

# Islam in China Today

PETER HUMPHREY

It has never been clear exactly how religion has fared in Communist China. Western publications on the subject have always relied heavily on statements in Chinese newspapers and statements by returned visitors, and the best-known lengthy treatise on the subject was published at a time when Sino-Western relations were under strain and anti-Chinese biases were strong.<sup>1</sup> Although the new rapprochement may still not give the outside observer the chance to see the whole truth, it does allow the inside observer to glean at least part of it. This article seeks to transmit the visible part of the truth which the writer has gleaned of one of the great religions in China— Islam.

Political changes since 1976 have revived most of the policies of the early 1960s, and one might expect religious policy to follow suit. But it will be left for the reader to make the comparison, while the writer presents the facts of the current situation. We shall present it from three angles: the definition and statistics of Chinese Muslims; the position of the Chinese Islamic Association; and the grassroots situation in society.

## *Who are the Chinese Muslims?*

Past studies on Chinese Islam have abounded with discrepancies and errors over the definition and statistics of Chinese Muslims, partly due to biases and partly to the non-availability of reliable information. Some pre-1949 observers estimated about fifty million Muslims in China, while the government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) acknowledged only ten million.<sup>2</sup> A further possible factor in these discrepancies may arise from differing definitions of who the Muslims are, for there is a complicated ethnic-religious relationship.

The Chinese Islamic Association recently published a paper delivered at an international Islamic conference in Pakistan in which the current official statistics and a clarification of the Muslim ethnic situation are provided.<sup>3</sup> Chinese Muslims belong mainly to ten ethnic minority groups: Hui, Uighurs, Kazakhs, Kirgiz, Tadjiks, Tatars, Uzbeks, Dongxiang, Salas and

Pao-ans. The following table is compiled from the association's information, giving official estimates and main locations.

<i>Ethnic group</i>	<i>Estimated population</i>	<i>Location of concentration</i>
Hui	6.4 million plus	Widely scattered throughout China but thickly concentrated in certain localities in certain regions and cities. Large concentration in the Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region in Northwest China.
Uighurs	5.4 million plus	Uighur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang in Chinese Central Asia (Turkestan).
Kazakhs	ca. 800,000	Kazakh Autonomous Prefecture of Ili in Xinjiang Region.
Khirgiz	ca. 97,000	Parts of Xinjiang (see above).
Tadjiks	ca. 22,000	ditto.
Tatars	ca. 2,900	ditto.
Uzbeks	ca. 7,500	Scattered in Xinjiang (see above).
Dongxiang	ca. 190,000	Dongxiang Autonomous County, Gansu Province in Northwest China.
Salas	ca. 56,000	Sala Autonomous County of Xinhua and Hualong County, Qinghai Province, Northwest China.
Pao-ans	6,800	Pao-an Nationality Township, in Gansu Province, Northwest China.
TOTAL	ca. 13,000,000	(China's total population ca. 1 billion)

These official Chinese data are tentative at best and probably no less a guess-timate than foreign data. No really authoritative population censuses have ever been conducted in China. This year, however, sees the commencement of China's first-ever comprehensive census with the aid of foreign computers. The programme will last five years, so great is China's demographic problem, and will perhaps produce reliable data on religious and ethnic numbers.

There are also some ethnic (Han) Chinese who adhere to Islam, but no official estimates are available for these. The association claims it is too difficult to calculate the number because they are widely scattered over China. Richard Bush estimated a probable five million, but gave no sources or reasons for his figures.<sup>4</sup>

Traditionally these Muslim groups are Sunnites following the Hanafite rite in matters of Muslim law. There is also a small number of Shiites.

The Islamic Association provided additional miscellaneous statistics. There are seven million Muslims in Xinjiang Autonomous Region, constituting 50-60% of the local population, and 1,900 mosques. In Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region 40% of the population are Muslims. In Xian City,

Shaanxi Province, there are 50,000 Muslims and eight mosques. In Peking there are 160,000 Muslims and two mosques. The most important ceremonies at Peking's Dong Si Mosque bring over 1,000 worshippers, and ordinary ceremonies about 500-700. Many small mosques in Peking became factories and remain so today. No further statistics are given.

