

Noah's Art by JB Dukes

Chapter 5

Great Mosque of Xi'an, Shaanxi Province, Central China

1959

Two Muslim clerics are seated on the second tier of the pagoda in Xi'an's Great Mosque, the oldest and most famous in China, dating as it does to the eighth-century Tang Dynasty. Only they are not, strictly speaking, Muslim clerics. Muslims yes but clerics only for the watchful eyes of the Party faithful. And the Party faithful come in every shape and form, from the old lady seated at the entrance to her apartment block opposite the Mosque's front gate, to the junior mullah, the shop-keeper selling hot tea and the school master accompanying his children on a visit to the Mosque's gardens.

But this is not a normal period in the anything-but-normal short history of the People's Republic of China. For ten years, Mao Tse Tung's ultimate 'policed state', where everyone polices everyone else, has grown, with varying degrees of economics success. 1957 had been a good year, following eight years of economic restructuring under the Chinese Communist Party leadership and with help from the Russians. But from 1959, people have started to starve as Beijing imposes ever-more unrealistic production quotas on factories and fields across the vast country.

And so it is that a Sufi from Persia, or was it Turkey – men frequently debated his origin – has slipped across the border from Tajikistan in Central Asia into Xinjiang province on China's western-most reach and thence to Xi'an. Those who two years earlier might have stopped and questioned the lone traveller, traversing the barren Muslim periphery of the Middle Kingdom, were too busy making things or pretending to make things in order to fulfill Beijing's quotas. And if they weren't doing this, then they were busy trying to keep themselves and their families alive. Long afterwards, researchers would estimate that over 30 million people died of starvation as a result of Beijing's Second Five Year Plan for the country's controlled economy (1958-1963).

The other 'cleric' has arrived in Xi'an by quite a different route. He is a guest of Mao-Tse-Tung's government under the Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty, which he has proudly learned to pronounce as *Zhōng-Sū Yǒuhǎo Tóngméng Hùzhù Tiáoyuè* in the Mandarin dialect. Being a high-ranking official in the Soviet Naval Research and

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Archive Service, he has been invited by local Communist Party Officials in the Northern port city of Dalian to advise on a new archiving system for the Chinese Navy. Xi'an was both a convenient place to change planes and a good excuse to see the most famous mosque in history built without a dome or minaret. But neither of these are the real reason for his week-long diversion – one that he feels sure will get him into trouble when he returns to Moscow. The real reason for coming to Xi'an is that he has heard a rumour that one of the leaders of the Naqshbandi sect people are starting to call the Noah Brotherhood, is in Xi'an. He had sent a message out to try and track him down.

The two 'clerics' are sitting deep in unobserved conversation on the mosque's unusual tower. The entire building has been constructed using Chinese architecture and building materials and resembles the courtyard house of a nobleman more than a place for Islamic worship. The communist liberation has made little difference to the place other than filling up some of its corners, outhouses and minor courtyards with communal living and eating spaces.

"You are from Moscow?" the Sufi cautiously begins. "A Muslim of high official rank? This is unusual in my understanding."

"Indeed so." Says the Muscovite. "I am from an old Muslim family in the city. One of my ancestors was a leader of the Tartar community in the Zamoskvarechye district and built one of the city's first formal mosques there in the 18th century - on Bolshaya Tatarskaya street, between Paveletskaya and Novokuznetskaya metro stations if you know the Zamoskvoretskaya Line."

"I have heard of it." He says enigmatically. "And I am honoured to make your noble acquaintance"

"And I yours. I pray that you are not offended by my request to meet like this. I do not want to dishonor my Chinese hosts but I may not have another chance to talk to the great teacher."

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“And why would that be lamentable for you my friend? There are many greater Sufis you could consult at more convenience to yourself.”

“None, however, with your interests in the Quran's teaching about the beginning and the end.”

“Ah. You have heard of my fanciful ideas.”

“I am attracted by them. More than attracted.”

“You are a free-thinking Muslim?”

“I worship at the Central Mosque in Moscow.”

“Ah. But you are free-thinking in your own home perhaps. What is it you wish to hear from me? We may not have much time. At some stage the Party watchers on the gates will come looking for you. They did not see me enter so they will not know that you have conversed with a stranger. But they will be concerned to make sure that you have not exited by another way.”

“From you I desire nothing; you have inspired me enough already. No. It is I who bring you something in return.”

“That, indeed is a pleasant surprise, although I live simply and need very little to support my itinerant way of life.”

“Not money, my friend. Something of more profound value. I have come across something deep in a Soviet Naval vault that I think you would be very eager to see.”

After a long pause to take this in, the Sufi says:

“It must be of very great value for an official of such high rank to interrupt such an important diplomatic visit to bring it to the attention of a humble wandering mystic.”

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