

Islam in China: an Update

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This article updates the situation of Muslims in China as described in an *RCL* article in 1982 (Peter Humphrey, "Islam in China Today", Vol. 10, No. 2, pp. 168-77). That article referred to the census of the population which commenced in 1982 and was expected to last five years. Some results have now been published. According to the census, there are nearly 15 million Muslims in the People's Republic of China (see Table 1).

Islam first appeared in China during the Tang dynasty (618-907 AD). It was brought by Arab merchants from Central Asia. The Hui people are the largest minority group professing Islam. They generally speak Chinese, although many know some Arabic. Racially they are little different from the Han Chinese. Their mosques are often built in pure Chinese style. There are nine other distinct minorities who profess Islam, each racially distinct and with their own language. The largest group is the Uighurs (Uygurs) who number nearly six million, and inhabit the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region. The Kazakhs number nearly one million, and many of them still lead a nomadic life in Xinjiang and other north-western provinces of China. The remaining seven Muslim minorities total about half a million people, and again are concentrated mainly in Xinjiang.

The official total of 15 million Muslims is less than high pre-1949 estimates and those of some Muslim scholars abroad.¹ The official Islamic Association in Beijing believes that previous estimates were grossly exaggerated by Chinese Muslims themselves.² Another tentative explanation could be that some Hui Muslims quietly shed their Islamic identity during the years of persecution during the Cultural Revolution, and have been reluctant to acknowledge their Hui identity to the census-takers. If some younger Hui lost their religious faith, there would be little left to distinguish them from their majority Han neighbours, unlike the racially and linguistically distinct Muslim minorities in Xinjiang. The Kaifeng Jews present an interesting case history, although on a much smaller scale, of how a religious and ethnic minority was gradually almost totally assimilated by the dominant Han culture.³

Islam is strong in China's North West particularly in Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai and Ningxia. However, there are many Muslims scattered across North China, and also in Yunnan province in the South West. What is

TABLE I

POPULATION STATISTICS OF CHINA'S MUSLIMS

(Based on the official census of 1982)

<i>Ethnic group</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Areas of distribution</i>
Hui	7,219,352	Ningxia, Gansu, Henan, Xinjiang, Yunnan, etc.
Uighur (Uyгур)	5,957,112	Xinjiang
Kazakh	907,582	Xinjiang, Gansu, Qinghai
Dongxiang	279,397	Gansu, Xinjiang
Kirgiz	113,999	Xinjiang
Sala	69,102	Qinghai, Gansu
Tadjik	26,503	Xinjiang
Uzbek	12,453	Xinjiang
Baoan	9,027	Gansu
Tatar	4,127	Xinjiang
TOTAL:	14,598,654	

perhaps surprising is the existence of smaller Hui Islamic communities in other areas as widely separated as Heilongjiang, Anhui and Sichuan (see Table 2). (See also map in *RCL* Vol. 10 No. 2, p. 171 — *Ed.*)

According to Chinese government sources there are upwards of twenty thousand Muslim religious personnel in China.⁴ This figure is not far below the 27,000 Buddhist religious workers, and shows the strength of Islam in China. Most are, however, concentrated in Xinjiang and Ningxia. Many are elderly and the government-recognised Islamic Association is making great efforts to train young imams. For instance, the majority of the two thousand imams in Ningxia are elderly, and training courses have been started in various places. A Koranic college has been set up in Urumqi, the capital of Xinjiang; sixty younger imams have graduated from recent training courses: standing committee members of the regional Islamic Associations have been allowed to train two or three Islamic students: 15 youths have been sent to the Koranic College in Beijing and three to institutions in Egypt.⁵

The China Islamic Association convened a meeting in Beijing in August 1982. The Director and Deputy Director of the United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee were present, and the Director of the Religious Affairs Bureau of the State Council gave an important speech outlining the party's basic policy on religious questions, dealing, for example, with the questions of how to reopen mosques and train young patriotic religious personnel. The Director of the Islamic Association delivered a report in which he stated that since 1980 a total of more than 160,000 copies of the Koran had been printed as well as some Chinese-Arabic bilingual selections, calendars, periodicals and other books. Promoting friendly international relations with Islamic countries is another important role of the Association: between 1980 and 1982 seven delegations had been sent abroad, and the Association had received ten groups from eight countries as well as 199

other foreign guests. The prime tasks for the future, he stated, were to assist the government thoroughly in implementing the policy of freedom of religious belief and to strengthen education in patriotism and socialism among Muslims.⁶ More Muslims than formerly are being allowed to leave China to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. In 1983, 313 went from Xinjiang at their own expense. In 1984 over a thousand applied to go at their own expense, but organised by the Association.⁷

