

MOSLEMS
IN A MARXIST CHINA:
AN UNEASY BALANCE

by Leo Goodstadt



Islam has a special status in China today. Moslems are an important religious group with a separate ethnic and cultural identity in many parts of the country. They are found in a number of frontier regions which are of considerable political sensitivity. But Islam is more than just a domestic issue. The Moslem community of nations has a major world role, particularly because of their control of a large share of world oil resources. In addition, Islam has seen a political revival of considerable concern to Beijing. In Iran, for example, religious leaders led the movement to overthrow the Shah, and they dominate Iranian political life today. In Afghanistan, the resistance to the Soviet invasion has a considerable religious element. The list of examples to demonstrate the increased impact of Islam in international affairs could be extended.

The recent history of Islam in China reflects the shifts and changes in the religious policies of the Chinese Communist Party and the conflicts of policy which have arisen as the nation has emerged from the storms of the Cultural Revolution decade.

The official estimate of the Moslem population of China was put in 1980 at ten million who belong to ten different national minorities. (*Xinhua News Agency* 6 April 80) The offi-

cial account gives Islam a long historical record among the Chinese, having arrived in 651 AD. Major cities have important Moslem communities. The official estimate for Beijing is over 160,000, with 34,000 in Shanghai. (*Xinhua* 13 Aug 80, Shanghai Radio 13 Aug 80) There is a tendency among Chinese officials to regard Moslems as essentially a feature of the Hui nationality (who account for a third of the 3.6 million population of Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region - *Xinhua* 4 July 80.) The strength of Islam in Ningxia and other Hui communities is acknowledged officially. One account described how

Many Hui people still embrace Mohammedism. They preserve their traditional customs such as that of eating mutton and beef. They avoid pork, horse, donkey and mule meat, the blood of all animals and any animal flesh that has died a natural death. Their meat is slaughtered according to strict Moslem customs. Their dead are buried quickly and without coffins. (*Xinhua* 6 Nov 78)

This official summary of the difference in life styles between Moslem Huis and Chinese in general is striking for two reasons. No reference is made to religious beliefs or practices related to worship. The impression is given that the Moslem Hui simply has some special customs not shared by China as a whole and which reflect the inheritance of a minority nationality. The second feature of the account is its stress on dietary laws. Indeed, it sometimes appears that the Chinese Communist Party believes that the Moslem question could be resolved almost entirely if the problem of feeding Huis and other Moslems with acceptable types of meat could be overcome.

The meat issue has become almost a symbol of the status enjoyed by China's Moslems in any particular period. It is also the test of how effectively Beijing's policy of religious toleration is implemented in practice. However, this policy of increased freedom for Islam dates back before the fall of "the gang of four". In the 1975 Constitution of the People's Republic of China, article 28 conferred "freedom to believe in religion and freedom not to believe in religion and to propagate

atheism" (using the same language which has become a separate clause - 46 - in the current (1978) Constitution). The month after the 1975 Constitution was promulgated, a special campaign was reported among PLA units in Xinjiang which required the soldiers to

make a conscious effort not to discriminate against or interfere with the masses' normal religious activities, not to enter mosques at will and not to hold military exercises in their vicinity. In addition, they do not let the hogs raised by their unit intrude into the place where the people of national minorities live, nor do they wash anything by the side of ponds. (*Xinhua* 15 Feb 75)

In September of the same year, Vice Premier Chen Xilian toured Xinjiang and stressed the constitutional rights of religious believers. (He also called for a ban on the persecution of those who abandoned their faith!) (Xinjiang Radio 29 & 30 Sept 75) Chen is very significant in this context because he was forced out of all his state and Party posts in February 1980 together with the other members of the "little gang of four" because of his leftist views. The evidence suggests that the extent of religious toleration is simply a matter of whether left-wing radicals dominate the Chinese Communist Party.

It is true, of course, that since 1976 and the death of Mao Zedong and the arrest of "the gang of four", the facilities offered to religious believers have increased enormously. Before that date, for example, the Moslems of Gansu province had to be grateful that the authorities exempted them from pig rearing. (Gansu Radio 2 Aug 1976) Today, local administrations proudly proclaim the special provisions they have made to accommodate the food laws of the Moslem minorities. Qinghai and Xinjiang are among those which made such arrangements in 1980. (*Xinhua* 27 Aug & 22 Oct 80) In Guizhou, a construction company has established a special canteen for its Moslem workers since 1976. They number a hundred and previously had to travel twenty kilometers to the provincial capital to obtain supplies

of lamb. (*Minzhu Tuanjie* 5/1980)

However, the Moslems' problems are far from over, even on the dietary question. Late in 1979, *Renmin Ribao* had to state: "We must resolutely stop such practices as forcing the Hui (Islamic) people to raise pigs and encourage them to raise sheep and cattle." In 1980, the sort of pressures to which Moslems could be subjected even after the fall of "the gang of four" and the announcement of official toleration for religion was dramatically illustrated by Beijing. National publicity was given to the experience of the Moslem community of Jiaohe county in Hubei province when visited by a recruiting team from the North China Oilfield in the last quarter of 1979.

