Islam in China

A Brief Initial Overview
Introduction

This brief look into the Muslims of China is initiated at the request of Shaykh Dr. Abdalqadir as-Sufi to 'research Islam in China', and as such is designed to give the reader some idea of the history and current situation there.

Owing to the location of this work in Botswana and the complete lack of reference material, all the material has been accessed via the Internet. Personal experience is limited to visiting, without the benefit of the local language, what is known as the tomb of Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas and the Huaisheng mosque reportedly established by him, ﷺ. There is plenty of room for a subjective rendering of the information scanned, however I see no point in painting any particular picture as I view this document as a limited aid to decisions on the future of Islam in China and a departure upon a considered course of action.

All the material referred to is non-Muslim and Sinology-based academism and therefore limited by its peculiar, sceptical and blinkered methodology as well as the antithetical, although somewhat more detailed and error ridden view of Christian missionaries. In order to present this note in months rather than years I have limited myself to satisfying my own mind as to a reasonable overview of the subject in hand. It is far from exhaustive and even if it were it would still only point to research among the Muslims of China at first hand.
Brief Overview of the History of Islam in China

Khalifah Sayyidina 'Uthman ibn 'Affan /radiya1, sent a delegation in 651ce lead by Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas /radiya1, to China -possibly because he had already been there before the Hijrah to Madinah. He was received by the Emperor Gaozong of Tang, emperor of the nascent Tang dynasty who is said to have had a dream of the Prophet Muhammad /salla2, which prompted him to send emissaries to Arabia, hence sayyidina 'Uthman's response. Sayyidina Sa'd initiated the building of the first mosque in Guangzhou (Canton) and the sahabi, (one of the ten guaranteed paradise by the Rasulullah, /salla2,) was allowed to teach Islam by the emperor. So the earliest encounter with Islam may go back to the time of Rasulullah but according to Chinese sources definitely under sayyidina Uthman.

There had been a flow of trade via the southern seas to the southern Chinese ports which the Arabs had been engaged in before Islam and this is where Islam would arrive as mentioned above through the Khalifah of the Muslims. Muslims also entered by land from the north via the 'Silk Route' and continued to do so in the succeeding centuries in one form or another.

From this first embassy Islam takes root in China and Muslims flow in by land and sea bringing with them their knowledge of medicine and pharmacology, trading expertise, music, food and military assistance. This
continued and increased during the Song dynasty to the extent that the Muslims dominated foreign trade in the South and even controlled some ports. One of the Song emperors invited Muslims from Bukhara to help his armies and Arabs on horseback began to immigrate in their thousands to the north. During this period what was known as 'Dashi Fe' (Law of the Arabs -from the Persian word for Arab) becomes 'Huihui Jiao', (the Religion of the Huihui) indicating a greater understanding and acceptance of 'foreigners' (Fanke -foreign guests) as citizens.

The Chinese dynasties have generally accommodated foreign influx with their inherent customs and beliefs as long as they did not conflict with established Chinese life, customs and authority and this has certainly been the case with Islam and its various proponents until the 19th Christian century under the Manchu dynasty, itself a far northern minority people. There had been a symbiotic relationship over the centuries with Muslims living under Chinese authority with a certain amount of autonomy and their being of service to the rulers according to their expertise and abilities. There were times when one or the other went a bit too far and friction and restriction occurred not including the repression of the Manchu and its subsequent rebellions.

The height of the Muslim presence in China was during the Yuan Dynasty (13th-14th ce) under the Mongols, when the Muslims made up one of the four social classes set up by the rulers second only to the Mongols themselves. This period saw the incorporation and immigration of many Muslim artisans and soldiers brought in by the Mongols from Persia and Central Asia along with conversions of Mongol royalty and their people in the north and Mongol conquests in the southern province of Yunnan by Sayyid Ajjal, an Arab who helped the Mongols against the Song, which was the cause, it is propounded, for such a large Muslim population there. The independent flow of traders also continued during this period. Thousands of Muslims held top posts in government, the military, finance and commerce. This brought the Muslims more power and respect but at the same time envy and dislike from the Chinese majority, who had been placed in a lower class by the new rulers. It has been remarked that placing the Muslims between themselves and the Chinese
was a tactic the Mongols employed to protect themselves from Chinese discontent. However that may be, it does seem that society became stratified in contrast to the more fluid interaction before they took charge and the process of intercultural merging reverted to a more ghettoised separation. The preceding growth of Muslim Arab and Persian influence, culture and knowledge increased and intensified under the non-Muslim Mongols and indeed it was the Muslims who designed Dadu or Khanbaliq the Yuan capital using Han Chinese architecture situated where Beijing is now.

