Tarih Dergisi, Sayı 51 (2010 / 1), İstanbul 2011, s. 21-45

ISLAMIC INSCRIPTIONS ON STONE MONUMENTS IN CHINA

Barbara STÖCKER-PARNIAN*

Abstract

In many yards and gardens of the about 45.000 mosques in China we find stone steles bearing Chinese inscriptions. These are documents about the long history of Islamic life in China, as they illustrate the social and cultural activities of the Muslims in China. The inscriptions are amongst others on the foundation and repair of mosques, on endowments for teaching and studies, support for festivities, or on Muslim personalities. Some steles bear the edicts of the Chinese Emperor, which were important for the security and independence of the Muslims in China. Carving stone inscriptions is already a long tradition in China and also the Muslims took over this handicraft. The oldest Islamic inscriptions are in Arabic dating back to the 12th century, while the earliest Chinese Islamic inscriptions are of Mongol times (1271-1368).

Keywords: Islam in China, Islamic inscriptions, Stone tablets, Chinese mosques, Hui/Chinese Muslims.

Introduction

Islamic inscriptions in mosques, on tombstones and on art objects can be found in the whole Islamic world. Almost 17,400 inscriptions were collected and published as *Thesaurus d'Epigraphie Islamique,* installed on six CD-ROMs[1] under the direction of Ludvik Kalus and Frédérique Soudan. It is the

* Dr., Muenchen Üniversitat; Institut für den Nahen und Mittleren Osten Fachbereich: Turkologie/Iranistik; stoecker-parnian@lmu.de.

1 The *Thesaurus d'Epigraphie Islamique* designed and compiled under the direction of Ludvik Kalus, comprises inscriptions from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Egypt, Central Asia, the Arabian Peninsula and the Maghreb. Here is a listing of the relevant CD ROMs:

intention of the editors to collect and publish all Arabic, Persian and Turkish inscriptions up to the year 1000 A.H. (i.e. 1591/92). Between 1931 and 1991 the *Répertoire Chronologique d' Épigraphie Arabe* has been published in 18 volumes, which include also some Arabic inscriptions from mosques in China, namely Peking (Pekin), Quanzhou (Ts'iuan-Tcheou) und Canton[2].

Ludvik Kalus and Chen Dasheng[3] also have published a special monograph on the Arabic and Persian inscriptions surviving in the southern Chinese province of Fujian, including 199 texts or textual fragments from mosques, steles, and tombstones in Quanzhou, Fuzhou and Xiamen (Amoy). However all these publications concentrate on the Islamic inscriptions in non-Chinese scripts; thus the reader gains the impression that the Muslims in China used the western languages of Arabic, Persian and Turkish to express their religious beliefs.

But the reality is quite different, as only a minority of the extant Islamic inscriptions are in foreign scripts, while the most texts surviving on stone and wood are in the Chinese language.

CD ROM: Thesaurus d'épigraphie islamique, 1ère livraison: Maghreb et Libye, Genève, Fondation Max Van Berchem, 1998 (conception et direction) (élaboré par Frédérique Soudan).
CD ROM: Thesaurus d'épigraphie islamique, 2ème livraison: Péninsule d'Arabie (Arabie Saoudite, Oman, Bahrain, Yémen), Genève, Fondation Max Van Berchem, 1999 (conception et direction) (élaboré par Frédérique Soudan).
CD ROM: Thesaurus d'épigraphie islamique, 3ème livraison: Asie Centrale (Ouzbékistan, Tadjikistan, Turkménistan, Kazakhstan, Kirghizistan), Genève, Fondation Max Van Berchem, 2001 (conception et direction) (élaboré par Frédérique Soudan).
CD ROM: Thesaurus d'épigraphie islamique, 4-5ème livraison: Egypte, Genève, Fondation Max Van Berchem, 2003 (conception et direction) (élaboré par Frédérique Soudan).
CD ROM: Thesaurus d'épigraphie islamique, 6ème livraison: Monde Indien (Pakistan, Inde, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives), Genève, Fondation Max Van Berchem, 2005 (conception et direction) (élaboré par Frédérique Soudan).
CD ROM: Thesaurus d'épigraphie islamique, 7ème - 9ème livraison: Inscriptions de l'Afrique subsaharienne, Inscriptions de l'Irak, Inscriptions de l'Occident européen, Genève, Fondation Max Van Berchem, 2009 (conception et direction) (élaboré par Frédérique Soudan). http://www.univ-paris4.fr/fr/spip.php?article2565 (21.09.2009).

2 *Répertoire Chronologique d'Épigraphie Arabe,* Pekin (XII/4794; XIII/4833; XIV/5596), Ts'iuan-Tcheou (XIV/5286, 5492) und Canton (XVI/6164).

3 Chen Dasheng - Ludvik Kalus, *Corpus d'inscriptions Arabes et Persanes en Chine,* Paris 1991.

Islamic records in China remain virtually unknown to Western scholars in the field. Nor do these researchers appreciate the value and relevance of these texts as sources for Islamic life. Yet these inscriptions are important and interesting documents demonstrating the history of Muslims in China.

Thus, to promote a better understanding of the differences and similarities between Islamic communities in a Confucian-dominated society, it is essential that these texts be made known to a wider public. This article will attempt an overview reflecting the quantity and diversity of inscriptions in the approximately 45,000 mosques constructed in China[4].

1. Research status

In the last few years, inscriptions from mosques in China have appeared in books and articles published in Chinese, the most recent contributions being the books by Da Zhenyi and Yu Zhengui[5]. In the anthology of Da Zhenyi (1999) we find 208 texts, while Yu Zhengui's (2001) compilation includes 440 pieces found in different parts of China. These 650 inscriptions are only a small part of the enormous Islamic epigraphy to be found all over the country. In addition, the Muslim journals *China's Muslims* (Zhongguo Mosilin) and *Research on the Hui* (Huizu Yanjiu) have published Islamic inscriptions, which are mostly integrated into articles on mosques. Donald Leslie has enumerated some of the titles of Muslim inscriptions written under the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties (13th to 19th centuries); his guidebook also contains the names of editors, publishers and publishing houses, and gives information on translations if any[6].

