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THE ADAPTATION PROCESS OF CHRISTIANITY, JUDAISM, AND ISLAM TO CHINESE SOCIAL LIFE (17th – 18th CENTURIES)

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Abstract
China, with its rich history and spiritual heritage, is recognized as one of the cradles of world civilization. Over the centuries, various religious beliefs have developed and flourished in this land, leading to the establishment of profound spiritual values. Among these, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam also spread throughout China and left their mark on the cultural life of the people living there.
This article explores the history of the spread of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in China, their influence on the country's political, economic, and spiritual life, as well as the condition of these religions during the 17th–18th centuries.
Among the three major world religions, Christianity entered China after Buddhism but before Islam, making it the second to arrive. It is believed that the first wave of Christianity reached China in the early centuries of the Common Era.
The Jewish population in China has been living in the region for over 2,000 years. They arrived through various routes, and the number of communities has changed over time. Nevertheless, their contribution to the development of China is significant.
The first arrival of Muslims in China dates back to the 7th century CE. Later, by the 17th century, Islam experienced a stage of growth in the region. During this period, Islamic sources were translated into Chinese, madrasas began teaching from core Islamic texts, and the Han Kitabs — Chinese commentaries on Islamic sources — were developed.

Keywords: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hui, Confucius, Han, Tang, Ming, Qing, Matteo Ricci, Shenshi, Tian, Shangdi, Nanjing Incident, Jesuits, Shen Yue, Buddhist, Daoism, Chinese Jews, Kaifeng, Siyu, Sun, Zhu Yuanzhang, Yellow River (Huang He), Chinese Muslims, Chan'an.

Introduction

From the experience of the world's major religious traditions, it is clear that once a religion extends beyond its original borders, its spiritual, cultural, and social elements tend to take on one of two main forms in a new local context — either "adapted" or "assimilated."
As Professor L.S. Vasilyev writes in his monograph History of Eastern Religions:
History shows that, regardless of how rich a foreign spiritual culture may be, upon entering China, it undergoes such a strong transformation that a new system of original ideas and institutions emerges. Because of their adaptation to traditional Chinese concepts, principles, and norms, the 'new teachings' retain only traces of their original essence[1].
The Jesuits, in their efforts to spread Christianity, promoted their religion by emphasizing aspects that did not contradict Chinese religious-philosophical teachings. Representatives of Judaism

[1] Nizomiddinov, N.G'. The History, Religious Beliefs, and Culture of Ancient China. Tashkent: Fan va Texnologiya, 2014, p. 324.

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and Islam also attempted to employ a similar approach. However, the outcomes were different for each of the three religions.

Christianity, which originated in the West, was the second of the three major world religions (after Buddhism and before Islam) to enter China. It is believed that the first wave of Christianity arrived in the early centuries of the Common Era. The spread of Christianity in Chinese territory can be divided into several historical stages. One of the later waves occurred in the 7th century CE, and further efforts to spread Christianity took place during the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties.

The Jewish population has lived in China for more than two thousand years. They arrived through various routes, and the number of communities has fluctuated over time. Nevertheless, their contribution to the development of Chinese society has been substantial.

The initial arrival of Muslims in China dates back to the 7th century CE. By the 8th century, during the Yuan dynasty, thousands of Muslim soldiers were brought in to help suppress uprisings. Many of them settled in the region permanently. Overall, Islam entered China through both trade routes and, as noted above, military deployment.

MAIN BODY:

By the 17th and 18th centuries, Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities were present in China. However, Christianity did not fully align with Chinese religious-philosophical beliefs, which prevented its widespread acceptance across the country.

Jesuit missionaries who came to China with the aim of spreading Christianity primarily targeted the educated bureaucratic elite known as the Shenshi. They hoped to attract this class by adapting Christianity to fit Chinese ideology as closely as possible, while simultaneously introducing them to certain achievements of European science and technology.

To achieve this, the Jesuits adopted several strategies. One approach was to present Christian monotheism as a revival of the ancient teachings of Chinese sages who worshipped a single supreme deity — Tian (Heaven) or Shangdi (Supreme Ruler). Another method involved carefully selecting passages from Confucian classics to frame Christian morality as being in harmony with Confucian ethics.

This strategy of adapting Christianity to Chinese religious traditions — developed by missionaries under the leadership of Matteo Ricci during the late Ming (1368–1644) and early Qing (1644–1911) dynasties — proved effective to some extent. Many members of the Shenshi class accepted Jesuit teachings. However, among other segments of Chinese society, certain aspects of Christian doctrine were seen as incompatible with traditional cultural values, leading to outright rejection[2].

Despite the Jesuits' careful efforts to culturally and intellectually adapt Christianity to what they idealized as "original Confucianism," the first persecution of Christianity in China occurred in 1616 — six years after Ricci's death. The crackdown was initiated by Shen Que (1565–1624) from the Nanjing Ministry of Rites, who submitted three reports to the imperial court detailing the missionaries' activities.

