



# CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS VII. PERSIAN SETTLEMENTS IN SOUTHEASTERN CHINA DURING THE T'ANG, SUNG, AND YUAN DYNASTIES

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## CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS

### vii. Persian Settlements in Southeastern China during the T'ang, Sung, and Yuan Dynasties

The ports along the southeastern coast of China had a long history of trade with Persia before the coming of Islam (see i, above). In addition, there is considerable evidence for the settlement of early Muslims, including Persians, in China. In 130-31/748 the Chinese monk Jian Zhen, attempting to sail northeast from Yang-zhou (formerly Kiang-tu) to Japan, was blown by a typhoon to Zhen-zhou (modern Ai-cheng, Ya-cheng), on the southern coast of Hainan island in the Gulf of Tonkin, where he learned that "Feng Ruo-fang, the chief of Wan-an-zhou [the modern district of Ling-shui], seized two or three Persian merchant ships every year, taking the cargo for himself and making the crew his servants. They were kept in an area three days' journey going



from north to south and five days' journey going from east to west, where villages eventually developed" (Takakusu, pp. 461-62). It was through the Persians that the Chinese had first come to know of Arabia and the Arabs (Dashi < Pers. Tāzī, referring to Arabs of the tribe of Ṭaī; Pelliot, I, pp. 44-45 no. 26; cf. *ET*<sup>1</sup>, IV, pp. 598-99, s.v. Tād̲j̲īk), and, as Persia itself subsequently became part of the Muslim empire, Persians and Arabs are usually not differentiated in Chinese historical documents; sometimes they are designated simply as "foreign merchants" (*shang-hu*) or "guests" (*fan-ke*).

On the mainland Yang-zhou in the north and Canton (Guang-zhou) in the south were important trading cities under the T'ang dynasty (618-907). Both must have had large Arabic- and Persian-speaking populations, for it is reported in Chinese sources that in 141/758 Arabs and Persians rioted in Guang-zhou, looting warehouses and burning homes (Liu, chap. 10, p. 253); two years later, when Yang-zhou was looted by the army of the rebel Tian Sheng-gong, thousands of Arab and Persian traders were killed (Liu, chap. 110, p. 3313). The port city of Quan-zhou (Ch'üan-chou, see below) was founded in 711 c.e. (Pelliot, II, p. 585) on Quan-zhou bay, 10 km east of the present city site in southeastern Fu-jian (Fukien) province on the Formosa strait. In the 10th century it was renamed Zi-tong, which was transcribed in later Arabic and Persian sources as Zaytūn, a word that coincidentally means "olive" (Pelliot, II, pp. 585-97). Recent discovery there of an inscribed stone containing the word Zaytūn, dated 1322, has confirmed the identification of Zaytūn with Quan-zhou (Chen et al., p. 38, fig. 46).

It seems that the Chinese authorities granted the foreign merchant communities in the major port cities a certain amount of autonomy in internal affairs and that they regulated themselves according to patterns familiar in their homelands. In 219/834 the T'ang emperor Wen Zong (r. 827-40) issued an edict providing for protection of foreign "guests" in the provinces of Kwangtung, Fu-jian, and Yang-zhou (Dong, chap. 75, p. 785). A few years later, in 237/851, the merchant Solaymān, from Sīrāf on the Persian Gulf coast, noted that "in Guang-zhou, which is the center for merchants, the emperor of China has appointed a Muslim to decide conflicts among the Muslims who have been permitted to enter the country" (ed. Sauvaget, p. 7; cf. tr. Ferrand, p. 38). Abū Zayd, also from Sīrāf, recorded that 120,000 Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and Mazdean (*bai huo jiao*, lit. "fire worshipers") traders established in Guang-zhou were massacred when the forces of the rebel Huang Chao ravaged the city in 264/878 (Reinaud, p. 63; Solaymān, tr. Ferrand, p. 76). In 1171 the



Chinese Zhu Yu mentioned (chap. 2, p. 19) a foreign residential quarter (*fan-fang*) in the densely populated area of Guang-zhou frequented by foreign merchants.