Despite these publications, however, there are still numerous inscribed stones which have not as yet been published and thus are not available to the

---

4 "In China there are about 45,000 mosques, with about 50,000 imams and [activists] for Da'wa". see: *Middle East Media Research Institute* (MEMRI), Interview with the deputy director of the Islamic Association of China, Mustafa Yang, 9 June 2004.

5 Da, Zhenyi (et al.) Zhongguo nanfang huizu beike bianlian xuanbian (*Selected compilation of stele inscriptions and wooden boards of the Hui nationality in Southern China),* Yinchuan 1999; Yu, Zhengui (et.al.) Zhongguo huizu jinshilu (*Collection of inscriptions on metal and stone of the Hui nationality in China),* Yinchuan 2001.

6 Leslie, Donald Daniel (et.al.) *Islam in traditional China, a bibliographical guide,* Monumenta Serica Institute, St. Augustin 2006, pp. 54-61.

public. Moreover few Western scholars have examined and translated Chinese Islamic inscriptions. Not until the beginning of the twentieth century did any Westerners do research on inscriptions, among them, Broomhall[7], Huart and Vissière[8].

2. Inscriptions on metal and stone, their size and appearance

The Chinese word for inscription is *jinshi,* which means literally "metal and stone", this term reflects the materials on which important texts were written in ancient China. Since the earliest times Chinese artisans have inscribed significant texts on bronze jars and stone tablets; but they also have used perishable materials like wood, silk and paper. The Islamic inscriptions in the 45,000 mosques of China are mostly written on vertical stone steles or horizontal and vertical wood and stone tablets. Wooden tablets hang on the walls and pillars of mosques, while stone monuments are erected in the garden-like yards that often surround these buildings.

Stone steles are of different sizes; we can distinguish large, medium and small monuments[9]. The large steles are at least two metres long and comprise a top, body and basis. Mostly these impressive stone monuments bear imperial edicts. Engraved into the top we sometimes find two dragons, the imperial symbol, playing with a pearl. The medium-size steles are between one to two metres high, and consist of only two parts, namely the body and the basis. As for the small tablets, they are at most one meter in height; many artefacts of this

---

7 Marshall Broomhall, *Islam in China: A Neglected Problem*, London 1910, repr. 1987. Broomhall translated three Chinese and one Arabic inscription. These are "A monument (to record) the building of the first mosque" (pp. 84-86), further the edict of the emperor Hongwu of the year 1406 A.D., in which he gave the permission for two mosques to be built, one in Nanjing and the other in Xi'an (p. 91). The third inscription is the edict of Emperor Qianlong of the year 1764, written in Chinese, Manchu, Turkish and Mongolian (pp. 94-97). The Arabic inscription is a praise of god and his creation (pp. 101-106).

8 C. Huart, "Inscriptions arabes et persanes des Mosquées chinoises de Kai-fon-fou et de Si-ngan-fou" in: *T'oung Pao 6* (1905), pp. 261-320; and Huart C. et Vissière A., "Stèle sino-mahométane de Tientsin" in: *Revue du Monde Musulman* 20 (1912), pp. 268-281. Vissière, A. , "Stèles de la chambre funéraire du Seyyid Edjell et ses temples commémoratifs à Yun-nan-fou" in: *Revue du Monde Musulman* 10 (1910), pp. 313-356.

9 Li, Xinghua, *Yisilan wenhua zhong de hanwen beike (Chinese stone-inscriptions in Islamic culture*), in: *Zhongguo yisilan wenhua*, Beijing 1996, pp. 114-118.

kind have been inserted into the walls of mosques, and therefore have been protected and preserved throughout the centuries.

Texts vary greatly in length, certain wooden boards bearing only a few words or sentences, while certain stone tablets may have long texts. Most wooden boards are undated, and establishing the date through outside criteria is very difficult. By contrast most stone steles bear the year in which they have been put up.

Besides their location in the buildings and yards of the mosques, the steles are also found near graveyards; some of them are now stored in museums. Unfortunately some stone monuments are in deplorable condition, as the process of erosion has already proceeded far, and the characters are hard to decipher.

3. Arabic inscriptions in Southern coastal China

The earliest reliably identified inscriptions in mosques date back to the Song dynasty (1127-1279) and have been found in the former port of Quanzhou, also called Zitong or Zaitun[10], in the province of Fujian in Southeast China. More than 200 Islamic stone carvings have been published by Chen Dasheng in 1984[11]. These inscriptions are carvings of mosques as well as of Muslim gravestones and tomb covers.

From the 10th to the 14th century Quanzhou was the most important commercial harbour in China, being in contact with more than seventy foreign countries and regions[12]. A large community of foreigners, of different religious beliefs, lived in the city; however the majority came from Islamic countries. These merchants imported much desired products like glass, perfumes, jewels,

---

10 Quanzhou (Ch'üan-chou) was founded in 711 A. D. during the Tang dynasty (618-907) on the south-eastern coast of Fujian (Fukien). During the 10th century it was renamed "Zitong", which Arab and Persian-speaking authors later transcribed as Zaytun. In Arabic *zaytun* means "olive", and so Quanzhou was also titled the "city of olives": Chen Dasheng, "Persian Settlements in South-eastern China during the T'ang, Sung, and Yuan Dynasties" *Encyclopaedia Iranica,* Vol. 5 (1991), p. 444.

11 Chen Dasheng, *Quanzhou yisilanjiao shike* - Islamic inscriptions in Quanzhou (Zaitun), Fuzhou 1984. The book consists of three parts, one in Chinese, in English and in Arabic.

12 Chen Dasheng, "Persian Settlements", p. 444.

pearls, corals, ivory, medicine and cloth to China, while the Chinese exported ceramics, metals, silk, and spices.

The stone inscriptions in the gravestones reflect the diversity of the community. From the *nisba* of the deceased it is obvious that they came from Persia, Arabia and Central Asia[13]. Among 164 inscriptions on tombstones, 45 are datable, while 119 stones are not[14]. Many of these tombstones were later re-used as building material, but since the mid-twentieth century these historical relics were collected and placed in the Quanzhou Foreign Maritime Museum.

