

# THE ISLAMIC RELIGION IN YUNNAN PROVINCE

NOTES BASED ON INTERVIEWS IN KUNMING,

XIAGUAN AND DALI, MAY, 1988



by Donald MacInnis

## Introduction

During a one-week visit to Yunnan I interviewed Catholic, Protestant, Buddhist and Moslem clergy and lay members, Islamic, Buddhist and Catholic Patriotic Association officers, Catholic, Buddhist and Moslem seminarians, and research scholars at the Minorities Institute in Kunming. My questions, which were based on extensive preliminary reading of reports and research publications, were directed to the present situation of religion in Yunnan.

## The Islamic Religion in Yunnan

The Islamic religion in Yunnan Province can be traced back to the Yuan (Mongol) Dynasty. It was brought in by Arab traders traversing the Inner Asian Silk Route, and by Mongol troops of Genghis Khan, who first pacified the region and then settled there. Kunming Municipality alone (which includes five counties) has over 50,000 Moslems.

I visited two mosques in Kunming, one in Dali, one in Xiaguan, two Islamic schools, and the Kunming office of the Chinese Islamic

Association. Kunming city has six open mosques, Xiaguan has two and Xizhou also has two. Two mosques (out of four) are still open in Dali. Weishan, 30 km. from Dali, has 20 mosques. There are 500 open mosques in Yunnan province. This is many more than the Christian churches or Buddhist temples.

### South Gate (Nancheng) Mosque, Kunming: office of the Kunming Islamic Association

I talked with the secretary of the Islamic Association, Mr. Ma. While he was busy preparing for "Kaizhaijie", the end of the Ramadan festival, which was to take place the next day, he was most willing to be interviewed.

Q. How many Moslems are there in Kunming?

A. The Kunming Municipality, which includes four districts and five counties, has 50,000 Moslems. We trace our history back to the Yuan Dynasty. There are 14 million Moslems in all of China. There are six mosques in Kunming City, with an average of five imams in each mosque, serving a total of about 20,000 Moslems.

Q. How many attend weekly religious services?

A. Tomorrow (Kaizhaijie), about half of them will come.

Q. How many mosque schools do you have for the training of young imams?

A. There are three Arabic (Islamic) Schools in Kunming: Nancheng Mosque has over 40 students, Xuncheng Mosque over 30, and Yongning Mosque over 30.

They also have an Islamic College (Jinxueyuan) and a government-registered school for the three southwestern provinces, Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan. The graduates become imams at the jiao zhang level (higher than ordinary imams). They study for three years. Students must be senior middle school graduates and pass the entrance examination. The government pays most of the costs.

The Arabic Schools, which meet in certain mosques, take in students who are primary or junior high school graduates. They study for three or four years under the local ahong [imam]. Some study at home by means of correspondence courses.

Q. Do you have a problem finding recruits to replace elderly imams?

A. No, we have quite a few young men studying to be imams. In fact we

have a surplus. Some must wait for job openings. There are 500 mosques in Yunnan, and quite a few have Arabic [mosque] schools. There are 100-200 graduates a year. Consequently not all become imams right away, because they may have to wait for job openings. We still have plenty of older imams. The young ones are allowed to "wear the hat" of an imam after completing their studies.

Q. How are new imams placed in jobs?

A. A local mosque invites the new imam. They may ask the Islamic Association to help by suggesting names.

Q. Are Islamic young people faithful to their religion?

A. That depends on the individual. Most of them are ren zhen (conscientious).

Q. Are there Islamic minority groups in Yunnan?

A. No, Moslems in Yunnan all are Hui people. But there are many Moslems among ten of China's 55 minorities in other provinces.

Q. What happens when a Han Moslem marries, for example, an Uyghur?

A. The parents decide whether the children will be Han or Uyghur. However, if the father is Han, the child will be Han.

Q. Tomorrow is the Kaizhaijie festival. How is it celebrated?

A. Last night the government observatory telephoned us at the first sight of the moon, which marks the end of Ramadan. Today we gather in the mosque for worship, which will last for about two hours. This is one of our three annual festivals. Corban festival takes place 70 days from now. At that time, the families will travel by bus to the Moslem cemetery, to read the Koran and honor the ancestors. Afterwards, we return to our homes, usually inviting others to join us for dinner. We usually exchange visits with friends and family.

