

Jewel of Chinese Muslim's Heritage

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JEWEL OF CHINESE MUSLIM'S HERITAGE

(A PERSONAL ENCOUNTER WITH THE FIRST MOSQUE IN CHINA)

This is one of a series of articles especially commissioned by FSTC to report on some Islamic Monuments and Centres of interest but are not well known to the wide public. This one is reported by FSTC's special researcher, Mohammed Khamouch

Long before I travelled to Asia, my mind was always fascinated by China and its magical arts. I was unaware of Chinese Muslim communities and their way of life since little, if anything, was ever mentioned about them. I slowly began to learn about the areas of China where these Muslim communities lived, about their history, cultural heritage and early mosques which immensely intrigued me and I could not wait to pay homage to them.

I entered the country from the south through Hong Kong where I visited the Hong Kong Museum which has numerous Arabic coins, Islamic Burial Tablets dating back to the T'ang and Song Dynasties and a magnificent model of The Huaisheng Mosque which I was to visit.

In order to embark on my spiritual journey and pay respect to the oldest mosque in the whole of China I had to obtain another entry visa from the Chinese authorities. This great mosque is dearly precious to every Chinese Muslim. It lies in the city Guangzhou (Canton), located at the north of Zhu Jiang (The Pearl River) which is the capital of Guangdong Province - the largest and most important gateway and foreign trading hub in southern China. From Hong Kong, I was anxious but thrilled to take the 165km journey northwest to Guangzhou to visit the mosque.



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



View of Pavilion and Minaret

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 south eastern 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 Holy 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 the Holy Prophet Muhammad, China was enduring a period of unification and defence. Early Chinese annals mentioned Muslim Arabs and called their kingdom al-Madinah (of Arabia). Islam in Chinese is called "*Yisilan Jiao*" (meaning "Pure Religion"). A Chinese official once described Makkah as being the birthplace of *Buddha Ma-hia-wu* (i.e. Holy 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 *al-Habasha Abyssinia* (Ethiopia).

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

However, some Sahabah never returned to Arabia. They may have travelled 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 Sa'd Ibn Abi Waqqas and three other Sahabah sailed to China in c.616 CE from Abyssinia (Ethiopia) with the backing of the king of Abyssinia. Sa'd then returned to Arabia, bringing a copy of the Holy Qur'an 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 Sahabaha 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 north western autonomous province of Xinjiang (Sinkiang) and about 400 miles east of the latter's capital, Urumqi. Xinjiang 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 Islamised area of China, Xinjiang is also of strategic importance geographically.

The Qur'an 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 (Messenger) 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 Holy Prophet, that Islam - the last of the three great 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 Qur'an. He possessed a mild and gentle nature and he married Ruqayyah and following her death, Umm Kulthum (both were daughters of the Holy 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 Qur'an 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 Sa'd 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 Holy Prophet said were assured a place in paradise.

In Madina, Sa'd, 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-Madinah led by Sa'd Ibn Abi Waqqas and his deputation of Sahabah, 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 travelled overland to Chang'an (present day Xi'an) via what was later known as the "Silk Route".

Sa'd 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 Sassanids 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 Sassanian 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 Sa'd 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.

Sa'd 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 door step. 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 Qur'an 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 modelled 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" (Olive is a symbol of peace according to Arab/Muslim tradition) in Fujian Province, where there are the Sacred Tombs of two Companions of the Holy Prophet who accompanied Sa'd Ibn Abi Waqqas's envoy to China. They are known to the locals by their Chinese names of "Sa-Ke-Zu and Wu-Ku-Su" and Arabs from various countries come to pay homage.

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, Sa'd Ibn Abi Waqqas died in Guangzhou where he is believed to be buried. However Arab scholars differ, stating that Sa'd 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. The message of Islam took root peacefully in China. 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.



Grave of Sa'd Ibn Abi Waqqas

Mu'awiyah (d.60 AH/680 CE), the sixth Caliph and founder of the Umayyad Caliphate, was known in China as "Mo-ee" and the Chinese closely observed the progress of the Islamic Empire, noting in the T'ang annals, when Constantinople was unsuccessfully besieged by the Muslim armies, between 674 and 679, and they called the Arabs of that period "White Robed Ta-shih. After the death of Mu'awiyah in 680, his son Yezid (r. 680-3) became the new Caliph. He sent Umar, son of Sa'd Ibn Abi Waqqas, who was in command of a large

army. A century after the death of the Holy Prophet, the Islamic Empire extended from the Pyrenees to the Himalayas and was eventually sharing borders with China which closely observed the progress of the Islamic world.

The Umayyad Dynasty had reached its zenith under the reign of al-Walid I (705-15) when expansion of the Islamic empire to the West and the East had achieved great success. When the first European lands (what is today Spain and Portugal) was conquered in 711 by Tariq Ibn Ziad and his army, Islamic rule was established right up to the Atlantic under the command of Musa Ibn Nusair. An overland expedition under Muhammad Ibn Qasim, a nephew and son-in-law of Hajjaj Ibn Yusuf, the governor of Iraq, was advancing through southern Persia and Baluchistan and reaching the lower Indus Valley.