The inscriptions on the gravestones are mono- or multilingual; in the latter case Arabic with Persian and Turkish, or Arabic, Persian and Chinese. The earliest tombstone dates from the year 1171 and once belonged to the grave of a certain Husayn ibn Muhammad Khalati[15], who lived and died in Quanzhou under the Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279).

From among 55 tombstones described by Chen Dasheng, 37 items bear the name of the deceased, while 18 are anonymous and show only verses from the Koran. The dates of death are given according to the Islamic lunar as well as the Chinese calendar, while the dates of birth are mostly absent. The inscriptions show that some foreign merchants brought their wives with them to China, because six names are of women. One of them was Shirin Khatun bint Hasan Sula[16], a Persian, who died in October 1321 in Quanzhou and was buried

---

13 The stone monuments are displayed in the appendix of Chen Dasheng, op.cit., plate 6-220. The names denoting the origins (*nisba*) of the deceased Muslims indicate in many cases that they came from Persia (Hamadan, Tabriz, Gilan, Isfahan, Shiraz, Siraf), Central Asia (Buchara, Khorazm), Yemen and other Arabic countries.

14 Chen Dasheng - Ludvik Kalus, *Corpus d'Inscriptions Arabes et Persanes en Chine. 1. Province de Fu-jian,* Paris 1991, p. 101.

15 Chen Dasheng, op.cit., part II., p. 29. Khalat (Ahlat/Hilat), located to the West of lake Van (Turkey), was the capital of old Armenia. The *nisba* may indicate that the deceased came from this town. see Chen-Kalus, *ibid.*, p. 178, No. 100.

16 Chen Dasheng, op.cit., p. 37; appendix no. 45, 1-2.

there[17]. Some women were also called "mother", which shows that children had been born to these couples[18].

Apart from the tombstones, Arabic inscriptions of the buildings of mosques have been preserved too. Out of seven mosques, which existed during Mongol times in Quanzhou, only one remained; this is the Ashab mosque (*Aisuhabusi*), which was built in 400 A.H. (1009 A.C.) in the city by the Muslim community. The inscriptions, on the walls, niches or the mihrab contain religious phrases, surahs of the Koran or recordings of the history of the mosque. One of these documents is the grand stone carving (5.35 m long and 35 cm high) of the mosque, which tells us that it was built in the year 1009 and again repaired in 1310 by a certain Ahmad ibn Muhammad Quds[19].

4. Chinese Islamic Inscriptions

a. History of the Sino-Islamic Inscriptions

The earliest still existing Islamic inscriptions in Chinese script date to the Mongol period (Yuan dynasty 1279-1368). Probably Chinese Islamic inscriptions had been put up in earlier times as well, but the famous inscription of Xi'an, supposedly from the eighth century is considered a forgery by most scholars[20]. One of the earliest and very important stone tablets are the inscriptions of the mosques in *Dingzhou* (1348, Hebei), *Quanzhou* (1350) and *Guangzhou*/Canton (1350). These 14th century texts give us some information on Islamic practice as well as the history of the mosques. The stele of the Qingjing Mosque in Quanzhou consists of a granite stone, 260 cm high and 110 cm wide. This impressive monument bears the title *Stele of the Reconstruction of the Qingjing Mosque*[21].

---

17 The other five tombstones derive from the graves of the following women: Fatima Khatun, Khadija Khatun, Fatimah bint Naina; Khadija bint Fan Shah; daughter of Sayyid Burtum b. Sayyid Muhammad Hamdani. *ibid.*, pp. 41-47.

18 For example: Fatima Khatun; *ibid.*, p. 41, appendix no. 50.

19 *ibid.*, p. 4, appendix no. 7.

20 Leslie, D. (et. al.), op.cit., p. 54. Broomhall supposes that the monument was not erected before 1300 A.D.; cf. Broomhall, Marshall, op.cit., pp. 86-89.

21 Da Zhenyi, op.cit., pp. 125-127; cf. also Chen Dasheng, op.cit., pp. 13-16; appendix, no. 21.

In the same fashion the inscription of the Huaisheng Mosque in Guangzhou, dating to the year 1350, describes the rebuilding of the mosque, and is appropriately entitled: *Record of the Reconstruction of the Huaishengta Mosque*. The original stone tablet having been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), only the top part of the stele has survived, showing the heading surrounded by the royal dragon and cloud design. Finally in 1984 the old text was again inscribed on a new stone.

These 14th century inscriptions are the earliest reliable Islamic documents in Chinese script. Since the texts document the reconstruction of mosques already in the Mongol Yuan period, we may be certain that already before that time, there existed Muslim communities possessing mosques. As the inscriptions are written in Chinese characters, they demonstrate that already in the 13th century there lived Muslims in China whose mother tongue was Chinese, and who slowly developed into the *Hui,* the Chinese-speaking Muslims that live in China today.

By 1279 the Mongols had conquered the entire Chinese territory. Their attitude towards the religions of their subjects was quite tolerant or perhaps indifferent, and they allowed the Muslim people originating from Central Asia, Iran and Arabia to enter the military and bureaucratic services. In the social hierarchy of the Mongol Empire, foreigners from Western and Islamic countries ranked higher than the native Chinese, which caused much resentment and even hatred among the locals. A famous Muslim personality was Sayyid Ajall Shams al-Din (1211-1279)[22] from Bukhara, who held different positions under Kubilai Khan in Peking, Shaanxi, and Sichuan. In his last years he was governor of the Southern province of Yunnan, where he died in 1279. Several steles stand near his tomb, one of them erected by his descendant Ma Zhu (1640-1711)[23], a

---

22 Sayyid Ajall Shams al-Din (1211-1279, Chinese: Saidianchi Shansiding. On his life see A. Vissière "*Biographie du Seyyid Edjell Chams ed-Din Omar*" in: RMM 8(1909) pp.343-358. See also P.D. Buell (1993) "Saiyid Ajall (1211-1279)." in: J. Rachewiltz (1993) *In the service of the Khan. Eminent personalities of the early Mongol-Yüan Period (1200-1300)*, Wiesbaden, pp. 466-479.

23 More about the life of Ma Zhu (1640-1711), see Stöcker-Parnian, *Jingtang Jiaoyu – die Bücherhallen Erziehung. Entstehung und Entwicklung der islamischen Erziehung in den chinesischen Hui-Gemeinden vom 17.-19. Jahrhundert.* Frankfurt 2003, pp. 106-110.

famous Muslim scholar of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), who thus honoured his distinguished ancestor.

