

Special Article

Mosques and Islam Evident on IMANA Trip to China

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The 8th International and 39th Annual Convention of the Islamic Medical Association of North America in China in July 2006 was memorable. The conference opening at the historical Grand Ballroom of the Beijing Hotel was one of the highlights of our visit. This was the place where President Nixon and Chairman Mao met in 1972.

From the time we arrived at the Beijing airport until our departure two weeks later, we were all pleased with Mr. Yusuf's IslamiChina Tours, especially with his well-informed Muslim and non-Muslim tour guides. Both China's natural beauty and its unbelievably rapid development impressed us greatly. Most inspiring was China's ancient Muslim legacy, which we learned about as we visited some of its many historic mosques.

Islam appears to have a rich heritage in China. It is related that the third rightly graded Caliph 'Uthmān sent Sa'd ibn Abī al-Waqqās, a companion of the Prophet ﷺ, as an official envoy to Emperor Gaozong in 650 AD. The emperor being impressed by the tenets of Islam pointed out parallels between Confucianism and Islam and ordered the building of the first mosque in China.¹

The major influx of Muslims in China began in 1070 AD. Emperor Shenzong invited 5,300 Arab men under the leadership of Prince Amir Sayyid "So-fei-er" (his Chinese name) from Bukhara to settle in China. So-fei-er is considered the father of the Muslim community in China. Later on these men settled between the Sung capital of Kaifeng and Yenching (modern day Beijing). In 1080 AD, 10,000



Figure 1. The Niujie Mosque in Beijing.

Arab and Muslim men and women migrated to China on horseback along the "Silk Road" and settled in all the provinces of the north and northeast. During the Song Dynasty (960-1279 AD) Muslims in China dominated foreign trade, the import/export industry to the south and west.

Estimations of the current Muslim population in China vary from exact numbers of 48,104,241 to 20-100 million, depending upon whose figures one trusts.² However, most experts agree that there are more than 20.3 million Muslims, as stated in the 2000 census. There are more than 40,000 mosques in China either of Arabic style or temple style siheyuan architecture (a compound with houses around a courtyard).³

There are 68 mosques in Beijing and a population of 200,000 Muslims in the city. During our stay in Beijing, we prayed our *zuhr* (mid-day) prayers at the Niujie Mosque (Figure 1), the Madian Mosque, and the Nanduya Mosque.

The Niujie Mosque, founded in 997 AD, was restored on several occasions, notably in 1442 and again in 1692 under the Emperor Kangxi. The inscription on one of the stone tablets reads:

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Figure 2. Chinese-style minaret of the Great Mosque (Xian, China).

Tell the provinces of the country that the governor will have anyone who spreads false tales about the Muslims executed, and then bring a report to me. All the Hui shall follow Islam and may not disobey my commands.

The story is that when the emperor's spies brought him news that the Muslim community was planning to rebel under the cover of the gatherings for one of their major feasts, he himself went to visit the mosque and, on finding the rumor untrue, made the proclamation above. Another factor was that the services of the emperor's excellent Muslim troops were of great importance to the stability of the country, and he may have wished to conciliate them. The Niujie mosque has undergone three renovations — in 1955, 1979 and 1996 — since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949.²



Figure 3. Id Kah Mosque (Kashgar, China).

Among the mosques of other cities in which we prayed, the most impressive was the Xian Great Mosque (Figure 2), the oldest mosque in China. It was built in 705 AD.

The largest mosque in China is the Id Kah mosque (Figure 3). Unfortunately, we did not visit it. It is located in Kashgar, Xinjiang in western China. Every Friday, it houses nearly 10,000 worshippers. Saqsiz Mirza built the mosque in 1422 AD, although it included older structures dating back to the 8th century. It covers 16,800 square meters.

We visited the most beautiful natural scenes in Guilin, situated in the northeast of the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in northeastern China. Its peaceful Li River flows like an illuminated script, and it left within our souls nothing less than a greater adoration and reverence for the Creator of all nations and all lands and increased our appreciation of the 5,000-year-old Chinese civilization.

We cruised in that river. The cruise inspired me with the poem that follows on the next page.

References

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The River Li

Sailing down the River Li,
Along the sculptured Guilin mounts
Where lime stones rise to volcanic heights,
As solid green sugar loaves eye-sweet,
Are strung like jade prayer beads.
We whisper with adoration and say wow!
Subhanallah, subhanallah, subhanallah.
Thanks to Almighty, as in our inner selves we find
Our compass and our true guide.
Alhamdulillah, alhamdulillah, alhamdulillah.
What glory is this, oh Glorious God
Creating such wonders leaving us in awe?
It is so good to be alive to see
Your immense kaleidoscopic works
As the pendulum of Your grinding clock
Moves East to West and back to East.
We chat with crickets along the shores,
Wave at fishermen in long sliver boats,
At each bent, sinew rush of graceful Li,
We join with all mankind and say,
God is Great,
God is Great,
God is Great,
God is the only Ultimate.
Ultimate Beauty,
Ultimate Truth,
Ultimate Reality.
Once again we bow, and bow
To His infinite and ineffable Majesty.
We submit ourselves now, and now
To the Creator of all nations,
The shaper of all civilizations
Of past, present and future generations.

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