Qutaiba Ibn Muslim was appointed governor of Khurasan by Hajjaj and he launched a series of successful military campaigns, gaining control over Transoxiana in 94-5/712-3 where many Persians and Turkish inhabitants embraced Islam. Kashgar, a frontier town of China, was also raided and Qutaiba swore to take control over China but his demands were deflected by a friendly approach which included a symbolic gift by the provincial governor to release him from his solemn oath.

According to the famous historian al-Tabari (225-310 AH/839-923 CE), in 96/714 there was a brief encounter with a "Ta-shih" delegation which brought precious gifts to Emperor Hsuan Tsung. The envoy refused to perform the traditional *k'o t'ou* (bow) and when asked why by the bemused Emperor, the reply was "in my country we only bow to God" (T'ian shen). The Emperor was angered and wanted to kill the envoy but a possible reminder of Qutaiba (who was besieging Feghana) by one of the ministers must have triggered the Emperor's mind to recall a Chinese proverb that says: "Exchange of jade and silk is better than of swords in a battlefield".

In the battle of Talas (Central Asia) in 751, under the command of Ziyad Ibn Salih, the Chinese had suffered a decisive defeat by the Arabs who captured some prisoners, two of whom knew the art of paper-making and were later rewarded and released. Parchment or papyrus was generally used by the Arabs until the introduction of paper-making technology in Samarqand. The first paper mill was established in Baghdad thus producing a major breakthrough in education and science which were high priorities.

Tu Huan (c.751-762), a Chinese clerical official who accompanied the ill-fated Chinese army in the battle of Talas under the command of Kao Hsien Chee, was held prisoner for a decade and travelled to Samarqand, Tashkent, northern Iran, Iraq and Syria before sailing back to Guangzhou from the Arabian Gulf. He wrote a book entitled "*Jing Hsing Chee*" (Where I Travelled) and accurately recorded the practice and fundamental belief of Islam, making it one of the earliest works of Islam in China.



The exterior view of Prayer Hall

One year after the death of the Amir al-Mu'minin, Abu-l-Abbas as-Saffah (r. 749-54), known in China as "A-Bo-Lo-Ba", the foe became a friend of "A-p'uch'a-fo" - the second Abbasid Caliph Abu Jafar al-Mansur (r. 754-75). The Emperor Su T'sung appealed for help in regaining control of his capital Chang'an from the treacherous commander, An Lu-Shan who was a multi linguist Tarter and governor of Pinglu and who had the wildest of ambitions and had rebelled against the Emperor.

An opportunity occurred for Islamic influence to penetrate into the heart of China when al-Mansur responded by sending 4,000 warriors who recaptured the city and were well rewarded by the Emperor. Some men never returned to their native lands and were known as "Ta-shihs". They married with Chinese women, subsequently establishing Muslim communities in Western China, descendants of which are the progenitors of the "Hui" (meaning return) nationality.

The illustrious Ming Admiral Muhammad Ma Ho, Zheng He (1371-1433), his immediate lieutenant Ma H'uan (Muhammad Hassan), chronicler Fei Hsin and his Arabic interpreter Hassan, a former Imam (exemplar) of Xi'an, were among these descendents. Zheng He courageously led treasure-ship fleets and expeditions to many countries, establishing good diplomatic, political and social relations between governments.

On the seventh expedition (1431-33), under the reign of Emperor Xuan De (1426-1435), Zheng He sailed with over 100 ships and 27,550 men. They visited several countries including Arabia and especially Makkah where he and some of his naval officers paid homage to al-Bayt al-Haram (Holy Ka'bah). Belonging to a very old pious Muslim family, his father and grandfather were both Hajjis who, unlike Zheng, travelled for months on horseback and camel, reaching their destination stops with great difficulty before finally reaching Makkah.

Heroically admired by many, he earned the title of *San Pao Kung* "Our Master of the Three Jewels" from the early Chinese settlers of Southeast Asia, wherein a Mosque named after Zheng He has been erected in Surabaya to mark the many years of trade and (Islamic) religious contact.

Arab merchants at this time commissioned mosques, headed by an "ahong" (from the Persian akhun, meaning religious leader) in various parts of China and expressed their commitment to Islam by building symbolic characteristics into their communities, called 'Fan Fang' foreign quarters clustered around a

mosque. Arabs and Persians, who became permanent residents in the cities previously mentioned, were referred to as 'Fanke' which means guests from the outlying regions.

They were allowed to marry and they had children who became known as 'Tusheng Fanke' (native-born guests). The latter were better known as "Hui Hui" as first noted in the literature of the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127). Representing the second largest of all ethnic minorities living in China today, they trace their descent from the Arabs and Persians, whom undoubtedly gained high command of the Chinese idiom.

In China, Muslim places of worship have not incorporated the Arabic name of "Masjid" (Mosque) instead an alternative name such as "*Qing Zhen Si*" (Temple of Purity and Truth) is used. "*Si*" (Temple) is used for Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian places of worship. Hence most early Mosque exterior building structures, architecturally resembled that of a temple.