From very ancient times down to the present day the art of manufacturing stone inscriptions has been practiced in China; and the Muslims also used this manner of representing important people or events, as well as proclaiming and preserving edicts within the public sphere. Most of the surviving inscriptions date to the 17th to 20th centuries, in other words the reign of the Qing, the last imperial dynasty.

b. Overview and categorization of the stone inscriptions

At present there is no complete collection of all existing Chinese Islamic inscriptions. For my research I have used the above mentioned publications of Da Zhenyi (1999) and Yu Zhengui (2001), as well as articles in Chinese magazines. Da Zhenyi[24] and his team of fellow scholars collected 208 inscriptions, wich are published in the monography "*Selected compilation of stele inscriptions and wooden boards of the Hui nationality in Southern China*". These inscriptions are of nine southern provinces, namely Guangdong (represented by 41 inscriptions), Yunnan (41), Sichuan (40), Fujian (20), Guangxi (19), Hunan (19), Hubei (16), Guizhou (10) and the island Hainan (2). One hundred and sixteen inscriptions are on stone tablets (beike), while the rest are on wooden boards, namely 39 horizontally inscribed boards and 53 couplets hanging on the pillars of the relevant buildings. The inscriptions encompass a period of nearly six hundred years, from the middle of the 14th to the middle of the 20th century.

The compilation of Yu Zhengui[25] with the title "*Collection of inscriptions on metal and stone of the Hui nationality in China*" includes 440 Islamic texts from 27 Chinese provinces, the earliest inscriptions dating to the 13th (Song dynasty) and the latest to the 20th century. In his foreword the editor Yu Zhengui informs us that a large number of unpublished Islamic inscriptions still can be found all over China, expressing the hope that diligent scholars will continue to

---

24 Original Chinese title: Da Zhenyi (et.al.), *Zhongguo nanfang huizu beike bianlian xuanbian*, Yinchuan 1999.

25 Original Chinese title: Yu Zhengui (et.al.), *Zhongguo huizu jinshilu*, Yinchuan 2001.

collect, decipher and publish them. Emphasizing the importance and relevance of these inscriptions for research on Islam in China and the history of the Hui, Yu Zhengui expresses his regret that in the course of the centuries so many precious inscriptions and other records have been destroyed.

As for the scholar Li Xinghua[26], he has collected about 1000 inscriptions, which have not as yet been published. Some of the inscriptions he has studied show Arabic words written on the top of the steles, usually taken from the Koran; the Basmala also appears quite often. As previously noted, Li classifies the steles by size, distinguishing between large, medium-sized and small tablets. This author also has examined the partly bad state of preservation of the stone monuments. Warning his readers of the further deterioration of the inscriptions Li writes: "If the [steles] are not deciphered, classified, collected, and conserved on time, they soon will become 'blind steles', whose real meaning will have been lost."[27]

When collecting Islamic inscriptions Chinese scholars have adopted the following systematization and categorization:

1. Inscriptions concerning the foundation, rebuilding and repair of mosques

2. Inscriptions recording the organization and structure of the Muslim community

3. Inscriptions documenting the regulations governing the mosque and its administration

4. Inscriptions concerning the support and promotion of teaching and studies

5. Inscriptions outlining endowments

6. Inscriptions recording imperial edicts

7. Inscriptions documenting the history of the mosque

8. Inscriptions expounding the history of Islam and its principal doctrines

---

26 Li Xinghua, op.cit., pp. 115-117.
27 Li Xinghua, *ibid.*, p. 115

9. Inscriptions mentioning eminent Muslim personalities

10. Inscriptions on graveyards and in holy places

However many texts are difficult to classify, because their content belongs to more than one category. Very often two or more topics have been covered; thus a text dealing with an endowment to finance teaching and studies also contains passages relevant to the renovation of the mosque. Or else inscriptions on the foundation and repair of mosques may have parts on the history of Islam and its principles. These interferences will become clearer when we analyze more closely some of the most widespread inscription types.

ba. Inscriptions on the foundation, rebuilding and repair of mosques

Many inscriptions concern the foundation, rebuilding and repair of a mosque[28]. For the religious and cultural activities of the Islamic community, the mosque along with its yard and garden was and is the most important site. In this enclosed territory Muslim believers pray, celebrate their festivals and mourn their dead. Older mosques, such as the Qingjing Mosque in Quanzhou, the Huaisheng Mosque in Guangzhou or the famous Niujie Mosque in Peking, often have several tablets bearing texts referring to the reconstruction of the building, which record the dramatic process of destruction and rebuilding in the course of the centuries.

Inscriptions documenting reconstructions have been composed according to a well-defined format[29]: Typically the text begins with an account of the origins of Islam, with reference to the geographical situation of Arabia (*tianfang*), its inhabitants, their customs and habits. Then the author(s) will introduce the Prophet Muhammad (*Mahama/Mohanmode*) and explain the principles of Islam (profession of faith/*nian*, prayer/*li*, fasting during Ramadan/*zhai*, hajj/*zhao*, alms-giving/*ke*). There follows a reference to the

---

28 Nearly a quarter of the inscriptions in the book of Yu Zhengui (*passim*) belong to this category.

29 This format can be read off from the translation of th stele inscription of the Qingjing mosque in Quanzhou Chen Dasheng, op.cit., pp. 13-16; see also the inscription "*Temple restauré de la pureté et de la vérité*" in the article of A. Vissière (1914) "Inscriptions sino-mahométanes de Fou-tcheou" in: RMM 27 (1914), pp. 162-173.

manner in which Islam reached China and found adherents there. Finally the author(s) present the particular mosque and its congregation: this account may include the date of first construction, the reasons why the original building had been destroyed, and the date of rebuilding, repairs and/or enlargement. The inscription may also tell us which person was responsible and/or paid for the repairs. At the end of the inscription we find engraved the year in which the stele was put up, the names of the sponsor, the scribe and the donors.

bb. Inscriptions on the support and promotion of teaching and studies

Giving money for education was a goal-oriented action, which became more popular in the 16th century, when the so-called bookhall-education (*jingtang jiaoyu*) was introduced by Hu Dengzhou (1522-1597)[30], who propagated the compatibility of Islam and Confucianism. Both Confucius and the Prophet Muhammad stressed the importance of learning. It was the duty of the believers to educate themselves and their fellow men, and so many sayings of the Prophet (Hadith/*shengyan*) on learning are commonly known to the Hui; including the statements that searching for knowledge is better than mere praying, or that it is the duty for everybody to learn the whole life. Teachers and poor students were financed with the money donated.

