by the Uzbeks and Uyghurs, and in the winter time they wear fur caps. The women usually drape or tie a scarf over their hair in a style not dissimilar to the headdress of the women of Eastern Europe.
Epilogue

39. Mosque in the foreground of the Nan Shan range, near Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang.

The Muslims of China play a significant role in the development and growth of the country, both culturally and economically. A large number of Muslims have participated in areas of government and society as statesmen, thinkers, writers, doctors, scientists, artists and artists. In May 1953, the prominent national Muslim body in China known as the China Islamic Association (CIA) was established. With the help of this highly organised body, Muslim activities have been expanding, resulting in an increase in the number of mosques, religious schools and Muslim industrial buildings. Social reforms in conjunction with economic reformation policies by the Chinese government since the 1970's have also had a relatively positive effect on the rights and lives of the Muslims in China. They have the liberty to hold religious festivals, teach Arabic and the faith in religious schools, establish centres for the mass production and distribution of halal food and organise pilgrimages to the Holy Land of Mecca.

Like any other minority culture, Chinese Muslims face the perils of assimilation or modernisation to the degree that they begin to lose aspects of their ancient traditions. Nevertheless, there seems to be a strong resolution amongst their communities to uphold their beliefs and keep their customs alive. Over time, the Muslims of China have succeeded in adapting to inevitable changes and developments whilst maintaining their faith and taking pride in their respective cultural heritage, and they will continue to do so.

Note:

1 According to the Muslim Almanac, compiled in 1996 by the Regional Islamic Da'wah Council of South-East Asia and the Pacific.