Followers of traditional Islam were known as "*Gedimu*" (from the Arabic *Qadeem* which translates as old) and they were exposed to various teachings described as "*lao jiao*" (old religious teaching) such as Qadiriyyah, a famous order founded by Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d.56/1166) in Baghdad. A group of which was founded in China by Hilal al-Din, Qin Jingyi (c.1656-1719). He received his early training from Khoja Abd Alla, a twenty-ninth-generation descendant of the Holy Prophet, who according to Chinese Sufi records arrived in at the port of Guangzhou in c.1674 and preached in many other cities before his eventual death in c.1689.

Hilal al-Din, known among the Hui as "Daozu" (Grand Master Qi is entombed at Linxia which was once an important stop on the silk road between Lanzhou and Yang Guan. Another Gedimu is the Naqshabandiyyah - the conspicuous Sufi order founded by Muhammad Naqshaband of Bukhara (717-791/1317-1389).

New teachings arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to replace the old ones referred to as "*xin xin jiao*": The Yihewani (*al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun*) Muslim Brotherhood movement was brought by annual pilgrims to Makkah, and the Wahhabis, a dominant sect in Saudi Arabia and Qatar which had established footholds in many countries including Africa, India and China. Devotees of this sect named after its founder Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1115-1201 AH/1703-1787 CE).

On 12th February 1949, some six months before the official inauguration of the People's Republic of China, the luminary Imam Hassan al-Banna (c.1906-1949) was martyred in the heart of Cairo. The eminent founder of al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun (Muslim Brotherhood), his mission spread globally from the local coffee-house in Egypt to downtown Muslim quarters of China attracting more urban intellectuals and sustaining a strong hold throughout China today.

Such impact is clearly visible in current Chinese Mosque architecture, where traditional "Gedimu" Chinese-style Mosques, which resemble that of Confucian temples, are rejected by the Yihewanis (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimun) who are of an Arabist nature. They prefer more plain white Arab-style (iconography) mosques instead, with a young Imam for leading the congregational prayers similar to the Imam of a Mosque I have visited in Luoyang who may possibly have graduated from al-Azhar University where some thirty three Hui students enrolled in c.1939.

Islamic civilization steadily spread - reaching the heart of every Chinese Muslim, creating a fascinating mosaic of ethnic neighbourhoods within the "Dragon's Den". Once on my return trip from the *Huang He* (Yellow River), also called China's Sorrow and the World's Muddiest River, a few miles north of Kaifeng in Henan Province, I spotted an old cottage remotely located with a small white flag flying from a tree branch, inscribed in Arabic with a Qur'anic verse to keep out evil spirits. Immediately it drew my attention as this was similar to what happened in many parts of the Muslim world.

Huaisheng Mosque embraces a unique ingenious architectural setting by successfully integrating Islamic architectural renderings with elements of the T'ang architectural style, producing an aura of Islamic-Chinese symmetrical architectural charm, free from ornamentation and idolatry.

The mosque gave birth to a new chapter in the field of architecture in one of China's most illustrious periods of history where efficient administrative system developed, printing appeared for the first time, custom and philosophy became even more sophisticated and creative arts flourished, producing a highly cosmopolitan empire.



Gateway to the Mosque

Huaisheng Mosque was rebuilt in 1350 during the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) under the rule of Zhizhen (1341-1368) and again during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911) under the rule of Emperor Kangzi. In 1695 the mosque was destroyed by fire and was rebuilt again on the same original site. A century-old photograph of the Mosque which I was fortunate to see displays a semblance of much of what we see today except for the uncultivated gardens which are in dire need of an aspiring gardener.

A decade or so after the modernization of Guangzhou city which began in the early 1920's, where the remainder of the old city wall was demolished, the present prayer hall has undergone a complete reconstruction in 1935 using reinforced concrete. The mosque complex can accommodate one thousand worshippers and occupies an area of 2,966 square meters lying on a north-south axis.

The building comprises of a main gate with a green awning facing south which is in accordance with Chinese tradition. As you enter through a narrow courtyard there is another gateway with a red plaque inscribed in four Chinese characters which translates as 'Religion that holds in great esteem the teachings brought from the Western Region'. There are beautiful green plants on each side of the arched entrance. Another arched gateway with a two storied portal built in the seventeenth century, makes it graceful to pass through. It's called the Moon Pavilion and leads through to a wonderfully set courtyard taking you to the prayer hall.

Entering the courtyard through the arched entrance of the Moon Pavilion, one instantly leaves behind the Chinese world for the Sino-Moorish. You begin to feel the calmness, spatial beauty and quiet atmosphere as if you were going back in time, in contrast to the hustle and bustle of the world one has just left. One begins to feel elevated by the fragrant smell of the flowers in the gardens and intrigued by such illustrious techniques used to venerate this building.