The end of the Yuan Dynasty brings in the Ming and another change for the Muslims. The new dynasty was well-disposed towards the Muslims possibly on account of their aid during the rebellion against the Mongols and the many Muslims of rank among the Ming. Certainly the second Ming emperor had as his first Admiral, Zheng He, the most historically famous Muslim and a hero to the Chinese along with many Muslim generals. During the next three hundred years of this dynasty the Muslims undergo great assimilation into Chinese life marrying Han women, adopting Chinese surnames and dress. Nanjing, the Ming capital becomes a centre for Islamic teaching and Islamic texts in Chinese start to emerge from the knowledgeable. The Ming became more internally orientated and there is less interaction with the outside world; the southern ports are severely restricted and trade and immigration decrease significantly. This curtailment of international exchange particularly with the Muslim world adds to the sinicization and integration of the Muslims with the Chinese. The Muslims continue to be well thought of and are protected by the emperor.

Quran with Chinese translation in Arabic and Chinese. The interlinear was produced by Ma Zhenwu, an octogenarian Hui akhund from Dachang, Hebei.
It is during these dynasties that Islam begins to merge with mainstream Chinese culture with minor attempts to interfere with this new direction of openness on both sides. This lead to a productive expansion of knowledge and expertise from the Muslims in fields such as medicine and astronomy in which the Muslims were more advanced and it still remains part of traditional Chinese knowledge. The Muslims were less reluctant to consider themselves Chinese and much common ground was found between Islam and Confucianism and Islam clearly becomes part of the Chinese cultural landscape and Muslims are found throughout the echelons of Chinese society in prominent positions.

From the sources accessed it is difficult to assess the true nature of this assimilation of Islam into mainstream Chinese life, whether it is a weakening of the fundamentals of Islam or an enlightened co-operation of knowledge and power. Muslims coming from the Islamic heartlands complained of the laxity of the Chinese Muslims and this may be the case, however it may also be a case of hard literalist Islam not being able to appreciate a more fluid pattern. All the known forms of Islam have come to exist within the vast country from those who avoid pork only through traditional Hanafi communities, Modernists, Wahhabis, Tariqahs as well as a small Shi’a element. From the Chinese side they can be authoritarian but also accommodating as exemplified by the Manchu and the early dynasties respectively.

This ease between the Muslims and Chinese changes dramatically in the mid 17th century with the arrival of the new Qing dynasty. They are Manchu and a minority and not Han; their reaction to this is was to destabilise the Muslims, Mongols, Han and Tibetans by setting them against each other, not without assistance from western powers, who as always pursue their own interests. They kept control with military might and punished the Muslims for their assistance to the previous regime with the abolition of ritual slaughter, prohibition of the construction of mosques and the Hajj. Not surprisingly there were several rebellions in the north and south, including the Panthay rebellion and Dongan revolt in the 19th century which led to the genocide -a 'washing'- of millions of Muslims.
Muslims suffered until the fall of the Qing and the arrival of Sun Yat Sen in the early 20th century. He declared that the country belonged equally to the Hui, Han, Mongol and Tibetan and established the Republic of China, which brought an easing of the tensions created by the Manchu. It reopened the interaction between the Muslims of China and the Muslim world, which continued until 1949 until the arrival of the communist 'People's Republic of China'. As an atheist state it was naturally antithetical to Islam as 'superstitious' and 'anti-social', however despite the destruction of mosques and the characteristic repression of communism the Muslims escaped the worst excesses of the regime. Under the ‘moderate’ leadership of Deng thirty years later diversity was allowed once more and people were allowed to follow their own ways and culture. For the Muslims this led to an upsurge in the numbers going on Hajj.