Two still existing inscriptions on supporting the teaching are situated in the provinces Henan and Anhui, dating from the era of Emperor Qianlong (r. 1735-96). They report that money was collected to buy fields for the mosque; the income of these fields was used for financing the teachers and the school[31].

Many of the texts of supporting education are of the 19th century and of Republican times (1912-1949), when the school system was renewed, partly realized by donations. As an example we might mention the inscription of Lady Na from Yunnan dated to the year 1938, "The charitable donation to support the

30 The biography of Hu Dengzhou in: Stöcker-Parnian, op.cit, pp. 84-88, see also Zvi Ben-Dor (2005) *The Dao of Muhammad, a cultural history of Muslims in late imperial China.* Cambridge. pp. 39-40.

31 Yu Zhengui, op.cit., pp. 340-342.

education by Lady Na"[32]. After the death of her husband, Lady Na, the wife of the Muslim scholar and haji Ahong Na Xinzhai, had donated a part of her yearly rental income for *madrasa* education.

Normally the mosques and their personnel were supported by the Islamic community, but famous mosques also got some financial grants from the emperor, a gesture which was normally recorded on an inscription; this applied for instance to the *Niujie* Mosque in Peking or the *Huajue* Mosque in Xi'an.

bc. Inscriptions outlining endowments

Through charitable donations the Muslim believer can, like his/her Buddhist counterpart, positively influence his salvation. Inscriptions of donations can be found in many mosques and there are 77 such inscriptions connected to pious foundations (waqf/*wakefu*) in the book of Yu Zhengui. Particularly after the 17th century the number of documents on donations and *waqf* has steadily increased. The believers had to maintain the mosque, its garden and other facilities and also support the clerics and other personnel. So donations in favour of the mosque and environment were of great help to the community. They include the donation of land, buildings and money to the mosque, resources intended for maintenance and repair as well as for new construction. These donations show the commitment of the believers towards their community, and as financial support is at issue, the *waqf* inscriptions also reflect the economic and social situation of the Muslims in China.

The donation tablet normally lists the name of the benefactor, his/her position, the object donated, such as land, buildings or money, in addition to the purpose of the donation.

A detailed inscription is the text of Ma Te from Guanyi (province Yunnan) dated to the year 1737: "Stone inscription concerning the everlasting support (*chang zhu*) of the Ma family for the mosque".

In the beginning of the long text the businessman Ma Te depicts that the origin of his family is Nanjing, and his ancestor came to Yunnan, the southern-

[32] Yu Zhengui, op.cit., pp. 360-361. The inscription is translated in Stöcker-Parnian, op.cit., p. 175.

most province of China, in the 14th century. The author tells us that his mother died, when he was 18 years old and he had to take the responsibility for his family, working hard for more than 30 years. Growing older he wants to thank god by doing a good deed. So Ma Te donated a piece of land to the mosque of his town and gave a detailed instruction with respect to the amounts of rice which he had assigned to the beneficiaries, namely the *imam, muezzin, khatib* and concierge of the mosque. Ma Te also gave extra grain that was to be used in the community feast that marks the end of Ramadan ('īd al-fitr/*kaizhaijie*). In the end he expresses his fear that his offspring will try to take back the donated land, and therefore Ma Te fixed his donation in a document and in stone.

Supporting religious festivities was a useful charity, from which the whole community benefited. An active and lively community life was essential for the Muslims in China, who lived in a Confucian-dominated society. The most important feast for the Chinese Muslims were the *'īd al-fitr,* or *'īd al-qurban* (*zaishengjie*), in addition to the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad (*shengji).* This anniversary was celebrated by the whole community, with hundreds and thousands of Hui coming together in the mosque area. To finance these feasts, special welfare fields (*gongtian*) were donated to the mosque, and various inscriptions document that the rent was used for the festival.

bd. Inscriptions of imperial edicts

Of great importance were inscriptions of imperial edicts and decrees, which ensured independence and security to the Muslims, demonstrating in public imperial support and patronage. These documents show the place of Islam in political life, particularly under the rulers of the Ming and Qing dynasties (14th to 19th centuries). An illustrious example is the edict of Emperor Ming Yongle (r. 1403-24), which was several times engraved in stone. The relevant tablets were hung in different mosques, visible for everybody and thus protecting the area; they are still extant in the mosques of Quanzhou, Fuzhou and Suzhou. The original text was written on a paper scroll (100 x 72 cm) in the year 1407, rediscovered in 1956 in Yangzhou. The imperial edict was originally

composed in three languages, namely Chinese, Mongolian, and Persian. The translation of the Chinese text runs as follows[33]:

"An edict to Miri Haji (*Mili Hazhi*)[34]. I think he who is sincere and honest will revere God and serve the Emperor; he will also guide the good people, thus giving invisible support to the royal system. Therefore God will bless him, and he shall enjoy infinite bliss. You, Miri Haji, have long since followed the teachings of Muhammad (*Mahama*); you are pious and honest, and are guiding the good people; you also revere God and serve the Emperor with loyalty. Such good deeds deserve praise and approval. Thereby I am giving you this imperial edict to protect your abode. No official, military or civilian personnel should despise, insult or bully them; whoever disobey my order by doing so, should bear the blame. This edict is hereby issued on the 11th of the 5th month of the 5th year of Yongle." (i.e. 1407)

Square seal "*Chi ming zhi bao*" (Seal of the imperial edict)

These imperial steles were of fundamental importance to the Muslims. They can be found in many mosques and are considered as "protective talisman"[35]. Particularly the Qing emperors Kangxi (re. 1662-1722) and Qianlong (re. 1735-1796) erected numerous steles. Peter Zarrow analyzed the stele inscription at Chengde, the summer resort of the Qing emperors, recreated to demonstrate the rulers' "claim to legitimacy"[36]. While the texts were Buddhist and Confucian in terms of content, the emperor showed his universal love and care for his people as a whole.