Q. Was your cemetery destroyed during the Cultural Revolution?

A. Yes, the graves were destroyed and the cemetery land is now



occupied by others. The government, however, has given us funds to buy land for a new cemetery.

- Q. Have any Moslems from Yunnan gone on hadj [pilgrimage] to Mecca?
- A. For many years the government would not allow us to go. In recent years several thousand have gone each year from China. But, since the individual has to pay his own travel costs, very few can afford it. Nevertheless forty from Yunnan applied to go this year; but we were only allowed to send fifteen. Last year fifteen were allowed to go. So people have to wait for their turn.

### I spoke with a young student from the local Mosque School

- Q. What do you study?
- A. The Koran, interpretations of the teachings of Mohammed, the Arabic and Persian languages. We have some textbooks. We learn to translate Chinese into Arabic. Our curriculum includes classes in religion, and studies in the Arabic and Persian languages. For these we use correspondence courses from the Beijing Language Institute, which were written by elderly scholars who studied in Egypt during the 1930s. We also have some electives; we may select certain courses of study in a local Chinese school. Our school also has a copy of the new Chinese translation of the Koran, which we use for reference. Only 68,000 copies were printed.

### Kunming Xuncheng Mosque

I found the Xuncheng mosque on the city map, one of five in Kunming. When I finally arrived at the mosque, I was greeted by a student and introduced to a 92 year old imam who began studying in his local mosque to be an imam at the age of 13. He is a native of Kunming.

I also met another ahong, aged 71, who was playing with his grandchildren. Parents and children were relaxing in the courtyard, creating a family atmosphere. I had the impression here, as I did later in Dali, that the mosque is the center of Islamic social as well as religious life. Because of the Ramadan fasting regulations, they were all waiting for sunset, so they could eat supper. About six or eight men came to pray around 6 P.M. In a side room one woman prayed behind a screen. They were reading from the Koran in Arabic. I was told that they can pronounce the words in Arabic, but few understand the meaning. There was no damage done to the mosque during the Cultural Revolution.

We talked with two imams and with some students and teachers from the two schools in the mosque compound: one is the Mosque [Arabic] School, taught by the imams; the other is the Islamic College, a three-year post-high school institution run by the government which was opened last year. Students at the mosque schools usually are only primary or junior middle school graduates.

### The Two Islamic Schools in the Kunming Xuncheng Mosque

While the mosque school has 30 students under the instruction of imams, the government school which opened last fall has 35. This school serves the three provinces of southwest China. Half of the budget is from the government (Religious Affairs Bureau) and half from the Moslems themselves. All expenses are paid for the students, who are all Hui Moslems. They must pass an entrance examination. When I asked about their future work their answer was a bit vague: "We will work for the government; we'll serve the Moslem people."



All the students are men, but I was told that women were not barred from applying. The college curriculum includes: Arabic language, the Koran, Moslem doctrine, history, politics, economics, Chinese. I met a Chinese teacher, Mr. Na, and his son, who was in his mid-30s and a student in another college. He had lost his chance to get an education during the Cultural Revolution.

When I asked what books are used in the Islamic schools, they showed me books printed in Chinese, some were published in Hong Kong by the Hong Kong Islamic Youth Association, others printed in Kuwait included a copy of the Koran in Arabic. They told me that very few Korans are published in China, as they are not yet allowed to mass produce religious texts. Although a Chinese Koran had been translated in 1981, they had only one or two copies.

## The Mosque

Attendance at Friday services averages about 250. During Ramadan, Moslems take no food or drink during the fourteen hours of daylight. "We are accustomed to it," they said.

When I asked if they prayed five times daily as required, they said that they did. But young Mr. Na said it was not convenient to pray at his work place. He prays at home three times a day, instead of the usual five: in the morning, at noon when he goes home for lunch, and in the evening.

When I asked about smoking I was told that some Moslem sects do allow smoking, but that theirs does not allow cigarette smoking.

The students pray in community five times daily, gathering to pray for about 20 minutes. Prayer means they read the Koran. They pray together rather than singly to foster group spirit.

The mosque school has a 5-year programme which includes courses in Arabic, Persian, Koran, Chinese, Islamic doctrine, history, politics, economics and natural science. Classes meet five days a week. Friday (the Moslem Sabbath) and Sunday are free.