Instead of a dome, a gambrel (mansard) roof with upswept eaves and undulating gables is used with a small stupica (small stupa) placed in the middle with a beautiful set of beams, spaciouly designed with several columns symmetrically divided with a red bricked arch entrance. Wooden sliding doors with glass patterned shapes characterized and organized into coherent patterns of form by its monumental exterior and Chinese classical colonnades mark the entrance. Several long wooden seats and chairs are situated around the colonnades available for worshipers to sit in between or after prayers.

The culmination of this *Qing Zhen Si* (Temple of Purity and Truth), known to the local Chinese as a Muslim's place of worship, dominates a historical overview of when the first Arabs embarked on their journey from the sands of Arabia to the silk-door steps of the "Middle Kingdom" (China).

I was lost in contemplation for a while, visualizing a theme of Arab merchants gathering in this very courtyard, reflecting on their long arduous and hazardous sea adventure. Thinking of such great men, all of whom I wish to pay tribute to, verily transported me back in time, and I was put into a kind of trance as I sat down in the cloistered courtyard.

During the reign of the Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur, Arab traders sailed from the ports of al-Basrah and Siraf, in the months of May and June, enduring between three to six months of travel to the port of Guangzhou trading at different stopovers and keeping alert from pirate attacks and returned during the months of October and November following seasonal winds. Other merchants traversed the rough and hostile terrain from the Central Asian steppe along the Silk Route on camel caravans, facing constant danger as their journey progressed to their trading point.

Intellectual curiosity which was embedded in the Islamic doctrine led early prominent Muslim travellers like Ibn Wahhab of al-Basrah to arrive in the port of "Khanfu" (Guangzhou) around c.815 CE, thence to Chang'an (Xi'an) where he attended an audience with the Emperor, wrote a vivid account on the city of Chang'an and the imperial household. Chang'an during the T'ang Dynasty and Baghdad which reached its zenith during the Abbasid Caliphate, were the most powerful and largest cities in the world.

Sulaiman al-Tajir (the Merchant), made numerous voyages to India and China from his native town of the port of Siraf where traders arriving from China first offloaded goods before distribution to al-Basrah and

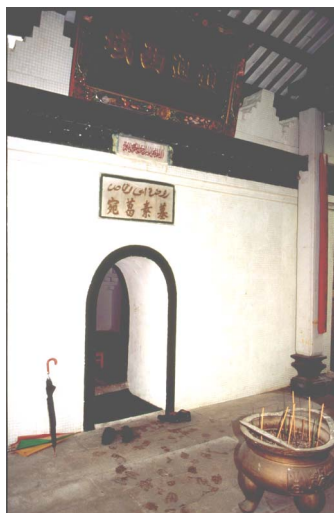
Baghdad via transportation vessels. He wrote about his long daring voyages in c.850 CE, describing the piracy and extreme weather en route to the port of "Khanfu" (Guangzhou) where extortionate port duties were charged on goods and finger-prints were used as signatures.

The Muslim community of Guangzhou that Sulaiman visited had their own mosques, bazaars and a Qadi (judge), appointed by the emperor who kept order and applied, not Chinese, but Shari'ah law (canonical law of Islam) amongst his co-religionists, and delivered the Friday (Khutbah) sermon to the faithful.

Stories of such adventures, which contain popular tales and scientific descriptions noted by early Arab travellers to China are recorded in twelfth-century Arabic manuscript entitled "*Akhbar al-Sin*" (Reports of China) "*wal Hind*" (Reports of India) relating stories of two Arab travellers. Tales of such adventurous voyages are compiled in the huge collection known as "One Thousand and One Nights" of which the legendary "Sindbad the Sailor" and "Prince Alladin" are the most famous tales.

The Muslim chronicler Abu Zaid Hassan al-Sirafi reported the massacre of some 120,000 Arabs, Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians that took place in Guangzhou and edited the account of Sulaiman al-Tajir in c.851 CE. He was a friend of the famous Abu'l-Hasan al-Mas'udi (d.345/956) who was an outstanding encyclopaedic figure, historian and scientist of Islam as well as a world traveller who sailed through the China Sea and wrote valuable observations about China in his "Meadows of Gold and Mines of Precious Gems". One of the few depictions of Arab shipping where sail, oars and the rudder were used can be seen in the 13th century manuscript of al-Hariri's Maqdamat which did not reach the Christian Mediterranean until several centuries later.

Within the prosperous maritime network, merchants brought valuable and distinctive commodities such as silk, jade, porcelain, lapis lazuli, spices and fruits which were carried on the backs of camels. Silk was one of many precious goods that were exchanged between East and West due to the prosperous maritime network managed by Arabs who were acting as intermediaries between China, India and the Middle East.



Ro'udat Abi Waqqas

Caravans of students, scholars, ambassadors, monks, soldiers, craftsmen and traders journeyed through the arteries of this magnificent international trade route which ran over the roof of the world serving the Eurasian civilizations for eighteen centuries. They would halt at stops on the road and at well-known

bazaars where Arab and Persian traders exchanged goods. Traders also gathered contributions to build mosques, many of which are of historical importance and are well preserved to this day. Men of the pen who treaded these foot paths acquired knowledge and spread Islam from the interior of China passing the Great Wall through to Central Asia.