This freedom continues -closely monitored- except in Muslim East Turkestan (Xingjian) and Buddhist Tibet. The repression in Tibet is well known as opposed to that in East Turkestan, for further details see; http://www.shaykhabdalqadir.com/content/articles/Art013_23032004.html. It is probable that there is agitation from some 'Uighur influenced by modern Islamic sects from the West, but the Chinese are making the usual mistakes of overreaction. However there has been a policy of 'Hanization' of Xingjian since the beginning of the communist era, which continues to this day. This entails the influx of large numbers of Han presented with incentives while the local Muslims and their customs are legislated against to their extreme difficulty.
The Muslim Peoples of China

The Ten Officially Recognised Muslim Nations

Population and Areas Inhabited with brief notes

Hui - 9,816,802 - Chinese

Every province & Autonomous region; concentrations in Ningxia, Xinjian Uighur, & Inner Mongolia Aut. Regions, Qinghai, Gansu, Shaanxi, Yunnan, Hebei, Henan & Shandong Provinces.

The admixture of Islam and Chinese culture creates a particular grouping of Muslims, Hanafi by school but Chinese in character and language. These days referred to as the 'Hui' (回) Muslims or Hui Zu, as opposed to the other Hanafi groupings with distinct Turkic or Mongol ethnicity. There may be some Turkic assimilation from earlier times, indeed although today the term refers to Chinese Muslims it was used to incorporate many different tribes before. The Hui, who are the largest grouping numerically, are spread all over China unlike the other Muslims who are generally in specific areas with smaller communities in the main conurbations.

The Hui have been classified by the Chinese government since the early communist era as a 'nation' among the ten Muslim 'nations'. All the other nations are clearly ethnically homogenous whereas the Hui vary considerably according to their ancestry although predominantly identical to the Han Chinese. The Hui consider themselves Muslim but this can range from the following of Hanafi fiqh to the mere avoidance of pork
and they are generally more assimilated into the mainstream Han society.

Much of this classification began in the days of Sun Yat Sen, the 'Father of the Modernisation of China' and the first provisional leader of the 'Republic of China'. They were taken further by the Stalin-inspired communists under Mao. However when these classifications of nationality took place the genealogical connections to Arabs and Persians were hardly evident and the differentiation was purely based upon what was perceived as their cultural difference; their connection to Islam.

Most of what is written in the 'Brief Overview' above refers to what is considered Hui history.

**Uighur - 7,214,431 - turkic**

*Xingjian Uighur Autonomous Region, small communities in Hunan & Henan provinces*

Mention of the Uighur ('Uweeghur') goes back to the early Chinese dynasties in the 2nd century ce, and various ancient sources describe their domicile as between the Yellow river in the east to East Turkestan in the west and the Mongolian steppes in the northeast. They are considered descendants of the Hun and were important in several Central Asian empires in the early AD centuries until the mid 8th century when they established their own rule. As they became more powerful they dominated the Chinese as their protectors however unwillingly, in lieu of tribute and this continued into the 9th century. Internal divisions, a strong Kirgiz neighbour and adverse seasonal weather
saw the decline of this first Uighur powerbase and emigration to other parts.

This led to the establishment of the Ganzhou Uighur kingdom in 850ce in today's Gansu area and they are known as the Yellow Uighur who follow Lamaist Buddhism, and the Bhuddist Karakhoja Uighur kingdom near today's city of Turfan. Shortly before this the Karakhanid Uighur kingdom was established which became Muslim a hundred years later. These two latter kingdoms were based in East Turkestan and indeed merged at the end of the 14th century and remained independent until the Manchu moved in. This led to more than forty rebellions over the next hundred years until they were successful in repelling the Qing from their land and re-establishing their independence recognised by the Ottomans, Russians and British among others. However fearing Tsarist influence in this new state British banks financed the Manchu Qing dynasty to re-conquer the area and they renamed it Xingjian or 'new territory'.

When the nationalist Republic took over from the Qing, the East Turkestan Uighur revolted and twice established their own rule until the Soviets stepped in militarily and curtailed their independence which led to Chinese communist domination.

The Uighur are a cultured people who have influenced those around them including the Chinese in such areas as medicine, art, music, architecture and even printing, however their society suffered under the Manchu and communist regimes until today and much has been lost.

The current situation of the Uighur is extremely repressive including exe-
cutions and severe limitations commercially as well as interference with their Islamic obligations.