Students are from Moslem homes. All Moslems in Yunnan are Hui. The Hui are "mixed blood", their ancestors being Arab and Persian traders, Mongols, and Chinese.

Q. What if a Hui man marries a Kazakh girl?

A. Their children are considered Hui. This is determined through the male line.

Q. Are you allowed to have more than one wife, as Moslems elsewhere are permitted?

A. Not in China. We obey the laws of China in this regard.

Q. Are there Moslem sects in Yunnan?

A. There are two sects in Yunnan.

Q. Are there any new Moslem converts from outside the faith?

A. Very few, but they are welcome if they wish to become Moslems. We are a religion of peace and we respect all religions. Our philosophy is peace among all peoples. The whole world is a family. We want the world to be like that. Ours is a free religion. Anyone

can join if they wish, without any pressure - unlike Christians. We are forbidden to worship idols, unlike Christians and Buddhists.

Q. Can imams marry?

A. Yes. In fact we encourage them to marry. We have no nuns or women clergy. We believe that women should marry. We oppose birth control.

Q. How are your imams trained?

A. They are trained in two ways: one is the traditional way, a father, himself an imam, trains his son; the second is more modern - we train young men in mosque schools or in the Islamic College.

Q. How would you compare Moslems with Buddhists in China?

A. Buddhists aren't organized as we are. They have no Buddhist community or actual membership. They aren't trained in doctrine. They go to the temple only when they want something from the gods, or on the days of major religious festivals. They burn incense and "bai bai" [kowitz and recite prayers]. It's the same with Christians.

Q. Is there a monthly Islamic magazine?

A. Yes, it is published by the government. But it is very "dan bo" (thin), not worth reading. There is no local or Yunnan provincial journal.

I saw large red hand-written posters on the mosque wall inside the gate listing the names of contributors and the sums given. There were hundreds of gifts. All were designated for repairs and construction. The largest was rmb1000. Another poster had the monthly financial report of the mosque.

### The Xiaguan Mosque

Xiaguan is in the Dali Prefecture, near the Burma border. I walked over to the mosque at about 8:00 in the evening as the sun was setting over the hills. Because of Ramadan Moslems would not be able to eat until 9:05 that evening, after sunset. As I waited for the imam to return, a man who later told me he was 75, came in and we began to talk. He was friendly and quite willing to answer questions. When he learned that I was an American, he visibly brightened and began to praise America. He had served with the Burma Road Maintenance Corps. The Burma Road goes through Xiaguan and I had traveled on it from Kunming.

The imam finally arrived. He was tall, thin, distinguished-looking, with a wispy white beard and an energetic stride. After my friend spoke with him I heard him say, "I'm too busy to talk with him now." He ignored me, and went into his office. I sat and waited. In a few minutes he came out, nodded to me and beckoned me in. He was friendly and talked freely, answering questions forthrightly and without hesitation. No one monitored this conversation, or any other I had during our Yunnan visit.

The imam was 76. He had no "school education", he said. He studied to be an imam under the former imam. He told me that the previous evening about 300 adults had gathered at the mosque and spent the whole night together, in worship. They do this the last few days before the end of Ramadan, he said. First they had supper together, then they said prayers and read from the Koran, and finally the following morning had breakfast together. There was to be a big festival on the 18th, the end of Ramadan. There are 2,000 Moslems in Xiaguan, 10,000 in the Dali prefecture, and fifteen mosques in the greater Dali municipality, all with one or more imams.

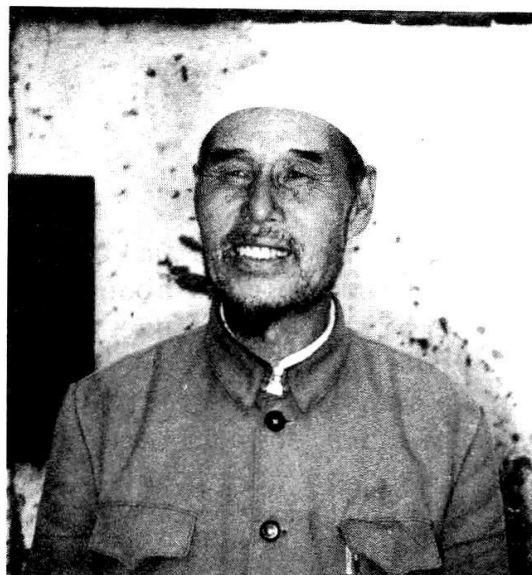
He told me he had been persecuted for his faith during the Cultural Revolution. He "wore a cap" [a political punishment] for 18 years, from 1958-1976. All imams in the area were taken to a certain town in 1958 for four months of political study, then "capped."