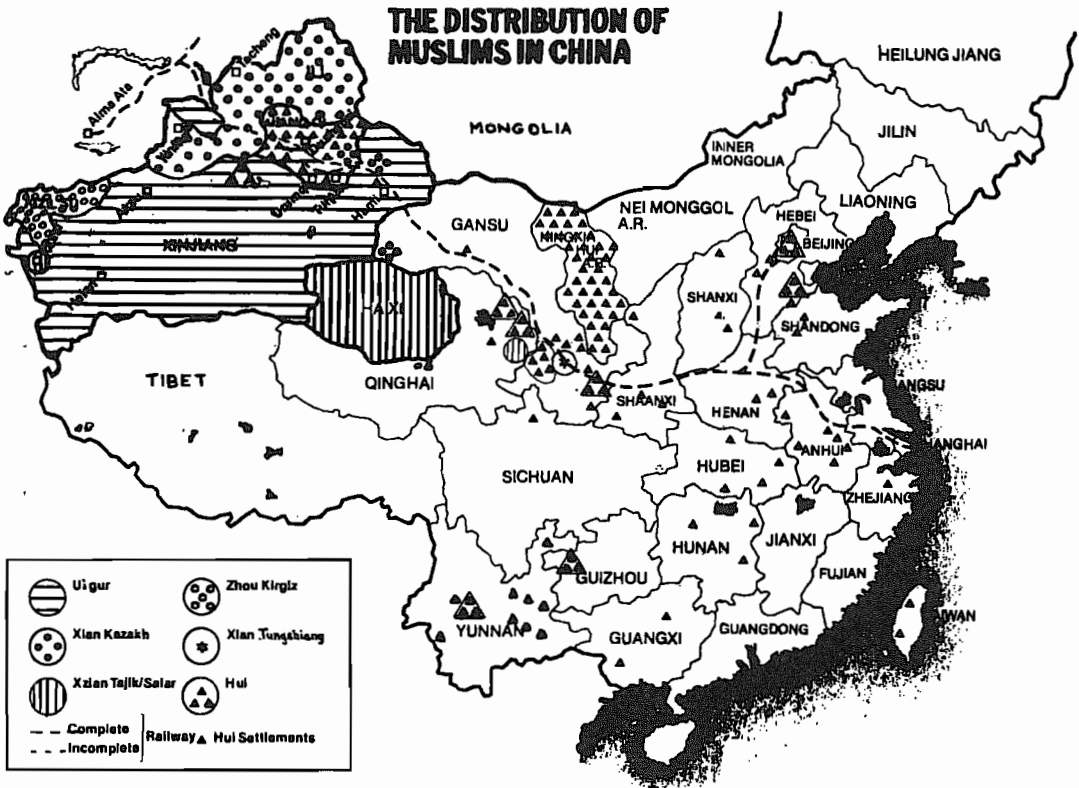
The Association also points out that these estimates may include some non-believers; not all members of Muslim families necessarily follow the religion in practice, although most do. But the Association insists that its statistics are more representative than all pre-1949 estimates or post-1949 western estimates. Their 1953 survey was the first "scientific survey" of Muslims in China. They claim that early estimates were often exaggerated by Chinese Muslims going abroad who deliberately boasted in order to win admiration. Thus compared with western estimates the official statistics remain modest, and the increase from ten million to thirteen million today is acknowledged as a mere reflection of general population increase.

The question of identity is complicated. A common misrepresentation among both Chinese and westerners is to refer to all China's Muslims as Hui (also Huimin or Huizu). But, as the table states, the Hui are only one of several Muslim groups, albeit the largest. The Hui descend from the West Asian Muslims who immigrated to China during the Tang (618-917), Song (960-1276), and Yuan (1276-1368) dynasties. They are classified by the Chinese authorities today not as a religious group but as an ethnic minority. The reasons for this are that they have a distinct historical development; a distinct psychological condition, minor linguistic characteristics and social customs differing from ethnic (Han) Chinese; and they are concentrated together in certain localities. All these factors give the Hui a distinct identity and fulfil the PRC criteria for classification as an ethnic minority.