Kazakh - 1,250,458- turkic

*Ili Kazak Autonomous Prefecture, Mori Kazak Autonomous County, Barkol Kazak Autonomous County in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, Haixi Mongolian, Tibetan and Kazak Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province, Aksay Kazak Autonomous County in Gansu Province.*

The Kazakhs of China were not much different from their Turkic, Altaic compatriots in Kazakhstan until rebellion under the Qing repression and the coming of communism in the second half of the twentieth century. Being Muslim and mostly nomadic herdsmen the communist commune system had a destructive impact on their traditional ways and authority as well as the difficulties of being a border nation between the Russians and Chinese. They retain the Islamic and nomadic traditions of hospitality to friend and stranger alike and are naturally highly skilled in animal husbandry with the horse playing a large part in their culture. The Kazakh generally are divided into three main groups, often called hordes, although their word is 'Juz' which sounds like the Arabic for part or section; the Great, the Middle and the Small hordes. In China they are mostly from the Great and Middle groupings. There are also Kazakhs outside of these three groups such as the Tore, descendants of Genghis Khan, Qoja/Khoja descended from Arabs, Tolengit from Oirat captives.
Dongxiang (Sarta) - 513,800 - mongol

They are probably descendents of Genghis Khan's army but may be a mixture of Han and Tibetans also. Their Islam dates back to the 13th Century. Their other name, Sarta, refers to the name given to Arab traders in Central Asia, which might point to other connections. They were also known as Dongxiang Hui before communism. Under amnesty from the Ming they settled in the Dongxiang region and the end of the fourteenth century. They rebelled many times under oppression over the centuries. They are arable farmers, craftsmen and traditional carpet weavers. They have a rich oral tradition but are uneducated in the modern sense.

Kirgiz (Khalkas) - 160,823 - turkic

The Kirgiz expanded after defeating the Uighur Kaganate in 840 and then spread to the Tian Shan mountain range where they ruled for around 200 years. The Mongol invasion curtailed their power and area during the 12th century and they retreated to the Altai Range.
and the Sayan Mountains. With the establishment of the Mongol Empire they migrated south. In 1207 Genghis Khan's oldest son Jochi occupied Kirgizstan without resistance and so they remained until the late 14th century.

The Chinese Kirgiz have been part of China since the seventh century. Although mainly nomadic, sedentary culture goes back centuries with marked signs of sophistication. Although mainly Muslim there are some Buddhists among them.

**Salar (Salas) - 104,503 - turkic**

*Xunhua Sala Aut. County & Qinghai Province*

The prevalent view is that they came from Samarkand fleeing persecution during the Yuan dynasty and they joined the invading Mongols in their eastward mobilisation. They lost around 40% of their population when they fought the oppressive Manchu regime. The Salars are mainly farmers of crops such as wheat, Tibetan barley, buckwheat and potatoes. They engage in stock breeding, lumber, salt-production and wool-weaving. Originally Oghuz Turkic linguistically and closest to the Turkish language they now are also influenced by either Chinese/Tibetan or Uighur/Kazakh

**Tadjik - 41,028 - turkic**

*Taxkorgan Tajik Autonomous County in Xinjiang. Taxkorgan, southern Xinjiang, living alongside Uighur, Kirgiz, Xibe and Han*

They are farmers and herders who live in the Pamir mountains in west Xingjian and Shi’a by religion.
Uzbek - 14,502 - turkic

_Urumchi, Kashgar, Yining & Tacheng in Xinjian Uighur Autonomous Region_

The Uzbek had been traders along the silk route from Samarkand and Bukhara for centuries. They began to settle into areas of Xinjiang during the Mongol period. They have close connection to the Uighur and Kazakhs including intermarriage.