The magnificent Niujie Mosque of Khan-Baliq (present day Beijing) is a great example. It was established by an Arabian scholar Nasir al-Din who served as an official in the Liao Dynasty (907-1125). Two Arabs who came to China during the Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) and served as Imams now rest beside the Mosque where their tomb stones can be seen today. Proof of commitment to this graceful land continues today by the bearers of this religion.

Huaisheng Mosque is austere and simple when compared with its younger sister several thousand miles away in al-Andalus (Spain) where 'La Mezquita' - The Friday Mosque of Qurtabah (Cordoba). The latter mosque is famously known for its impressive interlocking multi-lobed arches and pink and white striped arches. Its foundation had been laid down in 785 CE (after its purchase from the Christians) by Abd ar-Rahman I (756-88) who successfully sustained both the Umayyad Dynasty and its intricate arts in the West.

The interior designs of the *Da Qingzhen Si* (Great Mosque) of Xi'an built in 742 CE and the Niujie Mosque built in 996 demonstrate that unique ancient Islamic and Chinese classical architecture were merged to produce a vivid astonishing effect and embellishment. On the other hand the prayer hall of Huaisheng Mosque reflects the preference of simplicity and tranquility. There stands a low Minbar (pulpit) beside the Mihrab (niche facing Makkah) and a naturally shaped banister by the Minbar (pulpit) for the Imam to hold on to.

Two pillars decorated with nine bands of triangular Qur'anic inscriptions are located symmetrically supporting the low part of the ceiling which magnificently displays the Qura'nic verse, " The religion before Allah is Islam (submission to his will)" (Al-Imran 18-19) and is written in an Sino-Arabic style. A few copies of the Qur'an are neatly placed on a table beside the Mihrab on the left-hand side.

The Mosque currently boasts over 40 prayer mats inscribed with Arabic and Chinese dating back to the T'ang Dynasty.

The 'Guangta Tower' is a freestanding minaret, of 36.30 m (119 ft) high. It is a cylindrical, smooth-textured minaret made from grey masonry with a balcony that served as a ritual tower for the Muezzin to call the worshipers to prayer. Another solid cylindrical tower is surmounted above the ringed balcony with a base dome decorated with two tiers of 'dougong'. There is an elongated pointed tip with a metal rod supporting a crescent moon-shaped design. There are also windows to allow air and light onto the spiral staircase through which the Muezzin can access the balcony.

During the T'ang and Song Dynasties, when the bank of the Zhu Jiang (The Pearl River) was close to the minaret, sailors would occasionally climb the minaret to observe the weather conditions prior to sailing. This minaret has served its purpose well and famously became known as the 'Beacon Tower' and the city's principal landmark. A lamp was lit atop the minaret and served as a beacon for navigation that guided boats along the Zhu Jiang River during the night. Its height dominated the city's skyline before the

contruction of high-rise buildings and dwarfed everything allowing for a bird's eye view of the city. The luminous tower also had a weathervane, placed on its roof indicating the direction of the wind.

Its majestic presence played a huge role at the start of the 'maritime silk road'. Before reaching the mainland on the Silk Road, reaching this port must have been a tremendous achievement for many anxious merchants.

Another mosque in Galle, off the southern coast of what Arabs traders called *Sarandib*, i.e Sri Lanka, is called the *Ja'ama Al-Khaira't* or The Galle Lighthouse Mosque. The light tower minaret is free-standing next to a beautiful palm tree and is situated close to the sea front where it is currently geared up to serve incoming navigations. The mosque is like a small fortress-like colonial two-storied building: white washed, symmetrically square domed twin-towered facade, crowned with a shaped-gable in the middle and a crescent-shaped tail placed above.

The city of al-Zaytun which was the starting point of the Maritime Silk Route was well noted by Al-Idrissi who was born in Ceuta (492-576 AH/1099-1180 CE). He was a famous Moroccan geographer who, in 1154 CE, wrote in his book *al-Kitab ar-Rujari* (Book of Roger) a most elaborate description of the world. It formed the basis of European knowledge in the field at the time. He wrote about the commodities carried by Chinese ships such as leather, swords and iron and various textiles including silk which were bound for Aden. He described Hangzhou's popular glassware and rated Zaytun's silk as the best.

By the Song Dynasty (960-1279) trade was booming and many Arab and Persian merchants flocked to port of Guangzhou where the office of the Director General of Shipping was constantly under Muslim management, due to their law-abidingness and self-disciplined nature. Abu'l-Abbas al-Hijazi, a prosperous twelfth-century merchant who spent many years in China, had seven sons whom he posted in seven different commercial centres from his base in Yemen thus establishing a successful trading network after the loss of all but one of his twelve ships in the Indian Ocean.

Domination of trade from the Far East and East Africa into the Red Sea, was in the hand of the Karamis of Aden. They were one of the greatest trading families of all time and were brimming with success from agencies as far as the ports of China and earning the support of the munificent Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi (532-589 AH/1138-1193 CE) - a hero, honoured by Muslims and Christians alike, who freed Jerusalem in c.1187 and ended its eighty eight year occupation by the Crusaders.