Despite these imperial edicts the politics of the Chinese emperors alternated between religious tolerance and inflexible rigidity with respect to their Muslim subjects. Often the relatively liberal attitude of the emperors was foiled by narrow-minded officials, who often saw a threat to the state in any

---

33 Chen Dasheng, op.cit., p. 12, English translation of the Chinese text.

34 Miri/*Mili* is the Chinese word for "Amir", Haji/*Hazhi* is Hajji, the Muslim pilgrim.

35 Chen Dasheng, *ibid.*, p. 13.

36 Peter Zarrow, "The imperial word in stone. Stele inscriptions at Chengde", in: James Millward, *New Qing imperial history, the making of Inner Asian Empire at Qing Chengde,* London 2004. "These steles were a form of self-expression and one means by which the emperor related events in Chengde to larger questions of his rulership. They thus formed an important part of the Qing's general claim to legitimacy." p. 146

unfamiliar ceremony, and therefore acted unjustly in disputes. Conflicts between the Hui and the majority the Han Chinese were often decided a priori in favour of the latter. These unjust measures on the part of officials occasionally led to bloody revolts, especially in the 19th century.

be. Inscriptions mentioning eminent Muslim personalities

Already part of Chinese society for over a thousand years, the Muslims have produced numerous eminent personalities active in the political, cultural, military and religious arenas. Yu Zhengui included ninety-nine Muslim personalities recorded in inscriptions, among them politicians, officers, religious and secular scholars, scientists and pedagogues. Some inscriptions were composed many years or even centuries, after the death of the person thus honoured. Wang Daiyu (1580-1658) for example received two memorial tablets in Republican times, one in 1923 and one in 1935; they were installed in the Sanlihe mosque in Peking and in the Muslim graveyard respectively[37].

Tombstones are especially interesting, as they provide an overview of the life of the deceased, but they also demonstrate the importance of the relevant person in his community and in Chinese society as a whole. Typical is the inscription of the above mentioned Hu Dengzhou (1522-1597), the founder of Chinese Islamic education of the year 1718[38].

The inscription starts with the *Dao* (way), a synonym for god, which has no location and no form and therefore must be explained by holy persons. These are the prophets, starting with Adam, and then followed by Seth, Noah, Abraham, Ismail, Moses, David, Isa and finally there came Muhammad (*Muhanmode*), who arranged the Koran. He also explained the five principles of Islam and the Confucian rules of human relationship. Then Islam came to China, but after some time the knowledge and interpretation of the holy texts became very poor. Finally in 1522 the grand master Hu was born, who studied the Confucian classics, as well as the Islamic books. He established a school and many disciples came from all China. Two of his disciples, Feng and Hai, continued the teaching tradition of master Hu after his death in the year 1597.

---

37 Yu Zhengui, op.cit., pp. 449-453.

38 *ibid.*, pp. 512-514. The complete text is translated in Stöcker-Parnian, op.cit., pp. 88-92.

Then the inscription depicts the miracle around the tomb of Hu Dengzhou; in 1662 the grave of Hu was endangered by a great flood of the nearby river. So the townsmen decided to transfer the corpse and opened the grave. Suddenly an unknown fragrance ascended, and the bones had a golden radiance. In commemoration of this outstanding incidence and to honour the great master Hu this stone tablet was erected in 1718. More than seventy fellow believers, who supported financially the engraving and erection of the stele, were mentioned at the end of the text.

Hu Dengzhou, who had many disciples, had not left any writings of his own, but his survived in the works of his students. The original stele, which had survived the Cultural Revolution, was wantonly destroyed in 1980 by an unknown person. Fortunately in the 1950ies the text had been copied by Feng Zenglie.

Another famous figure of the Chinese Muslims living in the 19th century is Ma Dexin[39] (1794-1874), who was also honoured by a stele inscription by his disciple and friend Ma Anli. After many years of learning, being already 47 years old Ma Dexin started his pilgrimage to the west, performed the hajj and stayed nearly eight years in the Middle East (Mekka, Medina, Kairo, Istanbul,[40] Damascus, and Jerusalem).

After returning to China, he was again active as *ahong* and was writing and translating books on Islam. He also started to translate the Koran into Chinese, of which only five *suras* remained. His fame spread over all China, and therefore many *khalifas* came to study with him in Huilong, which became the center of Islamic learning in Yunnan. To end the long-lasting rebellious situation in Yunnan he became involved in politics, and was caught between the lines of Han and Hui, which led to his murder in 1874.

---

39 The biography of Ma Dexin, see Stöcker-Parnian, op.cit., pp. 122-136

40 In 1846 Ma Dexin lived for some months in Istanbul and had also an audience with Sultan Abdülmecit.

Conclusion

The Sino-Islamic stone inscriptions deliver an interesting and manifold insight into the life of the Muslims in China. They prove the existence of Islamic communities in the old imperial capital Chang'an (today: Xi'an) and the south-eastern coastal cities already in pre-Mongol times. Before the 14th century the Muslim communities were dominated by foreign merchants, while thereafter during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) they adjusted to the Chinese environment by adopting Chinese names and Chinese clothing. These Chinese Muslims, the so-called Hui, have been practising their religious rites in mosques, which were adapted to the Chinese architectural pagoda style.

As it is custom in China, the Muslims also carved their important texts in stones, which were erected in the mosque yard or on the burial ground. This was in particular important for the imperial edicts, granting the Muslims their religious rites and by that served as security for the mosque and its community through the centuries. But also inscriptions of endowments and donations of individuals for the mosque, the school, festivals etc. were of importance bearing witness of good deeds.

Thousands of stone steles and tablets can be found in the about 45.000 mosques in China. Over the years some of the steles were destroyed, but of greater risk today are erosion caused by negative environmental conditions. In consequence many texts are totally or partly illegible; others are on way of destruction. However the Chinese authorities try to protect these precious stones, partly by transferring them into museums or by covering the stones with little roofs or glass coverings.

