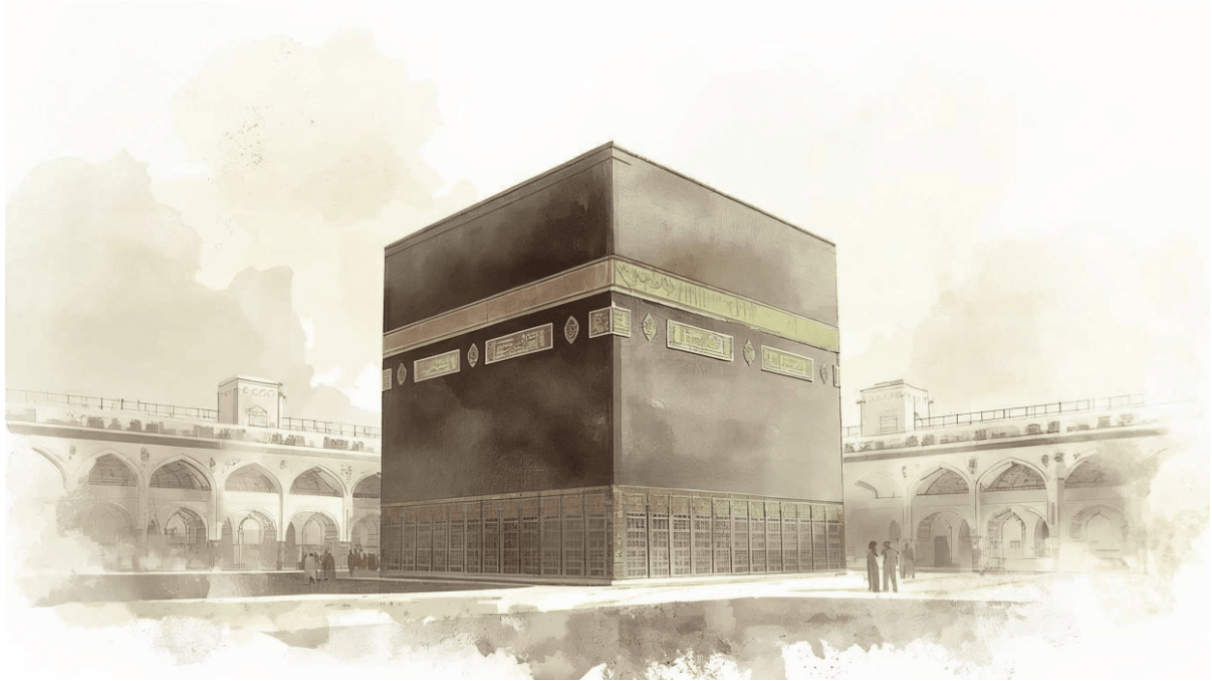


# The Long Road to Mecca: A Brief Historical Overview of Chinese Muslim Pilgrimage

By: [Mai Jianjun](#) December 16, 2025



For over thirteen centuries, Chinese Muslims have undertaken the sacred journey of **Hajj**, fulfilling one of the central obligations of Islam. This pilgrimage to Mecca, known as the *fifth pillar of Islam*, has always been more than a religious duty-it has been a bridge connecting China's Muslim communities to the wider Islamic world. Yet, the history of Chinese Muslims' pilgrimage is marked by extraordinary challenges: geographical distance, political upheavals, and shifting global conditions. From the perilous journeys of Ming dynasty scholars to the organized delegations of the modern era, the story of Hajj in China reflects both the resilience of faith and the evolving relationship between China and the Muslim world.

## Early Pilgrimage: Ming and Qing Dynasties

China was among the earliest countries to receive Islam, and Muslims in China have been performing Hajj for more than 1,300 years. However, written records of Chinese Muslims' pilgrimage only begin in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). One of the earliest references comes from the famous Hui Muslim navigator Zheng He, whose father and grandfather are said to have performed Hajj. Zheng He's companion, the Muslim scholar Ma Huan, recorded his impressions of pilgrimage-related practices in his book *Yinghai Shenglan*, marking the first Chinese-language account of Hajj.

During these centuries, the journey was arduous beyond imagination. Pilgrims either traveled overland along the Silk Road, passing through Afghanistan, Persia, and Mesopotamia, or sailed across the South China Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the Arabian Sea before reaching Jeddah. Both routes were fraught with danger, making the pilgrimage an undertaking marked by peril and relentless hardship.

A striking example is the Qing-era scholar Ma Dexin (1794-1874). In 1841, he embarked on his pilgrimage, traveling through Burma and India before crossing the seas. He reached Mecca in 1843-nearly a year and a half after setting out. After completing Hajj, Ma Dexin spent four years traveling across the Middle East, engaging in scholarly exchanges in Alexandria, Istanbul, and Baghdad. His journey lasted eight years in total, producing the influential work *Pilgrimage Travel Notes* (*Chaojin Tuji*). For scholars like Ma Dexin, the pilgrimage was not only a spiritual obligation but also an opportunity to immerse themselves in the intellectual currents of the Islamic world.

Yet, for ordinary Chinese Muslims who spoke only Chinese and lacked resources, the pilgrimage was nearly impossible. Language barriers, financial hardship, and the sheer length of the journey meant that Hajj remained a rare achievement, limited to a small number of determined believers.

## **Expansion in the Republican Era**

The Republican period (1912-1949) marked a turning point. The fall of the Qing dynasty and the opening of China after the 1911 Revolution created new opportunities for Muslims to travel abroad. Pilgrimage became more accessible, and records from this era show a significant increase in Chinese Muslims undertaking Hajj.