In 1292 the Venetian merchant, Marco Polo (1254-1324) described al-Zaytun and Alexandria of Egypt as one of the two greatest ports in the world. He also found a flourishing Arab merchant community which he associated with the conspicuous Muslim presence in various areas of China. On his way from China in 1288 and 1293, he visited the port of Kayal in India which was full of ships from Arabia and China. He also mentioned seeing a large number of Arabian and Persian horses imported by sea into south India.

Hajji Ibn battuta (1304-1369) was a noted explorer and a traveler who was born in Tangiers, Morocco into a family of judges during the Marinid Dynasty (1196-1511). He studied Islamic theology but little did his family know about his long journey at the age of 21 to perform Hajj at Makkah would take one and a half years and from which he would not return to his native town for nearly three decades.

He served as a Qadi (judge) for eight years in the Sultanate of India under Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq (1326-51) before he was summoned as head of a mission to China in 1341 as an ambassador to meet the most powerful ruler in the world, the Mongol Emperor of China.

The life-threatening adventure began just as he left Delhi where he was taken prisoner and hunted for eight days as a fugitive before ending up at the shores of Calicut with nothing but the clothes he wore and a prayer mat. He was blessed to be alive. He continued his journey to China via the Maldives where he became a chief judge - without the intention of becoming one - and married into the royal family.

He then set sail from Sri Lanka when his ship nearly sank in a storm. He was rescued by another ship which was attacked by pirates who stole all his provisions and the precious stones given to him by the King of Ceylon. He again ended up in Calicut with no coverings but for his trousers. He set sail once more, briefly stopping at the Maldives to see his two years old son for the first time, then boarded a Chinese junk to China via Chittagong (the main port of Bangladesh) and the Muslim Kingdom of Samudra (Sumatra, Indonesia) before resuming his role as ambassador when he arrived at the port of al-Zaytun in 1345.

My first journey to China took the form of a boat ferry from Inch'on, South Korea to north China's largest port city of Tianjin, nicknamed "Shanghai of the North", where a well-known and sizeable Hui village of Tianmu lies situated on the northern city's suburbs. It took over thirty horrific hours and nervous worries of what will happen once I finally reach China.



The Moon Pavilion

Ibn Battuta, on the other hand, considered China to be the safest and most regulated of all countries in the world for a traveller and declared that of all people the Chinese were the most skilful in the arts and possessed greatest mastery of them, hence his journey to reach China.

He described al-Zaytun as housing one of the largest ports in the world with about a hundred junks that could not be counted for multitude. Every city had a separate Muslim quarter where merchants and their families lived in an honoured and respected manner with their own mosques, hospitals and bazaars. The Qadi "Fanzhang" (judge) of the Muslims, the Sheikh al-Islam and the leader of the merchants all came to meet Ibn Battuta with flags, drums, trumpets and musicians.

He was invited and entertained by some immensely wealthy Muslim merchants including the family of Uthman Ibn Affan of Egypt. He was well received in every city as guest of honour on his way to Beijing only

to be disappointed to find the Emperor absent from the capital. He returned back to al-Zaytun before sailing back to his native land in Sha'ban 750 (13th November 1349).

On the morning of Monday 24th June 1996, I arrived at Guangta Road from Shamian Dao (sand surface island) to pay homage to the Huaisheng Mosque for the first time. Entering the Mosque felt like going back in time. It was before Az-zuhr prayer and the prayer hall was totally empty. I begun by performing two Raka'at in respect of the House of God and read a few Suras of the Holy Qur'an, before exploring the mosque. After which I began to contemplate and marvel at the wonders of this precious place, this 'House of God'.



Prayer Hall

I thought about all the Muslim envoys that had come to China, resided here and who prayed in this very prayer hall. They were Muslim merchants who traded here but never returned to their home land. Ibn Battuta (1304-1369) journeyed to this far away land and is believed to have prayed in this very Mosque. He has inspired me to tread onto this soil some 600 years later.

"Allahu Akbar - Allahu Akbar (God is great)", the adhan (call to prayer) was chanted by the Muezzin summoning the faithful to prayer. I felt elation at hearing the adhan, voiced in Arabic and blended with Chinese flavour hence making it even more pleasant to hear. My first congregation prayer with my Chinese Muslim brothers at Huaisheng Mosque was led by Hajji Muhammad Rashid Yang Tang (Imam and vice president of the Mosque).

Chinese Muslims, like those I have met in Central Asia and the Indian sub-continent, all wear white caps especially before Salah (prayer).

This is due to the adherence to the "Hanafi school of thought", which has the largest following amongst the Muslim community. It was founded by Abu Hanifa (81-150 AH /700-767 CE), a great Persian jurist of Kufah where he taught religious science and traded in Chinese silk, a popular commodity which made its first appearance in Europe due to the Arabs who spun the wheel of silk-weaving, interlacing Sicily and Spain with their knowledge of silk manufacture and production of textiles.

