**ISLAM IN BEIJING**
A *foreign* presence
in the cultural heart of China

*Transcript of slide presentation delivered at the Sydney Myer Asia Centre, November 13, 2006*

(If you would like to see the slides shown in the presentation, please email Anthony Garnaut at anthony.garnaut@anu.edu.au.)

Thanks everyone for coming tonight. This is a bigger audience than I had expected, which is good to see. I'm not sure if I should be thanking the organisers of the Soul of Islam lecture series for generating such interest in Islam amongst the Melbourne public, or whether thanks are due The Australian newspaper for the special promotional campaign on Islam that they have been running over the last few weeks. I will thank the organisers, particularly Brynna Rafferty-Brown of the ever-reasonable Islamic Council of Victoria, as well as Paul Davis of Asialink, and Hillary Smith of the Asia Education Foundation.

This is the first time I have spoken in a real lecture theatre, and I'm not quite used to so many pairs of eyes looking at me. But don't worry, I've come prepared. I went into the city this morning and bought one of those little laser pens, this little black thing that cost me six dollars and fires out a little red laser dot. With this red dot I hope to shift your focus from me, up to that slide screen behind me.

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[Fig. 1 Muslim Noodle King]

Now, what we have here is a picture of a noodle stall, taken in Beijing in the 1930s. People in Beijing today often get nostalgic about Old Beijing. What they really mean by Old Beijing is Beijing in the 1930s, after the last emperor had abdicated and the streets of the inner city had been opened up to the public, but before the Japanese invaded and the Communists started getting rid of everything that didn't look modern.

Muslims were particularly conspicuous on the streets of Old Beijing, running food stalls like this one, peddling sweets, selling meat, or transporting all kinds of goods around the city. You mightn't be able to pick this stall as a Muslim stall, but there are a couple of clues that might give the game away, such as the ornate metalwork you can see on his cooking gear, and that his nose is a touch longer than your average Beijing nose.

Or the fact that he has a sign disguised in Chinese characters advertising Muslim Noodles. The four characters on the bottom right say 'Stall of the Muslim Noodle King,' and the four characters on the bottom left say 'Stall of the Halal King.'

How many people here have been to Beijing? Can I see some hands? And did any of you eat noodle soup?

Muslim street stalls were a common sight in Old Beijing, and there are lots of Muslim restaurants in Beijing today. It's hard to walk more than a few city blocks without spotting their signs, painted on a give-away green background, often advertising noodles as their flagship dish. Beijing residents consider Muslim food to be one of the authentic styles of local Beijing cuisine, and the emergence of noodles as a popular restaurant food had a lot to do with Muslim chefs such as this man.

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[Fig. 2 Map of China]

I'll start with a map of China. Muslim noodles are one of the most common street foods in cities and towns all the way across the north of China, from Beijing out to the Chinese border with Kashmir in the far west.

Beijing is located towards the north-east of China, at the northern edge of the agricultural plain that stretches all the way down to Shanghai. Further south is where you will find the stereotypical Chinese countryside of rice paddies and fishing cormorants. These agricultural areas have always been the main source of wealth for the Chinese state.

North of Beijing are the grasslands of Mongolia, which has always been the main source of quality warriors.

Beijing is strategically located between the agricultural plains and the Mongolian grasslands, a good position for the emperor to keep an eye on tax revenues coming in from the south, while also making sure the Mongol tribes are behaving themselves. It so happens that the capitals of all the powerful dynasties that ruled China have been along this border between the agricultural plains and the grasslands, from Beijing down to Xi'an.

This has affected the culture of Chinese imperial capitals, which have always shown a synthesis of the cultures of the Han Chinese people to the south, and of the various peoples that lived to the north and west of the imperial centre.

Stretching west towards Central Asia is the Silk Road, which passes through the province of Xinjiang in the north-west corner of China. Most of the people here are Muslims who speak a dialect of Turkish. Closer to the centre of China is where most of the Chinese-speaking Muslims live, in the provinces of Gansu and Ningxia. You will also find Chinese-speaking Muslim communities living along the traditional trade-routes, such as between the west of China and Beijing, and from Beijing down along the Grand Canal to Shanghai.