For a better understanding of Islam in China these inscriptions are a valuable source material, which has not been analyzed up to now. Each stone is the individual document of one or more persons, showing their individual aspect of life. The value of these texts is not only their content, but also their simple existence. They demonstrate that the Muslims are since 1000 years part of the Chinese society, who have slowly adapted without loosing their religious identity. It also shows that the living together of Chinese Muslims and the Han-Chinese was mostly of a peaceful coexistence and less marked of confrontation,

as it is often stressed in the literature on Islam in China. Therefore it is necessary to study these scripts.

Owing to the fact that the texts are written in Chinese they are not accessible for the Western scholars of Islamic studies, who cannot read Chinese. Consequently these Islamic inscriptions are nearly totally unknown to the Muslim world.

By this short article I want to show the existence and diversity of Islamic relics, which can be found in the far eastern part of the Islamic world. Studying and translating these text is my concern, and by this way to draw out the secrets of the serene and dignified old stone monuments, staying in the beautiful and calm yards and gardens of the Chinese mosques.

Özet

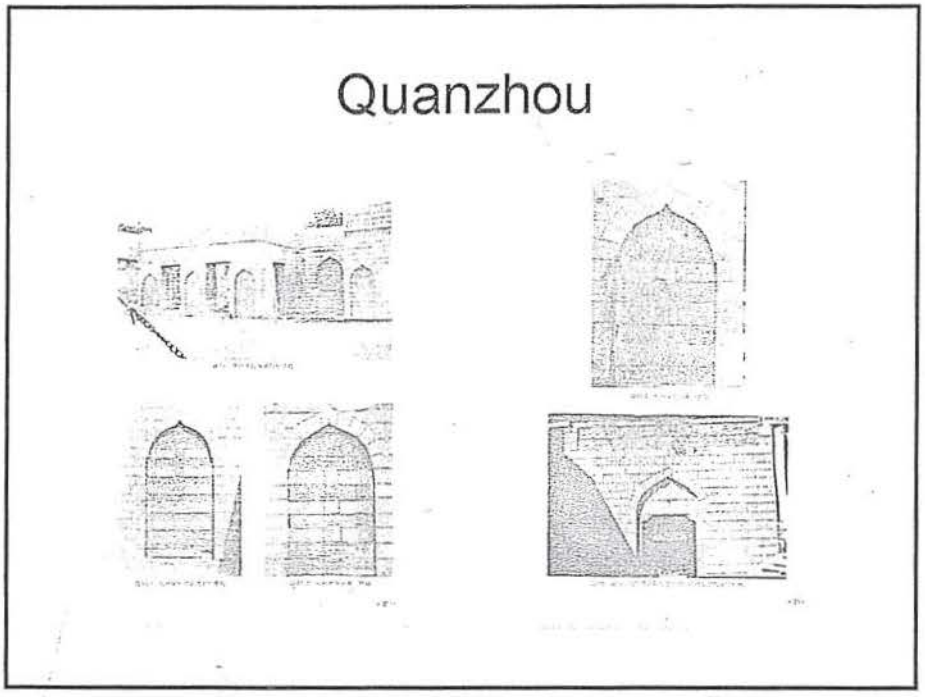
ÇİN'DE TAŞ ABİDELER ÜZERİNDEKİ İSLÂMÎ YAZITLAR

Çin'deki 45.000 kadar camiin avlusunda ve bahçesinde Çince yazıtlar taşıyan taş stellere rastlarız. Bu metinler, Çin'de İslamiyet'in uzun tarihi hakkındadır; Çin'de yaşayan Müslümanların sosyal ve kültürel faaliyetlerine ışık tutar. Bunlar cami inşası ve onarımı, eğitim-öğretim ve araştırmalara yapılan bağışlar, bayramlar ya da Müslümanlara verilen destekler hakkındadır. Bazı steller Çin İmparatorunun fermanını taşırlar ve Müslümanların Çin'deki güvenlik ve bağımsızlıkları açısından önemlidirler. Taşa yazı işleme geleneği Çin'de köklü bir gelenekti ve Müslümanlar bunu devam ettirmişlerdir. En erken İslâmî yazıtlar Arapça olup XII. yy.a tarihlenirken, en erken Çin-İslâm yazıtları Moğollar dönemine (XIV. yy.) aittir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Çin'de İslâm, İslâmî yazıtlar, taş tabletler, Çin camileri, Hui/Çin Müslümanları.

APPENDIX 1

Endowment stone tablet in the mosque of Nanjing, Qing dynasty (1644-1911)