This marked the first serious attempt by a high-ranking Chinese official to suppress a foreign

[2] Zürcher, Erik. "In the Beginning": 17th-Century Chinese Reactions to Christian Creationism. In: Time and Space in Chinese Culture. Leiden: Brill, 1995, p. 132.

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"heresy." As a result, several Jesuits and Chinese converts were arrested, and the event came to be known as the "Nanjing Incident." Shen Que alleged that the Jesuits had entered China illegally, were plotting subversion, expanding their influence, and preparing the ground for a large-scale foreign invasion. In January 1617, the authorities formally accused the Jesuits of deceiving the population and spreading barbaric customs within Chinese society[3].

The Chinese religious and ideological system did not require belief in any specific doctrine regarding the creation of the world or humankind. It was considered entirely acceptable for a person to be a Confucian, Buddhist, or Daoist without adhering to such teachings. On the other hand, the Chinese worldview of cyclical cosmic evolution did not align with the Christian concept of linear, progressive development — from creation to the end of the world (Judgment Day)[4].

Unlike Christian communities, Jewish communities in China generally lived in relative peace and distinguished themselves through active participation in various aspects of Chinese society. During the Mongol rule over China, Jewish communities were not isolated from the outside world and had not yet undergone deep cultural assimilation into Chinese traditions.

Following the rule of the Ming Dynasty, beginning in the late 14th century and extending into the mid-17th century — nearly two and a half centuries — the Jewish population in China experienced cultural and linguistic assimilation by the local Han Chinese population.

Evidence from 1489, found on stone steles in the Kaifeng synagogue, provides insight into the history of Chinese Jews. These inscriptions mention that "several hundred" Jewish families were living in Kaifeng at that time. Their ancestors — 70 Jewish families — had originally come from the "Xiyu" ("Western Regions"), likely referring to countries in the western part of China such as Persia, Central Asia, or India. These families had reportedly presented gifts of cotton fabrics to the emperor of the Song Dynasty and were granted permission to settle in the imperial capital of Kaifeng[5].

The first synagogue in Kaifeng was built in 1163, during the reign of the Jin Dynasty. Later, in 1390, 22 years after the Mongol Yuan Dynasty was overthrown and the Ming Dynasty took power, the founding emperor Zhu Yuanzhang granted land and privileges to the Jewish community in recognition of their services. In 1420, Jewish residents were said to have uncovered a conspiracy against the emperor from within the imperial family. In appreciation, Jews were granted the right to adopt Chinese names. From that point forward, Kaifeng Jews had both Chinese and Hebrew names[6].

In 1511, the synagogue in Kaifeng was rebuilt through the efforts of seven families, as confirmed by an inscription on a stele erected in 1512. In 1600, the synagogue was destroyed in a fire, but it was quickly restored. However, in 1642, during another peasant uprising, rebels deliberately flooded Kaifeng by redirecting the Yellow River (Huang He). As a result, the synagogue and Jewish cemetery were destroyed, and many Jews perished in the disaster. In 1644, the peasant uprising was suppressed by the Manchus, descendants of the Jurchens, who seized Beijing and established their own dynasty in China — known in history as the Qing Dynasty (Sin Dynasty

[3] Lomanov, A. V. Christianity and Chinese Culture. Moscow: Vostochnaya Literatura, 2002, p. 158.
[4] Zürcher, Erik. "In the Beginning": 17th-Century Chinese Reactions to Christian Creationism. In: Time and Space in Chinese Culture, Leiden, 1995, p. 132.
[5] Kadirbaev, A.Sh. The Jews in Imperial China (from Yuan to Qing). Moscow, 2008, p. 58.
[6] Kadirbaev, A.Sh. The Jews in Imperial China (from Yuan to Qing). Moscow, 2008, p. 58.

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in some historical contexts). The Kaifeng synagogue was rebuilt in 1653 and sanctified in 1663, as confirmed by inscriptions on a stele listing the names of all members of the Jewish community who participated in the synagogue's restoration, as well as in the reproduction and transcription of sacred texts from the Torah.

Historical records suggest that Jewish religious leaders in China tried to demonstrate that their faith aligned with the ideas of Confucius, considered a symbol of Chinese civilization. Some even sought to establish parallels between Biblical figures such as Adam and Noah with Chinese mythological figures like Pangu, the first man, and Nuwa, the ancestral mother of humankind. Over time, the Kaifeng Jews began observing Jewish festivals according to the Chinese lunar calendar[7].

As recorded by Ata-Malik Juvayni, a historian of the Mongol era, Jews during the Mongol period did not enjoy the same privileges granted to Muslims, Christians, and idol worshippers (Buddhists and Shamanists). Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that under foreign dynasties such as the Mongol Yuan, Jurchen Jin, Manchu Qing, as well as throughout Chinese rule under dynasties like the Han, Tang, Song, and Ming, Jews in China were never subjected to religious or ethnic persecution.