### *The Chinese Islamic Association*

The writer was received in 1980 by the Association Secretaries Ma Yunfu and Ma Shanyi. They gave a brief introduction to the Association and then answered questions. The following section expresses their stand on Muslim issues, which has remained unchanged to this day.

The Association was established in 1952 and convened its first congress in 1953. The original leaders are still present, though some promotions have taken place. The Association is a "mass organization" which exists to help the government conduct its religious policy, to promote friendly relations with Islamic countries (including the organization of pilgrimages to Mecca and invitations to foreign Muslims to visit China), and to organize Islamic activities within China such as those of the Islamic Institute. All these activities were stopped by the advent of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. The Association was revived in 1977 and resumed its activities by 1979. It has also



re-established local Islamic Associations in many places, including Peking, Shanghai, and Ningxia. In April 1980 the revived body convened its Fourth Congress in Peking. The secretaries claimed that Association members were highly satisfied with the congress. It confirmed that the Islamic Institute is resuming its work and Islamic literature is resuming publication. It was decided that Peking's Ox Street Mosque be restored immediately and re-opened within three months. (It opened in August 1980.)

Present leaders of the Association are:

Honorary Chairman—Burhan Shahidi

Chairman—Zhang Jie (Hadji Mohammed Ali)

Vice-Chairmen—Bai Shouyi, Yemliha, Amujie Damaola, An Shiwei,

Ma Tengai, Shen Xiayi, Ma Songting, Liu Pinyi,

Yusaiyin Aji, Ma Jincheng, Zhang Bingduo, Ma Xian.

Secretary-General—Yang Runshen.

The Association, its local branches and the mosques continue to be financed at both local and national level by two sources: donations in the form of alms and wills, and domestic government assistance. The Association's buildings, for example, are financed by government aid.

The representatives interviewed refuted the assertion that the Association has no legitimated religious function. They claimed that certain religious leaders have considerable political power; for example, in Xinjiang, where at the local levels of government eighty per cent of functionaries are drawn from the Muslim ethnic groups. In Xinjiang, unlike in most other ethnic minority autonomous regions, the local minorities actually form the ethnic majority of the region.

Their relations with the National People's Congress (NPC) are "not extensive" but proposals can be put forward by the Association's representatives in the NPC. Though China is not a religious state, the government's religious policy is concluded through discussion with the religious associations. They abide by government policy, but if events occur which infringe the freedom of religious belief they do not hesitate to speak out.

The Association's present conception of freedom of religious belief is that of the freedom to believe either in religion or in atheism. The majority of Chinese are said to be atheistic. Freedom of belief includes the right to worship and to conduct other activities associated with it, such as pilgrimages, prayer and proselytization. "If this were not so, how could it be called freedom of belief?" They claim that the Constitution always did embrace these freedoms, both in its pre-Cultural Revolution and post-Cultural Revolution versions.<sup>5</sup>

There is also said to be freedom to propagate Islam among the young. The doctrine is taught in the mosque and in the home. The imams train their successors in the mosque schools. Religious scriptures are freely published and distributed. There are now courses in the history of Islam at Xibei University

in Xian and at Fudan University in Shanghai. These university courses are conducted with an "objective and scientific" approach.

The Association claims that the worst period for Chinese Islam was the Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976. Mosques were closed and worship was forbidden. The policy of freedom of religious belief was not implemented then, as it is now. During the Cultural Revolution only foreigners worshipped at Peking's Dong Si Mosque, whereas now the worshippers are all Chinese. The recent congress was a great success and is seen as marking the triumph of re-implementing the religious policy. The policy is not a new one; it is the original policy.