Under the Sung (960-1280) and Yuan (1280-1368) dynasties Quan-zhou eclipsed the other Chinese port cities (Chen, 1982b, pp. 116-22), becoming one of the world's great commercial ports. From documents in Chinese, Arabic, Persian, and Western languages it is clear that between the 6th/12th and 8th/14th centuries Quan-zhou was in contact with more than seventy foreign countries and regions. A large community of foreigners, of many religious beliefs, was also settled there, Muslims being the most numerous and active among them. The earliest mosque appears to have been Masjed al-Aṣḥāb (mosque of the companions), which, according to a restoration notice of 710/1310, was originally constructed in 400/1009 (Chen et al., pp. 4-5, fig. 7). According to another restoration inscription, in Chinese ("Chong-li qing-jing-si bei-ji" Re-erection of the stele in Qing-jing-si mosque), Najīb Moḏher-al-Dīn, a man of indeterminate origin who had come on a trading ship from Sīrāf, built the Qing-jing-si mosque in southern Quan-zhou in 1131; the mosque was renovated in 1350, though later it was destroyed (Chen et al., pp. 13-18, fig. 21). A 6th/12th-century Chinese document entitled "Quan-zhou dong-ban zang fan-shang ji" (Note on the cemetery of the foreigners in Dong-ban of Quan-zhou), by Lin Zhi-qi (1111-76), is the earliest in which a Muslim cemetery at Quan-zhou is mentioned: In 1162-63 a native of the city who was descended from a man from Sīrāf sponsored the construction of a large cemetery at Dong-ban, to provide for Muslim merchants and travelers who died in Quan-zhou (Lin, vol. 15).

In 747/1346 the Arab traveler Ebn Baṭṭūṭa visited Quan-zhou, Guang-zhou, Hang-zhou (Hangchow), and other cities. Although Chinese documents do not contain information on the ethnic origins of officials of foreign quarters, he mentioned several prominent Persians living in Quan-zhou: Kamāl-al-Dīn 'Abd-Allāh Eṣfahānī, *ṣayk-al-Eslām* (dean of Muslim religious leaders); Tāj-al-Dīn Ardawīlī (Ardabīlī), *qāzi'l-Moslemīn* (Muslim judge); the prosperous merchant Šaraf-al-Dīn Tabrīzī; and Borhān-al-Dīn Kāzerūnī (Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, pp. 252-53), a shaikh of the Kāzarūniya order of Sufis. Muslim merchants and navigators customarily made pious offerings to this order in hopes that the blessing associated with the tomb of the founder, [Abū Eṣhāq Ebrāhīm Kāzarūnī](#) (352-426/963-1033), would protect them while crossing the sea. According to one later Chinese source, Borhān-al-Dīn was a Persian who had



settled in Quan-zhou in 1312-13, where he was appointed imam of the Qing-jing-si mosque (Huang, vol. 75). When Ebn Baṭṭūṭa met him he was shaikh of a *zāwīa* (retreat) outside the city and responsible for collecting the pious offerings from travelers on behalf of his order (Ebn Baṭṭūṭa, p. 253). In 1349, when he was said to be 120 years old, Borhān-al-Dīn was chosen *ṣayk-al-Eslām* in Quan-zhou and took the lead in obtaining funds for renovation of the Qing-jing-si mosque (Chen et al., pp. 13-18, fig. 21). He died in 1370 (*Min-shu chao*, p. 29).

Knowledge about the Muslim communities in south-eastern China has been confirmed by successive discoveries of tombstones with carved Arabic and Persian inscriptions, many of which include *nesbas* (attributive names) referring to places of origin in Persia and Central Asia (see

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**Table 38.** Persian and Central Asian Nesbas found in funerary inscriptions in China.