Throughout China's long history — from the era of Genghis Khan's Great Mongol Empire and its successor the Yuan Dynasty, through the Jurchen and Manchu periods, and during the Han, Tang, Song, and Ming dynasties — Jews in China played significant roles not only as wealthy merchants or officials, but also as skilled artisans, renowned physicians, public debaters, scholars of Confucian law, and translators. They were also known as builders of synagogues, scholars of Torah manuscripts, and authors of Jewish texts in the Chinese language. Their communities included experts in Hebrew, Persian, and Arabic, and they contributed to the cultural and historical legacy of the Chinese people[8].

Islam entered China at the beginning of the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE), arriving from the northwest via Xinjiang and from the southeast via maritime routes. At that time, Muslims in China were primarily Arabs and Persians. During the Tang period, China maintained relations with both Central Asia and the Arab kingdoms. In 742, a famous mosque was built in Chang'an (now Xi'an), the capital of China at the time, which later became known as the Great Xi'an Mosque.

During the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1271–1368), not only warriors, merchants, and preachers, but also members of noble Muslim families began to migrate to China. Some Mongol khans who ruled over China adopted Islam and appointed their Muslim advisors to assist in governing the country. However, after the Yuan dynasty was replaced by the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), Muslims lost many of the privileges they had previously enjoyed[9].

The Hui Muslim community played an important role in various aspects of Chinese social life. Initially, Chinese Muslims began teaching Islam in mosques with the goal of spreading Islamic faith and culture. This form of religious education was first supported by Xu Dengzhou from Shanghai Province. Teaching Islam in mosques gradually influenced the lives of Muslims in central and northwestern China and contributed to the wider spread of Islamic culture. During

[7] Kadirbaev, A.Sh. The Jews in Imperial China (from Yuan to Qing). Moscow, 2008, p. 59.
[8] Kadirbaev, A.Sh. The Jews in Imperial China (from Yuan to Qing). Moscow, 2008, p. 59.
[9] Zakharyin, A. Islam in China. Moscow, 2010, p. 56.

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that time, efforts were made to translate sacred Islamic texts into the Chinese language.

During the Ming dynasty, many Muslim scholars such as Wang Daiyu, Ma Zhu, Liu Zhi, Jin Tianzhu, and Ma Fuchu were not only well-versed in Islam and the three Chinese teachings — Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism — but were also fluent in both Chinese and Arabic. They used Confucian literature to interpret Islamic sacred texts and wrote and translated many works[10]. «As a result of the spread of Islam, a new ethnic group known as the Dungan or Tungan emerged in China. Some believe that the Tungan people were originally Chinese who converted to Islam. In reality, however, they are descendants of Turkic peoples, Arabs, and Persians who settled in China for various reasons and at different times. The majority of them were traders who came to China and remained there permanently»[11].

Numerous inscriptions reflect the charitable contributions made by Chinese Muslims to their local mosques. These donations were typically made in the form of money, land, or houses. It became common for Chinese Muslims to request, before their death, that their property be donated to mosques by their children or other family members. Donors often attached specific conditions regarding the use of their contributions, and it was not uncommon to find phrases in these records stating, “it must not be used for any other purpose under any circumstances.” These stipulations indicate the Chinese Muslims’ deep loyalty and commitment to their jiaofang (religious community). Donors typically intended their gifts to support the purchase of sacrificial animals, the hosting of banquets on holy days, aid to the poor, funeral expenses, the employment of religious teachers, and the maintenance of Islamic schools[12].

In general, in the Arab and broader Islamic world, large mosques have also served as major educational institutions. However, before the late Ming and early Qing periods, Chinese mosques did not possess such an educational function. This began to change during the late Ming period, when Chinese Muslim scholars, concerned by the increasing assimilation of Muslims into Chinese culture and the gradual erosion of their religious identity, launched an Islamic revival movement. One of the key initiatives in this revival was the establishment of free and public Islamic schools within mosques, known as “Halls for Studying the Sacred Religious Books.” These schools adopted the private school model of the Han Chinese but differed in their location and curriculum. The curriculum of these Islamic schools usually included classical Islamic texts, basic Arabic, and occasionally Persian. Some large and prestigious schools also offered instruction in advanced Islamic literature[13].

Conclusion: In conclusion, a comprehensive study of the history of religions and religious-philosophical ideologies in China requires a broad and interdisciplinary approach, making use of the scholarly achievements from various regional experts. The rich spiritual values created over centuries by the peoples of this land have played an important role in the formation and development of its high culture. In particular, the efforts of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam to align their religious doctrines with local religious-philosophical thought — driven by the

[10] The History of Islam in China: From Cultural Adaptation to Artistic Creativity. IQNA.ir/ru, 2017. [Online article]
[11] Khojayev, A. The Great Silk Road: Relations and Destinies. Tashkent: Uzbek National Encyclopedia State Scientific Publishing House, 2007, p. 35.
[12] Zhang, S., & Ang, S. Chinese Muslims in the Qing Empire: Public Culture, Identities, and Law, 1644–1911. Urbana, Illinois, 2015, p. 20.
[13] Ben-Dor Benite, Zvi. The Dao of Muhammad: A Cultural History of Muslims in Late Imperial China. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005, p. 24.

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political and social contexts of different eras in China — were intended to ensure the survival and spread of their beliefs rather than facing extinction in this region.

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