The Association also acknowledges that Islam suffered a fate less harsh than other religions during the Cultural Revolution. This is attributed to the ethnic character of Chinese Islam, which renders the religion more durable. The damage done was physical, not spiritual. For example, the rule of providing Muslim cuisine in factory canteens or a compensation allowance of 4 yuan per month to eat out was abolished during the Cultural Revolution, and Red Guards sometimes forced Muslims to eat pork. But the pork taboo is said to be an ethnic and not a religious custom,<sup>6</sup> and it is something physical. "It is harder to destroy people's belief; the harsher the oppression and persecution, the stronger the belief becomes."

The Association sees no contradiction between Islam and the modernization of China. "Mohammed said you can go forward, and patriotism is part of our belief." There are no changes in Islam as a consequence of modernization or communism. Religion is an "objective existence". It cannot be destroyed.

The Association officials claimed that China's Muslims support the present population control policy, which favours one-child families, since this policy, they said, meets China's practical needs. There is no clash over this issue between the authorities and the Muslims. In practice, however, it has been widely publicized that China's ethnic minorities frequently have traditionally large families and that the government for the time being tacitly accepts this in the name of respect for ethnic traditions, and possibly also because the ethnic minority regions are relatively underpopulated and border on enemy territory.

Religion may have a revolutionary content and Muslims may play a revolutionary role. For example, the Chinese Muslim army fought against the Japanese invasion. Afghanistan was also a revolutionary Muslim state before the Soviet invasion. "In Iran it is different: Khomeini has Khomeini's revolution."

The Association leaders expressed optimism on the future of their religion. Although Marxism insists that religion will eventually wither away, Ma Yunfu and Ma Shanyi expressed the view that religion is "indestructible". Belief cannot be erased. They point out that Marxism also postulates that all institutions will wither away, including the state. "As for the future

our greatest task is to train the young and raise up the new generation of Muslim successors.”

*The Real Situation—The Mosques and Society*

The definition of Chinese Muslims, the compilation of statistics, and the presentation of the Islamic Association's standpoint help to suggest the situation of Chinese Islam. But a more complete picture requires some evidence of the religion in practice and actual social attitudes towards it.

The foreign visitor to China is restricted in his itinerary, but certain cities open to foreigners do have practising mosques. The Great Mosque in Xian is the most interesting example. This mosque was closed for only one year during the Cultural Revolution, according to local worshippers.<sup>7</sup> It has been open since 1967. Local Muslims appear to fulfil their religious duties there with complete freedom, and the congregation includes both old and young adherents. In contradiction to the official statistics, Xian Muslims boast that China has around 100 million Muslims. True or not, this claim is indicative of a proud disposition and strong psychological condition. They also claim that Xian's Muslim community has expanded from 40,000 to 50,000 since 1966. Their holy buildings are well-maintained externally, and the older recently underwent thorough renovation. The interiors are more neglected, with decaying furnishings and decoration. The worshippers express great pride at being Muslims free to practise their religion.

A similar situation prevails in the mosque at Huhhot in Inner Mongolia. This mosque is also generally well-maintained and the older parts are undergoing restoration. The renovation work is being financed by the local Muslims themselves and not by the government. According to worshippers the mosque was closed during the Cultural Revolution and re-opened only last year. The Muslims here are much more reluctant to discuss their recent history, but are willing to discuss their religion separately from political issues. At the Sunday mid-day ceremony about 200 people participate, and during the whole day about 800-900 worshippers visit the mosque. The writer witnessed two Muslim funerals here, conducted swiftly and simply in Arabic. The crowd included scores of children dressed in white mourning robes. Following the ceremony a fierce row broke out between some ethnic Chinese and some Hui, suggestive of a certain degree of racial tension between the two.

