

Islam in China

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The ‘Great Mosque of Guangzhou’ is also known as Huaisheng Mosque which means ‘Remember the Sage’ (A Memorial Mosque to the Prophet) and is also popularly called the ‘Guangta Mosque’ which translates as ‘The Beacon Tower Mosque’. Huaisheng Mosque is located on Guangta Road (Light Pagoda Road) which runs eastwards off Renmin Zhonglu.

Prior to 500 CE and hence before the establishment of Islam, Arab seafarers had established trade relations with the “Middle Kingdom” (China). Arab ships bravely set off from Basra at the tip of the Arabian Gulf and also from the town of Qays (Siraf) in the Persian Gulf. They sailed the Indian Ocean passing Sarandip (Sri Lanka) and navigated their way through the Straits of Malacca which were between the Sumatran and Malaysian peninsulas en route to the South China Sea. They established trading posts on the southeastern coastal ports of Quanzhou and Guangzhou. Some Arabs had already settled in China and probably embraced Islam when the first Muslim deputation arrived, as their families and friends back in Arabia, had already embraced Islam during the Prophet’s revelation (610-32).

Guangzhou is called Khanfu by the Arabs who later set up a Muslim quarter which became a centre of commerce. Guangzhou’s superior geographical position made it play an important role as the oldest trading and international port city in China. Witnessing a series of historical events, China has become a significant place in history and one of the fastest growing regions in the world enjoying unprecedented prosperity.

Whilst an Islamic state was founded by Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, China was enduring a period of unification and defense. Early Chinese annals mentioned Muslim Arabs and called their kingdom al-Medina (of Arabia). Islam in Chinese is called “Yisilan Jiao” (meaning “Pure Religion”). A Chinese official once described Mecca as being the birthplace of Buddha Ma-hia-wu (i.e. Prophet Muhammad).

There are several historical versions relating to the advent of Islam in China. Some records claim Muslims first arrived in China in two groups within as many months from Abyssinia (Ethiopia).

Ethiopia was the land where some early Muslims first fled in fear from the persecution of the Quraysh tribe in Mecca. Among that group of refugees were one of Prophet Muhammad's daughters Ruqayya, her husband Uthman ibn Affan, Sad Ibn Abi Waqqas and many other prominent Companions who migrated on the advice of the Prophet. They were successfully granted political asylum by the Abyssinian King Atsmaha Negus in the city of Axum (c.615 CE).

However, some Companions never returned to Arabia. They may have traveled on in the hope of earning their livelihood elsewhere and may have eventually reached China by land or sea during the Sui Dynasty (581-618 CE). Some records relate that Sad Ibn Abi Waqqas and three other Companions sailed to China in c.616 CE from Abyssinia (Ethiopia) with the backing of the king of Abyssinia. Sad then returned to Arabia, bringing a copy of the Holy Quran back to Guangzhou some 21 years later, which appropriately coincides with the account of Liu Chih who wrote "The Life of the Prophet" (12 vols).

One of the Companions who lived in China is believed to have died in c.635 CE and was buried in the western urban part of Hami. His tomb is known as "Geys' Mazars" and is revered by many in the surrounding region. It is in the northwestern autonomous province of Xingjian (Sinkiang) and about 400 miles east of the latter's capital, Urumqi. Xingjian is four times the size of Japan, shares its international border with eight different nations and is home to the largest indigenous group of Turkic-speaking Uyghurs. Hence, as well as being the largest Islamized area of China, Xingjian is also of strategic importance geographically.

The Quran states in unequivocal words that Muhammad was sent only as a Mercy from God to all peoples (21:107), and in another verse:

"We have not sent thee but as a Mercy to all Mankind..."
(34:28)

This universality of Islam facilitated its acceptance by people from all races and nations and is amply demonstrated in China where the indigenous population, of ethnic varieties of Chinese Muslims today is greater than the population of many Arab countries including that of Saudi Arabia.

The history of Huaisheng Mosque represents centuries of Islamic culture dating right back to the mid-seventh century during the T'ang Dynasty (618-907) - "the golden age of Chinese history". It was in this period, eighteen years after the death of the Prophet, that Islam - the last of the three monotheistic religions - was first introduced to China by the third Caliph, Uthman Ibn 'Affan (644-656 CE/23-35 AH).

Uthman was one of the first to embrace Islam and memorize the Holy Quran. He possessed a mild and gentle nature and he married Ruqayyah and following her death, Umm Kulthum (both were daughters of the Prophet). Consequently he was given the epithet of ‘Dhu-n-Nurayn’ (the one with the two lights). Uthman was highly praised for safeguarding the manuscripts of the Quran against disputes by ordering its compilation from the memories of the Companions and sending copies to the four corners of the Islamic Empire.

Uthman sent a delegation to China led by Sad Ibn Abi Waqqas (d. 674 CE/55 AH) who was a much loved maternal uncle of the Prophet and one of the most famous Companions who converted to Islam at the age of just seventeen. He was a veteran of all the battles and one of the ten who it is reported that the Prophet said were assured a place in paradise.

In Medina, Sad, using his ability in architecture added an Iwan (an arched hall used by a Persian Emperor) as a worship area. He later laid the foundation of what was to be the first Mosque in China where early Islamic architecture forged a relationship with Chinese architecture.