Baoan (Bonan) - 12,212 - mongol

_Gansu, Linxia county_

The Bonan are descendants of Mongolian soldiers who came to the Qinghai region with the Mongolian advance during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. With the takeover of the Ming the Mongols left but some remained and after time became known as the Bonan or Baoan. They have been skilled in handicrafts for over a hundred years and most are expert in knife forging using brass, copper and ox bone. Their women are skilled in paper-cutting and flower pattern engraving on furniture, pots and knives.
Tatar - 4,873 -- turkic

*Xinjiang province, Yining & Tacheng*

They have been in China since the Tang Dynasty and are closely associated with the Uighur and Kazakhs. The Tatar are the fourth smallest of China's 56 officially recognized minorities and the least populace among the Muslims. The name Tatar appears to have originated during the Mongol Empire of the thirteenth century. As the Mongol hordes made their way across Asia, the terrified Europeans called them "The People from Hell." The Latin word for hell is Tatarus. The Tatar were known in China in the eighth century as Dadan. In the ensuing centuries after the collapse of the Mongol Empire, it seems to have been a favourable practice for various tribes to call themselves Tatar.
Provinces of China

Provinces are the first level of administrative division in the ‘People’s Republic’ and are twenty-two in number, not including Taiwan. Every province has a Communist Party provincial committee, headed by a committee secretary who is first-in-charge of the province, rather than the governor of the provincial government.

Autonomous Prefectures

Prefectures in China refer to unrelated political divisions in both ancient and modern China. In a modern context it refers to a level of division between the province and county levels. The prefecture level is the second level in the administrative hierarchy of the Republic. There are four kinds of prefecture-level divisions: prefectures, prefecture-level cities, autonomous prefectures, and leagues.

Autonomous regions

An Autonomous region is a first-level administrative subdivision of People’s Republic of China. Like Chinese provinces, an autonomous region has its own local government, but an autonomous region theoretically has more legislative rights. In practice, they only have the right to appoint the governor (from the local minority). In all Chinese autonomous regions the Party Secretary, who is the real power, is Han Chinese. An Autonomous Region is a minority entity which has a higher population of a particular minority ethnic group.

Autonomous Counties

There are several Muslim Autonomous counties within the Chinese Provinces and Autonomous Regions with significant numbers in Gansu, Qinghai, Ningxia and Xinjiang.

Other than these there are three ‘Autonomous Banners’ in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.
There are two Muslim autonomous regions in China: the Uighur in Xinjiang, the Hui in Ningxia. The other provinces with significant Muslim populations are listed below.

- **Ningxia** - most populous Hui region
- **Xinjiang** - Most Muslims groups but mainly Uighur
- **Gansu** - Linxia City - important to Muslims & Tariqahs, ‘Little Makkah’.
- **Hebei** - 95% Han with 500,000 Hui
- **Qinghai** - 50% Han, 20% Tibetan, 16% Hui plus Salar & Mongol
- **Yunnan**
- **Guizhou**

Administrative Divisions of the People’s Republic of China (PRC)
Four Ancient Mosques of China

Huaisheng - Guanzhou (Canton) - Tang dynasty
Qingjing - Quanzhou - (Masjid al-Ashab) Northern Song dynasty
Xianhe - Yangzhou - Southern Song dynasty
Fenghuang - Hangzhou - Yuan Dynasty

Linxia city in Linxia Autonomous Region in Gansu province - 'Little Mak-kah' important city for Muslims & Tariqahs. Fought against Qing oppression.
Conclusion

♦ It is clear that there is a long history of Islam in China that has had a significant impact on Chinese people and culture.

♦ The Sahaba have been there, and not only Sa’d ibn Abi Waqqas.

♦ Islam has been established at various times and in different places.

♦ Muslims have fought and died for their Deen with success and defeat.

♦ The Chinese have reacted favourably and otherwise to interaction with the Muslims.

♦ The Hui are the largest and most enigmatic of the Muslim peoples as their Islam seems to be different from the more ethnically based communities whom I expect to be more recognisable.

♦ It is expected that Islam in China is not dissimilar to other parts of the world although at the same time being unique and as such has suffered incursion from versions of Islam as well as erosion by modern philosophies and ways of life that have a pernicious effect on culture-permeated religion.

♦ In terms of a starting point to take what Allah has brought us through sayyidina Shaykh Abdalqadir as-Sufi to China it is difficult to pinpoint where to begin with certainty. Certainly there is great barakah at the grave of sayyidina Sa’d and based upon a brief encounter as we were taking our leave of his maqam, I feel there are great men around and one only need to visit this blessed place to meet them. However there seems to be no body of Muslims there on evidence at the Jumu’ah which was mostly populated by foreign Muslims and at the Huaisheng mosque, but I could be wrong based upon the short time we were there.
There is a case for beginning at Beijing as the capital and a place where all will gravitate to. From there direction and information could be found concerning significant Muslim communities within the country. It is also a more northerly starting point and closer to the main body of Muslim regions.