Chinese is the only spoken language used in the traditional community of Muslims in Beijing. The current Chinese government considers Sinophone Muslims to form a distinct ethnic group, separate from the Turkish-speaking Muslims of the far west of China.

I think it makes sense to think of Muslims as one group in a long line of peoples that have brought religious and cultural traditions into China from the West. This is the story of the Silk Road.

For much of the first thousand years of the Common Era, Buddhist traders and teachers came into China from what is now Afghanistan and Xinjiang. Buddhism had a profound influence on Chinese culture, not only in relation to religion, but also in literature and in ways of organising urban society.

For the second millennium of the Common Era, the main religion of the Silk Road was Islam, and in this context it is not surprising that Islamic traditions have left their mark on Chinese culture. The position of Islam as the main religious and cultural tradition linking China with the outside world was only displaced in the 19th century by a new group of Westerners who arrived in the ports along the east coast of China from the Christian states of Europe.

The title of this lecture series is the Soul of Islam. The problem with searching for the soul of Islam in Beijing is that you often come up against the soul of China. I'm not really sure what happens when one soul clashes with another.

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[Fig. 3 Bowl of lamb noodles, with a piece of deep-fried bread]

In Beijing, one of the results of this clash of civilisations is noodle soup.

This is a typical bowl of Muslim noodles. I'll use this bowl of noodles to talk about the place of Muslims within the urban culture of Beijing.

The essential ingredients of Muslim noodles are the hand-made noodles, shown here sitting in a beef broth, and the three slices of mutton placed on top of the noodles. This bowl has the optional extra of a slice of deep-fried bread, which is a Muslim festival food.

Muslims in China, as in Central Asia, tend to be a bit suspicious of green vegetables. A truly authentic bowl of Muslim noodles would not have the speck of green vegetables you can see here, which is just a concession to the taste of the modern, vitamin-conscious consumer.

I'll start by talking about the noodles.

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[Fig. 4 Xinjiang's Li Enhai, Guiness record holder for noodles]

The man with the shaved head in the first slide called himself the Muslim Noodle King. This is another self-styled noodle king called Li Xianhai, a Chinese-speaker from Xinjiang province. He holds several Guiness world records for hand-made noodles, and we can see him holding one of his many framed certificates. This photo gives you an idea of how hand-made noodles are made, by stretching a ball of dough,

and then folding it and stretching it again until you have one long noodle. This man's claim to fame is being able to turn a kilo of dough in under two minutes into a very thin noodle two thousand kilometres long.

It is commonly thought that pasta was introduced to Italy by Marco Polo, who had brought it back with him from his adventures in China. Now, I'm not sure that this is strictly true. Marco Polo went on two long journeys. On the first journey, he set out from Constantinople and made it as far as Central Asia, where he stayed for a number of years. It was only on his second trip that he made it to Beijing, after an extended stay in Persia and Central Asia.

Pasta had been popular in Central Asia for several centuries before Marco Polo arrived. If it was Marco Polo who introduced pasta to Italy, it is more likely that he brought it back with him from Central Asia after his first journey, rather than from China after his second journey.

Unfortunately, there's no solid historical evidence to say whether noodles were invented in China or Central Asia, or even Persia. My personal opinion is that they were probably invented in all three, the product of a long process of exchange in foods and cooking techniques that took place along the Silk Road. We do know that the practice of cultivating wheat was introduced into China along the Silk Road. We also know that noodles made from wheat have never been popular in south China, and have only become an everyday food in north China in recent times. It is even possible that Marco Polo, rather than bringing noodles from China to Italy, helped in introducing noodles into China from Central Asia.

I'll move now to the second ingredient of noodle soup, the slices of mutton that were placed on top of the noodles.

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[Fig. 5 Muslim butchering a sheep]

This is a picture of a Chinese Muslim butchering a sheep.

It so happens that almost all of the mutton and beef consumed in Beijing is killed by halal butchers. The biggest abattoir in Beijing is halal, and was built a few years by a German investor in a township on the eastern outskirts of Beijing. A fifth of the population of this township are Muslims, and almost all of the adult Muslims there are employed in the meat trade, working at the abattoir or selling livestock or delivering meat by minivan into the markets and restaurants of Beijing.

