

**An Islamic Intellectual Heritage In  
China  
Introducing Jin Tianzhu (1690-1756)  
and his *Qing Zhenshiyi***

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**Abstract**

This paper contains a brief account of the life and works of an eighteenth-century Chinese Muslim scholar by the name of Jin Tianzhu (1690-17576). Special discussion is devoted to the author's work known as *Qing Zhenshiyi* which means "Clarifying Misunderstandings about Islam." Completed in 1738 the book attempts to explain to both Muslims and non-Muslims in China the core teachings and practices of Islam by comparing them to the teachings of the other religions in China. The significance of the book lies in the fact that it was written at a time when Islam was widely misunderstood and Muslims became the hate target of some government officials. The author of this paper is about to complete his doctoral dissertation on this book, comprising of an edition and translation into English of the classical text as well as a commentary on it. The study would help to throw much light on the intellectual concern of Muslims in eighteenth-century China.

**Introduction**

It is well known that China was one of the greatest countries in history in terms of its achievements in civilization and culture. It had produced

great thinkers, and their thoughts had strongly influenced not only China but also its neighboring countries. Today, China is still playing a very important role in the world, especially in economic development.

However, the Islamic world does not know much about China, especially about the achievements of Chinese Muslims in general, and that of their scholars in particular. I thought it would be a good thing if I can help to introduce to the world the lives and works of some of the Muslim scholars in past Chinese history. I am presently engaged in a doctoral study of one of these Chinese Muslim scholars under the supervision of Emeritus Professor Osman Bakar. The scholar's name is Jin Tianzhu. I am interested in studying his work written in 1738 entitled *Qing Zhenshiyi* My English translation of this work with a commentary is now almost complete. In this paper, I would like to provide readers with a brief introductory account of the life and works of this little known man. I hope to publish later my above-mentioned translation and commentary. Those interested in the history of Islam in China may find this work of mine quite helpful.

### **Brief history of Islam in China**

As of today there are five major religions in China, namely, Taoism, Buddhism, Islam and Christian. As to whether Confucianism should be regarded as a religion or not, scholars are divided in their opinions. Some of them view it as a religion; others do not. The official Chinese position is that Confucianism is not a religion. Furthermore, according to the "official" view, Taoism is the only true indigenous religion; the others being foreign.

As for the entry of Islam into China, there is a book well known among the Chinese Muslims, namely, *Hui Hui Yuan Lai*, which means "the origin of Hui Hui." 'Hui' here means 'Muslims.' The book is about the historical origin of the Chinese Muslims in general.<sup>1</sup> According to this book, Islam first spread in China during the Tang dynasty. Other

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<sup>1</sup> This is one of the reasons why the Chinese people used to call Islam Hui Jiao. In China, however, this name is no longer in use. But in Taiwan and Southeast Asia, people still use it; they call Muslims Hui Jiaotu, meaning 'the followers of Islam.'

historical data showed that the Tang dynasty had opened its doors to the Islamic world. Islam and Tang China had established diplomatic relations. At the same time, there were a lot of Arab and Persian businessmen coming to China for trade. There was a big number of Muslims at that time in Chang An (today's Xi An), Guang Zhou, Quan Zhou and other cities of China.

In addition to that, it is well known that when the rebellion of An Shi happened (755-786), the King of Tang dynasty had requested some neighboring countries, including the Muslim Caliph of the time to help him crush down the rebellion. Afterward, some of these Muslim businessmen and soldiers preferred to stay in China. They were considered to be the spiritual ancestors of the Chinese Muslims. When the Song dynasty was established, it continued the Tang policy of opening China's doors to the world. As a result, more people from Islamic lands came to China. It is reported that starting from 968 till 1168, that is, within a matter of 200 years, the Islamic Caliphate had sent 49 diplomatic missions to China.<sup>2</sup> This did not include business contacts.

The Mongols were one of the most powerful rulers in Asia at the time of Song dynasty. They had grown in strength. When they consolidated their power, they started to conquer Islamic world. This forced many Muslim to flee to China. Some of them served in the Chinese army. Since some of these Muslims were knowledgeable and skillful, they were recruited to join the wars aimed at the unification of China. Subsequently, some of them reached high positions like, for example, Cheng Xiang (Prime minister). The Muslim population in the country grew large, and they could be found all over the Dynasty engaged in various professions. Later, the Yuan dynasty was replaced by the Ming. Some Muslims helped Zhu Yuanzhang to found and build his dynasty. As a result, many Muslims occupied high official positions in the government. During this period, a number of prominent Muslim scholars appeared on the Chinese intellectual scene, achieving a high level of understanding of Islam and leaving invaluable works to posterity.