Shanghai emerged as the central hub for pilgrimage. The Xiaotaoyuan Mosque and the China Travel Service (CTS) played crucial roles in organizing pilgrimages. Initially, pilgrims sailed from Shanghai to Singapore, then transferred to ships bound for Jeddah. This route was costly and time-consuming. In 1930, CTS negotiated with the British Blue Funnel Line to provide a direct shipping route from Shanghai to Jeddah, dramatically reducing expenses and travel time. This innovation marked the beginning of organized, large-scale pilgrimages from China.

By the 1930s, pilgrimage groups had grown in size. Notable figures such as Ma Songting and Zhao Zhenwu joined delegations of over 50 pilgrims. In 1933, a group returned together from Jeddah to Shanghai, signaling that pilgrimage was becoming a collective endeavor rather than an isolated act. Records show that between 1923

and 1933, at least 834 Chinese Muslims from the interior provinces traveled via Shanghai to Mecca, not including the thousands from Xinjiang who took traditional overland routes.

Personal stories from this era highlight both the devotion and the hardships of ordinary pilgrims. One such figure was Shan Dengpeng, a devout Muslim from Henan. Around 1930-1935, he invested his life savings to join the pilgrimage via the Shanghai-Jeddah route. His family lost contact with him for over a year, fearing he had died abroad. Yet Shan eventually returned, becoming the first recorded pilgrim from his region.

After Japan's surrender in 1945, individual pilgrimages increased. The most significant development came in August 1947, when the Chinese Islamic Association organized a monumental pilgrimage group of 200 people, led by Bao Erhan - who later became the governor of Xinjiang after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. This represented an unprecedented achievement in Chinese pilgrimage history and marked a rare moment when Muslim religious practice captured mainstream Chinese attention, partly due to Muslims' significant contributions to the anti-Japanese resistance.

## **New China: Obstacles and Breakthroughs**

The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 created new challenges for pilgrimage, as China and Saudi Arabia lacked diplomatic relations. In 1952, when the newly formed Chinese Islamic Association organized its first pilgrimage group,

the Saudi government denied visas, influenced by anti-China propaganda from Western powers. The group, including distinguished figures like Da Pusheng, Pang Shiqian, and Zhang Bingduo, was forced to return from Karachi without completing their journey. Nevertheless, this public appearance of Chinese Muslims on the international stage helped counter false claims that Muslims no longer existed in China.

A breakthrough came in 1955, when Premier Zhou Enlai, attending the Bandung Conference, personally raised the issue with Saudi leaders. This diplomatic effort reopened the door for Chinese Muslims. Between 1955 and 1964, China organized ten official pilgrimage delegations, totaling 152 pilgrims—an average of just 15.2 pilgrims per year. Though modest in number, these delegations symbolized China's commitment to religious freedom and its engagement with the Islamic world.

However, political turmoil soon interrupted progress. From 1965 to 1978, during the Cultural Revolution, pilgrimage was suspended for 14 years. International critics claimed that Muslims in China no longer existed or were persecuted. The absence of Chinese pilgrims reinforced these misconceptions.

## **Revival After Reform and Opening**

The post-1978 reform era marked a dramatic revival. The government reaffirmed religious freedom, and pilgrimage resumed. In 1979, a Chinese Muslim delegation visited Pakistan, paving the way for the 11th official pilgrimage group later that year. Despite difficulties in obtaining visas and navigating suspicion abroad, the group's

presence in Mecca after a 14-year absence was hailed as a powerful symbol of renewal.

By the mid-1980s, self-funded pilgrimage became possible. As living standards improved, thousands of Muslims applied for permission to travel. In 1986, over 2,000 Chinese Muslims performed Hajj, a number unimaginable in earlier decades.

Transportation also improved: while earlier pilgrims relied on ships and multiple flight transfers, by 1990 China chartered six planes to carry 900 pilgrims directly to Jeddah, revolutionizing the experience.

## **Contemporary Developments**

The establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Saudi Arabia in 1990 ushered in a new era. Pilgrimage numbers soared, reaching nearly 13,000 pilgrims by 2009. Travel became safer, faster, and more affordable, with streamlined visa processes and organized support from the China Islamic Association. Today, Hajj is no longer the rare, perilous journey it once was but a regular feature of Chinese Muslim life.

Yet, beyond numbers, pilgrimage continues to hold profound meaning. For Chinese Muslims, Hajj represents both the fulfillment of a divine command and a connection to the global ummah. It has historically been the primary avenue through which Chinese Muslims engaged with the Islamic heartlands, absorbing theological insights, cultural practices, and political ideas. Pilgrimage has thus shaped not only personal spirituality but also the intellectual and social development of Islam in China.

The history of Chinese Muslims' pilgrimage to Mecca is a story of faith tested by distance, politics, and adversity. From the solitary journeys of Ming and Qing scholars to the collective delegations of the Republican era, from the interruptions of the Cultural Revolution to the flourishing of the reform era, Hajj has remained a constant aspiration. Each generation of Chinese Muslims has found ways to overcome obstacles, affirming their place within the global Muslim community.

Today, as thousands of Chinese Muslims travel annually to Mecca, their footsteps echo those of Ma Dexin, Shan Dengpeng, and countless others who braved unimaginable hardships centuries ago. The pilgrimage continues to embody devotion, resilience, and the enduring bond between China's Muslims and the wider Islamic world.

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