Abu Yusuf, a follower of the late Abu Hanifa, became a supreme Qadi (judge) under the brilliant and luxurious reign of the fifth Abbasid Caliph Harun ar-Rashid (147-194 AH/764-809 CE), better known in China at the time as A-lun. Abbasids emissaries known as the "Black Robed Ta-shih", also known in

Byzantium, exchanged precious gifts on several visits with the Chinese Emperors thus improving and forging better future relations.

Chinese Muslims established good communication links within the Muslim Ummah (community) and updates of all current issues including that of Muslim Ulama (scholars) of jurisprudence were recognised.

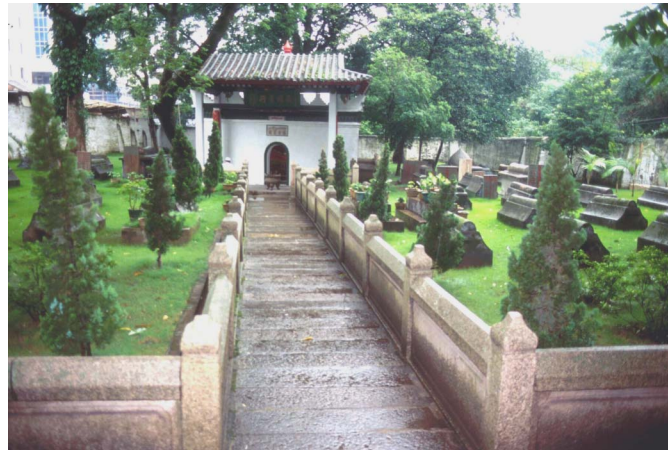
Ibn Taymiyah (661-728 AH /1263-1328 CE), a well known jurist, was born one year before the Mongols made Beijing their capital in 1264 after China had been conquered by Kublai Khan who established the Yuan Dynasty ("first") following the footsteps of Genghis Khan. Ibn Taymiyah was admired for his intellectual and physical prowess which he used to confront the Mongol chief Il-Khan Ghazan. He later engaged in jihad against the Mongols, winning a glorious victory for the Syrian-Egyptian army.

While the eminent globetrotter Ibn Battuta was leading a peripatetic existence in Damascus, he attended a Friday Jum'ah prayer conducted by Ibn Taymiyah whom he describes, as "a man of great ability and wide learning". His fame and influence extended beyond the boundaries of Egypt and Syria and even into China where funeral prayers in absentia were performed after he died by Chinese Muslims.

Hand written Qur'ans remain in existence in China today, preciously handed over from one generation to the next, the oldest of which dates back to the eighth century and was brought by the first Arabs. The famous calligrapher Ibn al-Bawwab (d-1022 or 1032), inventor of the muhaqqaq style, himself skilfully handwrote 64 copies of the Qur'an, one of which was written in Rihani script and kept at Lalei Mosque in Istanbul.

The earliest translation of the Holy Qur'an in Chinese dates back to the eighteenth century. However one of the first known translations was made in parts before the twentieth century by Sheikh Liu Che. The second is by Sheikh Ma Fu Chu who translated twenty Juz before he passed away, five of which were published after c.1927 by the Muslim Cultural Association in Shanghai. The complete Chinese translation of the Qur'an was composed from a Japanese translation based on that of Rodwell in c.1927 by Mr.Lee Tiek Tsing who embraced Islam after completing his translation.

The most popular Chinese (translation) version of the holy Qur'an was made by the famous Sheikh Ilyas Wang Ching Ch'a in c.1928 with the assistance of the following Arabic scholars: Sheikh A. Rahim Ma Sun Ting, Muhammad Ma Shang Ting, Amir Mi Huang Chang, Ali Chao Chen Wu, Abu Bakr Yang Hsi Ju, Ibrahim Chen Ch'eng Kia and Yusuf Ying Po Ching. They received generous financial support from many including Muhammad Chao Wen Fu. In China today, the Holy Qur'an can be found in as many as eight different translations in the Chinese language as well as in Uygur and other Turkic languages.



Path to Ro'udat Abi Waqqas

After the prayer, I was introduced to the Imam Haji Rashid who, once he found out I was from Morocco, began to tell me about Ibn Battuta and his travels to southern China. Haji Rashid also introduced me to Mr Hassan who was the director of the mosque; both offered assistance when I needed it. I wanted to visit the Muslim Burial place where Sa'd Ibn Abi Waqqas (RA) was entombed. Idris, an employee of the mosque, called a taxi and we went to the cemetery which is located on Guihua Ridge near the orchard garden. We went in to the cemetery's courtyard and passed by the religious services hall.

The cemetery is surrounded by walls and has a courtyard with a square pond in the middle surrounded by various green plants and some flowers against a backdrop of a bright red pavilion with two locked doors symmetrically placed and a gate in the middle leading to the cemetery. The pavilion opens onto a straight path in the middle of the burial ground surrounded by a 3 ft high wall on each side. Cylindrical stone graves with Chinese and Arabic scriptures can be seen from either side as you walk along the path to the grave of Sa'd Ibn Abi Waqqas (RA). The graves are neatly aligned facing 'Qibla' in Mecca.