There are a number of reasons that Muslims figure so prominently in the mutton and beef trade. Firstly, Muslims have always played the role of traders between the different ethnic regions of China, particularly between the Han Chinese towns and the Mongol grasslands were sheep are grown. Another reason is that Muslims generally consider butchering to be a respectable Muslim. Being able to kill an animal cleanly is a highly regarded skill in Muslim communities, which is not the case in Han Chinese communities, where the butcher by taking the life of an animal earns nothing but bad karma.

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[Fig. 6  Frying oily flat things]

The deep-fried bread that we saw earlier is a Muslim festival food, made only on religious occasions such as Eud, or for weddings and funerals.

This is the kitchen of a Muslim religious centre, where men and women are preparing for a memorial ceremony convened in honour of a deceased religious leader. They are expecting ten thousand people to arrive the next day, each of whom is to be given a piece of fried bread, and so the they have been busy with hot oil for a couple of days.

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[Fig. 7  Room full of oily flat things]

This is the pile they've made so far.

Deep-fried foods are not a traditional Chinese food, and were generally introduced to Beijing from the west of China. Deep fried breads are commonly sold for breakfast on the streets of Beijing, to be eaten with porridge or boiled eggs. Muslims are generally acknowledged as the authentic custodians of the tradition of making deep-fried bread. Despite this, I have never seen a Muslim selling these on the street. This is because this type of deep fried bread is considered a sacred food, and it is considered improper to sell objects of significance for a profit.

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[Fig. 8  Bowl of noodles, again]

Beijing residents take pride in hand-made noodles as one of the city's finest and most authentic culinary traditions. They also count Muslims as authentic custodians of the tradition of making noodles. There is no perceived conflict between the Muslim origin of the noodles and its status as an authentic Beijing dish.

This touches on the main point of my talk, that the culture of Beijing demonstrates a powerful synthesis of the cultures of many different regions of China. The last emperors of China were Manchus from the far north-east; the biggest religious complex in the city was and still is run by Tibetans from the far south-west of China; the Beijing dialect incorporates a lot of loan words from Mongolian and Manchu; and much of the street food sold in Beijing is of Muslim origin.

The fact that something has a non-local origin does not stop it from being seen as an essential part of Beijing's culture. Further, the ability of Beijing to incorporate non-local influences is generally seen as one of the sources of the strength and vibrancy of its culture. To my understanding, the ability to incorporate foreign traditions into an urban culture is the defining feature of the cosmopolitan city.

There is one more element of this bowl of noodles that I would like to talk about, and that is the bowl itself. The bowl shown here is a rather uninspiring example of Chinese blue and white ceramics, probably made at a big factory in southern China.

The tradition of blue and white ceramics is synonymous with China itself, and it is because of its blue and white ceramics industry that our grandmothers referred to their best crockery simply as ‘the china’. And as you may have guessed from the theme of this talk, Muslims played an important role in the development of this Chinese tradition.

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[Fig. 9  Blue and white plate, from the Topkapi Museum, Istanbul]

This is a prettier example. Blue and white ceramics were produced in the south of China from around the time of Marco Polo's visit, late in the 13th century. However, surprisingly few early examples of blue and white ceramics have been found within China's borders.

The reason for this is not simply that the best Chinese pieces were looted and sold to overseas collectors, as is the case with much of the best of Chinese art. Rather, the main reason is that the production of blue and white ceramics was initially an export industry. The best collections of early blue and white ceramics are now found in Istanbul and Tehran, having been preserved amongst the treasures of the Ottoman and Persian sultans and governors who commissioned ceramic pieces such as this one directly from China.

The mineral used for the blue glaze is cobalt. Cobalt was first imported to China by boat from Persia, where it long been used to decorate pottery.

Many of the designs painted on early blue and white ceramics were inspired by Islamic art. You can see that influence here in the arrangement of a flowering plant in a vine-like ‘arabesque’ pattern around the outer edge of the plate. The depiction of birds, flowers and fruit is common in Islamic art, and the melons and grapes shown here are not commonly portrayed in Chinese art.

Chinese paintings tend to be arranged as a scene, or a vista. We can see a bit of that happening here with the fern-like plant and the railing at the bottom, forming a bit of a frame for what could be construed as a garden scene. However, the overall composition of the painting in the middle of the dish is more like something you might see on a Persian carpet, where objects are distributed evenly across the space in a roughly symmetrical pattern.