It is a huge land mass and it is probable that a lot of travelling will be involved. There has been extensive internal migration to the massive urban centres around the country which may have a demographic impact upon existing metropolitan Muslim communities.

The Mandarin language will be necessary for serious investigation and settlement there, either by acquisition or the inclusion of members already fluent in its usage, indeed I would suggest that learning should begin immediately along with whatever programme is instigated. Arabic will be helpful with the established communities there.
In May 2008 amir Imraan Chand and I went to Guangzhou not far from Hong Kong to visit the tomb of sayyidina Sa’d ibn Abi Waqqas, one of the first Muslims; the first to shed blood and to shoot an arrow in Islam. He was one of the ten blessed Sahaba guaranteed the Garden by the Rasulullah, ﷺ.

We were amazed when we finally found the tomb whose directions we couldn’t believe. Behind skyscrapers, huge exhibition centres, over ten lane highways we finally turned a corner to be met by a iron gateway. Beyond this gateway was a wonderful pine-wooded, extensive garden/park with a two metre wide pathway of granite kerbstones as found in London but on their sides creating a majestic hundred metre walk to a gate announcing that we had arrived at our destination.

We entered into a courtyard with a small pagoda-like gazebo in its centre with some stools and a table. On the four sides of the yard, straight ahead was the open prayer area where the Jumu’ah takes place and a small shop-like area, also open, with a couple of ladies sitting there. To our left was the wudu area and to our right another pathway to the rawdah of the sahabi, as pictured here.

We entered the small room where his tomb is situated, greeted and made our dhikr and du’aa.

We left intending to return for Fajr the next day, but when we did we discovered that the park gate is only open during daylight hours so we
returned again later that morning.

Over the next few days we recited ‘Ya Sin’, the ‘Wird’, the Friday ‘Dala’il Khayrat’, ‘Nachnu Fee’ and more and made all the du’a we could think of for all we could remember and those we couldn’t. We attended the Jumu’ah in the pouring rain along with an overflowing jama’ah from all over the world.

When we returned on the first morning we were called by a group to the gazebo in the courtyard and told to eat from a freshly-cooked sheep carcass. We had just eaten breakfast but we ate and I was reminded of all those visits to the awliya in the Maghrib and how we were always welcomed by someone with food. We could not help feeling this was for our benefit and a princely welcome from our blessed host, honouring us as people of Shaykh Abdalqadir as-Sufi.

There are two tombs of ibn Abi Waqqas, one in Madinah also, of which some like to argue that that is were he is truly buried. Once here it doesn’t matter, because it is one of the greatest presences I have felt and I have visited many great awliya over the years and I am sure if I visit his tomb in Madinah it will be just the same.

We did not make any significant connections during this visit until the encounter I mentioned earlier. We were leaving the tomb for the last time along the granite pathway when we met, coming the other way, an old man dressed all in white—not a robe, but a white suite- with long white hair and beard followed by three women of varying ages. We greeted and our hearts met and he asked us—I am not sure whether in English or by sign, I can’t remember—which direction we were going. We pointed to the exit to indicate we were leaving. Soon after I regretted that we did not change our direction and go with him back to the tomb, Allah knows best.

More than anything I thank Allah for being included among the people of Shaykh Abdalqadir as-Sufi, may Allah allow us to honour this honour as it
is due.

We ask Allah to bless our Master Muhammad and grant him the honours that are unique to him and we hope for his intercession when it is needed. We ask continuing blessings on his family and all of his companions without exception.

We ask You to bless our master Shaykh Abdalqadir as-Sufi with long life, good health and all that he needs to continue to rise in Your pleasure and satisfaction. Realise his highest niyyah and bring him to the highest assembly for ever.

We ask Allah to forgive us for any presumptions and inaccuracies we have made in writing this report and protect us from the consequences of our mistakes. We recognise Your power over us and rely on You in our affair. Forgive us and return us to You clean, pleasing and well pleased.