Two mosques in Tianjin which the writer visited in 1981 have now been restored and are open for worship. There are 120,000 Muslims in Tianjin, concentrated mainly around the Great Mosque in the northwest corner of the old Chinese city and in the mosque in the suburb of Tianmucun. The Great Mosque, built in the very conventional temple style of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), with tiled roofs, red woodwork and coffered ceilings, is also the headquarters of the Tianjin Islamic Association. The central and local

governments provided 400,000 *yuan* (about £120,000) for its restoration. A local Muslim claimed that the mosque has several tens of priests (*akhuns*), the youngest of whom is 46. This seems a rather excessive number, but some of them may originate from other mosques, now closed. (There were fifteen functioning mosques in Tianjin in 1936.)

The situation at Tianmucun falls far behind this. The mosque, also dating from the Qing dynasty, was closed at the advent of the cultural revolution in 1966. The mosque and its surrounding land became a factory and storage depot. The local and central governments have jointly provided 100,000 *yuan* (about £30,000) for its renovation. The street committee deputy told me that there were seven *akhuns* in Tianmucun with an average age of fifty, the oldest being eighty years old.

In Peking's Dong Si Mosque I saw a thousand worshippers attending the most important ceremonies, young and old, all wearing Muslim caps. After Ox Street Mosque re-opened in 1980 some of the ten thousand Muslims who live in its vicinity but had been worshipping at the Dong Si Mosque returned to Ox Street for their prayers. But the overall total of Peking Muslims attending the two mosques has increased since the Islamic Congress and the local Muslims were extremely jubilant and proud at this development.

Yet there is evidence of restriction even so. A visit to a minuscule mosque in Xilinhot, Inner Mongolia, revealed a different story. Xilinhot opened to foreigners in 1979. It is a small town of mud-brick houses with very little attraction for the tourist but an overnight stay in a simulated Mongolian tent. Along one of its muddy lanes, the town hides its only mosque, also a shabby mud-brick building, totally unadorned. The inside walls are white-washed with two wooden pillars. The floors are covered with rough straw mats and a single strip of Koranic calligraphy occupies the centre of the wall. The *akhun* lives next door in a spartan dwelling with chickens scratching around his doorway. He is sixty years old, retired and lives on a pension of forty to fifty *yuan* per month. He is in poor health and constantly bronchitic, but he beams with friendship and benevolence. There are two thousand Hui Muslims in Xilinhot, he said. They were originally small pedlars. The mosque was established after the Liberation. During the 1950s the Muslims worshipped freely every day. "I even gave scripture classes to the children, and in those days the mosque was decorated, not just bare walls as today," he said. But in 1958 the "religious reform" forbade the participation of children. He added that from 1958 to 1966 about thirty to forty adults continued to worship daily, and on Fridays there were up to a hundred.

"But in 1966 the Cultural Revolution began, and the mosque was vandalized. It was occupied first by a school and later by a production brigade. Worship stopped completely except in the home."

He said he was away sick when this happened, euphemistically hinting he was in hiding. Although he suffered no bullying, he conceded that elsewhere *akhuns* were beaten. His own children, he said, were bullied in the street



“because your daddy is an *akhun*”. Some *akhuns* were paraded in the streets like common criminals and others were killed. The mosque re-opened in 1979 under the new religious amnesty. But even today, with this reconstituted freedom of belief, they are permitted to open for worship only once a week.

“Now the gathering has dwindled to a dozen or so old men. Children and youths don’t come. It seems they are pressured not to participate. And I am not permitted to teach the children. Even the ‘children’ of the mosque school days haven’t come back,” he said sadly.

In Spring 1982 in Canton, the writer found that the mosque there which is celebrated as being the oldest in China, is only open once weekly on Fridays. The rest of the time it is locked.