Unlike a century ago, the mausoleum stood noticeably on its own like a miniature fort. As an architectural structure and the first of its kind ever to be erected in a distant land such as China, its roots stemmed from Arabia, bringing wisdom and prosperity to a nation as great as China.

The mausoleum of Sa'd Ibn Abi Waqqas, which lies at the very end of the cemetery, is built like an ancient temple with a beamed roof and a thick wall circling the grave with a plaque inscribed in Arabic that "Roud'at Abi Waqqas" which means 'Grave of Abi Waqqas'. Idris and I took off our shoes and went in to pay our respect to this great Companion who, by the will of God, helped spark a new life in the hearts of many Muslims in this great country. It was a moment of great reflection.

Since the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, both Huaisheng Mosque and The Ancient Tomb at the Muslim Cemetery have been listed as historical cultural relics and are now under state protection. This is a historic testimonial of the friendship between the Chinese and Arabs.

Having paid homage to The Huaisheng Mosque and the Muslim Cemetery, it was now time to return. I made my journey back to Hong Kong via Macau to visit another Mosque at Ramal Mouros Road and the Macau Museum. I arrived in Hong Kong on Thursday 27th June 1996, to prepare myself before my flight to

Bangkok. I attended Isha prayer at the Kowloon Mosque and Islamic Centre which reminded me very much of the London Islamic Cultural Centre as it is a place where you can meet Muslims from all over the world.

I found the museum to be amazingly interesting with its exterior designed like a ship, housing an astonishing display of artifacts, models of boats and maritime activity which centered on the China Sea. There are four individual theoretical themes which the museum is divided into, one of which stunned me as I confronted a particular map on display by the famous Moroccan geographer of the entire Middle Ages, "al-Idrisi". It made me feel proud and homesick. There are various models of Chinese traditional vessels including a few models of Arab boats that once plied the oceans sailing towards the Zhu Jiang (Pearl River).

Zheng He (1371-1433), China's most celebrated navigator who constructed massive ships and led Chinese armadas in his magnificent voyages, visited more than thirty countries during his seven maritime expeditions. A special feature at the museum was of his adventures, marking him as a royal "Hero" in the history of navigation. He ventured the oceans on board a giant flagship which dwarfed Christopher Columbus's ship and he discovered America 70 years earlier. This was almost a century before Vasco da Gama, while searching for a sea route to India in 1498, was fortunate to find the most illustrious Arab navigator Ahmed Ibn Majid, who famously compiled an invaluable seamen guide, "The Advantages of Knowing the Sciences of the Sea".

Master Ahmed travelled to the land of the "Tiger and Elephant" on several occasions. With half a century experience of navigation under his belt and in possession of maritime instruments and maps never before seen by Europeans, he easily guided the Portuguese flagship from Malindi, below the Horn of East Africa, thence to the shores of South Indian (Malabar) coast.

Completing a full knot, from where my journey first began, I boarded a jetfoil from Macau, en route to what used to be the old "Maritime Silk Route". When Arab merchants sailed pass what is now Hong Kong, it must have been just a rock passed unnoticed, barely signalling a stop for the merchants while navigating through to the mouth of Zhu Jiang (Pearl River). Today it is anomalous with high rise office buildings and luxurious hotels greeting one another by ferry arrivals or below sea level via a fast train.

While speeding back to Hong Kong on a jetfoil, we passed by a Chinese junk sailing back to Hong Kong harbour. I had long hoped to see such a thrilling moment - a Chinese junk in action, just like the model display I had just seen at the museum boasting its versatility and superior advanced (unchanged) design to any other ship of its time.

I was staying opposite the Mosque at the Chunking Mansions. A popular place which accommodates all the foreign residents from places such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Africa and the Middle East who all live together in one big building which consist of shops, restaurants and guest houses snugly placed under one giant silk umbrella just as we once were in al-Zaytun.

This created a modern centralized "vessel", i.e. "Chunking Mansions", docked at the Golden Mile (Nathan Road) where many modern Muslim merchants of many nationalities purchase all their required goods such as jade, ivory and electrical gadgets before setting off and travelling faster than our predecessors through the means of air travel to trade in different cities of the world.

Immediately after Isha prayer ended, four very old frail gentlemen from Bangladesh stood up and one of them had a message. The men asked if some of us would like to sit for a few minutes to discuss their planned mission. Most of us agreed and sat in four separate circles where the talk began. I was immensely impressed with the gentlemen's courage and firmness and unflinching honesty. Their mission was to travel to Guangzhou at the crack of dawn after Fajr prayer to visit The Huaisheng Mosque for the Friday Jummah prayer where a planned lecture to Muslims of Guangzhou was to be given.

Soon after, I left the mosque and met two Algerian merchants dressed in loose white clothing who were on a business trip to China. They reminded me of the old Arab merchants setting sail for China once more. The merchants from Algeria together with the four gentlemen from Bangladesh on their mission to The Huaisheng Mosque make time seem like it has stood still.



Muslim Graves