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<sup>2</sup> Huaizhong, Yang. 1995. *Islam and Chinese Civilization*, Ningxia Publishing House.



However, after the Ming dynasty was replaced by the Manchu, the situation of Muslims in China worsened. Muslims no longer occupied any important position in the central government. On the contrary, Islam came to be increasingly misunderstood by the non-Muslims. Islamic books were forbidden to be published; conflicts happened more frequently between the Muslims and the Government; some provincial leaders urged the King to adopt the policy of demolishing mosques and forcing Muslims to give up Islam. It was during this turbulent and problematic Muslim period that Jin Tianzhu appeared in China.

### **Jin Tianzhu: his life and works**

Jin Tianzhu was born in Jiang Su Jiang Ning in 1690 and died in 1756. He has another name: Bei Gao; so people called him Bei Gao Xian Sheng, meaning Mr. Bei Gao. His family was aristocratic and well known. It was said that his forefather, Yibljain<sup>3</sup> was from Rumi.<sup>4</sup> A lecturer (Jiao Xi), Jin Tianzhu grew up in a well-educated and well-to-do family. He studied both Islamic and Confucian books from the time he was small. So, he had a wide knowledge of things.

In 1726, the fourth year of Yong Zheng, when he went to visit his father's grave in the capital of the Dynasty, Jin Tianzhu saw a public notice of an entrance examination. He applied to sit in the examination, and was accepted. Having passed it, he was appointed as a lecturer (Jiao Xi) at Si Yiguan (a translation centre) at the Hanlin Academy<sup>5</sup> where he worked for more than 20 years. In 1735, he took part in an imperial examination and passed. Two years later, in 1737, he was promoted to the post of the Director of the Translation Centre.

Regarding Jin Tianzhu's descendents, there are only two clues: one source mentions his two sons as being top students in a government

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<sup>3</sup> It is very possible that Yibljain here is Yiblaxin in Chinese, which is an adoption of Ibrahim in Arabic.

<sup>4</sup> It is located in Turkey.

<sup>5</sup> This means the Imperial Academy of the Dynasty

school, planning to sit for an examination and aspiring to be officials.<sup>6</sup> According to another source, there was a man named Jin Shihe, he was a modern educator, and he claimed that *Bei Gao* is his grandfather. As for the moment this is all that we know about the author's descendents.

### **Jin Tianzhu's work in the translation center**

Jin Tianzhu had described his work at the translation center of the Hanlin Academy of the Qing Dynasty in the following words: "I was the director of translators, while at the same time performing my job as a lecturer in the department of Hui Hui. My job is to explain the texts and words, and to present the customs of races and their etiquettes."<sup>7</sup>

### **Qing Zhenshiyi and its content**

The title of the book is pronounced as *Qing Zhen Shi Yi*. Literally, 'Qing' means 'clear and clean.' 'Zhen' means 'true or the truth;' when the two words are combined together, the resulting word conveys the same meaning as the word Islam.<sup>8</sup> 'Shi' means 'to explain and clear up;' 'Yi' means doubts, misgivings and misunderstandings. In the light of the meanings of the four different words, we can say that the title of the book means "*clarifying misunderstandings about Islam*".

The book contains questions and answers about Islam. It began with six prefaces and a review. The main part of the book includes the following topics: Introduction to Islam and some of the common misunderstandings about it; faith (Iman), God, prophet, calendar, fasting, zakat, funeral, dress, prayer, drinking and foods, looks and appearances, animal slaughtering, purification, offering sacrifices to

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<sup>6</sup> See our translation of *Qing Zhen Shi*, p. 140.

<sup>7</sup> Our translation, p. 157.

<sup>8</sup> In the history of Islam in China, Islam had been referred to as *Qing Zhen Jiao*. Till today, mosques are called *Qing Zhensi*; and today, all restaurants managed by Muslims are called *Qing Zhen Can Guan*, meaning 'Islamic restaurant;' Halal food is referred to as *Qing Zhen Shi Pin*.

gods, and leaving home for worshipping God. The book also contains a letter the author had written to a senior official requesting him to write a foreword to his book.

#### **When the book was first published**

The author completed this book in 1737, the second year of Qian long<sup>9</sup>. After he revised the book, he kept it in his safe for several years before publishing it. We do not know why he did that. We knew, however, that the first publication of the book was in 1745. According to Mr. Hai Zhengzhong, a copier of the book, it was published between 1745-1781, that is, between the tenth and the forty-sixth year of Qian long. However, Ms. Xuelian, a librarian of the Dalian Library, said it was published for the first time in the tenth year of Qian long. We have no clue till now about the original book. Based on information made available to me, the original copy of the book was said to be destroyed in a fire during a war in Nanjing. So far I have across three editions of the book. The one I am studying now for the purpose of edition, translation and commentary is the edition published in 1876, the second year of Guang Xu.