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[Fig. 10  Blue and white and metalware]

Along with the blue colouring and decorative designs, many of the shapes of blue and white ceramics were inspired by Islamic metalware dishes, and we have an example of this here.

It was only after the export industry had been going for two centuries that Chinese blue and white ceramics became popular within China itself.

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[Fig. 11 Marco Polo]

To return to Marco Polo, this is an old painting of him on his second journey, the one where he made it to China. He is shown arriving at Hormuz, one of the big trading ports of the Persian Gulf. It's from here that he set out on the long overland leg of his journey to China. He no doubt bought provisions here for the overland trek, such as the camels and horses shown in the painting. The mini-elephant is probably the fanciful addition of the artist, perhaps inspired by the mention made in Marco Polo's book of elephants' teeth and other exotic items from India that were traded in the Hormuz market.

There's something shown in this picture that was even more important for the success of Marco Polo's journey than the camels, and that is language. He's shown here talking confidently to one of the residents of Hormuz, even making the Islamic salute by touching his chest, though the painter shows him incorrectly using his left hand when he should be using his right.

The language that is being used in the little dialogue that is portrayed here is Persian. Marco Polo claims that he learnt several foreign languages on his journey, and Persian was no doubt the most important of these. Persian served as the *lingua franca* in the Mongol Empire, which incorporated both China and Persia.

It appears from his book of travels that Marco Polo knew very little of the Chinese language, despite spending seventeen years in China. He mentions several written scripts at different occasions but never mentions Chinese characters, and the words he uses to describe the sights he saw in China suggest that he had these sights explained to him by his travelling companions in Persian, rather than Chinese.

When Marco Polo arrived in Beijing, it had just been established by the Mongols as a capital city. Marco Polo was one of the many foreigners who were given a privileged reception there. He lived the life of an expat, and spent most of his time conversing with other foreigners in the language that had the greatest international currency at the time, which was Persian. Like a true expat, he reported excitedly that the foreign community in Beijing was serviced by over twenty thousand prostitutes.

Persian was used as the language of international diplomacy in China under Mongol rule, and this continued even after the Mongol rulers were replaced by a native Chinese dynasty. When the Portuguese first arrived off the east coast of China in the sixteenth century, Persian was again the language that this new group of foreigners used to communicate with the Chinese court.

The influence of Muslims on the development of Beijing's culture was much greater than their numbers or their visible presence would suggest. Leaving aside their international connections, Chinese-speaking Muslims were, until the 20th century, the only group of people who had established communities in all the ethnic regions of the old Chinese empire. In these regions, the predominant cultures were Mongolian, Tibetan, Central Asian Turkish and Han Chinese. The culture of Beijing, the old imperial capital, was a synthesis of these different cultures. Muslims were familiar with the many peoples of the empire, and played a central role in creating a new, cosmopolitan culture in the streets of Beijing that catered to the needs of people from the four corners of the empire.

So what does all this say about Islam in Beijing? I don't know that I've answered that question directly. My intention has been mainly to give a sense of the place of Muslims within the mainstream Chinese culture of Beijing.

This is the end of the narrative of my talk. I'll spend a few more minutes to show pictures of Muslims and Muslim buildings taken in and around Beijing.

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[Fig. 12 Camels and Muslim cameleers]

I had to include some camels because they're such photogenic animals. This is a postcard printed in Beijing, probably in the 1930s, showing camels and cameleers outside the south gate of the city. You can pick the cameleers as Muslims by their white hats. In China, as everywhere including Australia, cameleering was predominantly a Muslim trade.

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[Fig. 13 Camel train outside the Beijing city wall]

If a photo existed of Marco Polo arriving in Beijing, it would probably look something like this. Camel trains could be seen on the outskirts of Beijing right up until the 1970s, bringing in commodities such as wool and coal from the west of Beijing to keep the city warm through the winter.

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[Fig. 14 Hui martial artists]

Long-distance trade was a dangerous business, and you had to be prepared to defend yourself from bandits. Chinese Muslims excelled at martial arts, and today are still well represented in the national martial arts championships. These two Muslim men are practising a drunken stick form.

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[Fig. 15 Forbidden city]

You have all probably seen a photo like this one, of the front gate of the Forbidden City, the classic expression of imperial Chinese architecture.