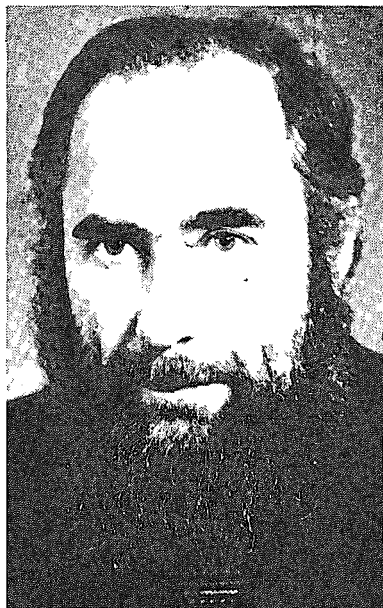
In Lanzhou, the provincial capital of Gansu, and in Xinjiang the writer found literally scores of what were once mosques now being used as factories, albeit dilapidated ones. Admittedly, one or two mosques were under restoration there with local Muslim contributions, and Muslim traders and dough makers were back in free enterprise on the streets in accordance with the relaxation of economic policies for the ethnic minorities.

Yet there have been serious ethnic disturbances involving Hans and Muslims over recent years which have clearly alarmed the authorities. In summer 1980 there were bloody battles in the Aksu and Ili regions of Xinjiang which continued through 1981. Since the area is a sensitive border zone with the Soviet Union, Peking had to take firm steps to rectify the situation. Last year the region was visited by the most senior leaders, Deng Xiaoping and Wang Zhen. And at the year’s end Wang Enmao was transferred to become the new provincial boss in Xinjiang because he had long years of experience in quelling the region after the communist takeover throughout the 1950s.

The social attitudes of Chinese to Muslims is still difficult to gauge. Most Chinese, when quizzed, claim to be atheist, but they express a non-hostile attitude to religion. Many youths do seem to be taking an active interest in finding out exactly what religion is. Special allowances and considerations for Muslims have been restored. There are numerous Muslim restaurants; factories and schools cater for the Muslim diet; festivals are observed.

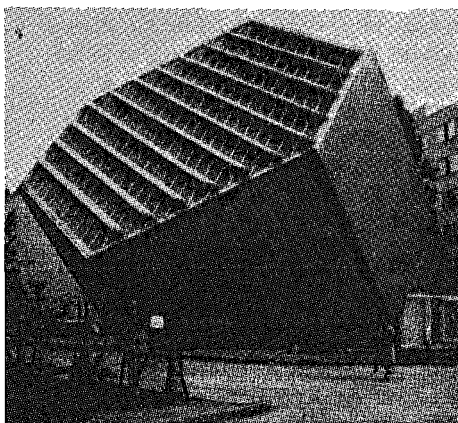
Although the Chinese Islamic Association claims that the policy of religious freedom has been “consistently pursued and will be pursued in the future”, and religion is “indestructible”, although they see protection in the law passed in 1979 providing penalties for officials who violate religious freedom, and although there is freedom in the mosques and social attitudes appear favourable, nonetheless re-affirmations of the Marxist view continue to appear. A review of the Chinese publication “The World’s Three Great Religions” in the *Peking Daily* epitomizes the latter standpoint:

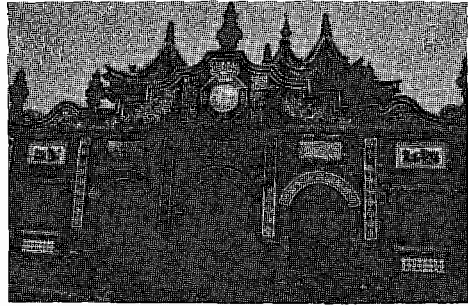
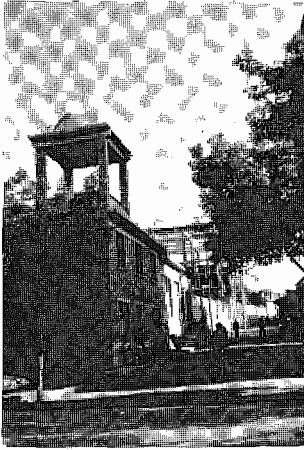
When you are propagandizing atheism and helping others to break the