#### **Why the book was written**

The author had written the book in the form of a dialogue, in which a guest asks him questions about Islam and he answers each of them; there were also arguments between two. The author was aware that some Muslims did not know Islam well or had misunderstood its teachings. These ignorant Muslims thought that Islam is demanding too much on their life, imposing many restrictions on their actions. They also viewed Islam as a difficult religion to be practiced. As a result, some of them decided to give up Islam and join other religions. As a Muslim scholar, Jin Tianzhu realized that it was his responsibility to tell people what Islam is all about. This was one of the reasons why he had written the book.

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<sup>9</sup> Our translation, pp. 156-157.



There was another reason for his doing so. Although there were books written in the Chinese language by famous Muslim scholars before him, such as Wang Daiyu, Ma Junshi, Liu Sanjie, Ma Zhu, and Liu Zhi, their main targeted readership was the Muslims and their language style was too academic for the public. As a result, these books were not widely read. Our author saw that the great majority of the non-Muslims of his time knew very little about Islam. Furthermore, certain anti-Muslim officials had tried to falsely portray the Muslims as anti-state and to convince the Emperor of the need to order and force Muslims to give up their religion. They tried to justify their anti-Islamic stance as follows: "Muslims do not worship Tian and Di<sup>10</sup>; they do not follow the calendar of the dynasty; when they slaughter animals, they read some words... So, let them give up Islam and destroy their mosques."<sup>11</sup>

The third reason – I think – was what the senior official in the Hanlin Academy had said. This has to do with the fact that the situation at that time was not in favor of the Muslims. It was not the right time for anybody to do something good for the Muslims. In other words, the existing situation was not encouraging enough for him to write this kind of book. But words that Jin Tianzhu heard from the official's mouth might have encouraged him to write the book. In a speech he gave at the Academy, the official encouraged its members to educate people, restrain from selfish desire, turn back to conscience, and be fair in their actions and sayings. This is the real knowledge with which they should be concerned. It is beneficial for the common people to write on such kinds of topics.<sup>12</sup>

These are indeed strong words of encouragement, especially coming from an influential and powerful man in the country. Apparently inspired by the speech, Jin Tianzhu wrote the book, and completed it in just a month.

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<sup>10</sup> 'Tian' means Heaven; 'Di' means Earth. Many non-Muslim Chinese worshipped them.

<sup>11</sup> See: Qing Zhen Shi Yi Bu Ji, p. 265.

<sup>12</sup> Qing Zhen Shi Yi: p. 149.

The fourth reason has to do with the guest's plea to Jin Tianzhu in the course of their dialogue. I think this factor should not be ignored. When the dialogue ended between the author and his guest, the latter demanded the former to write it down, saying: "Today, I have spent the whole day talking with you, my dear Sir, in several thousands of words, and these words suddenly allow me to see light. Still there are a lot of people who do not understand the behaviors of Muslims. So why not you write our dialogue down, print it as a book so as to help those who feel uncertain about Islam and make unfair comments on it?"<sup>13</sup>

**Significance of the book:**

The book can be regarded as a very good contribution from the author. Its significance may be summarized as follows:

- It was written and completed at the right time, that is, when Islam was widely and deeply misunderstood and Muslims became the hate target of some government officials.
- It played a good role in terms of introducing Islam to the non-Muslims in China; it had been read by a lot of Muslims also. It is said that Jin Tianzhu became well-known because of the book.
- It is very possible that the King, Qian long, was influenced by this book. It was known that when he received reports on the Muslims from some of his officials suggesting that they be punished and he destroy mosques, the King made the opposite decision. According to a preface of the book written by Xu Wenyong, a copy of it was once presented to the King. If this is indeed true, then this is a clear evidence of what I have said regarding the book's possible influence on the King.
- If the older generations of Muslim scholars in China may be said to have started the study of comparative religion, then Jin Tianzhu can be regarded as the first scholar to have opened the door for dialogues between religions.

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<sup>13</sup> Translation of Qing Zhen Shi Yi, p. 137.



- Jin Tianzhu provides a good example to contemporary Muslims in China on how to behave toward the non-Muslims.
- Through this book, we are perhaps in a position to gauge the level of intellectual concern reached by the Chinese Muslims in the eighteenth century.

### **Conclusion**

I have provided in this brief paper the little information I have collected so far regarding the author and his book. As my research progresses, I am confident that I will be able to know more about him and this book. I hope that once my doctoral dissertation is completed I would be able to share more information with you about the eighteenth century Islam in China in general and about the life and thought of Jin Tianzhu in particular.

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