TABLE 2

OFFICIAL STATISTICS OF SOME MUSLIM COMMUNITIES IN CHINA

Area or city	Number of Muslims	Number of Mosques	Number of Imams (Ahongs) ("professional religious personnel")
Xinjiang	7,000,000	14,000	15,000
Ningxia	1,000,000+	1,400+	2,000
Beijing	200,000+	40+	
Harbin (Heilongjiang)	30,000		
Xian (Shaanxi)	50,000		
Taian (Shandong)	28,000+		
Botou (Hebei)	12,000+	1	
Pingquan (Hebei)	7,000	3	4
Cangzhou (Hebei)		120	
Jianshi (Yunnan)	10,000	23	30
Chengdu (Sichuan)	10,000	2	
Xichang County (Sichuan)	9,420	17	11
Wuhu (Anhui)	6,000+	1	1
Maanshan (Anhui)	4,000+	1	
Zaodian, Jiaozuo (Henan)	6,000	2	
Wukeshou (Jilin)	1,200	1	

These statistics are taken from such sources as the New China News Agency, Muslims in China and the People's Daily.

Large numbers of mosques have been reopened and renovated, sometimes at government expense and sometimes through the contributions of local Muslims. A rough estimate of the total number of mosques in China would be approaching twenty thousand, bearing in mind that the official statistics so far published are by no means complete (see Table 2). Compared to the dark days of the Cultural Revolution when many Muslims were severely persecuted, and even forced to rear pigs, there can be no doubt that they are now enjoying much greater religious freedom.⁸

However, the Muslims of the North West have had a turbulent history in which, more often than not, they pitted themselves against the Chinese central government. In January 1982 the Xinjiang First Party Secretary acknowledged that there were "very serious problems" in race relations between the Han and local minorities.⁹ This followed reports of serious disturbances in Kashgar at the end of the previous years.¹⁰ Since then the situation seems to have improved, with efforts made to train more local minority cadres.¹¹

The Muslims of the North West have traditionally had very large families. Although originally the strict birth control policy in force among the Han Chinese was not enforced among the minorities, in more recent years there have been efforts to introduce family planning. In Ningxia, for example, the government "noticed that the masses of Muslims had scruples about birth control. It invited *ahongs* and personages in the country several times to discuss the issue. They tried to find out evidence for birth control in the scriptures of Islam so as to carry out family planning education among the masses of Muslims." The Ningxia Islamic Association compiled a pamphlet on family planning giving "evidence concerning the question of birth control in the scriptures of Islam, which is attached with the original Arabic text." It was circulated to mosques and agricultural brigades in the region.¹² In Ningxia where the Muslims are already a minority, and in Xinjiang where the Han Chinese population is approaching fifty percent of the total, birth control policy remains a potential cause of disaffection. Xinjiang has untapped natural resources, and in the longer term more Han immigrants are likely to come into the region.

The Chinese government maintains good relations with many Islamic countries, such as Pakistan and Egypt (the major exception is Saudi Arabia which still recognises Taiwan) and publicly supports the Islamic freedom-fighters in Afghanistan. Internally, despite some continuing restrictions and limitations, Chinese Muslims are enjoying a greater degree of religious freedom than at any time since 1949.

¹ *Chinese Year Book*, as quoted in *Zhongguo Huijiao Shi*, original edition 1937.

² Peter Humphrey, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

³ Cf., "New Hope for China's Jews", *Time Magazine*, 11 February 1985.

⁴ Concerning Our Country's Basic Standpoint and Policy on Religious Questions during the Socialist Period (Communist Party Central Committee Circular, "Document 19", of 31 March 1982, Section 5.) (See *RCL* Vol. 12, No. 3, pp. 244-55 for an account of "Document 19" — *Ed.*)

⁵ New China News Agency (NCNA) 6 May 1983 and 13 August 1983. All NCNA quotes taken from: *Documentation*, Religion in the People's Republic of China, China Study Project.

⁶ *Muslims in China*, No. 4, November 1982 as translated in *Documentation*, March 1983.

⁷ NCNA, 27 March 1984.

⁸ Cf. D. E. MacInnis, *Religious Policy and Practice in Communist China*. London: 1972, p. 292.

⁹ Sing Dou Yat Bou, 16 January 1982.

¹⁰ Sing Dou Yat Bou, 4 June 1982.

¹¹ Cf. *People's Daily*, 25 October 1983.

¹² *Muslims in China*, No. 4, November 1983. Quoted in *Documentation*, July 1984.

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