This unpleasant incident began with an attempt by the oil company to recruit qualified workers from among the 330 unemployed young people in this district. In the tests, 33 out of the 84 unemployed Hui youngsters passed the tests and were among the 160 to be offered jobs. At this point, the oil company staff decided that Moslems were too much trouble to employ because they would not eat the same food as Han Chinese. The Hui youngsters were told that they could have the promised jobs if they guaranteed to eat the same meals as the other workers. Some 14 signed pledges to this effect, not surprisingly given the acute shortage of decent employment opportunities. The other, supported by their families, refused to compromise over their religious practices. They mounted a successful protest which led to the oil company eventually offering to employ them and to allow all the Hui recruits to follow Moslem dietary laws including those who had signed guarantees not to insist on separate food. (Ma Zhenkun & Yin Guangen *Minzu Tuanjie* 7/1980, *Xinhua* 19 July 80)

The Chinese Communist Party's new religious policy has made a difference to the facilities for worship. Old mosques are being reopened and repaired. Ningxia refurbished with government funds 158 mosques (presumably damaged during the

Cultural Revolution) and was in the process of reopening them in 1979. Similar developments during the same year were reported in places as far apart as Beijing and Xinjiang, while Jilin followed suit in 1980. (*Xinhua* 3 Aug & Sept 80, *Minzu Tuanjie* 5/1980, Jilin Radio 19 May 80) At the same time, official publicity has been given to celebration of Moslem festivals such as Bairam and Corban in different parts of the country. A notable feature of these celebrations has been the presence of Moslems from foreign countries. (*Xinhua* 14 Aug & 20 Oct 80, Xinjiang Radio 18 Oct 80, Shanghai & Liaoning Radio 20 Oct 80) Foreign contacts have also revived. In 1979, sixteen Moslems were allowed to make the pilgrimage to Mecca for the first time since 1964. (*Xinhua* 19 Oct 79) This date is worth commenting on because it means that the rights of Moslems to go to Mecca had been curtailed even before the Cultural Revolution in 1966. In 1979 and 1980, the various municipal and provincial Islamic Associations were reborn. Islamic studies began again at university level, and a new Chinese version of the Koran was promised. (*Xinhua* 19 June & 2 Aug 79, 11 Nov 80)

Not everyone agrees with the Chinese Communist Party's new tolerance for Islam. Qinghai has confessed that some "do not understand the reasons for reopening these mosques and for restoring religious activities. They frown on religious activities and only support them in a lukewarm manner". But believers were also criticised. In some places, the same official account reported, "the localities arbitrarily divert the collective funds or compel people to build or repair mosques and temples". Furthermore, it was alleged, some people interrupted production for religious celebrations and tried to earn a living as mullahs. (Qinghai Radio 13 Sept 80) Ningxia has stressed the right to religious freedom while warning that classes in atheism are also necessary.

A development of great interest in 1980 was the official Gansu statement "that no youngsters under 18 years of age should be allowed to participate in religious activities. This is definitely stipulated in our nation's constitution". (Gansu

Radio 19 July 80) This observation was made by a Vice Chairman of the National Islamic Association. There is, of course, no such restriction on the age of participants in religious beliefs or practices set out in the constitution. Nor is any such age limit implied. (Where age is relevant - for exercise of voting rights as in article 44 - the constitution is quite specific.)

Religion and the law also came into focus in 1980 when Xinjiang promulgated its regional marriage regulations (in accordance with article 36 of the 1980 Marriage Law). A special attempt was made in these regulations to deal with "a few religious figures who still refuse to obey state laws and interfere with the masses' marriage and family affairs..... The marriage law also stipulates that religious interference in marriage and family affairs should be prohibited and that marriage registry should not be replaced by religious rites." Significantly, Beijing chose to give these regulations and their restraints on religious practices nation-wide publicity. (Xinjiang Radio 12 Dec 80, *Xinhua* 1 Jan 81) Presumably, this provision in Xinjiang's marriage regulations reflects articles 3 and 7 of the 1980 Marriage Law which seek to prevent any form of interference with the absolute freedom of a couple to marry, with lawful weddings performed solely at an official marriage registration office.

But to judge from M. J. Meijer's classic study, *Marriage Law and Policy in the Chinese People's Republic* (1971), the concessions made in Xinjiang and elsewhere to Moslem sensitivities in the 1950s are not to be tolerated any longer. In the 1950s, Moslems reacted very hostilely to attempts to allow marriages between Moslem women and non-believers. These alliances involved more than crossing religious boundaries. They often meant marriages mixed in ethnic or cultural terms. In the 1950s, the policy was to permit the Moslem communities to voice their objections to weddings with unbelievers. Xinjiang now seems to have decided that religion can today be kept out of marriages.

This Xinjiang regulation raises the constitutional issue once more. If religious beliefs (such as Islam) require their adherents to comply with certain rules about the rearing and education of children, the marriage of youngsters and the formation of families, are believers entitled to follow their consciences on such matters under the 1978 Constitution? The evidence suggests that the issue is regarded by Beijing as a political matter rather than a legal issue. The somewhat vague protection for religious freedom under the 1978 Constitution can be interpreted in an illiberal way if the local administration chooses.

The Moslem experience throws considerable light on the role which is assigned to religion in China. Firstly, the plight of believers in the ten years after the start of the Cultural Revolution cannot be blamed entirely on extremists, Lin Biao or "the gang of four". The door to Mecca was closed before the Red Guards were mobilised. The principle of religious freedom was set out in the 1975 Constitution (introduced to the nation by Zhang Chunqiao, one of "the gang of four"). Attempts were made under "the gang of four" to translate the constitution into real toleration for at least some Moslems.

Since the fall of "the gang of four", religion's position has been greatly improved. Yet the rights of Moslems to obey the basic laws of their faith (notably over food) have not been universally respected. There has been a revival of official Islamic organisations and studies. At the same time, local administrations have not always felt that the need has disappeared for keeping religion and its practice under very close supervision.

Perhaps the most impressive feature of Islam in China is the fidelity of its believers. The official Communist Party makes it clear that Moslems cannot simply be swallowed up by the Marxist state. The Moslem has a firm commitment to his religion, a commitment made all the stronger by the different cultural traditions generally enjoyed by the Moslem ethnic minorities, plus the improved status of the Islamic community throughout the world.