Q. Were there no public religious services?

A. No, only personal worship was allowed. But secretly we did have services together.

I asked about the problem of successors [jiebanren] to replace ageing clergy. This triggered a flow of words. This is a major question here and everywhere for all religions he said. "The Catholic situation is even worse," he added. "Fr. Liu in Dali is all alone here; there is no other priest. And the Protestants have no pastor at all, only lay deacons."

Because of the material progress in our country, he said, young people are lured away from religion. They





want more money and material things. It's too bad that after years of the Cultural Revolution and deprivation and now that the government and the Party guarantee freedom of religious belief, many young people don't care. They aren't interested in religion. Some young Moslems marry non-Moslems (Han) and give up the dietary laws and stop coming to religious services. Sometimes husbands and wives fight about these things. Moslems should not marry outside the faith. It can cause serious problems.

I mentioned the two Islamic clergy training schools we saw in Kunming. He scoffed at the one run by the government and said they wouldn't train "real imams". But there are several Islamic schools run by imams in the mosques of Yunnan.

He mentioned that the Moslems in the northwest provinces also had a problem. Some of them are saying, as his imam-teacher had once said to him, that it's better not to go to a formal Islamic school, but to study Arabic and the Koran under the direction of an imam. He disagreed. He felt that it is better to go to a regular school, like the school in Kunming where one could study Arabic, Persian, Chinese, and even English. But he had his doubts about the government Islamic school.

The Burma Road man was proud of his faith. He explained the good things about his religion. Moslems always wash carefully before worship, including their feet, and "even the hairs on our forearms"; they wear clean clothes when they go to worship. "Christians don't do that. We believe a clean body helps to nourish a clean heart and soul. We also pray five times a day. We fast for thirty days during Ramadan each year. That's our sacrifice for our religious faith. We don't smoke or drink or eat pork. Moslems have a strict discipline and way of life. This is important for one's religious faith."

#### **A Moslem Layman in Dali**

We were brought to this restaurant by a young woman and young man we had met at the mosque. The Ma family runs the restaurant: Mr. Ma, his wife, daughter, and uncle. They serve Moslem food, which means no pork. We talked with Mr. Ma, who said that about 200 Moslems regularly come to Friday worship in his mosque (there are two mosques in town). He says his prayers twice daily, at 6 A.M. and 9 P.M. He's too busy to pray five times daily.

Mr. Ma has four children, one of whom, an unmarried daughter of 22, served our meal. I asked if she would get married soon.

Q. Does the government set an age limit for marriage?

A. Yes, it is 22 for women, 24 for men.

Q. Do Moslems have arranged marriages or love marriages?

A. My daughter is free to marry whom she wishes.

Q. Does the government limit the number of children for Moslems?

A. Yes, we are now limited to two, by law. Formerly they only urged us to limit the number, without specifying how many. I have four, but they were born before the present regulations.

Q. Do you smoke or drink?

A. I only drink beer. Strong liquor makes you lose control, Allah wouldn't like that. I don't smoke.



Q. What special customs are there for members of your faith?

A. We always bathe thoroughly and wear clean clothes when we go to the mosque for worship. A clean body means a clean heart.

Q. What is the state of the Islamic religion in Dali now?

A. Dali had four mosques before the cultural revolution, but now has two. One burned down and one was demolished. Xiaguan has one mosque in town and one in the countryside. Xizhou has 2 mosques. Weishan, 30 km. from Dali, has 20 mosques.

Dali has ten imams, whose ages range from 50 to 60 or more, and two young imams, in their 20s, who returned to Dali after completing the course at the Islamic school in Wen Shan.

Q. Are young Moslems faithful to their religion?

A. Some are, some are not. They haven't been well-trained in our religion. But most of our young people are good Moslems.