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[Fig. 16  A mosque in Tianjin]

The old Chinese mosques were built in the same architectural style, both in the shape of the buildings and in the way they were decorated.

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[Fig. 17  Inside of the Niujie mosque]

This is the inside of the oldest mosque in Beijing, which was first built on its current site a thousand years ago. It has been rebuilt many times since. The placards of Arabic calligraphy hanging off the roof beams are the only obvious feature that distinguishes this building from a Chinese temple, at least for people that aren't familiar with mosques elsewhere. There are other features that this mosque has in common with mosques outside of China, such as having a large, carpeted floor covered by a low, flat ceiling, and an ornate prayer niche at the front.

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[Fig. 18  Inside one of the palaces of the Forbidden City]

This is the ceiling of one of the palaces in the Forbidden City. I'd particularly like you to look at the pattern of the ceiling, which is similar to that of the mosque just shown. The basic pattern is of circles within squares. Here in the Forbidden City, a dragon is painted at the centre of each circle. The dragon symbolises imperial authority.

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[Fig. 19  Ceiling of the Niujie mosque]

This is the ceiling of the old Beijing mosque shown just now. It has the same basic pattern of circles within squares, and uses the same colours. The difference here is that Arabic calligraphy is at the centre of the circles, rather than dragons.

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[Fig. 20  Ceiling of the Niujie mosque, close up]

This is a close-up of one of the ceiling panels. It says 'Allah', written in one of the conventional styles of Arabic calligraphy.

The relationship between Chinese and Arabic calligraphy is an interesting topic that few people have explored in any depth.

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[Fig. 21  Arabic calligraphy ‘Ya Mustafa’; Chinese calligraphy ‘Tiger’]

Here is an example of a Chinese style of writing Arabic calligraphy. The writing in the centre of the left-hand photo says 'Ya Mustafa', meaning 'O Mustafa'. Mustafa is one of the titles of the Prophet Muhammad. The calligraphy is written in a square, starting down the bottom, then going up the middle, and back down the right-hand side. This style of Arabic calligraphy is inspired by Chinese grass-script calligraphy. The small picture on the right is an example of grass-script calligraphy, a rendition of a single Chinese character meaning 'tiger'.

If we go back to the left-hand photo, you can see little squares of Arabic calligraphy on either side of the Ya Mustafa. Chinese buildings often have poems written down either side of the front door. The Arabic here is a saying of the Prophet. Instead of being written in a straight line, it is written in squares down either side of the Ya Mustafa, imitating the form of characters in a Chinese doorway.

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[Fig. 22  Three Chinese akhunds]

And finally, this is a photo of three Chinese imams, representing both the old generation of imams who were educated before the Communists came to power, and the younger generation educated in the 1980s after government policies restricting religious activities were relaxed in most parts of China.
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[Fig. 23  Thanks]

A transcript of this talk will be available on the Asialink website.

You can find more pictures if you do a google search for ‘china Islamic heritage’.

And please feel free to email me.

I would love to try to answer any questions anyone might have, either about Islam in Beijing or more general questions.

Notes

Permission has not been obtained for illustrations used above, with the exception of photos for figs. 6, 7, 17, 19, 20, 21 and 22 by the author.

Photo in fig. 1 by Hedda Morrison, collection of Harvard College Library, viewable online at: via.Harvard.edu

Map of China by the CIA map, available at:
www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/china.gif

For the blue and white ceramics in Istanbul and Tehran see:
T. Misugi, *Chinese porcelain collections in the Near East: Topkapi and Ardebil* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 1981), and John Ayers (ed.) *Chinese ceramics in the Topkapi Saray Museum, Istanbul* (London: Sotheby's Publications, 1986)

Further blue and white illustrations taken from:
Ma Wenkuan (Institute of Archaeology, CASS), 'A study of Islamic elements in Ming porcelain', *China Art and Archaeology Digest* 10 (June 2000), 7-38\

The best historical study available in English on the Sinophone Muslim community is:
Jonathan N. Lipman, *Familiar strangers: a history of Muslims in Northwest China* (Seattle : University of Washington Press, c1997)

A journal issue devoted to China's Islamic heritage was published online early this year, and includes articles on calligraphy and architecture:
www.chinaheritagenewsletter.org/editorial.php?issue=005