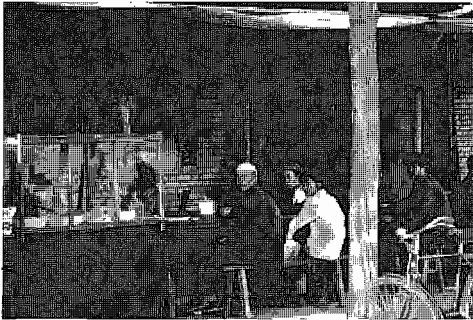
Moscow Jews Ilya Essas (*left*) and Iosif Begun (*right*) have both been detained at different times for teaching Hebrew unofficially. Professor Michael Zand, now in Israel, mentions unofficial Hebrew and religious study groups in an interview on Jewish life in the USSR and the aspirations of Soviet Jews: see p. 138. (*Both photographs courtesy of the Contemporary Jewish Library, London.*)

The nineteenth century Reformed Great Church in Debrecen (*below right*) is one of many imposing church buildings remaining in Hungary, as noted in the article *Protestantism in Hungary* (p. 124). In more modern style, a Reformed church resembling a tilted hexagon (*below left*) was built by an award-winning architect in the southern suburbs of Budapest.





Since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976, some mosques in China have been renovated and reopened for worship. In some cases the government has contributed to the cost of renovation, but believers themselves financed the cost of renovating the mosque (*above*) in Huihot, Inner Mongolia. The mosque in Lanzhou, capital of Gansu province (*left*) has also been restored, although many others here and in Xinjiang, northwestern China, are being used as factories.



The Muslim noodle stall (*left*) belongs to one of the Muslim dough makers and traders now allowed to operate in accordance with the new policies for ethnic minorities (see p. 176). *Below*, a Muslim storyteller in Urumqi, Xinjiang, performs to an interested crowd. See the article *Islam in China*, pp. 168-77. (Photographs courtesy of Peter Humphrey).



shackles of religion and superstition, do you ever feel that if you do not understand the essentials of religion and theology, you will be unable to put forward persuasive arguments? This shows that it is necessary to grasp some basic knowledge of religion . . . The book gives a scientific explanation from a dialectical-materialist and historical-materialist viewpoint . . . brings to light the historical laws governing the emergence, development and withering away of religion.<sup>8</sup>

So while spokesmen for the Islamic Association speak of the continuing freedom and indestructibility of religion, there are still counterviews in other sectors of society which postulate its eventual demise.

<sup>1</sup>Richard C. Bush Jr, *Religion in Communist China*, New York, 1970.

<sup>2</sup>Bush, p. 264.

<sup>3</sup>Haj Ilyas Shen Wiawi (Chinese Islamic Association), *General Conditions of Muslims in China*, Peking, March 1980.

<sup>4</sup>Bush, p. 265.

<sup>5</sup>Constitutions of the People's Republic of China were promulgated in 1954, 1975 and 1978. Article 46 of the 1978 Constitution read: "Citizens enjoy freedom to believe in religion and freedom not to believe in religion and to propagate atheism". This provision was amended and amplified in the draft Constitution of 1982 (not in force at the time of writing), Article 35 of which reads:

(1) Citizens of the People's Republic of China enjoy freedom of religious belief. (2) No organs of State, public organizations or individuals shall compel citizens to believe in religion or disbelieve in religion, nor shall they discriminate against citizens who believe, or do not believe, in religion. (3) The State protects legitimate religious activities. No-one may use religion to carry out counter-revolutionary activities or activities that disrupt public order, harm the health of citizens or obstruct the educational system of the State. (4) No religious affairs may be dominated by any one country.

<sup>6</sup>They did not mention the commonly circulated stories that imams were paraded through the streets with pig's heads suspended from their necks. Many Chinese give accounts of this.

<sup>7</sup>At another small mosque in Xian they claim not to have closed at all during the Cultural Revolution.

<sup>8</sup>*Peking Daily*, 28 April 1980.

### *RCL* subscription for 1983

The *RCL* subscription for 1983 is to be held at the 1982 rate —  
£15 per year for three issues

The overseas and members' rates (see inside front cover)  
will accordingly remain the same.