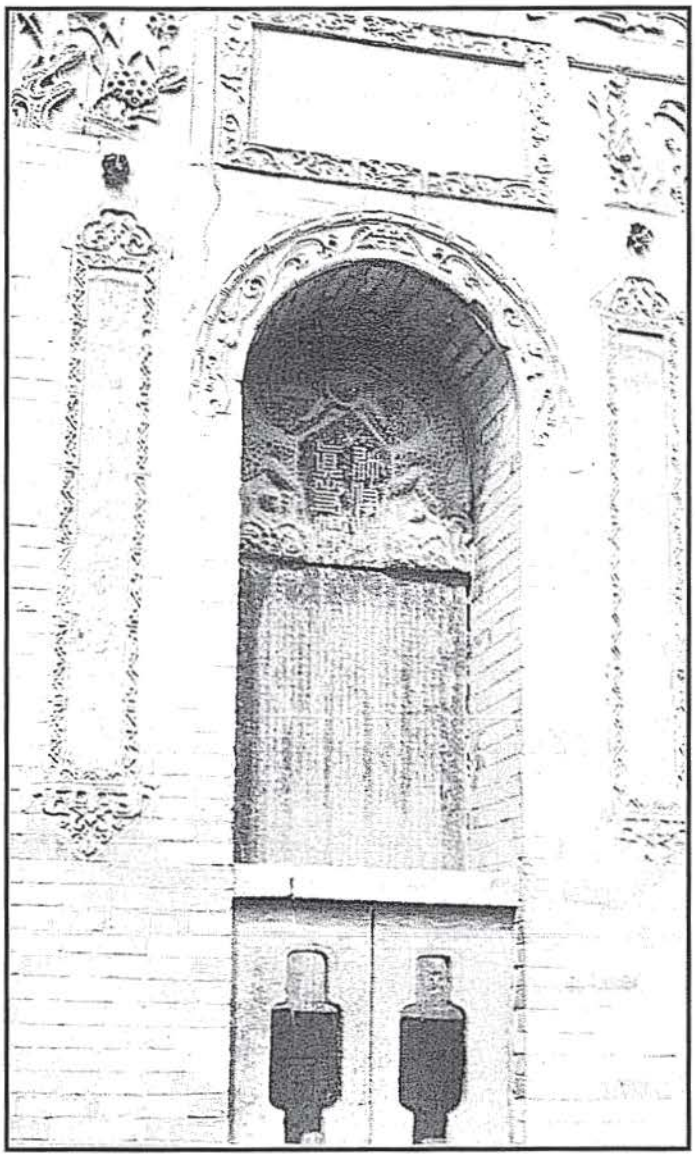


APPENDIX 2

Arabic inscriptions in the Ashab mosque in Quanzhou, Song dynasty (960-1279)

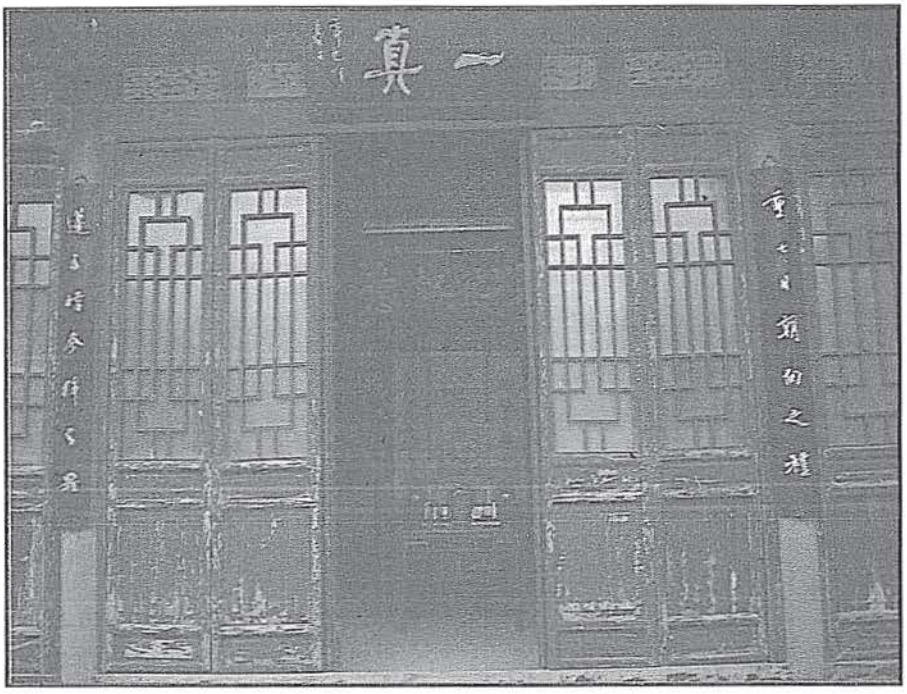
APPENDIX 3

Endowment inscription in the mosque of Nanjing, Republican times (1912-1949)



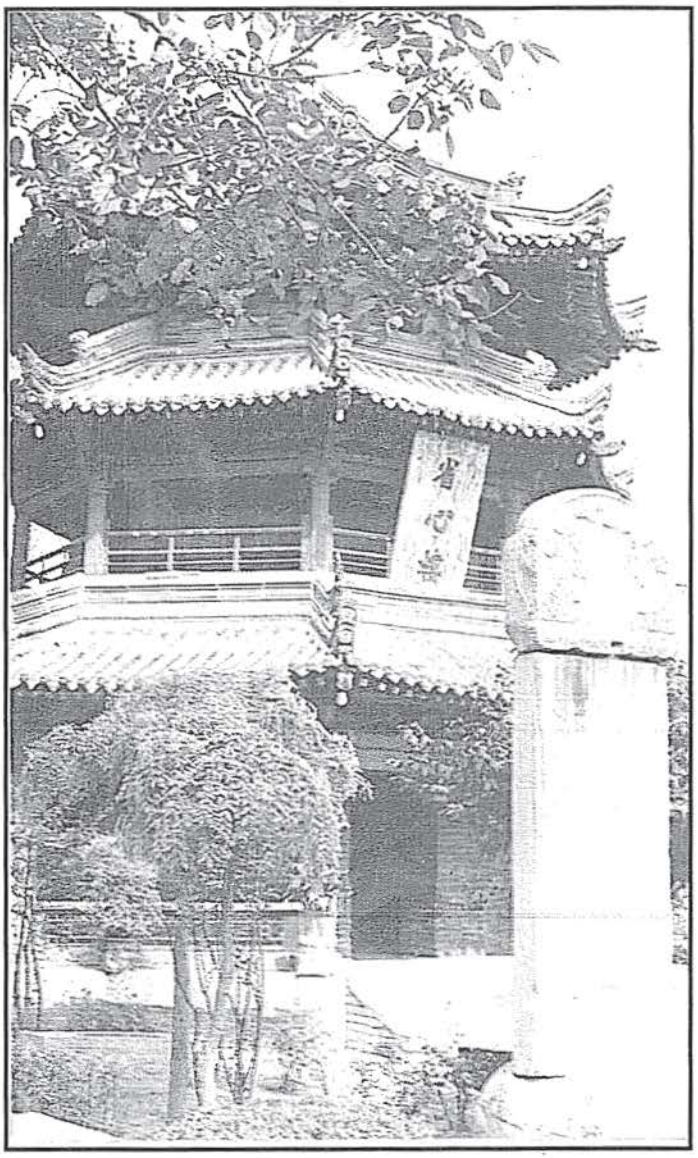
APPENDIX 4

Stone tablet in the Great Mosque of Xi'an, integrated into a wall, Ming dynasty (1368-1644)



APPENDIX 5

Horizontal and vertical wooden boards at the side hall in the mosque of Nanjing



APPENDIX 6

Stone tablet and minaret in the Great Mosque of Xi'an, Ming dynasty (1368-1644)