According to the ancient historical records of the T’ang Dynasty, an emissary from the kingdom of al-Medina led by Sad Ibn Abi Waqqas and his deputation of Companions, who sailed on a special envoy to China in c.650 CE, via the Indian Ocean and the China Sea to the famous port of Guangzhou, thence traveled overland to Chang’an (present day Xi’an) via what was later known as the “Silk Route”.

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Sad and his deputation brought presents and were warmly received at the royal court by the T’ang Emperor Kao-tsung, (r. 650-683) in c.651 CE, despite a recent plea of support against the Arabs forwarded to the Emperor in that same year by Shah Peroz (the ruler of Sassanid Persia). The latter was a son of Yazdegerd who, along with the Byzantines, already had based their embassies in China over a decade earlier. Together they were the two great powers of the west. A similar plea made to Emperor Tai Tsung (r.627-649) against the simultaneous spread of Muslim forces was refused.

First news of Islam had already reached the T’ang royal court during the reign of Emperor Tai Tsung when he was informed by an embassy of the Sassanid king of Persia, as well as the Byzantiums of the emergence of the Islamic rule. Both sought protection from the might of China. Nevertheless, the second year of Kao-tsung’s reign marks the first official visit by a Muslim ambassador.

The emperor, after making enquiries about Islam, gave general approval to the new religion which he considered to be compatible with the teachings of Confucius. But he felt that the five daily canonical prayers and a month of fasting were requirements too severe for his taste and he did not convert. He

allowed Sad Ibn Abi Waqqas and his delegation freedom to propagate their faith and expressed his admiration for Islam which consequently gained a firm foothold in the country.

Sad later settled in Guangzhou and built the Huaisheng Mosque which was an important event in the history of Islam in China. It is reputedly the oldest surviving mosque in the whole of China and is over 1300 years old. It survived through several historical events which inevitably took place outside its doorstep. This mosque still stands in excellent condition in modern Guangzhou after repairs and restorations.

Its contemporary Da Qingzhen Si (Great Mosque) of Chang'an (present day Xi'an) in Shaanxi Province was founded in c.742 CE. It is the largest (12,000 sq metres) and the best early mosque in China and it has been beautifully preserved as it expanded over the centuries. The present layout was constructed by the Ming Dynasty in c.1392 CE, a century before the fall of Granada, under its (ostensible) founder Hajj Zheng He who has a stone tablet at the mosque in commemoration of his generous support, which was provided by the grateful Emperor.



A fine model of the Great Mosque with all its surrounding walls and the magnificent, elegant appearance of its pavilions and courtyards can be seen at the Hong Kong Museum placed gracefully besides the model of the Huaisheng Mosque. I was fortunate to visit the real mosque last year during Asr prayer, after which I met the Imam who showed me an old handwritten Quran and presented me with a white cap.

Walking to the prayer hall is like sleepwalking through an oriental oasis confined in a city forbidden for the impure. A dragon symbol is engraved at the footstep of the entrance opposite the prayer hall demonstrating the meeting between Islam and the Chinese civilisation. All in all it is a dazzling encounter of the architecture of Oriental China with that of the indigenous fashionable taste of Harun ar-Rashid (147-194 AH/764-809 CE) of Baghdad - a newly founded city that was to become the greatest between Constantinople and China, fifty years after the time of Harun.



The Sheng-You Si (Mosque of the Holy Friend), also known as the Qingjing Si (Mosque of Purity) and Al-Sahabah Mosque (Mosque of Companions), was built with pure granite in 1009 CE during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). Its architectural design and style was modeled on the Great Mosque of

Damascus (709-15) in Syria thus making the pair the oldest extant Mosques to survive (in original form) into the twenty-first century.

Qingjing Mosque is located at “Madinat al-Zaytun” (Quanzhou) or, in English, “City of Olives” in Fujian Province, where also two Companions of the Prophet who accompanied Sa’d Ibn Abi Waqqas’s envoy to China are buried. They are known to the locals by their Chinese names of “Sa-Ke-Zu and Wu-Ku-Su”.

Zhen-Jiao Si (Mosque of the True Religion), also known as Feng-Huang Si (the Phoenix Mosque) in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province, is believed to date back from the Tang Dynasty. It has a multi-storied portal, serving as a minaret and a platform for observing the moon. The Mosque has a long history and it has been rebuilt and renovated on a number of occasions over the centuries. It is much smaller than it used to be, especially with the widening of the road in 1929, and it was partly rebuilt in 1953.

The other ancient Mosque is located in the city of Yangzhou in Jiangsu Province, once the busiest city of trade and commerce during the Song Dynasty (960-1280). Xian-He Si (Mosque of Immortal Crane) is the oldest and largest in the city and was built in c.1275CE by Pu-ha-din, a Muslim preacher who was a sixteenth-generation descendant of the Prophet Muhammad.

According to Chinese Muslim historians, Sad Ibn Abi Waqqas died in Guangzhou where he is believed to be buried. However Arab scholars differ, stating that Sad died and was buried in Medina amongst other Companions. One grave definitely exists, while the other is symbolic, God only knows whether it is in China or Medina. As one can see, the spread of Islam in China was indeed a peaceful one. The first envoy reached the southeast via the Zhu Jiang (The Pearl River) and was later followed by contact via an overland route from the northwest. Muslim communities are present over a wide geographical area in China today, including some in the remote places of Tibet, where I once met Tibetan Muslims in the middle of nowhere, while on a trek.